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Arslan Anarbaev has been the interim head of the Kyrgyz Embassy in Washington as charge d'affaires since ex-President Kurmanbek Bakiev was ousted in April. In Kyrgyzstan, he served in the governments of both Bakiev and his predecessor, Askar Akaev.

Anarbaev sat down with RFE/RL correspondent Richard Solash recently to talk about a range of issues in his country – from the presence of U.S. and Russian bases to lingering ethnic tensions in the south and the critical time Kyrgyzstan is facing, both now and in the coming months.

RFE/RL: How would you characterize current relations between Washington and Bishkek? And have they changed since President Bakiev was overthrown in April?

Arslan Anarbaev: To answer your question, I should note that cooperation with the United States is one of the main priorities in Kyrgyzstan's external political agenda, regardless of the government change. After the well-known April events that led to the government change, the U.S.- Kyrgyz partnership didn't change much. Kyrgyzstan is committed to observing its obligations in the framework of U.S.-Kyrgyz agreements and doesn't intend to break them. I think the United States right now considers Kyrgyzstan to be its partner and ally on matters of providing regional security, including stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan.

RFE/RL: Will both the United States' transit center at Manas -- which is so crucial to the its military operations in Afghanistan -- and the Russian air force base at Kant continue to operate? Do they represent competing presences in the country?

Anarbaev: I am sure that when all is said and done, the presence of Russian military infrastructure and the simultaneous presence of a [U.S.] transit center [in Kyrgyzstan] don't really interfere with each other. Each one of them executes their own mandate and their own functions, determined by their tasks. We have a bilateral agreement with the United States regarding the Manas base, which definitively states that one of the sides can terminate the agreement with six months' notification.

On the other hand, as you know, the Kyrgyz side has stated a number of times that as soon as the situation is normalized in Afghanistan, the U.S. base won't be needed. The same thing is the case regarding the Russian base presence. It will depend on the region's progress in the distant future. If the situation should worsen, the presence of the Russian base will still be vital.

RFE/RL: Have U.S. officials expressed concern to you about Russian interests in Kyrgyzstan?

Anarbaev: To answer your question, I'll repeat that this topic was never brought up during my meetings with either the U.S. side or the Russian side.

RFE/RL: There has recently been some criticism in Kyrgyz media about U.S. financing of the Manas transit center, particularly in regard to allegations that much of the money supplied to the base was actually going into the pockets of the Bakiev family. Is the government of President Roza Otunbaeva trying to make the financial transactions surrounding Manas more transparent?

Anarbaev: I've told you that the Manas base played and plays not only an important role in creating regional and national security, but I should tell you openly that the presence of the Manas base plays a positive role in economic development. As you know, the budget receives money from renting the base and from supplying gasoline and fuels. The money that we receive is significant, if you take into account that Kyrgyzstan's budgetary situation is always tense. So always when you are considering the presence of Manas in Kyrgyzstan, you are also considering the question of money. I think that during ex-President Bakiev's rule, corruption was present, [but] I can only guess if there were actual cases of corruption or not. This issue is still open at the moment and it's in the hands of the judiciary and law enforcement organizations, who are working on it now.

This issue was also brought up here in congressional hearings on Kyrgyzstan, if you remember. Back then, the U.S. Congress, the State Department, and also the Pentagon demanded an answer to the question of transparency of fuel contracts. This question is still open, but I know that at this time, discussions on the Kyrgyz side are going well, and from now on, gas supplies will be done in an open and transparent form.

RFE/RL: In the wake of the interethnic violence in June and the ensuing refugee crisis, does President Otunbaeva's government have full control over the south of Kyrgyzstan?

Anarbaev: That's a good question. I cannot answer this question for sure – [whether] we control the territory in the south of my country 100 percent. That's because of such objective factors as the lingering tension between these two ethnic groups [and] because of the mistrust and lack of confidence of the ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz communities toward local law enforcement bodies.

You know, the whole situation in the south of my country reminds me of live coals: If you blow, you might just see, God forbid, another flame. Of course, the interim government does its best to control [the situation], but I should say that this control is very fragile.

RFE/RL: How long do you think it will take to heal the interethnic rift in Kyrgyzstan? And will the government make an attempt to help smooth relations?

