# Villagers in shadow of Kyrgyzstan dam incensed by Uzbekistan deal

Zholdosh Omorov says the news that a huge reservoir near his house could be entirely handed over to Uzbekistan came like a bolt out of the blue.

Nobody had consulted him or his neighbors in Savay, a village an hour's drive north of Kyrgyzstan's second-largest city, Osh, about the idea, the 68-year-old told Eurasianet journalists.

In late March, Kamchybek Tashiyev, the head of the security services, had trumpeted a deal with Uzbekistan that included an arrangement to swap Kempir-Abad reservoir for 80 square kilometers of land – an area about half the size of Brooklyn – as an historic breakthrough that would end decades of rancor over the exact contours of the border.

"Issues around the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border have been resolved 100 percent," he said. "There is not a single patch of disputed territory left."

Kyrgyz villagers in the lands around the reservoir were incensed. Not just at Tashiyev, but also President Sadyr Japarov, a nationalist who has built his political brand on the idea of being close to the people.

Kempir-Abad 02

"I think they must have paid Tashiyev and Japarov off, and that that is why they want to give away the water. Who can settle 100 percent of everything just like that? Before going [to Uzbekistan], they should have consulted with us to ask if the land could be given away," Omorov said. "If they had asked, we would have said no."

Kempir-Abad reservoir – or Andijan reservoir, as it is known on the other side of the border – sits amid a bucolic scene. In spring, its blue waters are framed by green mountains peppered with poppies. Herds of sheep and cows roam on the slopes, lazily chewing the grass.

Kempir-Abad 03

For nearby villagers, the reservoir, which was completed in 1983 by the will of Soviet engineers, is a source of misery and joy. The grazing land skirting the water provides work and sustenance. Livestock drink straight out of the reservoir. Houses perennially sink into ground and are plagued with humidity, however. As for surfaced roads, there is no such thing.

Ilgiz Osmonov, a 34-year-old with a face blistered red from hours toiling in the sun, moved to the edge of the water four years ago from the village of Kyzyl-Oktyabr. He rented 1,500 square meters of land and built the home in which he lives with his wife and four children. He works long hours, digging beds for his crops, fencing vegetable plots and tending to livestock. It has been hard work. Of the 450 apple trees Osmonov planted, only 200 have prospered. Droughts in summer and high soil moisture in spring make striking the right balance difficult.

Until he can make his fruit crops profitable, he is tending cattle for residents of neighboring villages. But if the land transfer to Uzbekistan happens, there may be nowhere for him to feed the 500 or so cows he has been charged with caring for.

Kempir-Abad 04

Osmonov's dream was to be as close to nature as possible. He gave up his smartphone in favor of an old-fashioned model years ago.

No surprise then that he too only learned about the mooted land transfer by word of mouth.

"[Officials] don't want to get their expensive shoes dirty," and that is why they didn't come to the area before hatching their deals, Osmonov told Eurasianet.

"When we heard the news, we immediately thought that if needed, we would fight. No matter what high-ranking official comes, we will not give it up, we will stand to the end," he said.

Kempir-Abad 05

In the absence of useful feedback from officials, speculation has raged about what the Uzbeks might have planned. Osmonov said there is word of them building a resort on the shores of the reservoir and filling it with foreign tourists. Nobody in the villages around likes the idea.

In some sense, the idea of having Uzbekistan take over the reservoir and its contents flows naturally out of how the facility is used. Kyrgyzstan's uses 14 percent of the water to irrigate land in the Suzak and Kara-Suu districts, according to Nazirbek Borubaev, the government's spokesman on border issues. The rest feeds into Uzbekistan, which also controls the two hydroelectricity generators powered by Kempir-Abad.

Anticipating the objections of the local community to a land swap, Tashiyev said while making his "100 percent" remarks that Kempir-Abad would be used jointly.

"There will be no fencing or troops around the reservoir. Residents of Kyrgyzstan will be able to use the water and fish," he said.

