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# US Must Do More For Kyrgyzstan's Displaced – Refugee Advocate

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A leading independent refugee advocacy organization has called on Washington to cooperate better with the international effort to help those displaced by ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan.

At a donor conference in Bishkek at the end of July, several countries and international organizations pledged over \$1 billion in relief for Kyrgyzstan. The US contribution will be \$48.6 million, or about 5 percent of the total aid. But the US usually contributes 20 to 25 percent of aid in such cases, said Dawn Calabria, a senior adviser at Refugees International, who traveled to Kyrgyzstan in July to collect information on the refugee situation.

“Right now the US has done very little on the humanitarian side,” Calabria said. The US has pledged some aid outside the auspices of the UN, “but I think it's important to work in solidarity with the United Nations, in particular UNICEF in their educational programs, and to build up civil society in Kyrgyzstan,” she said, speaking at a forum at the **Women's Foreign Policy Group** August 5 in Washington, D.C.

US embassy staff in Bishkek counter that Washington has been quick to respond to the Kyrgyzstan crisis and noted that the \$48.6 million comes in addition to \$47 million Washington had previously pledged for fiscal year 2010. “The United States has been very active in our support for Kyrgyzstan and this \$48.6 million in new money demonstrates the United States' commitment,” an embassy spokesperson told EurasiaNet.org on August 6.

The aid for Kyrgyzstan's displaced needs to arrive quickly and the UN effort is the best way to do that, said Calabria of Refugees International. “Housing has to be done immediately. Tents ... are fine for the summer, but it's going to be really tough in the winter,” she said. In addition, she noted, with school starting soon, many schools in southern Kyrgyzstan were destroyed, and many families will be afraid to send their children to school if that requires entering a neighborhood of another nationality. And getting the education system up and running again will be key to Kyrgyzstan's reconstruction: “That's really important for the future of the country, and also for people's sense of peace and stability.”

Most of the over 100,000 ethnic Uzbek refugees who fled Kyrgyzstan for Uzbekistan after the June violence in and around Osh have returned to Kyrgyzstan, Calabria said. But they remain fearful for their safety. “In particular, there is a feeling from many of the Uzbeks that they have no place left in their own country,” she said. Kyrgyz officials and media have scapegoated ethnic Uzbeks, she said, and the mayor of Osh has formed a personal militia that intimidates Uzbeks. “Sweeps, detentions and arrests [in the wake of the violence] have fallen very heavily on the Uzbek community that suffered the most,” she said.

Evidence shows that Uzbeks in fact bore the brunt of the violence, she added: “If you look at the satellite

photographs, which all of the NGO offices have, you can see it was Uzbek neighborhoods that were primarily burned. And conveniently, in downtown Osh, you can see that the pattern of destruction matches an urban renewal plan the mayor put out last fall. ... He's even said, 'Now that these properties were unfortunately destroyed, maybe we should just bulldoze them and start construction of high-rise apartment buildings downtown.'"

Uzbekistan deserves credit for welcoming the refugees, even though it was initially grudging. "The president of Uzbekistan for a while closed the border, but then the outcry in his own country was extremely high," she said. "We heard Uzbek citizens talking, military, police, commentators, ordinary people on the street, that they had to do something. Some people wanted to go to war with Kyrgyzstan. Cooler heads prevailed and instead they decided to open the borders."

Uzbekistan, unlike Kyrgyzstan, does not have any laws regulating the acceptance of refugees and the UN High Commissioner on Refugees has no presence there. But the government in Tashkent reached out, which was encouraging, Calabria said. "Some UN agencies said they had never gotten a friendly call from the [Uzbekistan] government before. ... The government did a very good job, from everything we heard. They had hot meals, shelter, they had tents, they had blankets, they had medical care." Teachers and school counselors from all over the country were deployed to the refugee camps to help the traumatized victims. [[For background see EurasiaNet's archive](#) [1]].

Yet while the refugees have largely returned to Kyrgyzstan voluntarily, they were at least prodded along by the government of Uzbekistan, Calabria said. "The Uzbek officials who were operating the camps were very careful to make it clear that people had to go home."

Tashkent maintains that attitude, she said, which raises the concern that Uzbekistan may lose patience with the unknown number of refugees who remain in the country. They are not officially recognized as refugees, and so could be sent home any time the government wishes. "For the people hiding in Uzbekistan, the fear is that they could be deported tomorrow," she said.

"What the international community is hoping is that Uzbekistan's move in this direction and its recognition of the continuing problems in [Kyrgyzstan] will make them, at best, look the other way at all the people who are in their country illegally," she added. "The problem for these people is, what is their future? You can stay with friends and relatives, but how do you work? How do you support yourself?"

**Editor's note:** Joshua Kucera is a Washington, DC,-based freelance writer who specializes in security issues in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East.

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