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42 Dead as Tajik Offensive Ends

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DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon called off a military offensive Wednesday after rebel fighters agreed on concessions to end a battle that had killed 42 people, security officials said.

The ceasefire followed a campaign to capture former warlord Tolib Ayombekov in a remote mountain region next to Afghanistan, a show of strength by a government whose control over parts of the country remains tenuous 15 years after a civil war.

Twelve soldiers and 30 rebels were killed during fighting Tuesday, officials said. Shops and markets reopened Wednesday in Khorog, capital of the Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region and the closest town to the fighting deep in the Pamir Mountains.

"The decision was made to avoid further bloodshed, after the [rebel] field commanders promised to make concessions," said an official in the presidential administration, speaking on condition of anonymity.

He declined to say what concessions had been promised.

Security forces had earlier demanded the handover of four rebels, including Ayombekov, accused of killing the regional head of the State Committee on National Security on Saturday. Major-General Abdullo Nazarov was dragged from his car and beaten to death.

Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloyev traveled to the region for talks with rebel fighters and offered amnesty to those who turned in their weapons, a high-ranking official in the security services said on condition of anonymity.

"The main demand from our side is that the four people directly involved in the killing of Abdullo Nazarov are brought to justice," the official said. Ayombekov evaded capture during the offensive.

Tens of thousands of people died in Tajikistan during its 1992-97 civil war, in which Rakhmon's secular government, backed by Moscow, fought a loosely aligned opposition that included many Islamist fighters.

Russia has 6,000 troops stationed in Tajikistan, its largest military deployment abroad and a bulwark against the threat of Islamist violence spilling across the Afghan border after NATO pulls its troops out in 2014.

After much wrangling over conditions, Russia and Tajikistan agreed in principle this month to extend Moscow's lease on its military base for another 49 years.

"A military stand-off with the opposition would definitely weaken [Rakhmon's] internal position, making him more pliant in his relations with Moscow," said Arkady Dubnov, a Moscow-based Central Asia analyst.

"He has been a virtual steamroller that has suppressed political opposition, but the growing clout of armed gangs will pose an increasing challenge as the troop pullout from Afghanistan gets nearer," he said. "It's an open secret that he no longer controls large chunks of his own country."

Gorno-Badakhshan, separated from Afghanistan by the Pyandzh River, is an autonomous region where the authority of central government is fragile. Most of the 250,000 population sided with the opposition during the civil war.

Most communications in Khorog, 500 kilometers southeast of the capital, Dushanbe, were cut off for a second day. A local resident, able to communicate via a satellite link, said fighting had not spread to the town itself.

"We heard shooting, but we didn't see any troops," he said. "Last night we checked on our neighbors, and everybody was safe and sound. Nobody has bombed the town."

Ayombekov, who has denied involvement in Nazarov's death, fought with the opposition during the civil war and was among former fighters to receive government jobs in the peace deal that ended the conflict. But the GKNB, successor to the Soviet-era KGB, has said his gang had for many years been involved in smuggling drugs, tobacco and precious stones.

"The restoration of order in Gorno-Badakhshan is long overdue. The authorities have long discredited themselves by allowing local mobsters to run business in the region when they

should be in jail," said Dushanbe-based analyst Ramzan Sharipov.

"There will not be a second civil war in Tajikistan," he said. "The operation comes at a good time for the president, a year before scheduled elections, and will be portrayed by authorities as a show of strength and centralized power."

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