

The Uzbek and Kyrgyz Ethnic Conflicts in Kyrgyzstan: Replay of the 1990 Osh Drama

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Two decades after the 1990 interethnic clashes in Osh – some of the worst in a series of bloody conflicts that marked the collapse of the USSR — we are witnessing a recurrence of fighting between the local Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities. How likely is it that the development presages a new round of statehood disintegration in the post-Soviet space?

The Kyrgyz administration has declared a state of emergency in the Osh and Jalal-Abad provinces, but the republic's interim government is clearly unable to quell the violence independently. Judging by the scale of the hostilities and the death toll, at the moment Kyrgyzstan is on the brink of a conflict that can easily spill over the entire Fergana Valley.

The conflict involving the use of firearms was sparked by a fight between Kyrgyz and Uzbek youths in a city club in Osh late night on June 10 and immediately spread over a wider region. The administration put the republic's police and armed forces on high alert and Osh mayor Melisbek Myrzakmatov called for peace and restraint in a televised address, but the measures failed to prevent escalation. In Osh, gangs of young people with firearms and iron bars roamed around the city torching residences, stores, cars, restaurants, and gas stations while schools and state institutions were forced to close and the public transportation was brought to a halt. The administration also shut down gas supply to the city.

By the middle of the day, fighting and arsons in the downtown Osh were suppressed, but the epicenter of unrest had drifted to the Cheremushki neighborhood on the city outskirts, which was later sealed off by police. High concentration of armed people in Cheremushki was reported, and in one incident the mob even managed to disarm the soldiers from the cordon around the neighborhood. The Kyrgyz administration had to dispatch additional police units and army special forces on armored vehicles to Cheremushki to regain control over the situation.

Osh residents were building barricades in the city streets. The city's airport was overwhelmed by the number of people attempting to flee Kyrgyzstan. All stores in Osh closed, leaving the population without food and essentials, and marauding gangs looted the defenseless neighborhoods. According to an eyewitness account, traffic in Osh was totally paralyzed, mobs dragged people out of their cars that had to stop by the barricades, overturned the vehicles and set them on fire.

By the night of June 11 tensions began in the Batkent province. Some 200 aggressive young people gathered in downtown Batkent, planning to go to Osh and protect their ethnic brethren. Activists even called for the seizure of the local police station and its arsenal, but eventually the situation calmed down. Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, was the next city

to face a major upheaval as some 500 people convened in front of the parliament building and requested buses to take them to Osh. When the demand was rejected, they sized a dozen or so taxi minivans, and the police had to disperse the crowd.

Violence erupted in the Batkent and Jalal-Abad provinces on June 12 as riots took place in some parts of the former and a group of people attacked a military base in the Kugart township in the latter, seized several cars and a number of firearms, and headed for the Suzak village. A firefight in Suzak raged shortly thereafter. Unrest also began in the Aksy district of the Jalal-Abad province. Youths were gathering and shooting was audible in the city of Jalal-Abad.

Osh was facing a catastrophe. Mobs seized several armored personnel carriers and used them to open fire on unarmed people. According to the data supplied by Fergana.ru which may still be incomplete, the death toll topped 1,000, most of the victims being ethnic Uzbeks. Refugees from the southern part of Kyrgyzstan started flowing to the neighboring Uzbekistan which deployed special forces at the border between the two republics. The Kyrgyz administration officially asked Russia to intervene but so far Moscow is hesitant about a peacekeeping operation in the republic. In an attempt to restore order, the Kyrgyz administration mobilized reservists and authorized the law enforcement agencies to shoot when necessary.

The tide of violence in Osh subsided on June 13, but intense fighting resumed in Jalal-Abad where a group of youths attacked an Uzbek neighborhood and started a firefight. Banks, stores, and residences were set on fire in the city, prompting a dispatch of special forces from Bishkek. Russia deployed a battalion of the 31th airborne brigade to the Kant airbase to ensure the security of its military installations and to protect Russian citizens.

As of the morning of June 16, the official death toll reached 187. Medical assistance was requested by 1,928 people, of whom 902 had to be hospitalized. The truth, however, is that there is no reliable information on the total number of the people killed. Fergana.ru quoted Osh self-government officials as saying that the fighting took 1,526 lives, mostly those of ethnic Uzbeks. Tens of thousands of Uzbeks were forced to leave their homes. According to the UN High Commission for Refugees, the number of displaced people on June 15 was 275,000. Some 100,000 of them — mostly women, children, and senior citizens — rushed to Uzbekistan.

The majority of watchers are convinced that the Osh massacre was the result of a provocation organized by the clan of the ousted Kyrgyz president K. Bakiyev. On June 14, Jalal-Abad province commandant and First Deputy Chairman of the Kyrgyz State National Security Service Kubatbek Baibolov charged that a group of Tajic citizens who opened fire indiscriminately on ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks was responsible for fueling the unrest. He also said the Tajics were hired by the Bakiyev clan. Tajikistan reacted harshly to Baibolov's statement and requested that Kyrgyzstan either present evidence to support the claim or apologize.

Obviously, the key objective pursued by the forces which ignited the conflict is to derail the June 27 referendum which is to confirm the status of the Kyrgyz interim government. To an extent, they can already boast success as the outcome of the referendum will lack credibility given the large number of persons in Kyrgyzstan who are currently displaced. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have also been dragged into the orbit of the conflict — the former had to host masses of refugees and the latter — to face allegations that its citizens helped

organize the outbreak of violence. The escalation in Kyrgyzstan – in case it takes place – is sure to further affect both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Considering that Kazakhstan also borders Kyrgyzstan, it is clear that currently the entire Central Asia is under serious threat.

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