

Tajik Forces Demand Rebels Surrender Former Warlord

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State-run television channels covered the aftermath of the campaign to capture former warlord Tolib Ayombekov in the autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan region.

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Tajik government forces on Thursday demanded that rebel commanders lay down their arms and hand over a former warlord, a security official said.

The two sides began a second day of talks after a battle which killed 42 people.

President Emomali Rakhmon called off a military offensive after fierce fighting Tuesday in a remote mountain region next to Afghanistan.

Troops continued to patrol the streets on Thursday.

The cease-fire in the autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan region followed a campaign to capture former warlord Tolib Ayombekov.

The campaign is a show of strength by a government whose control over parts of the Central Asian state remains tenuous 15 years after a civil war.

Twelve soldiers and 30 rebels were killed in the operation to apprehend Ayombekov, who fought against Rakhmon's troops in a 1992-97 civil war before receiving a government job in the peace deal that ended the conflict.

The government has offered amnesty to all rebels except the four fighters, including Ayombekov, it accuses of killing the regional head of the State Committee on National Security, whose murder Saturday was the trigger for the military offensive.

"We are trying to persuade the fighters to lay down their arms and hand over the four suspects, including Ayombekov," a senior Tajik security official said on condition of anonymity.

"It could take a week or two. That's still better than shooting each other," he said. "Of course, they cannot continue forever. We've suffered heavy losses, but we will suffer more to end this situation if they do not agree to our conditions."

Khorog, capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan region and the nearest town to the fighting, was calm Thursday, the security source and a local resident said. Communications were cut off for a third consecutive day.

The local resident, able to communicate via satellite link, said that people had returned to work and that shops were open for a second day Thursday.

"We can buy rice, pasta, flour and butter. We are not going hungry," he said.

He said he was aware of at least two civilian deaths, one elderly man and one 18-year-old man caught in crossfire.

He said that he had attended the funeral of the younger man and that his neighbor had informed him about the elderly man.

The security service source said, "I don't know anything about civilian casualties. I have heard there may be some as a result of stray bullets."

Gorno-Badakhshan, separated from Afghanistan by the Pyandzh River, is an autonomous region where the authority of the central government is fragile. Most of the 250,000 population sided with the opposition during the civil war.

Ayombekov has denied involvement in the death of Major-General Abdullo Nazarov, head of the regional branch of the GKNB, successor to the Soviet-era KGB.

The GKNB has said his gang was involved in smuggling drugs, tobacco and precious stones.

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