

# *Central Asian Border Dispute Casts Shadow Over U.S. Afghan Departure*

Fighting between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan raised the specter of instability in the region as the United States prepares to leave Afghanistan.



By Andrew E. Kramer

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MOSCOW — Fighting broke out on Thursday between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over control of an irrigation canal and an access road to an ethnic enclave, raising the specter of instability in Central Asia as the United States prepares to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The clash escalated beyond the typical border skirmishes that break out regularly in the remote, mountainous region of southwestern Kyrgyzstan and are a legacy of the Soviet breakup. The countries dispute water rights and territory.

Border guards and other security forces exchanged small-arms fire, videos posted online showed, and mortars and artillery were fired from the Tajik side, according to Kyrgyz officials. The Kyrgyz authorities also reported that helicopters attacked several positions. Pictures from the area showed a Kyrgyz border patrol post on fire.

At least three people died, including a soldier and a civilian child, according to the Kyrgyz government. The Tajik government said three civilians had died, Reuters reported. By the end of the day, Kyrgyz authorities had evacuated several villages.

Late Thursday, the two governments announced a cease-fire and an agreement that soldiers would return to their usual positions, though it was unclear whether small areas of land that had changed hands would be returned, according to a senior Kyrgyz official who was not authorized to discuss the agreement publicly.

In announcing the cease-fire, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Interior said that it “does not have designs on foreign territory and also has no plans to share its own land with anybody.”

The fighting centered around Vorukh, a Tajik enclave within Kyrgyzstan and a flash point in the conflict over ethnic enclaves in and around the Ferghana Valley, a long-simmering security problem that gets little attention from the world at large. The Soviet breakup left dozens of small pockets of ethnic minorities in the valley.

Vorukh, a mountain valley lush with water and known for its apricot groves, is upstream from Kyrgyz villages that depend on it for irrigation.

In addition to the water dispute, the Tajik government claims an access corridor to the district that is contested by the Kyrgyz government. The fighting centered around this road and a sluice controlling irrigation water.

Raw ethnic tension is also a backdrop to the fighting. The clash was preceded by reports of locals hurling rocks at one another, and construction workers and shepherds being kidnapped.

Though the area is far from the Afghan border and main routes out of Afghanistan, the hostilities come at a delicate time for the United States.

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

Central Asia today provides an alternative to Pakistan as an overland route for moving equipment out of Afghanistan as the Biden administration has vowed a complete withdrawal by September.