

# Last chance to settle Tajikistan civil war

by Konstantin George

Since Nov. 16, the Parliament of the former Soviet Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan has been in continual session in the northern city of Khodzhand, which is under Russian military protection, attempting to form a "national unity" government of all major factions. The session, still ongoing as of Nov. 19, is being called by the Russian media "the last chance" to peacefully settle the bloody civil war in that republic, which has cost some 20,000 lives and produced hundreds of thousands of refugees. That civil war, raging since May, has produced a death toll greater than the combined toll of all other armed conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union since the dissolution of the U.S.S.R.

The first step toward a national unity government occurred on Nov. 18, when the Parliament accepted the resignation of the entire presidium of the Parliament, led by transitional President Akbarsho Iskandarov. The Parliament is dominated by deputies who had been followers of communist former President Nabiyeu, and various opposition currents, ranging from democratic-secular to "Islamic," both moderate and fundamentalist. The Parliament, in a gesture to Iskandarov and the "Islamic" forces, agreed in advance of the Khodzhand meeting to omit Nabiyeu from any personal role in a future government.

However, hopes for a settlement are slim. Fighting was non-stop in southern Tajikistan in the week prior to the Khodzhand meeting, and continued during the Khodzhand meeting as well. Southern Tajikistan, especially the area around the cities of Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyab, has been the main conflict zone all along.

The war escalated over the weekend of Nov. 14-15, when fighting began in the vital city of Nurek, some 75 kilometers (48 miles) from the capital, Dushanbe. Nurek is the site of a huge dam and hydroelectric complex, one of the largest such facilities in the former Soviet Union, and since September, it has been closely guarded by Russian units. Nurek and other Tajikistan hydroelectric facilities generate electric power for much of Central Asia, and the water reservoirs of Tajikistan are crucial for a water supply program to serve other, water-short Central Asian republics.

## Russia begged to stay

Convening the Tajik Parliament under Russian protection illustrated the consolidation of Russian military-strategic predominance in Central Asia. While the western media ex-

pound on whether Central Asia will be "won" by Turkey or Iran, "post-Soviet" Central Asia is remaining in the Russian sphere of influence. In contrast to the pattern in the Baltic republics, the former communist leaderships of the Central Asian republics have begged Russia to maintain its troop presence in the region. This was emphatically expressed in talks in early November between Presidents Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, Akayev of Kirghizstan, and Karimov of Uzbekistan, and Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev.

The "Russians please stay" outcry came after the brief capture in September of the southern Tajik city of Kurgan-Tyube by so-called Islamic forces, but who in reality were western-supported Afghan Mujaheddin who had crossed into Tajikistan. Tajikistan, like all Central Asian republics, is the product of artificial borders drawn by Josef Stalin, which led to large numbers of the main ethnic group of one republic living in another republic. Thus, a large Tajik minority lives in populous Uzbekistan, centered in the "Uzbek" cities of Samarkand and Bokhara, which Tajiks view as the historical-cultural center of their nation. The Stalin divisions have given Tajikistan a 23% Uzbek minority of nearly 900,000 people.

When the Mujaheddin entered Kurgan-Tyube, they began massacring Uzbeks and family members of "Tajik" (largely Uzbek ethnically) Soviet veterans of the Afghan War. It was only quick action by the Russian garrison commanders in the area, who armed the local Russian veterans of the Afghan War, who in turn recaptured the city, that prevented the massacre from escalating into a communal war between Tajiks and Uzbeks. This nightmare would not only have devoured Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, both of which have large minorities of the other group on their territories, but would have exploded the entire north of Afghanistan, where Tajiks and Uzbeks form the two largest ethnic groups, and extended through Afghanistan into Pakistan. The Afghan-Pakistan situation is fragile, as it ethnically mirrors the situation embracing the Tajik-Uzbek area north of Afghanistan and its ethnic kinship with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Pakistan, there has been growing ferment among the Pushtun tribes of the Northwest Frontier provinces to leave Pakistan and unite with the Pushtuns of Afghanistan, who dominate the east and south of that country and comprise its largest single ethnic group.

The leaderships of the Central Asian republics have realized their dilemma: that only with Russian troops can the conflict be kept from escalating. In Tajikistan, the clans which held power under President Nabiyeu have demanded that General Ashurov, the commander of the Russian 201st division, based in their republic, become "head of state." In the region as a whole, a defense alliance system with Russia has been formed, having gone the furthest in oil- and gas-rich Turkmenistan where, as confirmed by Russian Deputy Defense Minister Gen. Col. Boris Gromov on Nov. 10, the Armed Forces of the republic are under a "joint Russian-Turkmen command."