Kempir-Abad 06

Later, after what appears to have been an unexpected level of pushback, Tashiyev pledged that further negotiations might after all take place and that the March deal could undergo further revisions.

These high-level intra-governmental machinations are only part of what fuels dismay.

The dam that in practical terms marks the boundary between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan marks a stark difference in levels of development. While there is little infrastructure and few residences on the Kyrgyz side, a glance over the dam presents a whole different picture of smooth roads and well-appointed buildings.

Kempir-Abad 07

The fencing installed by the two countries could not be more different either. Kyrgyzstan has put up a few concrete pillars, but most of their boundary is rickety pickets holding up a perimeter wire. In some places, there is no fence at all. A careless outsider could easily wander into noman's-land without noticing.

The Uzbek operation is visible from Osmonov's hilltop home. They have strung barbed wire along a row of solid concrete supports spanning the horizon. Border guards monitor the scene from watchtowers.

Their Kyrgyz counterparts do not even have a booth. Until recently, guards had a little hut fashioned out of reeds and branches – a fact that came to light when Osh-based journalist Ydyrys Isakov filmed a report about it. The hut drew widespread online mockery.

"People say they [the authorities] got embarrassed so they dismantled the hut and burned it," Omorov said. There is only a patch of charred soil now where the hut stood.

For Omorov, this whole episode typifies the government's lax attitude. He and nearby residents fret that Uzbekistan is stealthily moving the de facto border and that there are no Kyrgyz troops around to keep watch.

"We have appealed to the authorities and told them that the Uzbeks are slowly moving their border, but they do nothing," Omorov said. "This is a serious matter.

The land is leaving us."

eurasianet

# Why Cubans took to the streets in all-but-unheard-of protests

Havana, Cuba – By Monday morning the streets of the Havana neighbourhood of 10 de Octubre were cleared.

The only sign of the previous night's violence were the elderly men in ragged work clothes sweeping the last of the dust from the road's surface, leaving only splotches of grey where thrown bricks had fallen.

And yet this street, heading south towards the outskirts of Havana towards the beautiful Church of Jesus del Monte perched on a hilltop, was the site of all-but-unheard-of protests in the Cuban capital on Sunday.

Other protests were held across the country, after the first rallies began just outside Havana in the town of St Antonio de los Banos. The protesters shouted "Libertad" – freedom – and "Patria y Vida", fatherland and life, a play on revolutionary slogan Patria o Muerte, which states the revolutionaries' willingness to die for one's homeland. "We are not afraid," they also chanted.

Videos and news of the protests spread via social media, sparking further demonstrations across the 1,250km country.

In the province of Santiago de Cuba, people marched in the town of Palma Soriano. There were reports of disturbances in Santa Clara, in the centre of the country, and in Cárdenas, the town hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

The protests spread so fast that the government appeared to be caught off guard and President Miguel Diaz Canel broke into all programming – including the Euro 2020 football final – to call for people to spill onto the streets to defend the revolution.

Surrounded by heavy security, he had appeared on the streets of St Antonio de los Baños, where he called the protesters "provocateurs" and suggested they had been fooled into the actions by counter revolutionary forces backed by foreign powers. "We call upon all the revolutionaries of the country, all the communists, to take to the streets," he said when he later appeared on television.

Ramiro Valdes, an 89 year old who fought alongside the Castros and had risen to be vice president before retiring earlier this year, tweeted that the protesters were "delinquents in the service of empire, carrying out the instructions given by their owners". Given the vast majority of the protesters were young, his comment showed a stark, generational schism opening up in Cuba.

Diaz Canel's appearance in St Antonio de los Banos was clearly designed to be an echo of the last major protests in Cuba, in 1994 during Cuba's special period, when the economy collapsed after the withdrawal of financial support from the Soviet Union. Then-President Fidel Castro had appeared on Havana's famed corniche, the Malecon, to talk down the protesters.

