

Uzbeks Order U.S. From Base In Refugee Rift

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Uzbekistan formally ordered the United States to leave an air base that has been a hub for operations in Afghanistan in protest over a predawn United Nations operation on Friday to spirit out refugees who had fled an uprising in **Uzbekistan** in May, senior State Department officials said Saturday.

The officials said **Uzbekistan** had given the United States 180 days to close the base, which has played a central role in rooting out fighters of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and in carrying out relief operations.

For several months, the Uzbek government said it wanted the United States to leave the base, the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, called K-2. But no specific timetable was set, and there was hope that the matter could be negotiated.

A top diplomat, R. Nicholas Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs, had planned to go to Uzbekistan to discuss that issue and a United States demand that Uzbekistan permit an international investigation into the violent suppression of a prison riot and public demonstration in Andijon in May. The Uzbek government estimated that 187 people had been killed in the crackdown, but the United Nations estimated that 200 to 700 people had been killed. Now, however, Mr. Burns said he probably would not go to the region for several weeks to let feelings cool.

"When we got notice of the Uzbek action Friday morning, we decided it would be inappropriate for me to go at this time," he said in an interview. "We were going to have a conversation about human rights, Andijon and the fact that the Uzbek government's failure to reform has put it in international isolation."

Mr. Burns said the United States had been "profoundly concerned" about the status of the Uzbek refugees in Kyrgyzstan who fled after the Andijon incident. "We have energetically supported the efforts to bring them to safety in Romania," he said, "because we feared they would be persecuted if they were sent back to Uzbekistan."

"We are not willing to overlook these very important human right concerns," he added.

Another State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of department ground rules, said, "Obviously we don't want to lose K-2." But he added that loss of the base was preferable to backing away from demanding that Uzbekistan start political and economic reforms and agree to an international investigation of the Andijon killings.

He said that position had been endorsed by top officials at the Pentagon, where Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld has said that the base, while important, could be substituted if necessary.

The State Department official said that 450 refugees had fled to Kyrgyzstan after the uprising in May but that the Uzbek government had wanted them back.

The Kyrgyz government has picked up 29 refugees for detention because some were charged with crimes. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has been working to get them to safety, the official said, and early Friday most were taken to an airport to be airlifted to Romania.

The official said that only 15 had been left behind, all but four of them designated as refugees and the others charged with crimes. "Our position is that they all have to come out," the official said. He said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was on the phone on Thursday and Friday with Kyrgyz leaders to arrange for the flight out.

After the mission, the official said, Uzbekistan sent a note to the American Embassy in Tashkent formally ordering the eviction of the United States from the air base.

The eviction order was first reported by The Washington Post on Saturday.

The Uzbek government opened the base to American forces shortly after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and it quickly became home for Green Berets of the Fifth Special Forces Group, light infantry soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division from Fort Drum, N.Y., and pilots and crews of AC-130 gunships and attack helicopters.

American money and construction teams quickly transformed the decaying, Soviet-era air base into a bustling hub for military

and relief operations. One of the first tasks was eradicating thousands of poisonous snakes that had taken up residence in abandoned hangars.

The eviction note came at the end of a week in which Mr. Rumsfeld toured the region for discussions on alternatives in case United States lost access to the base.

Mr. Rumsfeld received assurances from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that the American military could continue to use bases in those Central Asian nations to support relief and counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

"We feel we've had a good arrangement and good relationships in a number of those countries in the region," Mr. Rumsfeld said during his travels. "And obviously from time to time things may be adjusted one way or another."

The issue has been a test of the Bush administration as it has tried to balance two of its most prized foreign policy goals: democratization and counterterrorism.

Pentagon and military officials pointed out that it remained unclear whether the eviction from the Uzbek base would halt all bilateral relations with a nation on the rim of one of the most unstable regions in the world.

Those in the United States government and the military who argue for carefully managed engagement, even with dictatorial governments, note that without any formalized Western influence in places like Uzbekistan, there would most likely be influence from less-democratic sponsors, like Russia or China.