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KYRGYZ PROTEST AGAINST U.S. AIR BASE CITES ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

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The Washington Times, February 05, 2012 Protesters outside the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek last week demanded an end to the U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan, waving placards that read: "We will not respond to us! A and [redacted] leave our land! A Organizers said the protest against the Transit Center at Manas, a U.S. military base at Manas International Airport, were driven by reports from farmers near the air base who said that planes dumping fuel during landings have damaged their crops. [redacted] a result, residents of these villages cannot grow crops in their fields. Their gardens are not producing a harvest, A said Karypbek Sernenov of the Bishkek-based environmental group NGO Asyr. The U.S. Embassy issued a statement saying [redacted] is no evidence of a scientific basis for NGO Asyrs claim. A [redacted] Transit Center is a good steward of the environment, and environmental protection is included in the agreement between the Kyrgyz Republic and the United States, A the embassy said. Kubat Toksobaev of New Forces of Kyrgyzstan, which campaigns on social issues and took part in the rally, said the environment is not the only thing threatened by the air base. [redacted] case there will be a conflict between the U.S. and Iran, which is likely to happen, Kyrgyzstan, as a host for an important U.S. military base, will become a top target for Iranian missiles, A he said. But Marat Kazakpaev, a political analyst at the Bishkek-based think tank Polis-Asia, said the demonstrators fail to understand the geopolitical issues. [redacted] is a tension between the U.S. and Iran, but the latter has never talked about attacking the U.S. military base in Kyrgyzstan, A he said. The Transit Center is a crucial hub for U.S. and international forces in Afghanistan, and sits about 1,400 miles from Iran. It was established in 2001 after the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. It is a refueling point for NATO planes and a transit hub for troops and supplies. About 1,500 U.S. troops and contractors are based there, and about 700 Kyrgyz work there. Analysts note that Kyrgyzstan is the only country that hosts U.S. and Russian military bases. The Russian base at Kant is just 30 miles from Manas. Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev announced after his election in November that the lease on the U.S. base, which expires in 2014, will not be renewed because of the risk it poses to his countrys security. He was backed by Russia during his campaign. Last month, Mr. Atambayev discussed plans to convert the Manas base into a [redacted] facility. A The presidents office last week issued a statement saying Mr. Atambayev reminded U.S. Ambassador Pamela Spratlen of the leases expiration date during a meeting Wednesday. There have been sporadic protests against the U.S. base in the past seven years. In 2010, an opinion poll indicated that 89 percent of Kyrgyz considers Russia to be Kyrgyzstans most important partner, and 0.8 percent said the same of the U.S.

Kaynak/Source: