

# CONFLICTING VIEWS ON LAND ISSUE BETWEEN KYRGYZSTAN AND CHINA

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**On May 17, the parliamentary People's Assembly ratified an agreement with China pm the disputed Uzengu-Kuush area. According to the agreement, about 30 percent of the disputed land (about 90,000 hectares) goes to China and 70% to Kyrgyzstan.**

This historical event stirred up the Kyrgyz public, which was reflected by the republican media. Some believe the ratification of this agreement is illegitimate, whilst others have a different view. The disputed land issue divided the Kyrgyz media into two opposite camps throughout the negotiation process.

## SELLING OUT LAND?

«Kyrgyzstan cedes 125 hectares of its land to China,» Radio Azattyk (Radio Liberty) reported on October 11, 2001. The Deputy Foreign Minister, Asanbek Osmonaliev, said in a reply to the Radio Azattyk Bishkek office that «the handing over, change or reduction of Kyrgyz land is out of the question because the Kyrgyz Republic never had a state border with China before this agreement», while «only the state border that can be changed», and hence «agreements have been clinched with China on disputed areas owned by neither Kyrgyzstan nor China.» This information was published in the ResPublica weekly on November 27, 2001. Some the local media deplored the government's actions - it was seen to be national treachery - and similar public opinion

was published and aired by the media.

For example, on January 7, 2002, Prof. Clara Ajibekova told a Radio Azattyk correspondent, «Kyrgyzstan inherited its border with China from the USSR, and China made no reservations about any possible border adjustments when it recognized Kyrgyzstan as independent in the early 1990s.»

In its most recent issue, in the article entitled "Why the Hell Did Russians Guard the Border with Wild Kyrgyz?" the Aalam newspaper writes: «If only the Kyrgyz knew that two centuries later their sovereign heirs would begin to sell out their land, honestly demarcated by the Russians.»

In the Agym newspaper of May 31, A. Masaliev, a member of the Legislative Assembly, said that the agreement was illegitimate and anti-constitutional. «We are going to take this to the Constitutional Court,» he alleged. According to Masaliev, during the Soviet period this land belonged to Kyrgyzstan and the current authorities had therefore signed the agreement without any substantiating documentation. «The decision made by the People's Assembly on the Kyrgyz-Chinese border has created a double precedent,» be-

lieves the ResPublica correspondent (May 28, 2002). He explains: «The next time deputies discuss disputed territories - with Uzbekistan, for example - they will vote in favor of the President and our neighbors, well aware they will be pressurized to do so by both the president and government.»

## FACTS AND PAPERS

Other media in general supported the policy pursued by the government and are still doing everything possible to calm people down. For example, on April 19 the Vecherny Bishkek daily published a report by Turdakun Usubaliev, a member of the Jogorku Kenesh, in which he analyzed the issue in the light of the history of Kyrgyz-Chinese land-focused relationships from the time of Mao Zedong (1960s) to the present day. In Usubaliev's view, these «documents and facts witness that the oppositions' assertions that no USSR-China border negotiations took place during the Soviet period are groundless.» According to him, «the talks were going from 1992 through 1996. As a result, the first Kyrgyz-Chinese Treaty on Disputed Areas was signed on July 4, 1996.»

In general, «the Soviet-Chinese talks on disputed border areas took more than thirty years.» To make people believe that there is nothing terrible in handing the land over, Turdakun Usubaliev cites the ex-

amples of Russia, where «over 600 islands on the Amur and Ussuri rivers were given to China»; Kazakhstan, where 70% of the disputed area went to China under the Kazakh-Chinese border agreement; and Tajikistan, that has equally divided its disputed border areas with China. On May 28, 2002, Slovo Kyrgyzstana gave a detailed description of the negotiation process and commented, «Tien Shan's Gordian knot has at last been untangled and the interests of both neighboring and friendly countries have been satisfied.»

However there is another very sensitive aspect to this border story, linked to the relationship between the government and the op-

position.

#### **WHOM DO THEY DEFEND?**

An article entitled “Who Do the Uzengu-Kuush Defenders Defend?” in Kyrgyz Tuusu, obviously hints at the opposition, who have said they want to use the land issue for their political ends. «To all appearances the schismatic seek to use the Uzengu-Kuush issue as their last bulwark.» Slovo Kyrgyzstana seconded this motion (May 24): «We have been surprised watching the devil's Sabbath and debauchery unleashed around this issue by the aggressive faction of the opposition.» «The opposition seized the border topic for their own purposes,» reads another article in Slovo Kyrgyzstana (May

21). The stand taken by the opposition «sufficiently moves Kyrgyzstan towards a policy of confrontation with China,» said T. Usubaliev in Vecherny Bishkek (April 19, 2002).

#### **A PRETEXT TO FIGHT**

ResPublica states, «Handing over the land was initiated by the President and the ratification partisans.» «The agreement is probably a sort of excuse; the President's attempt to assuage his guilt over providing Manas airport to the allies.» Generally speaking, the land issue has once again become a new pretext for political battles and the gaining of new political scores, both for the authorities and the opposition.