

# 20,000 flee Kazakhstan after inter-ethnic violence claims 11 lives

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On February 7–8, the rural Korday District in southern Kazakhstan became a scene of violent rioting, ending in the deaths of 11 people and more than 170 injured. 30 residential buildings, 17 commercial sites, and 47 automobiles were damaged or destroyed by arson. More than 20,000 people, most of them Dungans, have fled the villages where the violence erupted.

Although the events began in the village of Sortobe, the riots and destruction occurred primarily in the village of Masanchi, about 12 kilometers away.

The Dungan people are a Muslim minority of Han Chinese descent. Estimates put the Dungan population living in Kazakhstan at between 51,299 and 72,000 (just 0.4 percent or less of the population). Most of them live in the southern district of Korday which borders Kyrgyzstan. About 64,000 Dungans live in Kyrgyzstan.

Masanchi, located fewer than 10 km from the Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan border, had a population in 2009 of just 13,606 people, of whom over 90 percent were Dungans. The village is known popularly as the “unofficial Dungan capital of Kazakhstan.”

Media sources based outside Kazakhstan have widely portrayed the February 7–8 events as an ethnically motivated pogrom perpetrated by ethnic Kazakhs against Dungans.

According to *Eurasianet*, “mobs of Kazakhs attacked the village from two sides, armed with stones, metal bars and firearms. Mobs went on the rampage, beating and shooting Dungans and hurling Molotov cocktails into houses and shops, while sparing the few Kazakh-owned buildings, according to those testimonies.

“Locals in both communities agreed that the spark on the day was a rumor that Dungans had beaten up an old Kazakh man. While most Kazakhs in the area insisted

this story was true, Dungans expressed doubts.” The village of Manachi, according to the online newspaper, was “a picture of devastation,” and police in riot gear were patrolling the streets.

The *Eurasianet* article proceeds to cite anonymous Dungan sources who claimed that the attacks were planned in advance and the attackers had traveled there from distant parts of the country. One eyewitness said that the police stood idly by while people were killed and homes destroyed.

National Guard units were mobilized to intervene in the riots. Law enforcement agencies called upon the population to believe only official notices, and not to spread rumors and falsehoods.

According to Kazakh news sources, the conflict began with a routine stop by a police road patrol of a Honda Odyssey minivan in the village of Sortobe. After the law enforcement officers had established that the driver did not have the required registration documents for the minivan, he attempted, unsuccessfully, to escape the police in the vehicle. The police officers followed the driver to his residence, where he and his relatives beat the police officers and pelted them with rocks. Eventually, about 400 people came to participate in the violence. More than 47 people were initially arrested and then released.

On February 8, government authorities in Almaty, Kazakhstan’s largest city, shut down the Yalyan, Baisat, and Alatau markets, which have been operated primarily by Dungans. The markets were not reopened until February 11, and then only under the presence of police and National Guard forces.

Over 25 criminal proceedings have been initiated. On February 18, the US-aligned Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported that police have arrested three ethnic Dungan brothers who are accused of having been

involved in a road-rage brawl that the Kazakh police claims triggered the ethnic clashes.

Following a well-established pattern of strict governmental control over access to information regarding local conflicts, evidence from independent sources as to what occurred on February 7-8 has been scarce. Tokayev's February 8 announcement included a statement that the National Security Committee and the General Prosecutor's Office are to "hold accountable persons who incite inter-ethnic discord, spread provocative rumors and disinformation." In other words, not only has the government tightly controlled the available information about the incident, but it has threatened criminal proceedings against anyone who disseminates information that contradicts the official version.

At the same time, a number of actions taken and statements made by high-ranking government officials have demonstrated an understanding that, in fact, the bloodshed and arson took place within a context of inter-ethnic strife.

Deputy Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Berdibek Saparbayev, whom Tokayev appointed to head the government commission on the Korday events, acknowledged on February 10 that approximately 24,000 people had fled across the international border into Kyrgyzstan. Saparbayev did not clarify who those refugees were or why they left, but all the concomitant circumstances indicate that they must have consisted primarily of Dungans. He also asserted that thousands had already begun to return to Kazakhstan. Additionally, more than 600 women, children, and elderly men were allowed to take refuge in border-crossing checkpoints between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Also on February 10, upon a proposal from Tokayev, the Akim (head) of Kazakhstan's Jambyl Region (i.e., a position analogous to a US state governor) was removed and replaced by Saparbayev. Prime Minister Askar Mamin commented on the event by asserting a need to "pay special attention to ideological work and the strengthening of inter-ethnic harmony."

As of February 12, control-access checkpoints had been set up in the Korday District at all road entrances to the predominantly Dungan villages of Karakemer, Masanchi, Bular Batyr, Sortobe, Karasu, and Aukatty.

On February 14, the Kazakhstan Minister of

Information and Social Development Dauren Abayev commented on the events, saying, "The authorities do not classify the guilty parties as either Kazakhs or Dungans. All of them are Kazakhstan citizens and are equally accountable under the law."

As with all of the ex-Soviet republics, the Kazakhstan government has systematically fostered nationalist sentiments since before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, including through the passage of laws that institutionalize discrimination against those who do not speak the Kazakh language or are less than fully fluent in Kazakh. Such policies are primarily aimed at dividing the working class and diverting from intense class tensions in the impoverished country, as well as minimizing Russia's political influence in the region. They have had a particularly discriminatory effect against ethnic minorities.

The 15 years have seen several instances of inter-ethnic clashes in Kazakhstan. This includes the October 20, 2006, mass fighting that took place among Kazakh and Turkish workers at the Tengiz oil and gas field. According to media sources based outside Kazakhstan, more than 1,000 people took part in the fighting and over 40 were killed. In March 2007, in the Almaty Region, a conflict between Kazakhs and Chechens led to the deaths of nine people, seven of them Chechens. In 2015, the stabbing of a Kazakh man by a Tajik man resulted in a rampage in a predominantly Tajik village.



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