

Kazakh Border Guards Found Dead Near China Frontier

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ASTANA, Kazakhstan — The charred bodies of at least 12 Kazakh border guards and a gamekeeper have been discovered at a burned-out border post on the frontier with China, a senior official from the country's border guard service said Thursday.

Fifteen guards had been stationed at the post in southeast Kazakhstan, said Turganbek Stambekov, first deputy chief of the border guard service. He gave no details about the fate of the three missing servicemen.

"At present, the charred remains of 13 bodies have been found, including the body of a gamekeeper from a hunting reserve adjacent to the border post," Stambekov told a news briefing, reading from a prepared statement.

He declined to answer questions and did not say whether the victims were believed to have died in the fire or beforehand.

Stambekov said investigators had traveled to the scene, near the Kazakh town of Usharal.

Local news agencies, citing unidentified sources, said the border post was reinforced during the summer months to guard against the illegal gathering of rare medicinal plants that grow in the region.

Last Monday, May 28, was the annual Soviet-era holiday for border guards, an event still celebrated in former Soviet countries. The bodies were discovered May 30, Stambekov said.

Kazakhstan shares a 1,530-kilometer border with China and exported goods worth more than \$16 billion to its neighbor last year, more than 18 percent of its total export revenues. There is no post-Soviet history of violence at the border.

Shootouts between drug traffickers and militants occur sporadically in other Central Asian countries, particularly Tajikistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan and lies on a conduit for Afghan opiates en route to Russia and beyond.

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