

Kyrgyzstan: New Evidence Emerges on Brutality of Attacks

International Inquiry Needed

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(New York) - Newly uncovered evidence of vicious attacks during the massive violence in Kyrgyzstan on June 10 to 14, 2010, underscores the need for an international inquiry into the mayhem, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch said the international inquiry should supplement the Kyrgyz government's investigation.

In one case that came to light during Human Rights Watch investigations, a 50-year-old ethnic Uzbek woman told researchers how on June 11, a mob invaded her home and beat and burned her as they tried to get her to reveal her son's whereabouts. She refused, but as she watched, helpless, the men entered and then torched an adjacent building where the son was taking shelter, burning him to death.

"This month's violence was the worst to hit Central Asia in two decades," said Ole Solvang, emergencies researcher at Human Rights Watch. "There needs to be an international investigation to establish what happened, determine who was responsible, and ensure this kind of violence never happens again."

On the eve of the June 27 constitutional referendum, the situation in the south remains extremely tense and unpredictable, with ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek residents having largely retreated into ethnically near-homogenous areas, each group fearing attacks by the other. Representatives of both groups told Human Rights Watch that they fear a resumption of violence, and many doubt that government forces would be able to control it. Human Rights Watch documented several attacks on ethnic Uzbeks who ventured out of their neighborhoods after large-scale violence had subsided.

The government's decision to proceed with the referendum and the return of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people to almost uninhabitable areas make the situation even more volatile, Human Rights Watch said. The interim government has not announced how it will ensure that refugees and individuals who lost their identification documents in the violence will be able to vote, raising concerns that the referendum will provoke new violence.

On June 17, Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group called for the deployment of an international stabilization mission in Kyrgyzstan to facilitate a safe environment for delivery of humanitarian assistance, provide security for return of displaced persons and refugees, and forestall further outbreaks of ethnic violence.

From Clashes to Mob Violence

Mass violence erupted on June 10 when hundreds of Uzbeks gathered near a dormitory in the center of Osh, allegedly in response to recent scuffles between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. The Uzbek crowd torched several buildings, including a casino, and set fire to several cars. Violence escalated when rumors spread that people in the Uzbek crowd had raped a Kyrgyz girl in the dormitory, a rumor that turned out to be false.

Human Rights Watch researchers working in southern Kyrgyzstan from June 10 to 22 documented the massive looting and destruction of civilian property and widespread acts of violence by Kyrgyz and Uzbek mobs in the city of Osh and the towns of Jalal-Abad and Bazar-Kurgan.

While both ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks fell victim to the violence, Uzbek neighborhoods were particularly affected as mobs of ethnic Kyrgyz, many of them reportedly from villages surrounding the city of Osh, repeatedly attacked Uzbek areas. Over the following days mobs looted and burned to the ground an estimated 2,000 houses in at least six Uzbek neighborhoods in Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Bazar-Kurgan. Human Rights Watch documented dozens of killings and beatings during these attacks, interviewed two Uzbek victims of rape, and received detailed information about the rape of nine others, ages 15 to 40, from the doctor who had treated them.

Human Rights Watch also spoke with relatives of Kyrgyz men who were killed during the violence and documented the destruction of several buildings belonging to ethnic Kyrgyz.

Hospital records and witness testimony indicate that the majority of dead and wounded are young Uzbek and Kyrgyz men. However, dozens of women and children were also shot or burned in their homes.

Human Rights Watch research suggests that the violence - particularly the attacks on Uzbek neighborhoods - was systematic and, at least in some cases, well-organized. Witnesses in several neighborhoods told Human Rights Watch that Kyrgyz men in military uniform riding on top of an armored personnel vehicle would first clear the barricades that the Uzbeks had erected at the entrance of their neighborhoods. A group of armed men, including gunmen strategically placed on rooftops, would then fire at people in the neighborhood, forcing them to flee.

Once residents fled or hid in their basements, the next group, in civilian clothes, entered the neighborhood and systematically looted the houses, often loading the loot on cars stolen on the spot. Another group then followed, setting the looted houses on fire with Molotov cocktails or gasoline. In several cases documented by Human Rights Watch, the mob also beat and killed residents who did not manage to escape or who tried to prevent the destruction of their homes.

