Responses to Information Requests (RIR) respond to focused Requests for Information that are submitted to the Research Directorate in the course of the refugee protection determination process. The database contains a seven-year archive of English and French RIRs. Earlier RIRs may be found on the UNHCR’s Refworld website. Please note that some RIRs have attachments which are not electronically accessible. To obtain a PDF copy of an RIR attachment, please email the Knowledge and Information Management Unit.

**KGZ105071.E**

Kyrgyzstan: Treatment of the Uyghur [Uighur] minority by society and authorities, including state protection provided to victims of violence and discrimination; Uyghur minority political groups, including activities (2012-2015)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

**1. Overview: Treatment of Minorities in Kyrgyzstan**

Sources report that in June 2010, interethnic violence took place between the Kyrgyz majority and the Uzbek minority in Kyrgyzstan (The New York Times 13 June 2010; Human Rights Watch 11 June 2010). In a 2013 report, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) states that since the June 2010 events, "a climate of discriminatory attitudes, racial stereotypes, suspicion between the majority ethnic group and the minorities, widespread nationalistic discourse and exclusion continue to exist" (UN 19 Apr. 2013, para. 14). In its 2014 country summary on Kyrgyzstan, Human Rights Watch states that after the conflict in 2010, "[e]thnic Uzbeks and other minorities remain especially vulnerable" (Human Rights Watch Jan. 2014, 466). The CERD report states that "the Committee is deeply concerned at the repeated ethnic conflicts and clashes which occurred in [Kyrgyzstan] between the majority of the population and some ethnic groups" (UN 19 Apr. 2013, para. 5). It also notes that it is concerned by reports that, following the June 2010 conflict, persons "mostly from minority groups" had been detained and subjected to "torture and other forms of ill-treatment on the basis of their ethnicity" (ibid., para. 7).

**2. Overview of Uyghur Minority**

A 2014 article by EurasiaNet, a website operated by the Eurasia Program of the Open Society Foundations that "provides information and analysis about political, economic, environmental and social developments in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as in Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Turkey, and Southwest Asia" (EurasiaNet n.d.), describes the Uyghur as a "Turkic ethnic group straddling borders in Central Asia and western China" (ibid. 25 Nov. 2014). According to Minority Rights Group International (MRG), the "small Uyghur minority" in Kyrgyzstan is found primarily in the southern part of the country near the city of Osh and in Bishkek, while the largest concentration of Uyghurs is found in China (MRG May 2011). Uyghurs reportedly comprise approximately 1 percent of Kyrgyzstan's population (US 20 June 2014). For more information on the Uyghur minority in Kyrgyzstan until April 2012, including history, demographics and the 2010 interethnic conflict, see Response to Information Request KGZ104071.

EurasiaNet reports that for "over half a century," the Uyghurs have been "a source of concern for Beijing" and that in 2014, China's conflict with the minority group "worsened" (25 Nov. 2014). In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, an associate professor with the Carleton University Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, whose research specializations include migration/diaspora studies, nationalism and minorities, and contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, stated that there is "fear within..."
the Kyrgyz and Chinese governments that Uyghurs from Kyrgyzstan and China might be forming groups, or relationships, or conspiring toward greater autonomy" (Professor, Carleton University 5 Feb. 2015).

In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, a professor from the International Development Studies Program at George Washington University, who specializes in indigenous rights in Central Asia, the former Soviet Union, and China, said that in the 1990's, neighbouring states around China did not suppress Uyghur political movements focused on the rights of Uyghurs within China, and such groups were generally able to organize protests, publish their own materials about Uyghur political issues, and advocate for the establishment of an Uyghur independent state within China (Professor, George Washington University 3 Feb. 2015). The Professor added that more recently, China, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) [1], has been able to influence supporting countries, including Kyrgyzstan, to "shut down" Uyghur political activity (ibid.). He stated that authorities have banned many Uyghur groups and are closely monitoring the ones that remain (ibid.). The Professor further noted that many Uyghur political activists in Kyrgyzstan have been harassed by state security organs (ibid.).

