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# Saving Central Asia

If ethnic anger explodes again, it will be felt far beyond Kyrgyzstan.

**Paul Quinn-Judge\***

**BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN** A major crisis is taking place in Central Asia, but much of the world — and most governments — would prefer not to think about it. Kyrgyzstan has lost control of a significant part of its country.

Initial violence has caused many hundreds of deaths and, as of the latest count, over 400,000 refugees. This from a population of five million. The calm that has come over the area is temporary combat fatigue. Kyrgyzstan's new provisional government is looking in-

creasingly incapable of taking any measures to restore homes, livelihoods, destroyed infrastructure or trust. It can barely impose order. Yet world leaders are looking elsewhere.

Washington is obsessed with Afghanistan, and though the Americans have a major base in Kyrgyzstan at Manas, they seem disinclined to do very much. They may have given up hope for the base, but they are clearly not interested in getting involved with Kyrgyzstan's police and military, whom they seem to regard as feckless at best.

Russia views Central Asia as its backyard, but it has no interest in cleaning up this particular bit of it. Moscow is not enthused that the provisional

government, for all its many failings, talks of building a multiparty democracy. Kyrgyzstan does not have the abundance of natural resources that make its neighbors so attractive or "strategic" to the outside world. Finally, senior leaders in Moscow — Vladimir Putin probably among them — do not want to set a precedent. That is, they do not want to intervene in Kyrgyzstan's domestic crisis, lest the international community suggest sometime in the future that they have a right to help search for peace in, say, Russia's permanently bloody North Caucasus.

With rare, noble exceptions — the Red Cross and United Nations High Commission for Human Rights and the refugee agency U.N.H.C.R. among them — the world's many international bodies have again been underwhelming. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe is chaired by the venerable autocrat Nursultan Nazarbayev, from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan's neighbor. His country can barely hide its disdain for the new Kyrgyz regime. The U.N. Security Council has as usual been timid and risk averse.

But it is no use just hoping the crisis will go away. Many atrocities have been committed in the past few days in Kyrgyzstan, and there are many angry — and armed — people in the region. Sooner or later, the anger will once again well up. The crisis has weakened the government almost to the point of collapse. The south has no functional government. It is not inconceivable the same could happen to the north. There are dangerous signs of a political vacuum taking shape.

Perhaps people feel that a power vacuum in a country that few people could find on the map is no big deal. They are wrong. Even if they do not want to know about the last few days of sadistic and horrific violence, they should perhaps ponder for a moment two things that could move in the vacuum.

Kyrgyzstan is a major stop in the drug road from Afghanistan. Much of Afghan-

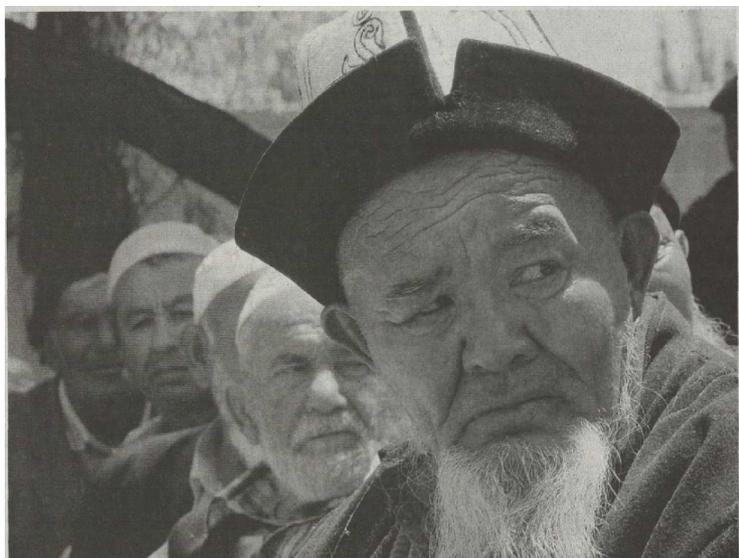
istan's opiates are trucked and flown in to the south of Kyrgyzstan. The chances are, in fact, that drug dealers have been active in the violence. Much of the drugs move straight on — to Russia, which already has an enormous problem both with drugs and intravenously transmitted H.I.V./AIDS, and to China, which is developing the same problem.

Southern Kyrgyzstan is also a transit route for another commodity the West fears: Islamist fighters. They move to and from Afghanistan, on their way to Uzbekistan just across the border, but also to Western Europe. It is already a comfortable stop along their long march. A country without a government will make for an even friendlier environment.

If we want to stop this happening, if we want to forestall a growing humanitarian crisis and avoid years of political instability and insecurity, the international community needs to stop sitting on its hands. It is a horribly difficult situation, getting more intractable by the day. But with a modicum of political will certain things can be done fast.

In southern Kyrgyzstan two well armed communities, Kyrgyz and Uzbek, live in close proximity, angry and scared. First of all they need to be separated, right away: ideally by an international armed force if anyone has the courage to offer troops. Failing that, a political buffer zone of international mediators who can keep the communities at a safe distance from each other. We need medical teams, ideally Russians, who speak the region's common language and who can treat Uzbeks who now refuse to have anything to do even with Kyrgyz doctors. We need a safe environment where cool heads from both sides can start the long process of searching for a middle ground. And we need to do this right now, before the middle ground ceases to exist.

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Uzbek and Kyrgyz citizens of Kyrgyzstan during talks over the weekend to ease ethnic strife.

ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS