

RECENT MILITARY ACTION IN KHOROG

A SUMMARY OF EVENTS, ANALYSIS AND OPINION

August 2012

On 24 July 2012 the Tajik government sent heavily armed troops (from the Presidential Guard, the Interior Ministry, the State Committee for National Security GKNB - formerly the KGB - and the elite 'Alfa' commando unit - according to a government statement), armoured vehicles and helicopter gunships to Khorog, the capital of the Pamirs region (autonomous province of Gorno-Badakhshan - GBAO) nominally to apprehend the alleged murderers of Abdullo Nazarov, head of the regional branch of the GKNB. Nazarov died in unauthenticated circumstances near Khorog on 22 July. The government accuses Tolib Ayombekov, a local border guard officer, and others connected to him, of the alleged murder.



A full-scale assault, with snipers posted on high ground around the town was launched on Khorog districts in which the alleged murderers were suspected to be hiding.¹



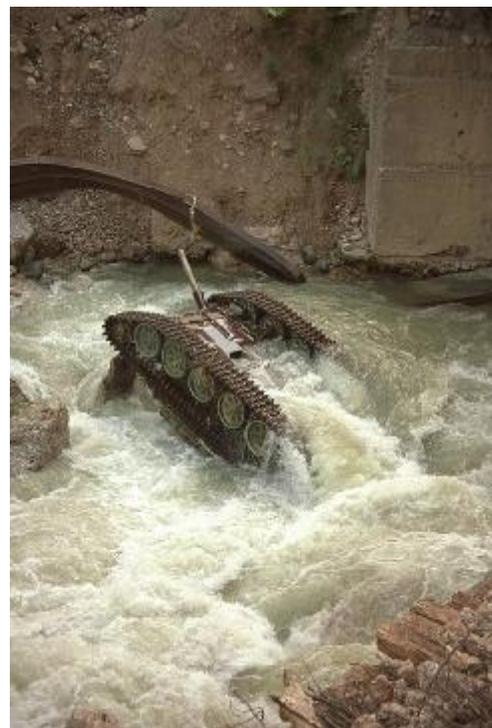
It may well be asked why such firepower was necessary to apprehend a few alleged criminals. The fact that the attack was launched in heavily populated urban districts

¹ See footage in <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=7433> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZ08K1D35I>

without any opportunity for civilians to leave the area can only be described as an indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force.² The additional fact that a full-scale military exercise was carried out near Khorog only a few days previously³ may be more than a coincidence and suggests that the assault may have been premeditated. Communications to Khorog have been cut and there is no Internet connection. The head of the state communications service, Beg Zukhurov, claimed that a stray bullet had severed telephone, mobile, and Internet connections to the region⁴ – a claim that would be laughable if the situation were not so serious. The websites of several news agencies have been blocked throughout Tajikistan.

A few perceptions need to be corrected:

- The population of the Pamirs was associated with the opposition forces during the Tajik civil war. It is not correct, however, as stated, among others, by *The Wall Street Journal* of 24 July that GBAO was a “onetime Islamist stronghold”. A large majority of the inhabitants observe the Ismaili faith, a moderate and modern form of Islam, of which the spiritual leader is the Aga Khan. Although there are now bridges allowing traffic across the Panj to Afghanistan, the people of GBAO have no connection or affinity whatsoever with the Taliban or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan as has been suggested in some reports.
- Memories of the civil war are strong and the leaders of the local Pamiri militia (the so-called “self-defence” forces) of the time are perceived as having prevented the invasion of GBAO by government forces (in 1993 the town of Sagirdasht was bombed and government forces reached the town of Kala-i-Hussein before withdrawing). Then and now some of these leaders were suspected of involvement in criminal activity, but they were and are still held in respect by the local people. Tolib Ayombekov is the younger brother of Abdulamon Ayombekov, better known as ‘Alyosha the Hunchback’, commander of the Khorog ‘self-defence’ forces, who was killed by a remotely detonated mine in Khorog in 1994.⁵ During the recent military activity many young men volunteered to fight against the government forces.



