

By Dmitry Solovyov

ALMATY, Sept 9 (Reuter) - Kazakhstan's die-hard communists said on Tuesday a planned military exercise involving the United States and several ex-Soviet republics in Central Asia was an attempt to spread U.S. imperialism.

"Clinton, hands off Kazakh land" and "No to NATO's exercise in Kazakhstan," declared posters in Kazakh and Russian hung in a conference room in the capital Almaty by activists from Kazakhstan's left-wing Rabocheye Dvizheniye (Workers' Movement).

On September 14-21, 1,400 troops from the United States, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Georgia and Latvia will take part in a peacekeeping exercise on arid steppeland in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The exercise, named "Centrazbat 97," is being held in the spirit of NATO's "Partnership for Peace Programme," although it is not officially sponsored by the alliance.

Utegen Kabaziyev, a retired Soviet army officer aged 72, who presented himself as "a devoted communist and Stalinist," told the news conference: "This is not just an exercise but an imperialist invasion by the U.S. in Central Asia."

"Under the leadership of the great Stalin we did not allow German intervention in Kazakhstan during World War Two," he said. "Why should we let in American boots today?"

Like Kabaziyev, most of the activists were elderly people hit hard by the republic's post-Soviet trek to a market economy.

NATO and the U.S. are a favoured target of left-wing groups throughout the former Soviet Union.

Pyotr Khalov, head of the movement's Almaty branch, said his organisation would picket the U.S. embassy in Kazakhstan on Friday to protest against the exercise.

"We are sorry we will be only able to picket the embassy because we lack sponsors who would give us money to go and block the exercise itself," said Khalov.

During the exercise, about 500 paratroopers from the U.S. and three former Soviet republics will fly 12,000 km (7,500 miles) non-stop from North Carolina to jump into Kazakhstan, making the manoeuvre the longest such airborne mission ever.

"It's bad that nobody can shoot down this American plane," sighed one of Khalov's comrades, an elderly woman.

17:10 09-09-97

By Ian Geoghegan

BRUSSELS, Belgium (Reuter) - NATO, on the verge of embracing three ex-Soviet bloc states, will further erase memories of the Cold War era next week when United States troops stage joint exercises with newfound partners in central Asia.

Initially dubbed "Silk Road," the "Centzbat 97" peacekeeping and humanitarian aid exercises will combine close to 500 U.S. paratroopers and some 1,000 soldiers from Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Latvia, Turkey and the three central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

"This will be the first time we've had such a military exercise in central Asia," a NATO official said.

"We've had other staff-level exercises there before to deal with disaster relief and emergency planning but this is the first time we've had a ground exercise of such ambitious dimensions."

A NATO colleague noted this was not a NATO-sponsored event, but was being carried out "in the spirit" of the Partnership for Peace Program aimed at fostering closer ties between NATO allies and former communist foes.

"It's not technically a NATO exercise. It's a multilateral exercise, organized by the U.S. Atlantic Command," he said.

Walter Thorp, project officer at the U.S. Atlantic Command in Norfolk, Virginia, told Reuters the exercises were designed to "enhance regional cooperation and increase the inter-operability of the Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion" (set up by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) and would help build stability in the region.

About 50 soldiers from the battalion will travel to the United States for training before flying non-stop for 19 hours from Pope Air Force base in North Carolina and parachuting over arid steppeland in Kazakhstan Sept. 15 alongside U.S. troops from the North Carolina-based 3rd battalion 504th parachute infantry regiment.

Gen. John Sheehan, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic, will make the first parachute jump.

"This will be the longest distance airborne operation in history. Forces from Turkey and Russia will also air-drop at the same location," Thorp said.

It will also mark the first time that Russian and U.S. forces have engaged in a combined airborne operations deployment exercise in the former Soviet republics. There are plans to repeat the exercise each year, Thorp said.

"This is a significant milestone in the (central Asian) battalion's development," Thorp said.

Some two dozen hard-core communists protested Friday in front of the United States embassy in the Kazakh capital Almaty against the planned exercises.

The mostly elderly protesters, outnumbered by police, brandished anti-NATO and anti-U.S. posters.

17:18 09-12-97

.c *The Associated Press*

SHYMKENT, Kazakhstan (AP) - The Cold War over, the United States, Russia and five of its former republics are taking part in their first joint military training exercise with the United States.

Some 1,400 troops from the former Soviet bloc, the United States and Turkey on Sunday began six-day mission to build cooperation for future peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts.

The largest contingents in the exercise are 500 paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., and the newly formed 500-member Central Asian Battalion, made up of troops from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

"This is so that in a future Bosnia-like situation, the Central Asian Battalion can come together quickly and efficiently, and become a full and active participant without a long lead time," said Navy Capt. Craig Quigley, a spokesman for the exercise.

Another goal of the mission, dubbed Exercise Centrazbat '97, is to assert U.S. support for the three independent states in Central Asia, a region rich in oil and mineral wealth but plagued by economic decline and bordered by hostile or unstable political situations in Iraq, Iran, Azerbaijan, China and Kashmir.