2.1 Uyghur Groups

Sources indicate that there is a Uyghur association in Kyrgyzstan called Ittipak [Kyrgyz-Uyghur Unity Association (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014)] (Independent Researcher 4 Feb. 2015; WUC 4 Feb. 2015; EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014). EurasiaNet reports that Ittipak held its 25th anniversary congress in October 2014 (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014). The same source states that Ittipak "plays a strong role in conflict prevention by addressing the grievances of Kyrgyzstan's Uyghur population and meeting needs when the government does not [such as language schools and charity]" (ibid.). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, an independent researcher on Uyghurs, who previously worked for the UNHCR as a Uyghur interpreter, stated that Ittipak is a "major" Uyghur organization, but is under "government control" and does not participate in political activities within Kyrgyzstan (Independent Researcher 4 Feb. 2015). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a representative from the World Uyghur Congress (WUC), a Munich-based organization that works with NGOs and the UN and aims to "promote democracy, human rights and freedom of the Uyghur people," stated that Ittipak is the WUC's affiliate organization in Kyrgyzstan, but "remains under supervision by the local government" (WUC 4 Feb. 2015). He also said that the Chinese government views Ittipak as a "separatist organization," along with the WUC and its other affiliated groups (WUC 4 Feb. 2015).

According to the WUC representative, while there is no official connection between the organizations affiliated with WUC and political groups, "the WUC and its affiliate organizations do communicate with members of Parliament/legislatures of their respective countries, along with some Members of the European Parliament and the UN" (ibid.). The EurasiaNet article states that Ittipak's leadership is "adamant that the organization does not support Uighur separatism in Kyrgyzstan or elsewhere, and has no involvement in events in China" (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014).

The independent researcher stated that there is another "very small" Uyghur group called Erpan, which is headed by Nurmukhamed Kenjiev and advocates for the integration of Uyghurs into Chinese society (4 Feb. 2015). Further and corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The independent researcher noted that Uyghurs do not have the "right to engage in politics, especially in Uyghur issue[s] in Kyrgyzistan" but that Uyghurs remain involved in Uyghur issues, either by helping Uyghurs from XUAR [known officially as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Chinese territory in which the Uyghurs live (Dwyer 2005, 2)], or by giving donations (4 Feb. 2015).

3. Treatment by Authorities

According to the independent researcher, "discrimination is widely applied" by the Kyrgyz government to Uyghurs "due to Chinese influence through SCO and other bilateral agreements" (Independent Researcher 4 Feb. 2015). The Professor from George Washington University stated that, while the power of the SCO can be "exaggerated," China's economic influence in Central Asia is increasing and "as a result, Uyghurs cannot count on Central Asian states to protect their rights, particularly if they involve any issues related to the interests of China" (3 Feb. 2015). For further information on the SCO, see Response to Information Request ZZZ105073.

The WUC representative indicated that "there is certainly a difference between treatment of Uyghurs and of other groups in Kyrgyzstan, principally because of China's influence over the Kyrgyz government specifically in relation to Uyghurs" (WUC 4 Feb. 2015). According to EurasiaNet, local political analysts state that as bilateral ties between China and Kyrgyzstan have strengthened, "Kyrgyz authorities have upped their surveillance and repression of Uighurs" (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014).

According to the Professor at George Washington University, "the Chinese government will not outset ask the government of Kyrgyzstan to suppress Uyghurs writ large, however China will sometimes convince
Kyrgyzstan to suppress politically active Uighurs (ex: Uighurs promoting rights in China)” (Professor, George Washington University 3 Feb. 2015). According to the WUC representative, "political freedom for Uighurs ranks below that of an ethnically Kyrgyz citizen or organizations promot[ing] minority rights of other groups" and for "Uighur civil society groups, and citizens in general, China maintains a definite sense of control over government policies [in Kyrgyzstan]" (WUC 4 Feb. 2015). The same source added that the Kyrgyz government is not "in a position to turn down Chinese requests or to tolerate too much Uyghur activity that is labelled separatist by the Chinese" (ibid.).