Echoes of that time's hunger are apparent now.

Cuba's problems have been slowly growing over many years as a lack of investment and increasing obsolescence has taken its toll – but the pandemic has exacerbated the problems. Last year, tourism fell away to nothing and the economy contracted by 11 percent, a figure which is believed to be far worse by now.

Many Cubans either worked directly in tourism, or on its margins, to earn enough to feed their families, or else they relied on money sent from abroad. All these sources of cash have dried up.

Meanwhile, the government unified two currencies it was running – the US dollar-pegged Cuban convertible Pesos and the Cuban pesos. This had been seen as a long-needed restructuring – the system protected outmoded and inefficient Cuban industry – but it came at the heart of a crisis.

The move saw the return of the United States dollar as common tender. The government, in order to raise the hard currencies it needs to pay for imported goods, then moved many necessities to so-called "MLC" stores where only hard – that is foreign – currencies were accepted.

A black market immediately established itself as the street value of the pesos fell to half or worse of its official rate against the US dollar and the Euro. Huge queues at the MLC stores also meant a black market in food has appeared.

These exchanges favour those with access to foreign currency, although the increasing cost of food has meant those with dollars are paying roughly what they did before for bread, eggs and medicine (other items, like milk, are all but impossible to get).

For those on the other side of the bargain, however, who have to buy foreign currency with the pesos they earn, food and medicine prices doubled and then doubled again. Protester after protester on Sunday told reporters they went into the streets because people are hungry and have nothing to eat.

Power cuts are now making the issue worse still. Most parts of the country have been facing four- to six-hour blackouts due to what the government said are worn parts that cannot be replaced because of the United States' 60-year embargo on Cuba. It also said power supplies to hospitals dealing with COVID-19 victims need to be protected.

Storm brewing

At 9am on Monday morning, with the streets quiet, state television began showing a meeting of the council of ministers. Local journalists asked questions of the president, the health minister, and ministers in charge of electricity and food supplies. Diaz-Canel blamed the protests on the US "economic asphyxiation".

He turned his fire on the protesters, too. "They threw stones at foreign currency shops, they stole items," he said, before calling their behaviour "vulgar, indecent and delinquent".

Since the demonstrations began, Cubans have been complaining from all over the island of the internet being shut down. Meanwhile, social media on the other side of the Florida Straits lit up. Sections of the Cuban community in south Florida called for "intervention" and staged a rally outside the iconic exile restaurant Versailles.

Francis Suarez, the mayor of Miami, told the crowd: "The United States and the international community must do something now. The people of Cuba need medicine. They are starving. They are in need of international help."

Michael Bustamante, a seasoned Cuba watcher and assistant professor of Latin American literature at Florida International University, responded to the more extreme calls for intervention by saying on Twitter: "That does NOT help."

Joe Biden, the US president, said in a statement: "We stand with the Cuban people and their clarion call for freedom and relief from the tragic grip of the pandemic and from decades of repression and economic suffering to which they have been subjected to by Cuba's authoritarian regime."

Outside the Zanja police station, where the night before police had faced off chanting protesters, occasionally darting into the crowd to arrest people, the family members of the detainees now sat patiently.

The sun was shining but overhead one of Havana's dramatic summer storms was gathering.

Aljazeera

# Japan to provide one million more COVID vaccine doses to Taiwan

Japan will send a third batch of donated COVID-19 vaccines to Taiwan this week, Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi said on Tuesday, in a further show of support for the Chinese-claimed island which is now ramping up inoculations.

Motegi told reporters that the AstraZeneca Plc shots would be sent on Thursday, which would bring the country's total donations to Taiwan so far to almost 3.4 million doses.

