

300 Tajiks Detained in Apparent Tit-for-Tat

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Moscow migration officials prepared to deport about 300 Tajik nationals over the weekend in apparent retaliation for the jailing of a Russian pilot in Dushanbe on murky charges last week.

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon appeared ready to back down over the case, [announcing](#) Saturday that he would personally see that the dispute was resolved "so as not to ruin the alliance and strategic ties with Russia."

For the Tajik diaspora, the situation looked desperate. The voice of Karomat Sharipov, head of the Tajik Migrant Labor group, trembled with emotion as he spoke to The Moscow Times about Russia's "show of power."

The authorities are "hitting a man when he's down" by threatening to expel Tajik migrants, Sharipov said.

He urged Tajik authorities to free the Russian pilot even if he deserved punishment.

"The 1.5 million Tajik migrants [working in Russia] depend on it and ... mustn't get mixed up in politics," he said in a telephone interview Friday.

Police have been ordered "to show no mercy to Tajiks," carting them away from construction sites where they were working, Sharipov said in a separate interview with Gazeta.ru.

Russian economic sanctions could cripple and even destroy Tajikistan's fragile economy, leading to Rakhmon's possible ouster, analysts said.

Citywide raids have resulted in 297 Tajik citizens being detained on charges of violating migration rules, a spokeswoman for the Federal Migration Service said Saturday, Interfax reported. She said they would be deported soon.

The migration service has denied that the crackdown is connected with a Tajik court's decision on Tuesday to jail pilot Vladimir Sadovnichy, saying it is a regular pre-New Year routine.

But RIA-Novosti, citing an unidentified Russian Foreign Ministry official, [said](#) the roundup was part of a "asymmetric response" to the arrest ordered by President Dmitry Medvedev.

The scandal was long in the making. Sadovnichy and a fellow pilot, Alexei Rudenko of Estonia, were detained by Tajik authorities back in March. The pilots, who were returning to Moscow from a NATO supply mission in Afghanistan aboard two An-72 jets, were been supposed to land in Tajikistan for refueling, but local air traffic controllers refused, saying they lacked the necessary paperwork. The pilots had to land anyway because they were running out of fuel. They were then detained and charged with illegal border crossing, as well as smuggling a spare, nonworking plane engine.

What prompted the charges remains unclear.

Rolkan Investmens Ltd., which owns the planes, says the Tajiks might have been interested in the 1970s-era aircraft, which has been confiscated as "physical evidence."

But tabloid Lifenews.ru [said](#) late last week that Tajikistan might have been pressing Russia to release President Rakhmon's son-in-law, Rustam Khukumov, who was handed a lengthy prison term on drug dealing charges by a Moscow court in September 2010. His case is currently under review by the Supreme Court.

The incident may also be political at heart, said Andrei Grozin, head of the department of Central Asia and Kazakhstan at the Institute of CIS Countries in Moscow.

Rakhmon may have wanted to "please the Americans" by "snapping Russia on the nose" after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently visited Tajikistan and said she wanted American military bases there, he said.

Rakhmon also might have allowed the case to proceed to "show his own significance and to boost his image with the population [by] showing the Russians such a harsh gesture," Grozin said.

If that were true, Rakhmon appeared to have second thoughts over the weekend. On Saturday, he announced that he was taking the case under his personal control to ensure its speedy review, RIA-Novosti reported.

The statement followed others by Tajik officials who tried to play down the scandal. The Tajik Foreign Ministry said Friday that it "regrets the political overtones" in the case.

Tajik Prosecutor General Sherkhon Salimzoda [told](#) reporters Thursday that the sentences for the pilots had no political overtones.

He also shifted the blame onto Afghan authorities, saying they had unsuccessfully tried to prevent the two An-72s from leaving Kabul, where he said they had been used for illegal business operations for three years.

Salimzoda said Afghan authorities had wanted to seize the planes now held by Tajikistan.

Afghan authorities made no comment on the matter over the weekend.

Lawyers for the detained pilots appealed the verdict Friday, Interfax said. The court has seven days to review the appeal.

Senior diplomats interviewed by Interfax on condition of anonymity said both sides wanted to find a solution as soon as possible without violating Tajik legislation and damaging bilateral ties.

"We don't need all this fuss, we just want the pilots of a Russian airline to return home," a Russian diplomat was quoted as saying.

A fuss, however, was growing in Moscow. News reports said the Federal Migration Service has stopped issuing work permits to Tajik migrants, and the government was considering the introduction of a visa regime with Tajikistan.

Nationalists rushed to offer their assistance, with the low-profile anti-migrant group Svetlaya Rus [reporting](#) that it had helped detain 40 Tajik migrants on Thursday alone, Gazeta.ru said.

Federal Migration Service chief Konstantin Romodanovsky [told](#) Medvedev during a meeting Thursday that Tajik migrants commit more crimes per capita than representatives of any other Central Asian nation.

The crackdown is likely to boost the popularity of ultranationalists, for whom migrants are a prime target, said Alexander Verkhovsky, head of Sova, an independent watchdog tracking xenophobia.

The open roundup will heat up growing animosity toward migrants and attract new members to nationalist groups, he said.

The government carried out a similar roundup in 2006, when it targeted Georgian nationals after the expulsion of alleged Russian spies from Georgia. Relations between the two countries continued to deteriorate after that, culminating in a 2008 war over South Ossetia.

Russia is unlikely to push Tajikistan as far this time, said Grozin, of the Institute of CIS Countries. A visa regime, for example, would be a "catastrophe" likely to topple Rakhmon's government and cause needless destabilization in the region, he said.

But he conceded that Russia was acting on "strong emotions from a serious blow" dealt by its traditional geopolitical partner.

Grozin speculated that Rakhmon had likely hoped to settle the conflict unofficially and had waited for a telephone call from Medvedev or Prime Minister Vladimir Putin that had failed to materialize.

Moscow still has plenty of leverage to pressure Dushanbe, banning exports and money transfers and possibly confiscating property that Tajik officials, including Rakhmon himself, own in Russia, Grozin said.

He predicted that Tajikistan would soon find some Tajik officials as scapegoats and release the pilots.

He was echoed by Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, who said Friday that both pilots would soon be released with apologies from the Tajik side, Interfax reported. He did not elaborate.

Meanwhile, questions lingered about why Russian officials waited months to mount the campaign for the Russian pilot's release.

Tajik authorities have repeatedly stressed that Moscow showed no interest in the case until it hit the media spotlight last month. Tajikistan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement Friday that their Russian counterparts never addressed them about the case even when the trial started, Interfax reported.

Hours later, the Foreign Ministry in Moscow [published](#) on its web site a copy of a letter by its ambassador in Dushanbe to the Tajik Foreign Ministry and the KGB that was dated May 17 and inquired about the case.

Representatives of Rolkan, which owns the planes in question, said it addressed the embassy in April but the first reaction it got was the appearance of a diplomat at the trial in October, Kommersant [reported](#) earlier.

Rolkan head Valery Pfefer spent three days unsuccessfully waiting for a personal meeting with embassy officials in Dushanbe in April, the report said.

Nevertheless, the Russian Foreign Ministry lashed out Friday at the media for suggesting that diplomats had shown indifference.

Such reports are "unscrupulous" and use "unverified information from people who are not directly involved in the case ... but voice their opinion all the same," a diplomat [told](#) RIA-Novosti on condition of anonymity.

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