The Professor from George Washington University stated that the "rights of Uyghurs, in Kyrgyzstan, are selectively suppressed" and the treatment they receive "depends on whether or not they are politically active" (Professor, George Washington University 3 Feb. 2014). Without providing details, he noted that "serious ramifications may arise when Uyghurs, in Kyrgyzstan, become politically active vis-à-vis China" (ibid.). The independent researcher similarly stated that Uyghurs born in Kyrgyzstan are "under strict government control," so if they want either to help Uyghurs from China or to show their Uyghur sentiments, the Kyrgyz government will "take measures to stop it" (4 Feb. 2015). EurasiaNet reports that, according to activists, "authorities have frequently prohibited Uighur meetings" (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014). The same source also notes that Ittipak was able to hold its 25th anniversary congress "without a problem" in October 2014 (ibid.).

### 3.1 Treatment of Uyghurs from China by Kyrgyz Authorities

The Professor from George Washington University stated that "Uyghurs from China are particularly vulnerable in Kyrgyzstan. If China requests the arrest or extradition of its Uyghur citizens resident in Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz government is likely to oblige them" (Professor, George Washington University 3 Feb. 2015). The professor added that "China does not want the Kyrgyz government to respect the rights of Uyghurs to freedom of speech or assembly as it relates to issues inside China, and it actively seeks Kyrgyzstan's assistance in suppressing the right of Uyghurs to self-determination within the borders of China" (ibid.).

The representative from the WUC stated that "[w]ith regards to Kyrgyzstan, Uyghurs who flee persecution in China are invariably sent back to face Chinese authorities" (4 Feb. 2015). In its 2014 submission to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report for the Universal Periodic Review, the UNHCR indicated that

Kyrgyzstan continues to apply a discriminatory approach in granting access to state registration and refugee status determination ("RSD") procedures, in addition to the granting of the refugee status with respect to certain groups of asylum-seekers. The Uighurs from China are altogether excluded from the state Registration and RSD procedures, and UNHCR conducts RSDs for these persons. Uighurs from China who seek asylum are not issued any documents by the Government certifying their legal stay in the country, and are therefore at risk of police harassment and refoulement. (UN June 2014, 3)

Media sources report that in January of 2014, 11 Uyghurs from China were killed after crossing into Kyrgyzstan (Reuters 24 Jan. 2014; Radio Free Asia 24 Jan. 2014). According to Radio Free Asia, Kyrgyz officials said that two of the eleven were killed by a local hunter and the remaining nine were later killed by border guards (ibid.). Reuters reports that the acting head of the Kyrgyz border guards claimed the group of eleven men appeared to be part of a militant group of Uyghur separatists (Reuters 24 Jan. 2014). In response, the WUC stated that it was concerned the men may have been refugees and called for an investigation into the incident (Radio Free Asia 24 Jan. 2014; WUC 24 Jan. 2014).

### 4. Treatment of the Uighur Minority by Society

Information on the treatment of the Uyghur minority by society was scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response. The independent researcher stated that while there is no "obvious discrimination" of Uyghurs by "ordinary Kyrgyz people," during ethnic violence, like the clashes that took place in 2010, Uyghurs are one of the groups that are targeted (Independent Researcher 4 Feb. 2015). He added that during the clashes of 2010, "Uyghur bazaars and shops were destroyed as well" (ibid.). EurasiaNet states that "[d]uring [the] political violence that engulfed the capital Bishkek in 2010, there were sporadic reports of Uighurs being targeted by mobs" (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014).

In correspondence with the Research Directorate, a professor with the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, who specializes in identity politics in former Soviet countries in Central Asia, similarly stated that "[a]fter the ethnic (Uzbek-Kyrgyz) riots in 2010, we've seen the steady rise of an unapologetic Kyrgyz ethnic nationalism that is intolerant of ethnic minorities" (Professor, University of Toronto 6 Feb. 2015). The 2014 EurasiaNet article notes that the "[t]he tension affecting Kyrgyz Uighurs may be connected more to local interethnic issues than top-down repression" (EurasiaNet 25 Nov. 2014).
The Professor from Carleton University stated that the Uyghur minority is generally perceived as "less threatening" than ethnic Uzbeks by the Kyrgyz majority (Professor, Carleton University 5 Feb. 2015). He also noted that there is "a strong nationalist sentiment," primarily against Uzbeks, but "Uyghurs are still affected by this ... in terms of the social perceptions that citizens should learn [the] Kyrgyz language and should try to integrate into [Kyrgyz] society; although the government does not have means to assist with this integration" (ibid.). According to the independent researcher, Uyghurs born in Kyrgyzstan live predominantly in Uyghur neighborhoods, because of "impossibility to be assimilated or integrated into Kyrgyz culture" (4 Feb. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