The exercise seeks to "show U.S. commitment to the Central Asian republics," according to planning documents. If neighboring countries see the weeklong operation as a show of U.S. strength and support, "of course we can't control that," Brig. Gen. Martin Bemdt said at a pre-operation briefing.

The 500 U.S. paratroopers flew nonstop aboard six C-17 transport planes on Sunday together with 40 airborne troops from the Central Asian Battalion.

They were to parachute to the exercise site near Shymkent in south-central Kazakhstan on Monday at the end of a 20-hour, 7,700-mile flight that includes two midair refuelings - the longest-distance airborne operation ever tried, the Pentagon says.

Shymkent is 400 miles west of the Kazakh capital of Almaty.

The Pentagon also was using the exercise to practice its pool arrangement with the news media, under which reporters, still photographers and television camera crews are deployed along with U.S. forces for coverage of military operations.

AP-NY-09-14-97 1723EDT

By Dmitry Solovyov

SAIRAM, Kazakhstan (Reuter) - Hundreds of U.S. paratroopers completed the longest airborne mission in history Monday, landing in the Kazakh steppe on a multinational exercise deep inside what was long 'enemy' territory.

Four-star Marine Corps Gen. John Sheehan was first to jump from a C-17 plane at 10 a.m. (11 p.m. EDT Sunday) into an arid sun-scorched plain in the south of the ex-Soviet republic against the backdrop of the towering Tien Shan mountain range.

The jump heralded the start of a big military exercise involving Russians and Central Asian nations as well as Americans. It was also a "swansong" for Sheehan, who leaves his post as Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic Thursday.

Asked by reporters about the reasoning behind the unprecedented airborne mission, he said: "The U.S. interest is that the Central Asian republics live in stability."

But he added: "A message I would like to leave is that there is no nation on the face of the Earth that we cannot get to."

A few moments after Sheehan's jump, six transport planes dotted the clear sky with the lettuce-colored chutes of 540 paratroops, including 500 from the United States and 40 from the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Russian and Turkish troops also participated later.

The U.S. drop was the longest distance airborne operation in history. Eight C-17 planes flew 19 hours to cover 7,500 miles from North Carolina to Kazakhstan, a vast mineral-rich republic. The planes had to be refueled three times in the air.

"I know of two or three minor injuries. Nothing out of the ordinary. It's an unfortunate part of the job," U.S. press officer Major Jim Hinnant told Reuters after the drop.

The exercise, named "Centrazbat 97" and whose first phase will take place in Kazakhstan Sept. 15-18, is held in the spirit of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" but is not formally part of the Western military alliance's training program.

The second phase will be held in Uzbekistan later this week.

Around 1,400 troops are taking part in "Centrazbat 97," named after the battalion formed last year by the three Central Asian neighbors Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as a peacekeeping unit of the United Nations.

In the exercise, the paratroops and the battalion have to take control of an airfield of a fictional state where separatists oppose a government plan to receive arms and ammunition from a third country.

Kazakh Mi-24 combat helicopters, Sukhoi-25 ground attackers and MIG-29 fighters hit nearby hills before the parachute drops to prevent an offensive by the "separatists."

Some 150 local residents trained to play separatists were scheduled to "provoke" the force guarding the airfield.

Top Kazakh military officials beamed with optimism, seeing the interaction between their servicemen and U.S. soldiers.

"One can definitely say now the Central Asian battalion exists...and is ready to fulfil any tasks set," Kazakh Defense Minister Mukhtar Altynbayev told reporters. "I think this exercise will upgrade the level of our states' security."

But there was still a faint whiff of Cold War rivalry in the air.

"This is an interesting exercise but we have nothing to learn from the U.S. military," Col. Alexander Ryskin of the Kazakh army told reporters. "We know no less than they do."

11:17 09-15-97

By Dmitry Solovyov

SAIRAM, Kazakhstan (Reuter) - Kazakhstan hosts a multinational military exercise Monday and its highlight is expected to be a jump by 500 U.S. paratroopers.

The paratroopers from North Carolina will fly non-stop on board C-17 transport planes to jump into the Kazakh steppe, half-encircled by the Tien Shan mountains near the town of Sairam, 560 miles southwest of the Kazakh capital Almaty.

U.S. Marine Corps Gen. John Sheehan, head of U.S. forces in the Atlantic, will jump with the paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division.

The jump by U.S. paratroopers at 10 a.m will start "Centrazbat" exercise which will continue until Wednesday and involve 1,400 troops from the United States, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Georgia and Latvia.

The exercise will go on in Uzbekistan Sept. 18-21.

U.S. paratroopers will jump simultaneously with 40 Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek parachutists due to arrive in the area independently.

By 1 p.m. the first wave of paratroopers will be joined by drops of 40 Turkish and 40 Russian servicemen who will fly from bases in their countries.

The peacekeeping exercise is held in the spirit of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" program though it is not formally part of it.

"The scenario of the exercise will unroll in an assumed country torn apart by a separatist movement which opposes the government," Alexander Ryskin, operational department head at Kazakhstan's Chief Headquarters, told a news briefing in a makeshift military camp in Sairam.

