

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

The Wall Street Journal

Afghan Drug Trade Sends Tremors

By Yaroslav Trofimov

08/02/2012

Dispute Over Trafficking Sparks Security Crisis Along Opium Route Through Neighboring Tajikistan

A dispute over the drug trade lies at the heart of a security crisis that has gripped this Central Asian nation, as Afghanistan's opium industry sows instability across the region.

Senior Tajik law enforcement officials are involved in this trade, Western officials say, including a border commander targeted by government forces last week in the worst violence since the country's civil war ended in 1997.

This narcotics business enjoys protection at the highest levels of the Tajik government, Western law-enforcement officials believe. "State security agencies and departments are still reluctant or unable to arrest and prosecute high-level drug smugglers—there is just too much drug flow through Tajikistan for any other view," the U.S. State Department said this year in its annual narcotics report.

Tajik officials say the government is committed to the fight against narcotics trafficking.

Up to 80 tons of heroin and 20 tons of opium are smuggled through Tajikistan's 835-mile frontier with Afghanistan every year, on the way to consumers in Russia and Europe, according to United Nations estimates.

A sizable portion of this drug flow comes through the narrow river that separates Afghanistan from Gorno-Badakhshan, the mountainous eastern province where Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon sent thousands of government forces to launch an assault last week.

On Wednesday, some security forces began pulling out from neighborhoods in the provincial capital city of Khorog. The government said that approximately 200 gunmen surrendered weapons. With the main local warlords still at large, the potential remained for fighting to resume.

The main target of this operation was Talib Ayombekov, a border police lieutenant-colonel in charge of a large part of the Afghan frontier. Like many other civil war-era rebel commanders, Mr. Ayombekov joined the government under 1997 peace accords. Tajik authorities say he is one of the region's main drug lords and also runs a cigarette- and gem-smuggling business.

Over the past few years, President Rakhmon, a former Soviet apparatchik, has steadily pushed out other former rebel commanders, consolidating his authority. Gorno-Badakhshan, a sparsely populated area that accounts for nearly half Tajikistan's territory, was the only major region where former rebels still enjoyed considerable sway.

Many Tajiks and Western officials describe the latest campaign as driven, at least in part, by a desire of criminal networks allied with Mr. Rakhmon and hailing from his hometown of Kulyab to muscle in on Mr. Ayombekov's lucrative turf.

"This was about economic control, and a dispute between the center and local structures over the region's business, legal and illegal," says Parviz Mullojanov, a political analyst in Dushanbe.

Tajik authorities say they launched the operation to arrest Mr. Ayombekov because they believe he orchestrated the assassination of the province's state security chief, Gen. Abdullo Nazarov, earlier in the month. Mr. Ayombekov denied the accusation and called for an independent inquiry.

Three other Gorno-Badakhshan commanders—including another former border police lieutenant-colonel—took up arms to defend him when government forces entered Khorog on July 24. Dozens of servicemen and local fighters, and an unknown number of civilians, were killed.

The two sides have since maintained a cease-fire, with government officials proposing an amnesty to the three other rebel leaders and to all fighters—excluding Mr. Ayombekov and whoever killed Gen. Nazarov.

"Both sides are looking for a compromise, which is likely to be a return to the status quo," Mr. Mullojanov says. "The local population won't forgive them if there will be high civilian casualties."

Details of what is happening in Khorog are sketchy, as the Tajik government has maintained a blackout of the province's mobile-phone networks, closed the roads, and on Wednesday expanded its practice of blocking access to independent news websites across the country.

"Maybe things in Khorog aren't going as well as they claim, and they don't want anyone to know about it," said Zebo Tadjibaeva, executive director of the Dushanbe-based Asia-Plus news agency, whose site was blocked Wednesday on government orders.

A man who managed to flee Khorog this week for the relative safety of Dushanbe said he had little sympathy for either Mr. Ayombekov or the assassinated security chief, Gen. Nazarov. "A general and a colonel couldn't manage to divide the spoils, and now a war has begun," he said as he arrived in Dushanbe in a dusty SUV, after a 14-hour trek. "Tell me, what does this have to do with us, the peaceful residents who suffer as a result?"

The Tajik crisis, meanwhile, has reverberated across the frontier in Afghanistan, where Mr. Ayombekov has high-level friendships and business connections, especially among fellow members of the Ismaili sect of Islam that dominates Gorno-Badakhshan, according to Tajik officials. Afghan authorities said Wednesday they arrested the chief of Afghan police in a district not far from Khorog on suspicion of helping the Gorno-Badakhshan fighters.

"We worry that the conflict in Tajikistan will create problems between our government and the Tajik one," says Afghan national security adviser Rangin Dadfar Spanta. "The problem on the Tajik border is about smuggling. We will deploy forces to crush the smugglers."

While Gorno-Badakhshan is an important smuggling route, it is complemented by the drug flow through the rest of Tajikistan, including bulk shipments via a modern bridge that the U.S. built across the Panji river in 2007 to facilitate legitimate trade and supplies for coalition forces, Western officials say. "Why take it on a donkey if you can drive it by the truckload?" one official says.

In Dushanbe, capital of the poorest former Soviet republic, drug wealth is converted to gaudy new buildings, largely unoccupied, and fleets of Porsches and BMWs and even an occasional stretch Hummer plying the city's crumbling streets.

From Tajikistan, heroin exits in sealed railway cars or on the several daily flights that ferry guest laborers to Russia, which hosts more than a million workers from Tajikistan. "Once heroin crosses the Afghan border into a Central Asian state, there are no obstacles and no frontiers anymore, the way is open," says Russian Ambassador to Kabul Andrey Avetisyan. —Maria Abi-Habib contributed to this article.