

Kyrgyz Troops Break Up Crowd

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyz troops fired blank rounds into a crowd trying to reach a mass demonstration outside the parliament on Thursday, averting what the country's security chief said could be an attempt to oust the government.

Kyrgyz security forces stopped several busloads of supporters of regional leader Urmat Baryktabasov on the outskirts of the capital, Bishkek.

After a standoff lasting several hours, they fired tear gas and blank rounds to disperse the crowd that was traveling to the capital from Baryktabasov's hometown.

About 2,000 to 3,000 other demonstrators, meanwhile, amassed in the capital to demand a role in the government for Baryktabasov, who had recently returned from exile after a failed attempt to seize power five years ago.

Kyrgyzstan has been in turmoil since a popular uprising toppled President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April. An interim government has struggled to impose its authority since, amid savage fighting between ethnic groups that has killed more than 350 people and left thousands homeless.

Keneshbek Dushebayev, head of the Kyrgyz national security service, said the army was acting on information that some of those arriving by bus from the shores of Lake Issyk-Kul were armed and could try to overthrow the interim government.

"If their demands are not met, they are intent on seizing power," he said in the village of Kirshyolk, where helicopters roared overhead and 500 troops gathered to block the road.

Baryktabasov tried to seize power before the presidential election in 2005 that swept Bakiyev into office. After his failed coup, Baryktabasov fled the country but returned after the overthrow of Bakiyev. Baryktabasov appeared among the crowd of his supporters at the roadblock Thursday.

People in the crowd whistled, waved red flags and shouted their demands to be admitted into Bishkek to attend the rally. They made no explicit demands beyond being allowed through the military cordon, and dispersed after the tear gas was fired.

In central Bishkek, demonstrators held banners saying, "Hands Off Baryktabasov!" Some demanded that he be allowed to speak on a makeshift stage erected outside the parliament building.

"We live in poverty. In the south, there are also many who are against those in power," said Avazbek Abakirov, a man in his mid-40s in the crowd outside the parliament building. "The population wants to unite around Baryktabasov."

But Farid Niyazov, a spokesman for the interim government, said Baryktabasov was ineligible to participate in elections because he was a citizen of Kazakhstan.

The crowd outside parliament later began to disperse peacefully.

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