

Kyrgyz 'terror' probe complications

A POLICE CRACKDOWN AGAINST suspected Islamic extremists following a recent grenade blast in Osh is sparking concerns among human rights defenders about discrimination against Muslims and harassment of Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek population, the country's largest minority group.

The attack that set off the controversy occurred on November 20, while members of the Interior Ministry Special Forces were conducting a police raid in Osh, the country's southern capital. Though details of the investigation have been kept sealed, official reports state that the blast occurred after police officers took four young men into custody after two of them failed to supply their identity papers when asked. As the group entered Osh's inspection directorate, one of the detainees allegedly threw a hand grenade in an attempt to escape. One police officer, Nurlan Sadiev, and the detainee, whose identity has not been released, were killed in the ensuing explosion. The remaining detainees escaped.

Kyrgyz officials maintain that the incident was a terrorist act carried out by Islamic extremists and have put Osh police on high alert. Preliminary police reports linked the escapees to the fundamentalist Wahhabist movement and then to an unnamed group of Islamic extremists based in Uzbekistan. Two Kyrgyz passports taken from two of the detainees before the blast have provided police with a critical lead to the alleged perpetrators of the attack, Osh police chief Polotbek Tolonov told EurasiaNet. The documents bear the names of Khasan Suleimanov and Khasan Suleimanov, both residents of Osh. Religious literature reportedly found at the house of one of the detainees, Khasan Suleimanov, appears to have fuelled claims that the attacks were the work of Islamic radicals.

But local human rights observers say that connections with Islamic extremists or terrorist groups are tenuous at best. Police also blamed Islamic terrorists for a June 1998 bus explosion and a May 2003 bank explosion in Osh. As in those instances, observers note that the event appears to be more closely tied with criminal activities, or a reaction to the police raid itself.

A former member of an Osh-based Wahhabist group, who asked only to be identified as Khasan, agreed, telling EurasiaNet that "claims that Wahhabis are behind the explosion are baseless. Other things were behind it. The police are lying to people." To date, no religious group has taken credit for the grenade blast.

But that has done little to deter police in their investigation. Following the incident, police have raided houses in Osh and the Aravan and Nookat districts, all in southern Kyrgyzstan where a large Uzbek diaspora exists and traditional Islamic beliefs run strong. As a result of these raids, two individuals have been arrested for possession of books published by the non-violent Islamic radical group Hizb-ut-Tahir, and more than 50 have been brought in

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for interrogations. Search warrants have also been issued for an additional six suspects, including two citizens of Uzbekistan.

The crackdown has raised not only issues of religious discrimination, but, also, of ethnic harassment. Most believers who are being targeted by the police probe are ethnic Uzbeks, while law enforcement officials are Kyrgyz. Uzbeks are Kyrgyzstan's largest ethnic minority, accounting for some 13 percent of the total population of 5 million. In recent years, complaints of discrimination have increased significantly. A 2003 poll conducted by the Osh-based Uzbek Cultural Centre found that more than 60 percent of 1,436 ethnic Uzbek respondents thought that the government inadequately defended Uzbek interests. Yet with the rise in nationalism among Kyrgyz politicians, many Uzbeks in the country's south have opted to back the government rather than opposition groups in 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections as their best bet for stability and peace. How the Osh investigation will

affect this calculation is unknown.

Further complicating matters, local human rights defenders and organisations appear reluctant to intervene to defend those scooped up in these raids. The example of Ravshan Gapirov, the director of the Kara-Suu Human Rights Centre, serves as one strong deterrent. Gapirov has sat in prison since November 2000 on charges of hooliganism after offering to represent jailed Hizb-ut-Tahir members.

Still, human rights activists do not hesitate to point out that police actions fall outside the bounds of the law. One activist in Osh, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that police raids and interrogations were illegal since they had not been sanctioned by the prosecutor's office. Police have also used the raids, the activist said, to extort money from potential suspects.

Ironically, considerable support for these arguments has come from the government itself — albeit not directly. In recent days, some Osh and national officials have also expressed scepticism that the attack was the work of terrorists. Osh city prosecutor Ryskulbek Baktybaev flatly told journalists that "his was not a terrorist act" while Minister of Internal Affairs Bakiridin Subanbekov has raised the issue of police incompetence.

The grenade blast, Subanbekov told a November 22 press briefing, was the result of unsatisfactory work by local police alone. "If [the Osh police] worked well,

Nurlan Sadiev would be with us," said Subanbekov. — *DT-EurasiaNet*

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13/12/05 Daily Times

Central Asia