

Kyrgyzstan Ponders Big Rent Hike for Russian Base

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BISHKEK, Kyrgyzstan — Kyrgyzstan plans to drastically hike the amount of rent Russia pays to use key military facilities in the Central Asian nation.

Defense Minister Abdilla Kudaiberdiyev said the government might seek a fourfold increase on the \$4.5 million in annual rent that Russia pays for an air base and three other military facilities. He mentioned a possible figure of \$18 million.

"The previous agreement was signed in 1993, and at that time \$4.5 million was a very substantial sum," Kudaiberdiyev said Thursday.

Kudaiberdiyev also said Moscow owed Kyrgyzstan \$6 million in unpaid rent and that the debt could be settled with the delivery of some weapons. The Kyrgyz army is woefully equipped and the guarantee of new supplies would be eagerly welcomed.

No definitive agreement on the Russian military is likely ahead of the Oct. 10 parliamentary elections — the first such vote since former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev was ousted in a

bloody revolt in April. The influence of the legislature was boosted and the president's powers watered down after voters overwhelmingly backed a June referendum on constitutional reform.

Russia's air base in Kant is seen as an important outpost for the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-dominated alliance of former Soviet nations designed as a counterweight to NATO. About 500 Russian troops and more than 20 aircraft are stationed at the base.

As well as leasing military facilities to Russia, Kyrgyzstan also hosts the Manas U.S. air base at the airport in Bishkek, a vital hub for troops and supplies destined for nearby Afghanistan. The lease for the base was extended for a year last month.

Russia has a long interest in further expanding its military footprint in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Ruslan Kazakbayev said last month that the government was in principle open to the idea of creating a new Russian military base in the south, which was ravaged in June by ethnic riots that killed hundreds of ethnic Uzbeks.

International advocacy groups condemned the life sentence handed to a leading rights activist in Kyrgyzstan, saying Thursday that his trial was tarnished by violence and procedural irregularities.

The Nookan District Court in southern Kyrgyzstan convicted Azimjon Askarov on Wednesday on charges including complicity in murder, participating in mass violence and hostage taking during the June unrest.

The sentence for Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek, will stoke new fears that the authorities are singling out the minority Uzbek community for prosecution over the violence.

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