

Over 40 Dead in Tajik-Kyrgyz Border Clash as Death Toll Rises

Fighting that broke out over water rights also injured more than 200 people, government officials said.



By Andrew E. Kramer

April 30, 2021

MOSCOW — A border clash this week between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan killed more than 40 people, government officials said Friday, significantly raising the death toll for an episode that began as a dispute over irrigation water.

The outbreak of violence comes at a delicate time for the United States after the Biden administration announced a full withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, which borders Tajikistan to the south, by September. The nations of Central Asia provide an alternative to Pakistan as an overland route to withdraw American military equipment.

The fighting around a Tajik enclave in southwestern Kyrgyzstan briefly resumed on Friday before the countries' presidents spoke on the phone and agreed to meet next month. The sides had agreed to a cease-fire Thursday.

The office of Kyrgyzstan's president, Sadyr Zhaparov, issued a statement saying it was "confident that mutually beneficial cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will continually and fruitfully develop on the basis of traditional and centuries-old friendship and honesty between the peoples."

But local reports suggested the situation on the ground, entangled in local grievances and raw ethnic tension, remained unfriendly. Videos posted online showed Tajik-speakers rejoicing as Kyrgyz homes burned in one village.

What began with rock throwing between Tajiks and Kyrgyz in villages along the border escalated into an exchange of small-arms fire between border guards and other security forces.

Kyrgyz authorities said that the Tajik government had deployed military forces in the region before the escalation and that a helicopter attacked a border post. Still, when the fighting stopped with a cease-fire Thursday both sides reported a total of six dead.

But on Friday the Ministry of Health of Kyrgyzstan said 31 people died and 154 people were wounded on its side. The national authorities in Tajikistan have not released a death toll for their side, but local media citing regional officials said 10 people had died and 90 were wounded.

The fighting centered around Vorukh, a Tajik enclave in Kyrgyzstan that has for years been a hot spot in a long-simmering conflict over ethnic enclaves in and around the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia, a legacy of the Soviet breakup.

Another long-running security headache in Central Asia has been water politics. Tajikistan controls the headwaters of many of the region's rivers that the four other former Soviet states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, depend on for irrigation. The fighting this week began over control of an irrigation canal.

In the early stages of the Afghan war, the United States opened two bases in Central Asia to move troops into Afghanistan, and also transported everything from fuel to food on an overland route through the region and into the war zone.