Ryskin said that under the scenario, participants of the exercise will have to help the government of the assumed country to restore stability.

He added that experts, who prepared the scenario, had taken into account similar conflicts with separatists in other republics of the former Soviet Union.

The former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, which neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, has survived a bloody civil war in 1992 followed by a protracted conflict between the government and Islamic opposition. The Tajik foes have struck a peace deal earlier this year.

The exercise will be the first large-scale exercise for a joint peacekeeping battallion set up by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan last year.

The exercise will be the first U.S.-led rehearsal in the region.

U.S. Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary Catherine Callaher told a news conference in the regional town Shymkent, "Our strategic interest in this region is to ensure that all these countries are sovereign and independent."

13:46 09-14-97

.c The Associated Press

SHYMKENT, Kazakstan (AP) - Moments after becoming the first American to parachute into this former Soviet republic, Gen. John Sheehan looked skyward and watched Russian MiGs fly overhead in support of the peacekeeping exercise.

"I said to myself, 'It really is a different world,'" Sheehan recalled a short time later, speaking with reporters about the first joint training exercise to bring together former Cold War enemies.

Under a fair sky and against the backdrop of the 6,000-foot Tien Shen mountains, 620 airborne troops from the United States and five other nations parachuted in wave after wave onto a barren, dusty plateau in south-central Kazakstan.

The paratroopers, most from the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., floated down after a 19-hour, 7,700-mile flight from the United States.

The airborne deployment, the longest distance ever attempted by the U.S. military, required three in-flight refuelings.

One message of the mission is "that there is no nation on the face of the Earth that we cannot get to," said Sheehan, commander of U.S. Atlantic Forces, who is retiring this week.

The jump was the kickoff for a six-day training mission involving 1,400 troops from a dozen nations aimed at creating a new peacekeeping and humanitarian force in Central Asia.

Three former Soviet republics - Kazakstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan - form the 500-member Central Asian Battalion; 40 members of that unit jumped with the Americans.

The exercise was observed by the defense ministers of the three countries, together with U.S. ambassador to Kazakstan, Elizabeth Jones, and other dignitaries who sat on a stage atop an earthen mound decked with the flags of the United States, Turkey, Russia and the three Central Asian countries.

A region once traversed by silk traders and Ghengis Kahn, Central Asia is struggling to create economic prosperity and recover from decades of Soviet domination.

Today's training mission was a strong show of interest by the United States in the region, which is rich with oil, natural gas and mineral deposits but also surrounded by potential hot spots, including China, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Kashmir.

"It's a dramatic demonstration of U.S. interests in the region," said Catherine Kelleher, deputy assistant secretary of defense for the region.

For the three Central Asian nations, the exercise was aimed at creating a home-grown capability for dealing with potential ethnic conflict. Col. Alexey Riskin of the Kazak military cited separatist strife in other former Soviet republics since the breakup of the Soviet Union six years ago.

"Similar situations and conflicts can arise in every region," he told reporters, speaking through an interpreter.

The battalion, he said, is an effort to create a "ready force ... against aggressors. It will allow us to liquidate any conflict situation in its very beginning, and not allow it to grow into a major conflict."

He said the force also could be used in any part of the world where the United Nations seeks peacekeeping help from its members.

For the United States and Russia, their joint participation in Centrazbat '97 was a rare example of direct military cooperation, which U.S. officials said arose from a common interest in regional stability.

The exercise had a personal side, as well, breaking down Cold War mistrust in face-to-face work between former adversaries.

When U.S. Special Forces trainers came a year ago for their first sessions with the Central Asians, "it was kind of tense," said Capt. Bill Medina of the First Special Forces Group from Fort Lewis, Wash.

"For many of them, it was their first contact with the other side," Medina said. "But the tension was broken by soldiers talking about things soldiers talk about: shooting guns, what they've done in the field. That's common everywhere."

Soon they were swapping addresses and showing off family pictures, he said.

Today's exercise involved a scenario in which the United Nations brokers a cease-fire between two fictional countries in conflict, and calls for help in quelling renegade elements on both sides. Follow-up training was taking place in neighboring Uzbekistan.

The Pentagon also was using the exercise to practice its pool arrangement with the news media, under which reporters, still photographers and television camera crews are deployed along with U.S. forces for coverage of military operations.

The national media pool concept was developed after U.S. forces invaded Grenada in 1983 without news coverage. The military agreed to form a pool made up of news organizations that could deploy in secret and provide joint dispatches of the earliest hours of a combat operation.

AP-NY-09-15-97 1325EDT

Airborne Mission Complete

Hundreds of U.S. paratroopers completed the longest airborne mission in history today when they landed deep inside Kazakhstan. Four-star Marine Gen. John Sheehan was first to jump from a C-17 plane into an arid sun-scorched plain in the south of the ex-Soviet republic. The jump heralded the start of a big military exercise involving forces from the United States, Russia and Central Asian nations. The U.S. drop was the longest airborne operation in history. Eight C-17 planes flew 7,500 miles from North Carolina to Kazakhstan.