

Regional Overview: Central Asia and the Caucasus 19-25 January 2020

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Bringing clarity to crisis

Over the past week in Central Asia and the Caucasus, significant developments include: continued fighting in Afghanistan resulting in civilian fatalities; arrests in Tajikistan targeting alleged supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood; and a court decision in Kazakhstan concerning two ethnic Kazakh men who fled from the Xinjiang region of China. Meanwhile, ceasefire violations between Armenia and Azerbaijan continued at similar levels.

In **Afghanistan**, the number of violent events and reported fatalities increased slightly compared to the prior week, with no progress reported concerning US-Taliban peace negotiations. Fighting particularly intensified on Saturday, as Afghan military forces conducted multiple ground and aerial operations in nine provinces, reportedly killing 51 militants and wounding 13. In one incident in the northern province of Balkh, an overnight airstrike led to reports of multiple civilian fatalities, including at least three women and four children, prompting hundreds of people to protest and call for an investigation ([VOA, 26 January 2020](#)). Thousands of Afghan civilians have been killed in airstrikes conducted by pro-government forces during the 18-year war, and the total number of reported civilian fatalities caused by airstrikes spiked by more than one third in 2019 compared to 2018 ([ACLED, 23 January 2020](#)).

Since the beginning of 2020, authorities in **Tajikistan** have conducted mass arrests of alleged supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organization that is banned as an extremist group in the country. Tens of people have been detained in the crackdown, including university professors and local government workers ([RFE/RL, 28 January 2020](#)). No

official charges have been issued yet, but critics claim that the authorities often use allegations of 'religious extremism' to target opposition elements ([Eurasianet, 27 January 2020](#); [Human Rights Watch, World Report 2019](#)).

In **Kazakhstan**, the trial of two ethnic Kazakh men who fled China's Xinjiang region ended on 21 January 2020. As expected, the court ruled out extradition due to the possibility that the men could face persecution in Xinjiang. Still, the court sentenced each of them to one year in prison for illegally entering the country. Meanwhile, anti-China sentiments continue to grow in Kazakhstan: on 23 January, a group of Chinese nationals celebrating the Chinese New Year in Almaty city were attacked by a mob. The assailants reportedly shouted, 'Kazakhstan is not China.'

Ceasefire violations between **Azerbaijan** and **Armenia** continued at similar levels during the past week. As reported by Azerbaijan's Ministry of Defence, there were 45 armed engagements along the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact and 17 armed engagements along the Armenia-Azerbaijan Line of Contact. The Defence Ministry of the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic reported that Azerbaijan was responsible for over 130 ceasefire violations on the Artsakh-Azerbaijan Line of Contact over the past week, while Azerbaijani forces also allegedly fired 700 shots into Armenian positions "from various caliber ammunition" ([Artsakh Republic Ministry of Defence, 25 January 2020](#)).



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