



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
High Commissioner on National Minorities
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STATEMENT ON KYRGYZSTAN

by
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to the
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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Mr. Chairperson, Distinguished Ambassadors, Members of Delegations,

Following recent events, I visited Kyrgyzstan last week to look into the interethnic situation in the country. My visit was facilitated by the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ambassador Tesoriere and his team for their excellent support.

As you know, as High Commissioner, I work in confidence and do not publicly report on my findings. However, the mandate does allow the High Commissioner to bring a particular issue to the attention of the OSCE Permanent Council.

I am very concerned about the situation in Kyrgyzstan and believe it deserves the attention of this Council. In my view, post-uprising Kyrgyzstan represents one of the OSCE's biggest challenges since the 2008 war in the Caucasus. This challenge is not confined to the field of interethnic relations and I would like to draw your attention to three examples:

First, many people in Kyrgyzstan have become disillusioned with politics. They no longer trust their politicians and do not see a positive future for their children in the country.

Second, physical security and the protection of property rights are acute problems. Many of my interlocutors in Kyrgyzstan have asserted that the police do not command the trust of the population. Consequently, it appears that criminal groups may be taking advantage of this situation, seizing people's land and demanding "protection" money from entrepreneurs.

Third, Kyrgyzstan has traditionally been a trading hub for the Central Asian region and the continued closure of borders will have a major impact on government revenues.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Head of the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, Ambassador Tesoriere, will provide a comprehensive report on the situation in Kyrgyzstan in a few weeks' time. Consequently, my

remarks will focus on the effect of the April 2010 events on the interethnic situation in the country.

National minorities have become particularly vulnerable. The events in the village of Maevka, which I visited last week, provide an illustration of their plight. On 19 April 2010, several houses belonging to the Meskhetian/Meskhetian Turk minority there were looted and torched in the presence of a large crowd that numbered several hundred. I was told that these houses had been marked beforehand to enable attackers to recognize specific targets. As a result of this violence, five people died, many more were wounded and several properties were burned down. The attackers also seized land belonging to members of minority communities. I am happy to learn that according to press reports police action on Tuesday has resulted in the return of the illegally occupied property to the local community.

The provisional authorities assert that the violence in Maevka was inspired by remnants of the former regime. I can neither confirm nor deny these reports.

What is evident is that the people I met in Maevka are living in fear and perceive the violence to be ethnically targeted. I felt a sense of deep apprehension and defencelessness when I talked to them.

This pattern of violence is not unique. Incidents of this kind – albeit on a lower level – have taken place across the north of Kyrgyzstan, namely, in the town of Tokmok and in the villages of Gidrostoitel and Aleksandrovka. Interethnic tension is also increasing between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in the south of the country.

The uprising in Kyrgyzstan has resulted in an increase in nationalism, which has the potential to threaten interethnic peace in the country. This wave of nationalism is perhaps an inevitable outcome of the Bakiyev administration's policies, especially given that members of his administration held openly xenophobic views and proclaimed the ethnic superiority of the Kyrgyz people.

For example, employment, particularly in the state sector, was skewed in favour of persons claiming titular identity, notably in the police, judiciary and security forces. Knowledge of the State language was increasingly being set as a prerequisite for state sector employment.

At the same time, little was done practically to increase knowledge of the State language among non-speakers.

Members of minority communities had few opportunities to realize their potential, except in the business sector. This particular minority niche led to accusations that minorities became wealthy at the expense of the Kyrgyz people.

The Bakiyev administration maintained a façade of interethnic harmony. It paid lip service to respect of minority rights. I tried to bring my concerns to the attention of the Bakiyev administration on numerous occasions, both in writing and in person, but have been unable to meet with Mr. Bakiyev in my three years as High Commissioner. Many of my recommendations remain unanswered.

At the same time, I have endeavoured to promote minority inclusion and integration through projects in education and policing. Many of these projects have been successful. However, without the commitment and support of the top leadership and without a long-term strategy they will only have a marginal influence on interethnic relations.

