

## REPORT SUMMARY

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## Kyrgyzstan: A Small Arms Anomaly in Central Asia?

By S. Neil MacFarlane and Stina Torjesen

The southern tier of the former Soviet Union (the Caucasus and Central Asia) is widely perceived to form an arc of instability fuelled by state weakness, economic decline, social fragmentation, civil conflicts, national and transnational crime, and the spillovers of conflict from neighbouring areas. For all of these reasons, many analysts have expected a high demand and availability of small arms throughout the region.

A study carried out by SAS in mid-2003 indicates that the degree of small arms possession, use, and proliferation in Kyrgyzstan is less serious than appears to be the case in other Central Asian states. There is no firm evidence of a link between the trafficking in small arms and that in drugs and people. Furthermore, small arms violence and casualty rates are limited. The study highlights the need to question regional generalizations and challenges assumptions about the link between social problems and arms proliferation and misuse.



Kyrgyz soldiers guard their headquarters in Batken in September 1999. (© Reuters/Shamil Zhumatov)

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The Kyrgyz government holds an estimated 50,000 weapons. This calculation is based on the number of armed servicemen and law enforcement officers and assumed ratios of 2.25 guns per soldier and 1 gun per law enforcement officer. Strict legislation governs civilian possession and, in practice, only members of the Hunters' Association are granted permission to own weapons. Of an estimated 15,000 registered hunting guns, 80 per cent are in the area surrounding the capital Bishkek.

Kyrgyzstan is thus different from most other countries for which data on possession is available in that the government controls a larger arsenal of small arms and light weapons than the civilian population and that more hunting guns are registered in urban areas than in the countryside. The majority of registered hunters are ethnic Russians who live in urban areas.

Illegal possession of weapons is difficult to quantify, but a number of indicators suggest that it is low and does not constitute a major security issue. Opinions of law enforcement officials and household survey respondents indicate that civilian ownership is likely to be low. Half of the respondents of a household survey carried out in villages close to the troubled borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan claimed that 'almost no households' in their villages had guns, while another quarter said that 'a few households' had guns.

## Small Arms Survey



Moderate gun injury and murder rates seem to confirm the assumption that gun ownership in Kyrgyzstan is limited. Officially reported gun fatalities remain at a low level, with no obvious upward trend: six in 2000, 11 in 2001, and nine in 2002. The ratio of murders committed by use of a gun among all murders is relatively low (10 per cent), a further indicator that guns are not widely available.

Kyrgyzstan has no weapons production, but in Soviet times the republic was a major producer of ammunition for the Soviet armed forces, providing as much as 30 per cent of Soviet force requirements. Ammunition production continues in Bishkek, and in 1996 Kyrgyzstan was the world's 13<sup>th</sup> largest exporter of small arms ammunition.

Leakages from government stockpiles are a concern to the government, and a number of officers and soldiers have faced charges. The military prosecutor records 530 charged individuals, but rampant corruption in the Kyrgyz government and crime among army personnel may lead to considerable underreporting of infractions. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan's overall stockpile is likely to be relatively small since withdrawing Soviet troops, took much of the equipment with them in 1991.

Most SALW will reappear on the black market in Kyrgyzstan or possibly elsewhere in the region. The main items circulating on the black market in Kyrgyzstan appear to be Makarov pistols and Kalashnikovs. At USD 500–1,500, a Kalashnikov is much more expensive in Kyrgyzstan than elsewhere in the region, most likely the sign of limited supply.

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Contrary to what some European analysts argue, the study finds no available evidence suggesting large-scale northward shipments of SALW from Afghanistan through Central Asia. Analysts asserting the existence of such a flow presuppose that arms flows accompany drug flows. Yet most local analysts and law enforcement personnel in Kyrgyzstan stress that there is no northbound trafficking in arms.

While there appear to be no substantial arms flows, Kyrgyzstan is home to a number of arms caches, which are a cause for concern. Most caches were probably installed by activists from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), who entered Kyrgyz territory in 1999.

Kyrgyzstan certainly is not free from socio-economic problems. Income levels continue to be below what people were accustomed to in the Soviet area and there are signs of considerable frustration and political disillusionment within society. State structures are weak. Ethnic minorities remain underrepresented. The government is unable to consistently provide essential public services. Ethnic tensions between the minority Uzbeks, minority Tajiks, and the Kyrgyz majority continue in southern Kyrgyzstan. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that the economic and political pressures facing Kyrgyzstan are producing major political instability within the country. Moreover, there is little sign that economic deprivation and social and political frustrations have led to increasing armed crime. Despite the common belief that Central Asia as a whole is awash with arms, small arms and light weapons do not appear to be a crucial security issue in Kyrgyzstan.