A reminder of the civil war at Kala-i-Hussein

- GBAO is the poorest part of what is one of the poorest countries in the world. The inhabitants feel themselves underprivileged and under-represented. Survival during the civil war was only possible because of humanitarian assistance provided by the international community, principally through the Aga Khan Foundation. The agricultural and much of the economic development in GBAO is due at least as much to the work of agencies of the

² <http://news.tj/en/news/there-was-no-necessity-launch-large-scale-military-operation-khorog>

³ <http://news.tj/en/news/defense-minister-observes-military-exercise-khorog>

⁴ <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/30/tajikistan-respect-rights-security-operations>

⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyrmrXeD6o4>

Aga Khan Development Network as to investment and economic assistance from the central government.

- It should not be surprising that appeals have been made during the past week to the President of Russia (*Ria Novosti*, 26 July 2012). Russia is held in high regard by the people of the Pamirs: during the late 19th century, several appeals were made to the Tsar for protection against Afghan depredations and the Russians were welcomed to Khorog when they established a military base there in 1897. During the Tajik civil war, similar appeals were made to Moscow for protection.
- Accusations of corruption are regularly levelled at all branches of the Tajik government.⁶ Tajikistan is ranked 152nd of 183 countries in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index. Opportunities abound, not least for the internal security service GKNB and the Border Guards.⁷ Corrupt senior officials of both organisations compete for the proceeds of smuggling, particularly narcotics.⁸ It cannot be excluded that Nazarov's death is related to this rivalry. Nazarov's wealth is a subject of speculation in Dushanbe and, it is claimed, bears no relation to his salary as a government official.
- Gorno-Badakhshan is only one of the routes by which drugs from Afghanistan transit to Moscow and the West. A UN report of May 2012⁹ noted that "the eastern flow is smaller in volume and travels through the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in the area between the Tem and Ishkashem border points. This is the traditional opiate route to Osh, Kyrgyzstan." Many Tajiks and Western officials describe the latest campaign as driven, at least in part, by a desire of criminal networks allied with the central government, particularly those from the President's home district of Kulyab to muscle in on the smuggling business in Gorno-Badakhshan.

Nazarov is not a native of GBAO, whereas those accused by the government are, and – because of their role in the civil war – enjoy a certain hero status locally. It is suspected that the "power structures" in Tajikistan may have used Nazarov's death as a pretext to settle scores with former leaders of the local militia from civil war days, who still have influence in GBAO. Many of those now being tracked down were integrated into the Tajik Border Guards under the 30% rule agreed for ending the civil war (30% of senior government posts were allocated to members of the opposition forces), but in Dushanbe their loyalty to the President was always in doubt.

A Western diplomat was quoted by Eurasianet as saying that the killing just acted as a catalyst for government action in a region the president sees as growing increasingly lawless, he said, but the heavy-handed tactics could backfire. "It's ironic that for years the president has been saying a return to civil war is the nightmare scenario, because

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/248969>, <http://gdb.rferl.org/A8DD059E-EC3B-4418-B2A9-9A6E971FBAE5.jpg> and <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62564>

⁷ http://etajikistan.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/rfe_who_is_tolib_avombekov_27_july_2012_en3.pdf

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tajikistan/9034768/Tajik-police-arrest-anti-narcotics-officials-on-drug-smuggling-allegations.html>, <http://www.avesta.tj/eng/afghanistan/554-afghan-general-has-accused-the-tajik-border-guards-to-facilitate-the-smugglers.html>, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/2012829732701255.html> and <http://jod.sagepub.com/content/37/4/951.refs>

⁹ http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf

this attack may well escalate,” he said. “The president is likely embarrassed at having gotten this so spectacularly wrong,” the diplomat added. “The longer term price is difficult to determine, but there is clear discontent here at the overreaction of the authorities.”¹⁰

A Soviet-style attempt to suppress all opposition to a kleptocratic government? This thesis is supported by the reported death in custody in Khorog of Sabzali Mamadrizoyev, head of the GBAO section of the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), the largest opposition party in Parliament, and the disappearance of the head of IRP’s organization for Khorog, Sherik Karamkhudoyev. The party has demanded an investigation.¹¹

During the assault on Khorog, government troops, many of them raw recruits,¹² suffered substantial losses, as a result of which the President called a cease-fire which, after several extensions, is still holding. Positions have hardened and the civilian population, furious at the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force in an urban area and resulting civilian casualties,¹³ combined with continuing sniper attacks, spontaneously took action to support the local rebels and effectively barricaded major parts of the town. Eyewitness reports state that recruits were told they would be brought to Khorog to prepare for security during the celebrations for the 80th anniversary of the town of Khorog at the end of August and that several of them have told local residents that they want no part in violence against the local population and want to return home as soon as possible.

