

Flights Diverted From Manas in Kyrgyzstan to Kuwait Amid Turmoil

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JALAL-ABAD, Kyrgyzstan — U.S. personnel flights in and out of Afghanistan are being diverted from a key air base in Kyrgyzstan to Kuwait, while resupply flights out of the central Asian base are taking place only on a “case-by-case” basis, a U.S. military official said Saturday.

Normal flight operations out of Manas air base, a key transit point for the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan, had resumed Friday afternoon following a 12-hour shutdown imposed by Kyrgyz authorities that ended Thursday night in Kyrgyzstan, said the official, who spoke on background because he wasn’t authorized to discuss the situation.

The subsequent decision to divert personnel flights was “security-related” and made by the U.S. base leadership at Manas, the official said. The precise basis of the security concerns, however, remains unclear. The base, which the U.S. shares with civilian airlines, is about 20 miles from the downtown Bishkek area where the past week’s opposition uprising was centered.

Resupply flights out of Manas have been made only on a case-by-case basis since the shutdown ended Thursday. The U.S. official did not know what factors enter into allowing each flight.

The delays have not caused a freeze in troop rotations in and out of Afghanistan, the official said. But about 1,300 in- and outbound U.S. troops remain in limbo at Manas while awaiting the resumption of normal flights, which will be a “conditions-based” call by U.S. base officials.

The Kuwait diversion is expected to last only a few more days, the official said.

Meanwhile, in the stronghold of Kyrgyzstan’s deposed president, residents clustered on the streets Saturday, holding intense discussions on whether to follow the figures who claim to be the new government.

Some said Kurmanbek Bakiyev did a lot of good for the country and dismissed the complaints of the opposition members who drove him out, but many other appeared weary of the country’s turmoil and were willing to support anyone who can bring them a measure of stability and comfort.

Bakiyev fled the capital, Bishkek, on Wednesday after a protest rally against corruption, rising utility bills and deteriorating human rights exploded into police gunfire and chaos that

left at least 79 people dead and sparked protesters to storm government buildings. He was believed to be in his home Jalal-Abad region on Saturday.

“He built the economy. He built schools, roads and kindergartens. The protesters were just a minority,” said Aizat Zupukharova, a health worker in Jalal-Abad.

But, she added, “People are afraid to come out.”

“Bakiyev did some good things, but his family led him astray,” said another resident, Sapar Usmonov, referring to widespread allegations that Bakiyev’s relatives profited hugely and improperly from his nearly five years in office. Those claims echo those made against Bakiyev’s predecessor, Askar Akayev, who was driven out of office in protests in 2005.

The interim rulers say they have offered Bakiyev safe passage out of the country if he steps down, but he has made no public sign of capitulation. That stalemate leaves Kyrgyzstan’s near-term stability in doubt, a strategic worry for the West because of the air base’s importance to the U.S. and allied war effort.

Kyrgyzstan’s society is strongly clannish, but there are few overt signs that Bakiyev’s fellow southerners would coalesce into support for him against the self-declared opposition interim government even though they think well of him.

Jalal-Abad is on the southern side of the soaring mountain massifs that divide Kyrgyzstan into often-rival sections. Usmonov expressed fatigue with such jockeying for power.

“It doesn’t matter where the president comes from — he just has to be a fitting man,” he said.

Across the mountains in the capital, hundreds of people gathered in one of Kyrgyzstan’s most prestigious cemeteries for the burial of some of those who died Wednesday. The interments tacitly conferred national hero status on the dead.

“For the sake of the future, for the power of the people, young people gave their lives,” Roza Otunbayeva, a former foreign minister and onetime Bakiyev ally who heads the interim government, said at the Ata-Beit cemetery. “The people who came into power five years ago on the wave of revolution turned out to be criminals.”

“We won’t let Bakiyev come back; the people won’t let him back into Bishkek,” vowed mourner Mehlis Usubakanov.

Otunbayeva said Friday the base agreement will be continued at least for the near future. Opposition figures in the past have said they wanted to close the U.S. base, located at the international airport serving the capital.

Russia, which also maintains a military base in Kyrgyzstan, had pushed Bakiyev’s government to evict the U.S. military. But after announcing that American forces would have to leave the Manas base, Kyrgyzstan agreed to allow them to stay after the U.S. raised the annual rent to about \$63 million from \$17 million.

The status of the base has been a significant strategic question since the uprising Wednesday.

“We have no intentions whatsoever to deal with the American base now. Our priority is the lives of the people who suffered. A top priority is to normalize the situation, to secure peace and stability,” Otunbayeva said Friday as she visited a Bishkek hospital that had treated many wounded.

Staff writer [William H. McMichael](#) and Associated Press Writers Yuras Karmanau in Bishkek and Jim Heintz in Moscow contributed to this report.

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