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Kyrgyzstan Says It Foiled Two Islamic State Attacks

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An Islamic State flag and ammunition displayed in al-Alam Salahuddin province, Iraq.

Kyrgyzstan's security police said on Friday they had prevented two major attacks by Islamic State.

A day after security forces killed six gunmen in two firefights in the capital Bishkek, the police identified them as Islamic State members and said seven others had been captured in a mopping-up operation.

It is the first time authorities in former Soviet Central Asia have reported armed clashes with militants of the ultra-hardline jihadist group, which is based in Iraq and Syria.

"Yes, they were all Islamic State members," said Rakhat Sulaimanov, a spokesman for the GKNB security police. "They had planned two terrorist attacks — one in the central square (of Bishkek) during today's prayers ending the month of Ramadan, and another one at the (Russian) airbase in Kant."

The group was led by Zhanbolat Amirov, a national of neighbouring Kazakhstan wanted by police after his escape from a Kyrgyz prison, the security police said in a separate statement. Amirov was killed during the operation, the spokesman said.

Authorities in the poor, mostly Muslim country have said repeatedly they are worried about the risk of locals joining militant groups in Iraq and Syria, then returning to mount attacks at home.

Fears of militancy have been echoed by Russia, which deploys warplanes and helicopters at Kant near Bishkek, and by governments of other former Soviet republics in the region. To date, however, there have been no reports of such attacks.

Kyrgyzstan's Interior Ministry has said it knows of more than 350 Kyrgyz citizens who have gone to fight for Islamic State in Syria, more than 30 of whom have died.

The overwhelming majority of the locals recruited by IS are ethnic Uzbeks from the south, where Kyrgyzstan shares the fertile but overpopulated Ferghana Valley with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Kyrgyzstan also lies on a drug-trafficking route out of Afghanistan. Two presidents have been deposed since 2005 and hundreds were killed in ethnic bloodshed in the south in 2010.

Police said on Thursday that four attackers had been killed and four security service members wounded in central Bishkek, and two more attackers were killed at around the same time in the suburbs.

On Friday, the police said they had seized seven Kalashnikov assault rifles, five pistols and a large quantity of grenades and other ammunition. They also seized 500 kg (1,100 lb) of saltpeter for making explosive devices, the GKNB said.

"At the moment GKNB structures continue investigative and search actions to detect other active members and helpers of the terrorist underground," it said.

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