A negotiating committee comprising representatives of the regional government and civil society was formed and has been negotiating since 24 July with the central government representatives and the rebels. The main objective has been to disarm all local armed groups and allow government forces free access to all parts of Khorog.

With a presidential offer of total amnesty and under pressure from local people and respected community leaders, the first groups announced on 29 July that they were laying down their arms.¹⁴

International pressure (OSCE, USA, European Union, UK, UN, ICRC, Germany, Human Rights Watch) on President Rakhmon is growing, despite reported support for him from China. The key question is what it will take for him to announce a retreat from the region without losing face. Several commentators pointed out that going into this mountainous and inaccessible region, into which government forces had not penetrated during the civil war, was a high risk strategy for the President, dictated partly by electoral considerations and partly to demonstrate to the Russian government that he could impose his authority on this remote region of the country. How many surrendered opposition fighters and weapons will he need to back off?

¹⁰ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65722>

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPwtGrxFF5E&feature=related>, <http://news.tj/en/news/irp-urges-thorough-investigation-murder-mamadrizoyev> and <http://news.tj/en/news/irp-sends-delegation-gorno-badakhshan>.

¹² According to an expatriate eyewitness, the majority of the soldiers were from GBAO. “The government had used Pamiri soldiers against Pamiris. It was really underhanded and increased tensions a lot,” he said. (<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65722>)

¹³ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65733>

¹⁴ http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2012/07/31/newsbrief-03

Given his limited popularity in the country, the government losses (officially 17, some 150 according to local eyewitnesses) must be a source of concern to him as he heads into the 2013 Presidential elections. Even though the former opposition armed groups are small, the indiscriminate use of force and heavy civilian casualties have brought many local young men to their side. It can only be hoped that the government commanders on the ground also recognise the risks.

Today, the situation looks promising. The local leadership and civil society have done good work and are optimistic that a non-violent solution has been found. Asia Plus reports that the voluntary disarmament process is continuing.¹⁵ The authorities in neighbouring Afghan Badakhshan are cooperating with the Tajik authorities.¹⁶

There are reports that President Rakhmon is about to sign an amnesty and that only the alleged murderer and two associates are now being sought.¹⁷ Reports that they had headed for Lake Sarez with a large quantity of explosives, threatening to blow up the natural dam and cause a major catastrophe are without basis. Many of the local men involved in the fighting may be formally integrated into a militia that is supposed to work within the State structures.

If, however, the ceasefire is broken by either side, there is a strong likelihood of further major casualties. Even if the government forces prevail it will be a Pyrrhic victory leading only to further outbreaks of violence in the future. There are fears of a renewal of the pogroms of the civil war, when people of Pamiri origin, easily recognisable by their accent or use of one of the Pamiri dialects were rounded up and shot – housewives no longer dare speak Shugni to each other in Dushanbe markets.

The overwhelming wish of the people of GBAO is for peace.¹⁸ For the sake of the civilian population it can only be hoped that the President can again demonstrate the political acumen he showed in bringing the civil war to an end in 1997.

Sources:

Anonymous eyewitness accounts and opinions

AsiaPlus (<http://news.tj/en>)

Radio Ozodi (<http://rus.ozodi.org/> and <http://www.rferl.org/expert/area/153.html>)

Google News (search term “Khorog”)

YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1t6HijlBxVs&feature=channel&list=UL>)

¹⁵ <http://news.tj/en/news/process-voluntary-surrender-weapons-continuing-khorog>

¹⁶ <http://news.tj/en/news/afghan-regional-security-force-commander-detained-connection-khorog-events>

¹⁷ <http://news.tj/en/news/authorities-reportedly-promise-bring-only-three-persons-justice-khorog>

¹⁸ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BReJ5zRD3aU>