Both Uzbek and Kyrgyz mobs seem to have specifically targeted the other ethnic group. Human Rights Watch observed that many houses had been marked with the ethnicity of their owners. In several neighborhoods, virtually all Uzbek homes were destroyed, while the few houses that remained intact belonged to Kyrgyz, indicating that the mobs obtained information about the owners of the houses and limited attacks to Uzbek houses. The Kyrgyz mobs covered the walls on Uzbek homes with graffiti saying "Death to the Uzbeks" and similar slogans.

Questions About Involvement of Government Forces

Many Uzbeks told Human Rights Watch that they believe government forces participated in the attacks on their neighborhoods, referring to the presence of armed men in military uniform among the attackers and the use of armored personnel carriers (APCs) to remove the Uzbek barricades.

Local law enforcement officials admitted to Human Rights Watch that APCs had been used in the attacks. They claimed, however, that the mobs had stolen weapons and military vehicles from nearby military bases. A high-level local official in Jalal-Abad told Human Rights Watch that at least 59 automatic guns, a grenade launcher, and two armored vehicles were taken from two military bases in Jalal-Abad. The official told Human Rights Watch that "in order to avoid bloodshed the troops abandoned the base," but claimed that they had first "broken" the military vehicles to avoid them being used by the mob.

While Human Rights Watch has not been able to conclude whether Kyrgyz security forces were directly involved in the attacks based on the information collected so far, the presence of men in military uniform, the apparent ease with which the mobs obtained weapons, including heavy military vehicles, and the failure to stop the violence should be key elements of the investigation, Human Rights Watch said.

"Given the circumstances, one can understand why the Uzbeks believe that government forces were complicit in these attacks," Solvang said. "The authorities need to investigate these allegations thoroughly and bring to justice those who participated in these attacks, regardless of whether they belonged to government forces."

Skepticism About the Government's Investigation

The interim government has begun an investigation into the June violence. Many Uzbeks told Human Rights Watch, however, that they do not believe that the authorities will conduct an impartial and objective investigation.

An Uzbek man who fled the town of Bazar-Kurgan and who, as of June 20, was still staying near the Uzbek border with thousands of other displaced Bazar-Kurgan residents who were too afraid to go home, told Human Rights Watch: "We don't believe the authorities any more. While the

Kyrgyz were burning our homes and killing us, the police were nowhere to be seen. How can we trust them now to investigate these violations if they failed to prevent them and refused to protect us in the first place?"

Recent actions by government forces have reinforced the perception in the Uzbek communities that they cannot trust the law enforcement authorities to be objective. Shortly after the military forced residents of Uzbek neighborhoods to remove barricades that they had erected for protection, security forces carried out several abusive sweep operations, during which the security forces killed at least two ethnic Uzbeks and beat and wounded dozens of others.

Human Rights Watch said that in addition to an international inquiry into the violence, the Kyrgyz government investigation should involve international experts.

"Many Uzbeks told us they believed security forces either perpetrated the attacks or deliberately turned a blind eye to them," Solvang said. "Regardless of whether this is true, the result has been a complete breakdown in trust between the Uzbek community and the government. The participation of international experts in the investigation would lend the investigation crucial credibility."

Human Rights Watch said that for an investigation to be effective, it needs to be prompt, impartial, independent, and thorough. Impartiality and independence are essential to public confidence that allegations of collusion or tolerance of the perpetrators of the violence will be addressed. Those responsible for carrying out the investigation need to be independent from those implicated in the events, not just institutionally but in practical terms.

For example, the investigators should not rely on evidence or information solely from the source being investigated, and should have the mandate to establish the key issues of responsibility and liability, coupled with the power and resources to secure the necessary evidence. Given these standards, international participation would provide added essential expertise and credibility.

Selected cases from Human Rights Watch research

Gang-rape of 16-year-old "Umida"

Late at night on June 10, hundreds of young Kyrgyz men came to several streets in the Cheremushki neighborhood in the eastern part of Osh, inhabited predominantly by ethnic Uzbeks. Numerous witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch said the men were beating the residents and looting and burning the houses. Umida, whose name was changed to protect her, said:

"The men came and took me to the neighbor's house. There were about 30 women and children there. The Kyrgyz said they would hold us hostage and then exchange us for \$4,000 each.

