

Tajikistan: In Badakhshan, the government fights with former field commanders

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On 24 July, Tajik power structures began special operations in the Gorno – Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) directed against local criminal groups linked to former field commanders from the civil war period (1992-1997), some of which had been operating within the state structures. The immediate cause of the intervention was the murder of the regional security service chief, General Abdulla Nazarov on 21 of July. Despite moving substantial enforcements from the western part of the country, the government has encountered surprisingly strong armed resistance, mainly in the regional capital of Khorog, which it has not been able to fully suppress. On 25 July the parties agreed to a ceasefire, which however does not mean the end of the fighting or a resolution to the crisis. According to official data, 42 people were killed during the operation (12 members of government forces and 30 insurgents). Access to information on the situation in GBAO is difficult, due to the blockade imposed by Dushanbe on communications with the region. In this context, it is worth noting the activity of some Russian media, which have been openly escalating tension around these events, and overstating the number of fatalities (citing figures of about 200).

Commentary

- The latest events in the region are the aftermath of an unresolved problem: the opposition field commanders, who after the war were integrated into the state (under the peace agreement, the opposition received 30% of positions in the state apparatus). Although the government systematically removed their former opponents from these posts in subsequent years, including by physically eliminating them, in the GBAO – a region traditionally difficult to access, and which maintains a large measure of independence – many of them retained their positions, and Dushanbe's control over Badakhshan remained weak.
- The murder of Nazarov – which may be a settling of scores among criminals for his alleged involvement in drug-running – has been treated by the government as an excuse to get rid of the old commanders, and to take control of one of the two main heroin-

smuggling routes leading from Afghanistan through Central Asia, which runs through the GBAO. Despite mobilising its most efficient special units, the government was unable to pacify the criminal groups. It also encountered significant opposition to the intervention from the local population, who are distrustful of the central authorities. In this situation, the government will have to seek an agreement with the former commanders, and Dushanbe's control of the region will remain weak.

- The events in the GBAO demonstrate the far-reaching weaknesses of the Tajik state's structures. This is the second incident in recent years where the government has had difficulty enforcing control over part of its territory (after the attacks on government forces in the Rasht valley in autumn 2010). Russia may exploit this situation in order to increase pressure on Dushanbe to protect Russian interests in Tajikistan. Currently both nations are unsuccessfully negotiating the basis for stationing over 6000 Russian troops in Tajikistan; the subjects being discussed include the length of the lease of military installations (the current term expires in 2014) and introduction of fees for their use. Moscow has for years also been trying to get Dushanbe to agree to return its troops to the Tajik-Afghan border (where they were from the fall of the Soviet Union until 2005), arguing that the scale of threats stemming from Afghanistan and the need for a more effective fight against drug trafficking justifies such a move; in fact, however, this would strengthen Russian dominance in Central Asia.

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