

US Renews Rights to Kyrgyz Base

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WASHINGTON: The United States has reached an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to renew rights to an airbase seen as vital for the US-led war effort in nearby Afghanistan, a senior US envoy said on Tuesday.

Richard Holbrooke, the US pointman on Afghanistan and Pakistan, toured four Central Asian nations last month in a bid to ensure their support for President Barack Obama's campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Holbrooke said that the United States would soon renew an agreement to use the Manas airbase, where he said 35,000 US troops were transiting each month on their way in and out of Afghanistan.

"We will renew the arrangements on (the base) in the next few weeks, and I wanted to launch that process," Holbrooke told reporters on his return to Washington.

"We're very grateful to the Kyrgyz government for that support," he said.

Kyrgyzstan last year briefly ordered the closure of the US base near its capital Bishkek, in what was widely seen as a power play by Russia that had offered a generous aid package for the former Soviet republic.

But Kyrgyzstan eventually changed its mind after the United States agreed to pay it 60 million dollars a year to lease the airbase — more than three times the price since taking over the base after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

It was the first trip to Central Asia by Holbrooke since he assumed his position after Obama took office in January 2009.

Along with Kyrgyzstan, Holbrooke visited Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. He said he had also planned to go to Turkmenistan but could not due to a logistical problem.

In Tajikistan, Holbrooke said he spoke with President Emomali Rakhmon about starting a project to provide water to parched areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The United States has stepped up cooperation with the central Asian republics since the September 11, 2001 attacks but its relations sometimes been uneasy due to concerns about their leaders and human rights records in the region.

Holbrooke visited Tajikistan just before legislative elections that strengthened Rakhmon's grip on power but which the United States and European observers said were marred by major fraud.

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