Uzbek economist Alisher Taksanov has launched a scathing attack on Uzbekistan for mines on the borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

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He dismissed the Uzbek leadership's arguments that the mines were against extremists' attempts to make incursions into Uzbekistan from the neighbouring countries, saying that the mines kill nobody but peaceful people and animals. He said that the anti terrorist operation in Afghanistan had radically changed the geopolitical situation in the region and that there was no longer a threat to Uzbekistan from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while mines were only making relations tense between Uzbekistan and its neighbours. The following is an excerpt from the article entitled: "The danger of mines: Uzbekistan ignores it", carried by the Moscow-based Centrasia information agency web site; subheadings inserted editorially:

An official delegation from Uzbekistan did not attend the first Central Asian meeting on land-mine problems, which was held in [the Kyrgyz capital] Bishkek in early November 2003. [Passage omitted: background on international efforts to ban the use of landmines in the world; land mines were used by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s; Kyrgyzstan is planning to sign an international document banning the use of land mines]

No arguments to justify mines

To what extent the position of [the Uzbek capital] Tashkent is justified when it says that land mines are a coercive measure which aims to fight extremist groups and are an effective means in fighting the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, as well as in countering drug trafficking, illegal migration and smuggling in goods and artefacts.

Independent Uzbek experts believe that this position was justified after armed incursion [into Uzbekistan] by militants in 1999 and 2000. Mining borders were justified at that time. The geopolitical situation in Central Asia changed radically after the events of 11 September 2001. The antiterrorist operation has minimized a military threat to the former Soviet republics from Afghanistan. The presence of military bases of the coalition forces [in Central Asia] is a major factor for stability. Mines no longer can be described as a preventive measure. Moreover, there has been no single case in which a militant was blown up by a mine. This is proof that the "mine security" is absolutely ineffective.

[Passage omitted: land mines are little help in fighting transnational crime; the Central Asian countries should make joint efforts to fight it]

Mines kill migrants, hamper trade

Illegal migration is a sign of economic weakness and serious shortcomings inconducting reforms by the government. If people are leaving the country, that means there is no opportunity for them to make an honest living in their home country. It is necessary to create favourable conditions so that people can work normally and develop their business. Only then will the migration problem be alleviated. It is also important to simplify the registration of migrants, which will put an end to describing migrants as "illegals". Meanwhile, more people are leaving Uzbekistan for neighbouring countries than arriving in the country. It is no secret that Uzbek citizens have great difficulty in crossing the border since the government has complicated this process without explaining the reason for doing so. In any case [Uzbek] border guards on the Uzbek-Kazakh border near the town of Chernyayevka [in southern Kazakhstan] fail to explain why people cannot cross the Uzbek-Kazakh border, which is free of visa formalities. However, depriving people's of their lives or making them disabled for their aspiration to cross the border in search for jobs is a crime on the part of the state that planted mines, and cannot be justified under any circumstances. For this reason, mines are a curb on normal labour migration.

Mines are a curb on still existing border trade, which has now become dangerous for people's lives. The declaration of Central Asian integration - which has been signed by four countries [Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan] and is aimed at creating a free trade zone and ensuring the free movement of goods, capital and labour force - remains on paper. Barbedwire, visas and mines have become a serious obstacle in the implementation of this idea.

Mines threaten environment

Mines are a serious ecological threat. Dozens of animals, including the ones under state protection, are being blown up by mines; you cannot explain to poor animals that they should not cross the border in this country. This is a barrier to the development of tourism since tourists do not want to visit places heavily planted with "death", no matter how rare and beautiful these places are. On the other hand, huge areas are being withdrawn from agricultural use and thus depriving people of their source of income.

Mines strain interstate relations

Mines are currently not a means of achieving military goals since there is no real or even imaginary threat to Uzbekistan from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In any case this is the opinion of people living in border areas and that of all sober-minded people in the country.

Mines are making interstate relations tense since the countries still have multitude of unresolved problems, in particular in vital areas such as the use of water and land resources. Do you remember the Osh tragedy [ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan] at the end of the 1980s? It was caused by a quarrel between [ethnic] Uzbeks and Kyrgyz who had their own conception of the ownership of these territories. Of course the carnage was provoked by forces which the authorities did no like to mention or perhaps they know nothing about it, or maybe they are afraid of incurring wrath upon themselves.

Under the present conditions, mines are a detonator of new clashes which have potentially been laid down in society.

The delimitation (demarcation) of borders between the countries has not been completed and administrative boundaries inherited from the former Soviet Union are still in force. Unless this process is completed, the unilateral decision to plant mines means an attempt to resolve the problem by using force. The decision is being thrust upon others. One may describe it as a demonstration of force by a state to its neighbours - the neighbours that we are living within a so-called "Central Asian integration".

Proceeding from the above, one may conclude that land mines are hampering our lives. They are alienating Uzbekistan from its neighbours. They arecrippling dozens of people who are not to blame for the fact that a certain leader cannot and does not want to resolve differences by peaceful means, in a democratic way. Unless mines are removed from the borders, all people living in Central Asia, in particular in Uzbekistan, will be hostage to them.

Von: Centrasia web site, 04 January 2004

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