The WUC representative stated that

media reports coming out of China and distributed in [Kyrgyzstan] have also contributed to the negative perception of Uyghurs as "terrorists" and "fundamentalists," potentially affecting social standing and employment opportunities. (WUC 4 Feb. 2015)

In a May 2011 information update on the Uyghur group, Minority Rights Group International (MRG) reports that

there have been claims of abusive and antagonistic statements - some coming from government officials - describing Uighurs as terrorists and fundamentalists ('Wahhabis'), and perhaps contributing to what is perceived in employment and negative societal attitudes and media coverage of the Uighur minority. (MRG May 2011)

5. State Protection

Following a 2013 meeting between the President of the European Commission (EC) and the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, the President of the EC released a statement indicating that "Kyrgyzstan still faces many challenges, in upholding the rule of law, respecting human rights and promoting inter-ethnic reconciliation" (EU 17 Sept. 2013).

The UN Human Rights Committee 2014 review of the Second Periodic Report of Kyrgyzstan (on its implementation of the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) noted that "[s]tate body for the protection of the rights of minorities had been created and worked on issues such as interethnic relations" (UN 11 Mar. 2014). Central Asia Online, a news website sponsored by the US Department of Defence to promote regional stability (n.d.), reports that Kyrgyzstan's Assembly of the People is a consultative body, which was founded in 1994 to promote inter-ethnic tolerance; in 2014, it had representation from approximately 80 groups (Central Asia Online 7 Apr. 2014). Ittipak reportedly participates in the assembly (ibid.; Independent Researcher 4 Feb. 2015). The chairman of Ittipak reportedly said that the assembly holds cultural events and roundtable discussions to "strengthen unity" (qtd. in Central Asia Online 7 Apr. 2014).

The UN Human Rights Committee indicates that during the review, experts "expressed concern about the apparent lack of protection against discrimination based on ethnicity [and] languages" (UN 11 Mar. 2014). The University of Toronto Professor stated that "[p]rotection for minorities in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan included, has always been more declaratory than real" and that "authorities lack enforcement capabilities, and so the law is at best enforced unevenly and at worst simply ignored" (6 Feb. 2015).

The CERD report states that there is an "absence of effective measures to create a peaceful and inclusive society and to fully promote tolerance, reconciliation and understanding between the Kyrgyz majority and the minority ethnic groups" (UN 19 Apr. 2013, para. 14). The same source indicates that there is an "absence of explanations [from Kyrgyzstan] on the effective remedies available to victims of racial discrimination and their effectiveness" (ibid., para. 19).

The WUC representative indicated that Uyghur civil society organizations are able to provide "some level of support," but are "unable to influence policy in a more general sense" (4 Feb. 2015).

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.

Note

[1] The SCO was founded on 15 June 2001 by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan (SCO n.d.). The SCO indicates that its goals are "strengthening mutual confidence and good-neighbourly relations among the member countries" (ibid.).
References


Independent Researcher. 4 February 2015. Correspondence to the Research Directorate.


Professor, Carleton University. 5 February 2015. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.

Professor, George Washington University. 4 February 2015. Telephone interview.

Professor, University of Toronto. 6 February 2015. Correspondence with the Research Directorate.


Additional Sources Consulted

**Oral sources:** Attempts to contact the following were unsuccessful within the time constraints of this Response: International Uyghur Human Rights & Democracy Foundation; Professors in the Department of Political Science and International Relations, American University of Central Asia; Uyghur American Association.

**Internet sites, including:** Al Jazeera; Amnesty International; ecoinet; Factiva; Minority Rights Group International; Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); Society of Threatened Peoples; United Nations – Refworld; United States – Department of State; Uyghur American Association; Uyghur World Congress.

Tips on how to use this search engine.