Anarbaev: It will take quite some time -- maybe decades. But we do know that we should start to reconcile [the Kyrgyz and ethnic communities] right now, by such activities as providing timely assistance to those who suffered heavily from the terrible events [of June]; supplying them with food, medical assistance, and construction materials, so that people can have their homes before the winter season comes. This is the first step.

RFE/RL: What about longer-term plans for dealing with this issue?

Anarbaev: In the second stage, I think that there will be special programs developed to help bring peace to the ethnic communities. This is a long and painful process and we'll need more international help. I already stated that it would be good to invite a specialized mission from the OSCE, from the office of ethnic minorities, to determine the severity of the situation on the spot.

Based on this we can develop short and middle-term programs and projects for reconciliation between the ethnic communities -- programs in culture and education, increasing understanding of human rights. All of them must be inserted into grade school and higher education to promote civic peace in the country as the most important step in the country's stable socioeconomic

evolution and growth.

RFE/RL: There are growing allegations that many media outlets in Kyrgyzstan, through inflammatory or biased reporting, are fueling ethnic tensions in the country. As you see it, is that the case?

Anarbaev: That's a good question. The thing is -- and it's true not only in Kyrgyzstan -- that sometimes a careless word, spoken or printed in a newspaper, can do much more harm than a terrorist bombing on the street, for example. That's why journalists have a very big responsibility. You, being one yourself, probably understand it. That's the reason we are working with journalists in many ways, encouraging them to be cautious and correct, before making bold statements, especially in this tense environment.

At the same time, we pay a lot of attention to media freedom and freedom of speech. You know that during Bakiev's rule, freedom of speech was severely degraded. You know how many journalists were assaulted and persecuted. And you know about the assassinations. That's why we created a new program in Kyrgyzstan, called "Back to Democracy," that aims to develop and strengthen democratic values in the country [and] to strengthen fundamental human values and freedom of speech.

RFE/RL: Robert Blake, the assistant U.S. secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, said at a July 27 hearing of the U.S. Helsinki Commission that there was a threat of Islamic extremists from Afghanistan entering the south of Kyrgyzstan through the Tajik border. Do you take that threat seriously and is the government trying to counter it?

Anarbaev: I should say that we cannot exclude the possibility of some forces with destructive aims getting into our country from neighboring countries -- members of radical Islamic organizations, for example. Unfortunately, we are not excluding this possibility because our country has enemies and those who wish us ill, and we have a lot of proof that people close to Bakiev and his family members had a part to play in the region's destabilization.

The interests of these internal destructive forces match the interests of external ones, located in neighboring countries -- radical Islamism and drug trafficking. Matching interests unite those groups and may, God forbid, create a new burst of tension in our country. That's why our government pays a lot of attention to border security. The help of the United States, Russia, Kazakhstan, our neighbors, assists us with this. The danger can come from other countries, as well, not only from Tajikistan.

RFE/RL: Observers say that the parliamentary elections scheduled for the fall will set a critical precedent for post-Bakiev Kyrgyzstan. What is the government doing to ensure that they will be conducted fairly and openly?

Anarbaev: We all understand that the conduct of the essential upcoming election plays a huge political role for us and the fate of our country depends on how well the election will be organized. That's why my president and members of the provisional government are doing everything possible for the election to be open, clear, and honest -- complying with all international standards that are, as you know, universal for all democratic countries.

And in these efforts we are trying to make sure that these elections proceed with maximum transparency and in a fair manner, in the presence of independent international observers. As you know, parliamentary elections in our country are always, unfortunately, accompanied by excessive emotionality on the part of the voters and the political parties, which often leads to destabilization of the internal political situation. This is why we are trying to provide public safety -- personal safety -- for all participants of the parliamentary elections themselves and for those who are organizing them.

RFE/RL: The new Kyrgyz government has issued several criminal charges against Bakiev, his family members, and his associates. Some of those accused may have assets in the United States. Is your office investigating this or taking action on this issue?

Anarbaev: As far as I remember, we did ask the United States for help in investigating whether money-laundering and illegal financial transactions [by the Bakiev family and others] indeed took place. It appears that the U.S. side then agreed to help. I don't have the information at this moment, but I think that this issue will return after the parliament in our country is formed.

When parliament forms -- after that important moment -- the legitimization process will begin for all structures, all democratic institutions. After that, it will be easier for us to cooperate with the U.S. side to investigate this issue more thoroughly and give a definite answer as to whether or not any wheeling and dealing took place. Now it's too early to tell.