Regional Overview: Central Asia and the Caucasus 9-15 February 2020

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Last week in Central Asia, key developments included the killing of high-ranking members of a Pakistani militant organization in Afghanistan; violence related to home demolitions in rural Uzbekistan; and the aftermath of deadly Dungan-Kazakh ethnic clashes in Masanchi, Kazakhstan. In the Caucasus, Azerbaijani state forces targeted opposition activists after they criticized the country's 9 February elections, while ceasefire violations continued on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In **Afghanistan**, the leader of the Hakimullah Mehsud group of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) was killed when a remote-controlled bomb exploded close to his home in the eastern province of Kunar. The incident followed the killing of two senior TTP commanders almost two weeks earlier in Kabul. It is not clear who is behind the killings, but media reports suggest either the Afghan security forces or Pakistani intelligence services were responsible (BBC, 7 February 2020). TTP is the largest militant umbrella organization in conflict with the Pakistani government (CISAC, July 2018). Since 2014, Pakistani security forces have pushed many of the group's fighters into eastern Afghanistan. There, Afghan intelligence services have allegedly developed links with the group in response to Pakistan's support for the Afghan Taliban. It is possible that the killings of senior TPP leaders — along with a recent Afghan raid targeting another Pakistani militant group, Hizbul Ahrar — are part of an agreement between American and Pakistani officials in exchange for Pakistan facilitating peace talks with the Taliban (BBC, 15 February 2020). The Taliban and the United States have, in the meantime, agreed to a seven-day reduction in violence, which, if successfully implemented, would pave the way for a peace accord in the coming weeks (VOA, 15 February 2020).

In **Uzbekistan**, violence flared after local authorities notified residents of the Halqabod neighborhood of Altinsay district in Surkhandarya region that they planned to demolish illegally built homes. Several residents clashed with the police and injured two officers. A week before the incident, in Altinsay, a video of an Uzbek woman holding an axe to

defend her home from a planned demolition was widely shared among Uzbek social media users, spotlighting tensions between the authorities and local communities affected by large-scale demolitions and construction projects (Kun.uz, 11 February 2020). Similar protests and riots occurred during the past year in different regions of the country that has been undergoing significant infrastructural changes since the former president Islam Karimov's highly authoritarian regime ended in 2016 (BBC, 30 July 2019).

In **Kazakhstan**, the death toll from ethnic clashes between Dungan and Kazakh villagers in Masanchi rose to at least 11. On 9 February, two more deaths were reported and on 13 February, a burned body was recovered, unveiling more details about the severity of the riots (RFE/RL, 13 February 2020).

In **Azerbaijan**, on 10 and 11 February, anti-government protests took place in Baku over irregularities reported by international observers during early parliamentary elections held on 9 February (OSCE, 10 February 2020). Police dispersed the protests and detained several activists. Some opposition figures claim that police targeted them ahead of the protests, arresting and then abandoning them outside of Baku (RFERL, 16 February 2020). As the Azerbaijani police forcibly intervened in the majority of opposition protests; this method has been used in the past to prevent anti-government demonstrations (Open Caucasus Media, 17 February 2020).

Meanwhile, leaders of **Armenia** and **Azerbaijan** met on 15 February during the Munich Security Conference to discuss the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This is a part of a dialogue between the two countries that resumed two years ago, contributing to a major decrease in ceasefire violations (Crisis Group, 20 December 2019). Though this meeting was also viewed as a positive step, it achieved no significant results (RFERL, 15 February 2020). On the same day, an Armenian soldier was wounded and an Azerbaijani soldier was killed on the Azerbaijan-Armenia Line of Contact. Additionally, during the past week, 17 armed engagements were reported along the Armenia-Azerbaijan Line of Contact and 50 armed engagements were reported along the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact, according to Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defence. The Defence Ministry of the disputed Artsakh Republic also reported that Azerbaijan was responsible for 120 ceasefire violations on the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact. At the same time, 1,100 shots were fired into Armenian positions by Azerbaijani forces "from various caliber ammunition" (Artsakh Republic Ministry of Defence, 15 February 2020).

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