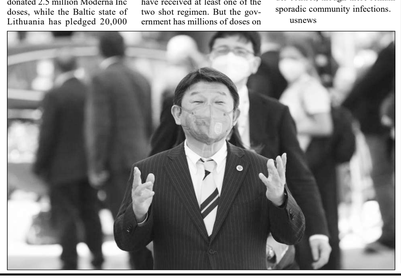
The first batch was sent in June, followed by a second donation earlier this month.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry expressed its thanks, especially at a time when Japan is facing its own serious coronavirus situation.

"The friendship between Taiwan and Japan is unwavering. The Foreign Ministry once again thanks our partners in freedom and democracy for their warm assistance and strong support," it added.

Taiwan has complained that Chinese interference blocked a deal earlier this year for it to get vaccines from Germany's BioNTech SE, charges Beijing has denied, but since then donations have rolled in for the government.

Last month the United States donated 2.5 million Moderna Inc doses, while the Baltic state of Lithuania has pledged 20,000 shots of AstraZeneca's vaccine.



Taiwan is rapidly expanding its vaccination programme, though so far only around one-tenth of its 23.5 million people have received at least one of the two shot regimen. But the government has millions of doses on order.

Taiwan's own relatively small domestic COVID-19 outbreak has now generally been brought under control, though there remain sporadic community infections.

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# Iraq accuses Iran of violation by cutting off water from vital rivers

Iraqi officials have accused Iran in recent days of reducing water flow from rivers shared by the two countries, violating international law and endangering Iraq's agricultural sector and in some cases the populations drinking water supply.

Minister of Water Resources, Mahdi Rashid Hamedani on Sunday that water flow from Iran to Iraq has completely stopped and Baghdad considers to lodge a complaint with United Nations entities for breach of international laws and inflicting damage by cutting off rivers flowing across the border. Iran was accused last year of cutting off two main tributaries flowing into Tigris River also in the peak of summer, denying much needed water for two dams in Iraq.

However, this year water shortage in Iran is much worse than last year, with almost 50 percent less precipitation in the winter and spring. Almost 8,000 villages are supplied by tankers and many nature reserves and lakes have gone dry.

This year, Iraq's Diyala province has taken the brunt of Iran's action. Hamedani says that for now the province has a reserve of drinking water and the government is looking for ways to limit damage to agriculture.

The minister announced that Iran has completely cut off water from four rivers and if this situation continues the Diyala province might face a serious situation.

Even without Iran's reduction of water flows, Iraq has been suffering from serious water shortages(link is external) for years. The main rivers feeding the country originate in Turkey and Iran, with climate change reducing water supplies in the whole region. Iraq's water crisis can add flowing into Tigris River also in the peak of summer, denying much needed water for two dams in Iraq.

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Even without Iran's reduction of water flows, Iraq has been suffering from serious water shortages(link is external) for years. The main rivers feeding the country originate in Turkey and Iran, with climate change reducing water supplies in the whole region. Iraq's water crisis can add to political conflict in the country, trying to establish a measure of stability.

But amid the current crisis, Baghdad has appealed to Ankara for more water to be released into rivers flowing south. Turkish sources said Sunday that Ankara has already increased the flow.

Iraq complains that both Turkey and Iran have an insatiable appetite for building dams, which give them the ability to withhold water and even direct it to other projects, such as Iran's futile attempts to revive Lake Urmia in north-west.

People in Iran also have the same concern that the government and especially construction companies affiliated with the powerful Revolutionary Guard have been building dozens of dams, often without careful study of their impact on water supplies and the environment.

Water protests have increased since last month in Iran, especially in the oil-rich Khuzestan province bordering Iraq. Tens of thousands of farmers are forced to buy even their drinking water from tankers visiting villages.

Iraqi officials say, so far, Iran has not responded to their requests to discuss the issue of water flows, despite previous promises of holding negotiation over the issue. Iran is facing not only a water crisis this year but also serious electricity shortages that might impact its ability to provide Iraq with energy based on a bilateral agreement. Iranian officials in recent days have told an angry public that all electricity exports have been halted.iranintl