

Tajik Troops Attack Ex-Warlord After General Killed

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DUSHANBE — Tajikistan's security forces launched their biggest operation for nearly two years on Tuesday, using helicopter gunships in an assault on a former opposition warlord accused of killing a security services general in a remote eastern region.

A security services source said several rebels had been killed in the "special operation" in the remote region of Gorno-Badakhshan and several government troops had been wounded.

The attack was ordered after Major-General Abdullo Nazarov, head of the regional branch of the State Committee on National Security (GKNB), was beaten to death on Saturday by a group who stopped his car in a mountainous area neighboring Afghanistan.

Communications were cut off in the regional capital, Khorog, and a Khorog resident said locals had been told to stay at home and gunfire could be heard in the distance.

"Several rebels have been killed, a few taken alive, including five Afghan citizens. We will check if they are linked to the Taliban, but we have no doubt about it," said the security

services source, who requested anonymity.

He said several security servicemen had been wounded, but there were no dead among government forces.

The GKNB, successor to the Soviet-era KGB, said in a statement that the "organized criminal group" accused of killing Nazarov was led by Tolib Ayombekov, a former opposition warlord who now commands the Ishkashim detachment of border guards.

Ayombekov's gang had for many years been involved in drug trafficking and the smuggling of tobacco and precious stones, and had committed "bandit attacks," the GKNB said. It did not say why it had not arrested him earlier.

"We hope the operation continues to proceed this way," the security source said. "We are just about to capture Ayombekov — dead or alive."

Gorno-Badakhshan is an autonomous region in the Pamir mountains, its capital Khorog lying about 500 kilometers southeast of Dushanbe, the national capital.

Tajikistan, a mainly Muslim, Central Asian nation of 7.5 million, remains the poorest former Soviet republic 15 years after the end of a 1992-97 civil war in which the Moscow-backed secular government fought the Islamist opposition.

Tens of thousands were killed before a 1997 peace deal signed in Moscow, under which the opposition was entitled to a 30 percent quota in Tajikistan's state institutions.

"This murder was the last straw. The warlord, who has clean forgotten that the war ended 15 years ago, must be destroyed," the Tajik security source said.

Communications have been cut off in Khorog, the security source said, and a Khorog resident with Internet access told Reuters by email that sporadic shooting could be heard from about 20 kilometers away. Military helicopters were patrolling the area.

Employees of international humanitarian organizations were evacuated to a safer location and local residents were told not to go to work on Tuesday, he said.

The Gorno-Badakhshan region, with a population of around 250,000, mainly supported the opposition during the civil war. Local attitudes toward Dushanbe remain chilly.

President Imomali Rakhmon's tenuous grip on the restive region is further weakened by drug trafficking and the smuggling of tobacco and other goods across the porous Afghan border.

Tuesday's operation appeared to be the largest of its kind since late 2010, when troops hit rebel forces in a retaliatory attack in a nearby region.

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