

United States to Retain Manas Base in Kyrgyzstan for Another Year

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General David Petraeus, Commander of the U.S. Central Command, has visited Kyrgyzstan for talks with Kurmanbek Bakiyev. The Kyrgyz president said it is in Kyrgyzstan's interests to maintain security and stability in Afghanistan and therefore it will not be against the United States using its Manas international airport.

This means that Kyrgyzstan will not terminate the agreement according to which the United States is using Manas airport for transshipment of troops and military cargo to Afghanistan. The agreement expires on June 22 but can be automatically prolonged for another year unless one of the sides terminates it.

U.S. Special Representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Halbrooke, met with the Kyrgyz leader on February 20 to discuss the issue. He said upon his return to Washington: "We will renew the arrangements in the next few weeks, and I wanted to launch that process."

Meanwhile, opponents of the U.S. military presence have become more active in Kyrgyzstan. The Council of Kyrgyz Aksakals (Elders) on Wednesday demanded that the base be closed and U.S. troops pulled out of the country.

Academician Omorbai Narbekov, a member of the council, said the demand was formulated after Abdolmalek Rigi, leader of terrorist group Jundollah (Soldiers of God), said the Americans are using the Manas base to train troops for overthrowing the Iranian regime.

Based in Pakistan, Jundollah claims to be fighting for the rights of Sunni Muslims in Iran and is responsible for numerous attacks in Iran, targeting both civilians and military personnel.

"The United States made short shrift of Iraq and has turned on Iran, planning to destabilize the situation in Central Asia so as to involve the regional countries into their war, just as they did in the case of Afghanistan," Omorbai Narbekov said.

Another member of the council, a Mr. Samokhvalov, said: "There is no guarantee that Iran will not attack Kyrgyzstan tomorrow."

Iran's special forces arrested Rigi on February 23 on board of Kyrgyzstan's airliner Boeing 737. Iran later said that the arrested man had confessed to working for the secret services of the United States, Britain and Israel and that he was going to Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan, for a meeting with a high-ranking U.S. official at the transit base.

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