Then I saw that my house was on fire, and minutes later the Kyrgyz men dragged my father out. He was badly beaten, bleeding, and I tried to get out and started screaming at the Kyrgyz who were guarding us to protect him.

Then, two men dragged me out of the house. I was trying to resist, and then a third one hit me hard on the lower back and I was in so much pain I couldn't fight with them any more. The men dragged me to the toilet in the yard of the house, and the two of them raped me. Then another three came and raped me, too. I lost consciousness, and I am not sure how long I stayed there after they left.

I managed to make it back to the house, and then my father and I ran away."

Along with hundreds of other Uzbeks who lost their homes or had to run for their lives, Umida found refuge with wealthy neighbors, who arranged shelter and medical help for her and other victims of the violence. A doctor confirmed to Human Rights Watch that Umida had been raped. Umida expressed willingness to talk to Human Rights Watch and made an effort to tell her story, but she was visibly in a state of deep shock, not getting out of bed and hardly speaking to anyone else.

Attack on 22-year-old Emil and 22-year-old Ruslan

On June 10, at around 10 p.m., two ethnic Kyrgyz men, Emil and Ruslan, who work in a computer club in Osh, were on their way back to their home village of Japalak on the outskirts of the city. They had not yet heard of any clashes in the city and thus took their usual route - through an Uzbek neighborhood. Emil told Human Rights Watch:

"We took a taxi, and everything seemed quiet, but on Telmana street we saw that the road was blocked by a car and there were about 200 to 300 Uzbek men there, with sticks, shovels, and some with weapons. They stopped our car, screamed, "Get you, Kyrgyz!" and dragged us out of the car.

About 20 or 30 of them started beating us mercilessly until we were on the ground and could hardly move. I was begging them to stop, saying that we are all Muslims and can't treat each other like that, but they didn't listen.

They would have killed us, but an older man suddenly intervened and dragged us away from the crowd. He made us sit by the side of the road and said he would shoot us if we tried to flee.

As we were sitting there, we saw the Uzbeks stopping other cars and beating the passengers, while more and more Uzbeks arrived to support them.

Eventually, the old man who rescued us led us across the street and told us to escape by foot. We crossed into Cheremushki neighborhood, and from there a friend gave us a lift home."

When Human Rights Watch interviewed Emil and Ruslan, whose last names were withheld to protect them, on June 18, they still had marks from the beating on their faces and bodies. Emil's eyes were extremely swollen, and he had trouble seeing.

Also, on June 11, an Uzbek mob raided the village of Kyrgyzcheck, which is predominately Kyrgyz, resulting in the deaths of at least eight people. Dozens sustained gunshot, knife, and burn injuries.

Killings and Torture During Raids on Osh Uzbek Neighborhoods

At about 1 p.m. on June 11, 14 armed men with guns stormed into the house of 60-year old "Nigora" in the Shait-Tube neighborhood in Osh city. The men beat Nigora on her legs with a baton and burned her skin with a loofah sponge, which they set on fire, in an attempt to force her to tell them where her son was. The bruises and burn marks were still visible more than a week after the attack. Nigora said:

"Some of the men wanted to kill me, but the oldest of them, who was about 30 years old, stopped them. I told them that there was nobody else at home, but they didn't believe me. They went to the building in our courtyard where my son was staying. When they came out, they set fire to the house while my son was still there. They laughed and forced me to watch as the house burned down with my son inside. I don't know why he did not run out. Maybe they killed him when they went in.

Eventually they dragged me out on the street. I was crying and screaming. I watched as they cut the throat of my 56-year old neighbor, set fire to his house, and threw his body into the burning house. I also saw the dead body of our 14-year old neighbor on the street."

Nigora later saw the dead body of her son among the burned ruins of her house. She eventually made it to the town of Suratash on the Uzbek border, where she told her story to Human Rights Watch.

"Now I am just sitting here," she said. "I am afraid of a new war. I don't know what to do. I can't go to Uzbekistan and I have nothing to go home to."