

Three Years in the Kyrgyz Republic: My Observations as Ambassador

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As I prepare to leave the Kyrgyz Republic for my next assignment, I have been reflecting on the people and issues I have encountered during my three years as U.S. Ambassador here. I have seen an active civil society, a vibrant media and a growing number of youth seeking new ideas for the future. During the nearly two decades of the Kyrgyz Republic's independence, my predecessors and I have been impressed by the resourcefulness and ingenuity of this country's people. Ensuring that all citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic benefit from this country's potential is an essential task, one that I believe that this country can achieve. And the United States will continue to support, as it has since independence, Kyrgyzstan's development as a stable, prosperous democracy.

Since my arrival in August 2005, I have traveled throughout the country. My conversations with farmers in Talas, business leaders in Bishkek, women's groups in Karakol, teachers in Osh, students in Batken, and Muslim leaders over an Iftar dinner in Jalalabad have revealed aspirations for a better life. The people of the Kyrgyz Republic, with their diversity, their proud history, their love of freedom and independence, and their respect for education, have the potential to make the Kyrgyz Republic a much better place.

BUILDING BRIDGES TO LINK CONTINENTS

The citizens of our two countries share many interests and ideals. To expand the links between our two countries, we have opened two new American Corners, in Kant and Karakol, for a total of five such centers around the country that allow Kyrgyz and Americans to learn about each other. The Embassy has launched new exchange programs, including Open World, Benjamin Franklin, summer workshops and the Fulbright student program. Altogether, we have sent thousands of Kyrgyz students, educators and professionals to the U.S. to forge closer ties with their counterparts.

Our cultural exchanges have included opening an American Music Center at the College of Music, staging a joint production of the Kyrgyz epic Janyl Myrza in Bishkek, Naryn, and New York, and bringing jazz musicians, Native American storytellers and American cowboys to the Kyrgyz Republic. And in one of the best examples of partnership, the Kyrgyz State History Museum, with U.S. Embassy support, opened the Golden Collection this spring to showcase priceless artifacts from thousands of years of Kyrgyz history that reflect this country's proud heritage.

PROMOTING RULE OF LAW TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

As the U.S. recognizes the value Kyrgyz citizens place on the rule of law and on an open and transparent judicial and law enforcement establishment that is responsible to the people, the United States recently endorsed a Kyrgyz package of reforms through the Millennium Challenge Threshold Program. This program seeks to increase the independence and effectiveness of the Kyrgyz judicial system, develop a more functional and trusted police force, improve the government's capacity to investigate and prosecute corruption cases, inform the public and media on the dangers of corruption and strengthen the financial disclosure system.

Implementing these bold steps in full are essential to allow this country to achieve its potential, including sustained, private sector investment. Investors, whether Kyrgyz or foreign, must feel that their assets are secure and protected from abuses of the legal and regulatory systems. While I encourage U.S. firms to visit the Kyrgyz Republic to investigate opportunities here, those firms must make their own business decisions and analyze the risks involved in operating in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Meanwhile, the United States has listened to the needs of Kyrgyz entrepreneurs by providing well over 600,000 micro-credit loans to strengthen business and commerce. We have helped farmers improve

agricultural inputs like fertilizer and seeds as well as irrigation systems to expand production. Recognizing the importance of trade to economic growth, we have encouraged local businesspeople and companies to consider opportunities in the broader region and the world.

EXPANDING COOPERATION TO ENSURE SECURITY

In addition to strengthening the ties between our societies, our governments have forged a strong security partnership. Our security cooperation has curbed attempts by terrorists and extremists to infiltrate Central Asia. To support ongoing humanitarian operations and the security situation in Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz Republic has hosted the Manas Coalition Airbase since 2001. Manas Airbase is a transit and logistical point for troops and cargo supporting the mission in Afghanistan, and also contributes over \$60 million annually to the Kyrgyz economy. Success in Afghanistan means peace and stability, not just for Afghanistan, but for the Kyrgyz Republic and all of Central Asia.

Other benefits of the U.S.-Kyrgyz security partnership include the establishment of the Kyrgyz Drug Control Agency and the reconstruction of border posts. We have provided training and exchange programs for thousands of Kyrgyz soldiers and Ministry of Emergency Situations personnel. These and other efforts, combined with goods and equipment supplied by the United States, enable our Kyrgyz partners to respond more effectively to natural disasters such as earthquakes, and to other threats to the security and stability of the Kyrgyz people.

ACKNOWLEDGING CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

However, amidst all the progress and cooperation, there have also been developments that cause me concern that the people of this country may not be able to realize the better life they seek. I know this is of concern to Kyrgyz citizens as well. The openness, active civil society, lively media, protections of minorities and diversity characteristic of the Kyrgyz Republic have all been diminished recently. The harassment of the media and the lack of an independent public broadcaster limit information citizens need in order to participate in governance. Attempts to restrict representation of the people in elected government bodies are not consistent with this country's democratic ideals. Efforts to centralize authority and power in the hands of a select few serve to disenfranchise many of this country's citizens.

As President Bakiyev has said, the Kyrgyz Republic must become a country where the rule of law is supreme, and everyone is equal before the law. It is important that decisions be made to benefit the people of the Kyrgyz Republic and not specific financial or political interests. The world is full of countries that simultaneously protect the rights of their people and promote economic growth, from Japan to Turkey, from Botswana to Brazil, to name just a few. The Kyrgyz Republic will develop in its own way and in accordance with its own history and culture, but there is nothing specifically Western about economic and political freedoms and ensuring the rule of law in the public's interest. And the countries where citizens enjoy the full protection of the law are the ones that are the most stable in the long run. The people of the Kyrgyz Republic have the ideas, the education, the energy and the resources to build such a country.

On July 4, Americans celebrated the 232nd anniversary of our Declaration of Independence. During my three years in the Kyrgyz Republic, I have met many people here who value the same ideals, beliefs and freedoms that have shaped my country and are critical to the further development of the United States and the Kyrgyz Republic. Given these shared values and our common interests, the American people will continue our steady partnership with the people of the Kyrgyz Republic in order to support their desire to build a country that is prosperous, that is strong and that protects the rights of all its citizens. We believe this is in Kyrgyz interests. We know that it is in our interests. I believe that the people of the Kyrgyz Republic, in partnership with the United States, can successfully overcome any challenges if given the rights and freedoms to realize this country's potential for the benefit of all citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic.