

U.S. Sees Tajik Support for Base

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The  **Moscow Times**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Tajikistan has indicated that it would welcome a U.S. military air base on its territory as reinforcement against Afghan unrest and a means of funding its cash-strapped economy, a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable said.

The cable, sent on Feb. 16 this year and published by WikiLeaks, also said "cronyism and corruption" permeated all levels of government and prevented development.

Tajikistan, which shares a 1,340-kilometer border with Afghanistan, is an important transit route supplying cargo to the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan. The cable said Tajikistan was pressing for greater benefits in return for this support.

"They have indicated they would be happy for the U.S. [to] establish an air base in Tajikistan. They see U.S. involvement in the region as a bulwark against Afghan instability, and as a cash cow they want a piece of," the classified message read.

Tajikistan's Foreign Ministry said it would not comment on any of the revelations. "We do not consider any materials published on WikiLeaks as important or truthful," said ministry spokesman Davlatali Khaidarov.

The cable may embarrass Washington as it attempts to build closer ties with Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon who shares concerns about the spread of Islamist militancy in the region.

The cable, published by Britain's Guardian newspaper, said "resistance to reform" was the greatest obstacle to improving an economy that relies on remittances from migrant workers in Russia for more than 40 percent of revenues.

"From the president down to the policeman on the street, government is characterized by cronyism and corruption," the cable read.

It said Rakhmon and his family controlled the country's major businesses and played "hardball to protect their business interests, no matter the cost to the economy writ large."

The cable quoted an unidentified foreign ambassador as saying: "President Rakhmon prefers to control 90 percent of a ten-dollar pie rather than 30 percent of a hundred-dollar pie."

About 1 million Tajiks work abroad to feed their families, unable to find jobs at home, but the country seeks to develop its economy by investing in ample hydropower resources and a major silver deposit.

The cable described Afghan instability as a "malign" influence on Tajikistan, a secular but mainly Muslim country of 7.5 million people, and said that drug trafficking undermined the rule of law in Tajikistan.

Underlying these concerns, Tajikistan has this year jailed more than 100 members of banned religious groups and has been fighting insurgents in the mountains since a column of troops was attacked in September.

"Tajiks fear the spread of extremist ideas from Afghanistan, and militants in Afghanistan can threaten Tajik security across the long, porous border," the cable said.

The cable also described "personal animosity" between Rakhmon and Uzbek President Islam Karimov, as well as mistrust of Russia and Iran.

It said: "Displays of Persian solidarity do not mask deep suspicions between the hard-drinking, Soviet-reared Sunni elite in Dushanbe and religiously conservative Shiites in Tehran."

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