The consequences of this disregard for interethnic issues started to emerge long before the 2010 uprising. Open ethnic clashes first erupted in February 2006 in the village of Iskra, and later in the village of Petrovka in April 2009. Most recently, ethnic Kurds have been forcefully evicted by the ethnic majority from the town of Kok-Jangak. In January 2010, an ethnic-Kurd raped a Kyrgyz girl, resulting in collective punishment for the Kurdish population, which has led to a reported 23 out of 28 families leaving the town

I urged the authorities to act at that time but to no avail.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that minority communities continue to suffer disproportionately in the post-uprising period. It is the members of numerically smaller communities – Meskhetians/Meskhetian Turk, Kurds, Uighurs and Dungans, however, who are most at risk because they lack police protection and have no kin-State to rely on or to migrate to. As such they represent a soft target for marauders and criminals.

I was told that many members of minority communities are leaving the country for good because of absence of law and order. They are reportedly too afraid to stay. Various interlocutors in the provisional authorities and civil society activists have confirmed increases in migratory plans.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Kyrgyzstan cannot afford ethnic strife.

What can we in the OSCE do to face up to this challenge?

This was precisely the subject of my talks with the provisional authorities in Bishkek and in Osh.

First, I urged the provisional authorities to meet their obligation to ensure the security of all Kyrgyz citizens, including the country's sizable minority communities. I stressed the need to publicly condemn anti-minority attacks, to investigate these crimes and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

It is also imperative to stop inflammatory statements and prosecute individuals inciting interethnic hatred. I was given copies of newspaper articles which, for example, called for the expulsion of ethnic Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan so that the Kyrgyz poor could take possession of their houses and land. Similar views are said to feature in some broadcasts.

In conversations with leaders of the provisional authorities, I also raised concern about statements made by some officials who said they would dismiss all non-Kyrgyz speakers from the Government. I am grateful to the leaders of the provisional authorities, particularly Ms. Otunbayeva, for their assurances that such statements were isolated and would not become official policy.

Second, I emphasized the need to include minority communities in the process of drawing up the Constitution and Electoral Code, and to take into account their wishes and aspirations.

This will not only serve as an immediate confidence-building measure but would also send a signal to minority communities about their continued importance and value for the future of Kyrgyzstan.

I am pleased that the newly established Constitutional Conference includes some prominent members of the Uzbek, Russian, German and other minorities. This is a welcome sign.

Next week, I will also dispatch a member of my legal staff to Bishkek to work alongside the Venice Commission and the ODIHR in the process of drafting the Constitution so as to make it compatible with the country's international obligations.

Third, the longer-term, post-election perspective also requires that measures be taken in the fields of linguistic policy, education and participation.

Minorities have to be recruited into the judicial sector, prosecutorial offices, police, army and civil service. It is important to allow minority languages to be used in areas of geographical concentration – a provision in the 1993 Constitution, but which later disappeared. The Kyrgyz authorities also have to roll-out a genuine programme of State language teaching for minorities. Multilingual education will need to be supported by the post-election Government.

In fact, ideas such as multi-ethnic policing and multilingual education have already been embraced by police officers and educators at the grass-roots level. Now, they need to be supported at the very top in order to make them successful.

Finally, it is equally important to empower the minority communities themselves. The current organization that is intended to represent minority interests – the Assembly of the People of Kyrgyzstan – has been ineffective under the Bakiyev administration.

Both the provisional authorities and minority organizations that comprise the Assembly told me that they want to reform the Assembly and make it into a genuine consultative body that would advocate and lobby for minority rights. In the coming months, I will assist the Assembly and the provisional authorities to formulate a draft law setting up a consultative body on minority issues.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Last autumn a number of you travelled to Kyrgyzstan. I expect that many of you were struck – as I was on the occasion of my first visit to Kyrgyzstan in 1999 – by the country’s ethnic diversity and by the rich cultural heritage of its communities.

We in the OSCE need to help Kyrgyzstan preserve this diversity during this difficult time. Having just returned from Kyrgyzstan, I am concerned, but I am also hopeful.

I am hopeful because I was impressed by the stated intention of Kyrgyzstan’s provisional authorities to protect and promote human rights. I believe this desire is real and we in the OSCE have to encourage it as much as we can.

I believe it is also crucial that this Permanent Council sends a message emphasizing the importance of protecting interethnic peace in Kyrgyzstan. I encourage you to consider a Permanent Council Statement to that effect. This will reassure minority communities that the international community knows about their problems and attaches great importance to their resolution. As a result, they will make a long-term commitment to Kyrgyzstan.

Thank you for your attention.