



## RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

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4 April 2012

### KGZ104071.FE

Kyrgyzstan: The Uyghur minority, including how they are treated by society and the authorities; government protection provided

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### 1. General Information

According to sources consulted by the Research Directorate, the Uyghurs make up about one per cent of the population in Kyrgyzstan (L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde 29 Sept. 2011, Sec. 2; MRG May 2011b). By comparison, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) states that the Kyrgyz, the largest ethnic group in the country, make up almost 70 per cent of the total population (ibid.). According to sources citing official statistics, there are more than 50,000 Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan (RFE/RL 9 April 2010; RFA 13 April 2010; The Jamestown Foundation 13 August 2009). However, some sources say that, according to some estimates, the Uyghur population is greater than 250,000 (*The National* 18 June 2010; *The Guardian* 14 June 2010; RFA 13 April 2010).

According to sources, the Uyghurs are mostly Muslims (*The New York Times* 2 Jan. 2011; MRG May 2011a; RFE/RL 9 Apr. 2010). MRG specifies that they are mostly Sunni (MRG May 2011a). The Uyghurs live mainly in southern Kyrgyzstan (L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde 29 Sept. 2011; sect. 2; MRG May 2011a). According to MRG, most of the Uyghur population lives in southern Kyrgyzstan, near the city of Osh, although a "sizeable population" of the Uyghurs live in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan (ibid.).

The largest Uyghur population is located in the Chinese region of Xinjiang, which shares a border with Kyrgyzstan (ibid.; RFA 13 Apr. 2010). The *New York Times* states that many of the Uyghurs who live in central Asia emigrated from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; the *New York Times* article does not specify when that emigration took place (2 Jan. 2011). According to MRG, in the years prior to 2011, Kyrgyzstan saw the arrival of Uyghurs fleeing the "repression" in Xinjiang (MRG May 2011a). MRG states that the Kyrgyz government initially tried to discourage the migration of Uyghurs from Xinjiang to Kyrgyzstan but that it did not "suppress it harshly"; the Kyrgyz authorities allowed the existence of Uyghur organizations linked to or that fostered the cause of the Uyghurs from Xinjiang (ibid.).

### 2. Treatment of the Uyghurs

#### 2.1 Attitude of the General Population

According to MRG, there were “abusive and antagonistic statements-some coming from government officials-describing Uyghurs as terrorists and fundamentalists (‘Wahhabis’)” (ibid.). MRG added that the Uyghurs have been subjected to “negative societal attitudes and media coverage” (MRG May 2011a). No corroborating information could be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

## **2.2 Violence**

According to sources, attacks against the Uyghurs and against members of another ethnic group, the Dungans, took place in April 2010, in the city of Tokmok (Freedom House 2011; RFE/RL 9 Apr. 2010). According to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Tokmok is located in northern Kyrgyzstan, about 30 kilometres from the capital, Bishkek (ibid.). RFE/RL states that these attacks by groups of anti-government protesters left 11 wounded, five by gunshot, and allegedly targeted houses, cafes and shops belonging to Uyghurs or to Dungans (ibid.).

Various sources indicate that, in June 2010, interethnic violence between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks took place in Kyrgyzstan, causing the death of hundreds of people and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people inside and outside the country (MRG May 2011b; AI 2011; *The Economist* 17 June 2010). According to MRG, this violence allegedly caused the death of more than 2,000 people and also had repercussions on other ethnic groups in the country (MRG May 2011b). However, the annual reports of Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (AI) say that the number of deaths was about 400 (Human Rights Watch 2012; AI 2011). Amnesty International explained that this number comes from preliminary government data and that the total number of deaths was undoubtedly higher (ibid.). According to the *Economist*, many people were buried without their families registering their deaths, following an Islamic custom that the dead are to be buried within 24 hours of death; the *Economist* infers that the number of deaths was therefore underestimated (17 June 2010). According to MRG, during this period, many Uyghurs allegedly fled from northern Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan, after receiving threats that they would be the next target of violence (May 2011b).

## **3. Treatment by the Authorities**

According to MRG, Kyrgyzstan is described as a country that is “more ‘minority friendly’ than some of its neighbours” (May 2011b). MRG explained that the country implemented mechanisms for consultations of minority groups and that state support is available to some minority organizations (May 2011b). An article written by a central Asia specialist and published on the Jamestown Foundation website mentions the People’s Assembly of Kyrgyzstan, a government body that brings together members of ethnic minority groups (13 August 2009). According to MRG, the inclusion of Russian as a “link language” in the Constitution and the fact that Russian remains the “language of inter-ethnic communication” shows the authorities’ willingness to remain open to ethnic diversity (May 2011b).

