

Some Flight Operations Resume at US Manas base in Kyrgyzstan

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Limited military flight operations have resumed at the air base in embattled Kyrgyzstan that serves as a key resupply hub for the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan, a Pentagon official says.

Flights in and out of the Transit Center at the Manas airport, outside the capital of Bishkek, were suspended for 12 hours Wednesday, according to a military spokesman at the base. U.S. Air Force Maj. Rickardo Bodden was evasive when asked if flights had resumed, but the Pentagon's Bryan Whitman said Thursday, "Currently there are limited operations at the Manas airfield." He subsequently indicated he was referring to flight operations.

Whitman added that support for U.S. warfighters in Afghanistan "has not been seriously affected" and that "we hope we will be able to resume full operations soon."

In the meantime, officials said they are using alternate means to get that support into Afghanistan. "As prudent planning dictates, we will make use of options to ensure that support continues to those conducting operations in Afghanistan," said Tampa, Fla.-based Central Command spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Bill Speaks.

The center, overseen by the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing, is the No. 1 air mobility hub for the International Security Assistance Force and coalition military forces operating in Afghanistan, officials say. In March, about 50,000 U.S. troops passed through Manas on their way in and out of Afghanistan, said Maj. John Redfield of Central Command.

An opposition coalition proclaimed a new interim government Thursday in Kyrgyzstan and said it would rule until elections are held in six months. It urged the president to resign and said there were no immediate plans to change the U.S. lease for a strategic airfield.

The new interim defense minister said the armed forces have joined the opposition and will not be used against protesters.

China on Thursday said it was "deeply concerned" about the violent uprising in its small western neighbor, echoing comments by Russia and the U.S. The impoverished Central Asian nation hosts the Manas U.S. military air base, a key facility supporting the war in Afghanistan, and also hosts a Russian military base.

Opposition leader Roza Otunbayeva, the former foreign minister, said parliament was dissolved and she would head the interim government. She said the new government controlled four of the seven provinces and called on President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who has fled the capital of Bishkek, to resign.

“His business in Kyrgyzstan is finished,” she said.

Although the opposition has previously voiced objection to Manas, Otunbayeva said there were no plans yet to review the current one-year lease agreement with the U.S. She said her government would meet U.S. diplomats for talks in Bishkek.

“Give us time, it will take time for us to understand and fix the situation,” Otunbayeva said.

Kyrgyzstan, which shares a 533-mile border with China, is also a gateway to other energy-rich Central Asian countries where China, Russia and the U.S. are competing fiercely for dominance. It is a predominantly Muslim country, but it has remained secular.

The U.S. Embassy denied reports in the Kyrgyz media that U.S. citizens were being evacuated to the Manas air force base, where about 1,200 U.S. troops are stationed. Americans in civilian clothing were seen entering the base Thursday morning.

Russia sent in 150 paratroopers to its base to ensure the safety of the 400 military personnel and their families there, Russian state media reported.

By Thursday afternoon, there was no sign of Bakiyev. Otunbayeva said he had fled to the central region of Jalal-Abad, the heart of his political stronghold, to seek support. This raised some concerns that Bakiyev could try to exploit the country’s traditional north-south split to secure his own survival.

Thousands of protesters have clashed with security forces throughout the country in the last two days, driving out local governments and seizing government headquarters in Bishkek. Elite riot police shot into crowds of protesters in Bishkek on Wednesday and hospitals were overwhelmed with the dead and wounded.

The country’s new defense chief, however, said Thursday that the nation’s 5 million people now have nothing to fear from the security forces.

“Special forces and the military were used against civilians in Bishkek, Talas and other places,” Ismail Isakov said. “This will not happen in the future.”

In Bishkek, residents nervously went about their business on a clear spring morning Thursday, the snowcapped mountains visible in the distance. There were no police on the streets.

Most of the government buildings in the capital, as well as Bakiyev’s houses, have been looted or set on fire and two major markets were burned down. A paper portrait of Bakiyev at government headquarters was smeared with red paint. Obscenities about him were spray-painted on buildings nearby.

Otunbayeva blamed Bakiyev for the week’s violent clashes.

“Yesterday’s events were a response to aggression, tyranny and a crackdown on dissenters,” she said. “All the people who were killed and wounded are victims of this regime.”

The Health Ministry said at least 74 people were killed and 400 people hospitalized in

clashes nationwide Wednesday.

Almaz Bakibayev, a 30-year-old cook who was among the wounded, said the bloodshed would be worthwhile if it brought in a better government.

“The blood was not shed in vain,” he said at Bishkek’s Hospital No. 4. “What I can’t understand is why they started shooting at people.”

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for calm and said he would immediately send an envoy to Kyrgyzstan, which he had criticized in a visit Saturday for its human rights violations.

“I could feel the tension in the air,” he said Thursday in Vienna. “The pressure has been building for months.”

Since coming to power in 2005 amid street protests known as the Tulip Revolution, Bakiyev had ensured a measure of stability, but the opposition said he did so at the expense of democratic standards while enriching himself and his family.

He gave his relatives, including his son, top government and economic posts and faced the same accusations of corruption and cronyism that led to the ouster of his predecessor, Askar Akayev.

The interim government brings together a wide spectrum of opposition leaders whose differences have undermined them in the past.

One area of consensus was on the decision to repeal the recent sharp increases to utility taxes that provoked widespread anger. Beyond that, the new team of ministers — who range from the socialist Ata-Meken party leader Omurmbek Tekebayev, whose portfolio will include drawing up proposed constitution reforms, to the technocratic interim Finance Minister Temir Sariyev — may have trouble forging a united platform.

“We have kicked out Bakiyev, the people have taken power into their own hands, but we have no plans for the future,” said Abdykerim Sadykov, a 42-year-old teacher, as he stood with thousands of others outside the ransacked government headquarters.

“We will wait until the opposition hatches a plan,” he said.

In Washington, State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said the U.S. deplored the violence and urged all to respect the rule of law.

In 2009, Kyrgyzstan said U.S. forces would have to leave Manas, a decision made shortly after Russia granted Kyrgyzstan more than \$2 billion in aid and loans. The government later reversed its stance and agreed to a one-year deal with the U.S. that raised the rent to about \$63 million a year from \$17 million.

The U.S. is also paying \$37 million for airport improvements, another \$30 million for new navigation systems, and giving the government \$51.5 million to combat drug trafficking and terrorism and promote economic development.

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