

Ethnic and border tension between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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On 6 January, a major border incident took place on the frontier of Sokh, an Uzbek exclave in Kyrgyzstan. People from the Uzbek village of Hushar attacked a newly built Kyrgyz border watchtower and then entered Kyrgyz territory. As a consequence of this incident, 34 Kyrgyz residents from a nearby village were captured and imprisoned in Sokh. Overnight from the 6th to the 7th of January, Kyrgyz troops blocked access to Sokh, thus preventing thousands of Kyrgyz citizens from entering the enclave. On 7th January, following negotiations between representatives from both countries, the hostages were released. However, the situation will remain tense, and both sides are accusing one another of having incited the incident.

There are several exclaves along the southern frontier of the Fergana Valley. In Kyrgyzstan these include exclaves of Uzbekistan (the largest being Sokh and Shakhimardan) and of Tajikistan (the largest is Vorukh). Tajikistan also has one exclave in Uzbekistan (see map). These exclaves were formed in the process of setting the borders between the Soviet republics in Central Asia. Since regaining independence, the enclaves of the countries in this region and – more broadly – the delimitation of some borders have been a problematic issue. This is a mountainous area, with an ethnically diversified population. The roads or water infrastructure often cross the enclaves and national borders (including those of the enclaves themselves – do not follow ethnic divisions. For example, ethnic Tajiks predominate among the population of Sokh, which is Uzbekistan's largest exclave. This region also saw raids by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in the past (in 1999 and 2000).

Commentary

- Ethnic and social tension (conflicts over water and land) is still present between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks and between Kyrgyz and Tajiks in southern Kyrgyzstan. Incidents leading to clashes between different ethnic communities are common, as are border incidents, most of which concern sections which have not been delimited. The scale of the most recent incident indicates that there is a tendency for these conflicts to escalate, especially in the southern part of the Fergana Valley, where this tension has existed continuously. However, this tension had previously never taken such a violent form as, for example, the clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh in 2010, in which 470

people, mostly Uzbeks, were killed.

- This is the first time when ethnic conflict has overlapped with mutual animosity between the countries. Ethnic conflicts had previously concerned almost exclusively citizens of Kyrgyzstan of various ethnic backgrounds. The border crossing by Uzbeks people and bringing hostages to Uzbek territory has brought a new quality and this – given the tense relations between the two countries and their mutual distrust – may have dangerous consequences in the future.
- This incident is reminiscent of the instability existing especially in this part of Central Asia resulting partly from: an erosion of respect for the central government, the limited efficiency of state structures, ethnic and social tension, and the high level of tension existing between the countries in this region. Given the high concentration of problems, even a local incident may have far-reaching consequences for the entire region. This is especially disturbing in the context of the expected further deterioration of the situation following the completion of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan in 2014.

Map

Frontier area of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