However, according to MRG, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyz nationals have been looking to consolidate their position in the country, gradually taking on the role previously held by the Russians and establishing Kyrgyz as the country’s official language (May 2011b). L’aménagement linguistique dans le monde, a website that describes linguistic policies around the world and that is

managed by a linguist and sociologist at Laval University (15 Mar. 2012), notes that the Uyghurs, among other minorities, are more inclined to learn Russian for economic and historic reasons (L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde 29 Sept. 2011, Sec. 2, 4.1, 5.4). According to MRG, the growing prominence of Kyrgyz meant that the Russian-speaking population was facing more obstacles accessing its rights and the labour market, including in the civil service (May 2011b). According to MRG, candidates for elected office, as well as university students, must be proficient in Kyrgyz (May 2011b). MRG notes, however, that Russian continues to be the country's "language of inter-ethnic communication" (May 2011b).

### **3.1 China's Influence**

Several sources consulted by the Research Directorate note China's interest in the Uyghur population of Kyrgyzstan (*The Guardian* 14 June 2010; *Le Figaro* 31 Oct. 2009; The Jamestown Foundation 13 August 2009). According to the daily *The National*, based in Abu Dhabi, the Chinese authorities are concerned that Kyrgyzstan could be used as a refuge and base from which to launch an insurgency against Xinjiang (18 June 2010). Two sources note that China is pressuring the Kyrgyzstan government to control the Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan (RFA 1 May 2011; The Jamestown Foundation 13 August 2009). MRG also points out that the authorities warned two groups, the Uyghur Freedom Organization and the Kyrgyzstan Uyghur (Ittipak) Association, not to participate in activities related to the Uyghur situation in Xinjiang, in order to avoid any incident with China (May 2011a).

In August 2009, the police detained two leaders of the Uyghur community after a demonstration held in response to riots in the Chinese province of Xinjiang in July 2009 (The Jamestown Foundation 13 August 2009; RFE/RL 10 August 2009; Reuters 10 August 2009). Sources note that the two people were the main leaders of Ittipak (ibid; The Jamestown Foundation 13 August 2009; RFL/RE 10 August 2009). According to Reuters, the event that resulted in the arrest of these two leaders involved a demonstration against China regarding the riots that lead to death, injuries and the arrest of numerous Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Reuters 10 August 2009). According to Reuters, the demonstrators accused China of "state terrorism" because of its actions during the riots (ibid.). Reuters also stated that the ombudsman of Kyrgyzstan, who was present at the demonstration, allegedly stated that they had been arrested for organizing a gathering that had not been sanctioned by the authorities (ibid.). An RFE/RL article also notes that the event had not been approved (10 August 2009). However, according to the article published by the Jamestown Foundation, the government did not provide the reasons for the arrest (13 August 2009). According to an RFE/RL article, the two Ittipak leaders were released following the intervention of the ombudsman (10 August 2009).

According to two sources, in May 2011, four Uyghur activists were prevented from travelling to the United States to attend an international conference on the situation of the Uyghurs (HRIC 4 May 2011; RFA 1 May 2011). Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported that these activists were escorted off the airplane by the police without any explanation for why they could not travel; one of the militants, cited by RFA, said that Chinese pressure on the Kyrgyz authorities played a role in the matter (ibid.). A news release from Human Rights in China (HRIC), a human rights NGO that advocates China's compliance with its international obligations (HRIC n.d.), states that two of the activists were told that their trip would "harm Sino-Kyrgyz relations" (ibid. 4 May 2011).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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**Internet sites, including:** Amnesty International; BBC; Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst; CentralAsiaNews.net; Civil Society International; Congrès Mondial Ouïgour; Country of Origin Research and Information; Eastern Turkestan Information Centre; eoi.net; Eurasianet.org; Europe solidaire sans frontières; Factiva; Forum 18; Hudson Institute — Center for Religious Freedom; Human Rights Watch; Institute for War and Peace Reporting; International Crisis Group;

International Uyghur Human Rights & Democracy Foundation; Minority Electronic Resources; Minorities at Risk; United Nations — Refworld, Integrated Regional Information Networks; United States — Commission on International Religious Freedom, Department of State; Uyghur American Association; Uyghur Human Rights Project; World Uyghur Congress.

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