

Ceasefire reached in deadly border conflict between Central Asian republics

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A ceasefire has been declared in the border conflict that erupted last week between the Central Asian countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. According to press reports, a total of 54 people died on both sides and hundreds more were injured. The Kyrgyz side reported 36 dead, including at least two children.

The two states, impoverished former republics of the Soviet Union, share a 1,000 kilometer frontier, of which about 40 percent is disputed. The zone is situated in the water-rich and fertile Fergana Valley, a region over which neighboring Uzbekistan also lays claims.

The latest round of fighting began in late April, with villagers in the Tajik province of Sughd and the Kyrgyz province of Batken throwing projectiles at one another. Regular troops stationed on both sides quickly became involved, using guns and mortars to assault one another. Hundreds of homes and other structures were torched in the fighting, including schools and a kindergarten.

Kyrgyz residents claim that the Tajik military deployed an attack helicopter. Roadblocks temporarily cut off part of Kyrgyz territory from the rest of the country. The Kyrgyz government in Bishkek evacuated 60,000 residents, although that order has been lifted since the May 1 ceasefire took hold.

Russia, which has military bases stationed in both countries, indicated its willingness to mediate between the two sides, and Vladimir Putin will meet with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon on May 8.

At the center of the conflict are competing claims over the Kok-Tash reservoir, a body of water drawn from the Isfara River, which is essential for irrigating agricultural lands and maintaining pastures along both sides of the border. Population growth in the Tajik and Kyrgyz neighboring provinces is putting pressure on the essential but limited natural resources in the area.

The situation has worsened since 2014 when Kyrgyzstan started development projects, including the building of roads, which threatened to cut off Tajik access to the reservoir.

The disastrous economic situation in both countries has intensified the long-standing conflict, in which clashes have erupted repeatedly over the last two decades. Kyrgyzstan's GDP fell during 2020 by 9 percent due to the impact of the coronavirus, which has infected nearly 97,000 people in the country of less than 6.5 million. Tajikistan, with a lower rate of infection but larger population, is still posting economic growth, although it has slipped from 7.5 percent before the pandemic to just 2.2 percent last year.

Both countries have now racked up large budget deficits. Their economies are heavily reliant on remittances from citizens working in low-wage, highly exploitative jobs in Russia. Money sent home from those working abroad accounts for 28 percent and 33 percent of Kyrgyz and Tajik GDP, respectively. In a vicious anti-immigrant action aimed at deflecting social anger inside Russia, the Kremlin recently declared that all the Central Asian countries must get their undocumented citizens out of Russia by mid-June.

The ceasefire declared earlier this week between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will do nothing to resolve the long-term conflict. On Wednesday, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov made a point in his annual address to the nation of stating that the country had "to create an army composed of well-prepared and properly equipped divisions ready to carry out military actions."

The cross-border conflict in the Fergana Valley is the direct product of the dissolution of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991. Over the course of Soviet history, the boundary lines of Kyrgyzstan and

Tajikistan were redrawn on several occasions, including in the 1920s and the 1950s. Despite the changing map, united in a single country, the populations of the two republics moved back and forth across the internal borders and made shared use of the region's resources.

When Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan spun off into independent states, the corrupt ruling elite in each newly formed country claimed whichever version of the former Soviet map—the one from the 1920s or the one from the 1950s—would give them the most. Each side has endlessly whipped up ethnic chauvinism in an effort to channel popular frustrations over widespread poverty behind their respective economic and geostrategic agendas.

The region has long been the object of imperialist meddling, with the United States playing a central role in the 2005 Kyrgyz “Tulip Revolution,” through which it sought to bring to power a regime more subservient to Washington. The outcome has been years of political upheaval, instability and violence. As part of the war in Afghanistan, the US has developed close relations with the Tajik government and Bishkek has received significant funds from the US as part of the “war on terror.” More recently, the region, which has significant economic ties to China, has been further destabilized by the US-led confrontation with Beijing.



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