

Gazprom Looks to Supply U.S. Air Base

December 08, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

Gazprom Neft will team up with a new Kyrgyz state company to supply fuel to a U.S. military air base in Kyrgyzstan, a Russian diplomat said Wednesday.

A subsidiary of the oil producer, Gazpromneft-Aero, only provides fuel to Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan for civil aviation, Gazprom Neft's press service said in an e-mailed statement.

Kyrgyz authorities on Wednesday unveiled the new company, Manas Refueling Complex, to supply the Manas air base, overhauling an opaque contract system that it had scorned earlier.

Manas Refueling Complex will supply up to half of the fuel consumed by the air base, a key transit point for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan.

"This is the first step toward displaying this government's readiness to work transparently," said Amangeldy Muraliyev, Kyrgyzstan's deputy prime minister.

Russia, however, may also have a role to play.

Manas Refueling Complex is owned entirely by the government of Kyrgyzstan. But Valentin

Vlasov, Russia's ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, said a unit of state-owned Gazprom Neft was planning to team up with the Kyrgyz state concern to supply fuel to the base.

The United States in November awarded a new fuel contract to Mina Corp., the Gibraltar-registered company that supplied fuel to the Manas base under the Kyrgyz president ousted in April. The company has denied any links to the former president or his family.

At the time, the U.S. Defense Department said the deal allowed for a future, second contract to supply 20 percent to 50 percent of the base's fuel needs.

"Kyrgyz companies will sell up to 50 percent. This means Mina Corp.'s portion will be reduced by up to 50 percent," said Larry Memmott, deputy chief of mission of the U.S. Embassy.

"We want all of Kyrgyzstan to understand our relations and to know where the money goes, and we are glad that this money will go into the budget," he said.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, visiting the Manas air base on Dec. 2, offered U.S. assistance in creating a new body to manage part of the fuel supply contract.

Manas Refueling Complex plans to supply up to 20,000 tons to the base before the end of the year, rising to 120,000 tons next year and 180,000 tons — or about half of all supplies — in 2012.

"Today, we have 20,000 tons in our reservoirs," said Marat Malatayev, head of the state-owned company. "Everything is ready for work with the Manas transit center and we can begin at any moment."

(Reuters, MT)

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