

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد
بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم
از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Vijay Prashad

26.03.2022

Hunger Stalks Central Asia as the Ukraine War Unfolds

On March 16, 2022, Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev delivered his State of the Nation [address](#) in Nur-Sultan. Most of Tokayev’s speech was about the political [reforms](#) in Kazakhstan he had either accomplished or planned to advance, after he had [promised](#) them as redress to January’s political unrest and protests against the Kazakh government. He also addressed the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war on Kazakhstan during his speech and [pointed](#) to the spikes in food prices and currency volatility as some of the worrying economic consequences being faced by the country as a fallout of this conflict.

The address by Tokayev was made four days before the holiday of Nauryz, which fell on March 20 and is a new year festival celebrated by people in the belt that runs from the Kurdish lands to the Kyrgyz lands. Households across Kazakhstan were preparing for this celebration, although inflation of food prices—which predated the Russian intervention in Ukraine and the resulting Western sanctions imposed on the Kremlin—had already dampened the mood of the festivities in the country; by mid-March, the National Bank of Kazakhstan had [reported](#) that prices of food products such as baked goods, cereals, vegetables and dairy—the important components of a Nauryz meal—had increased by 10 percent.

“Kazakhstan is facing unprecedented financial and economic difficulties in our modern history due to the escalation of the geopolitical situation,” President Tokayev [said](#). The “harsh sanctions” imposed on Russia by the West are already impacting the global

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

economy, he said, adding, “Uncertainty and turbulence in the world markets are growing, and production and trade chains are collapsing.” Rising food prices and financial turbulence—a result of both the Western sanctions on Russia and of the integration of national economies—have set the alarm bells ringing and seem to have heightened the urgency to resolve these issues in Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan.

Famine and Hunger

Tokayev spent part of his State of the Nation speech speaking about the [inflation](#) of energy and food prices. He spoke about the need for the government to oversee the production of agricultural equipment, fertilizers, fuel and the stocks of seeds. Tokayev’s remarks are not novel. Other heads of governments in Central Asia have similarly expressed the need for their governments to enter the food production arena, since both the COVID-19 lockdown and the current Russian war in Ukraine have demonstrated the enormous vulnerabilities in the global food chain, exacerbated by the privatization of food production.

Food prices in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and Russia—continue to [rise](#), as a result of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, outpacing world food prices. While these countries [are](#) “strongly dependent on imports from Russia,” they are now facing a [temporary ban](#) on exports of wheat and sugar from Russia owing to the conflict.

On March 11, 2022, the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) [released](#) a [report](#) on the “Food security implications of the Ukraine conflict.” The conflict, says the WFP, “comes at a time of unprecedented humanitarian needs, as a ring of fire circles the earth with climate shocks, conflict, COVID-19 and rising costs driving millions closer to starvation.” Russia and Ukraine produce and “supply 30 percent of wheat and 20 percent of maize to global markets,” according to the WFP [report](#), and these two countries also account for three-quarters of the world’s sunflower supply and one-third of the world’s barley supply. Meanwhile, the Black Sea ports have largely been [dormant](#) since Russia has blocked any exports from these ports due to the ongoing war. This has [led to](#) “[a]n estimate of 13.5 million tons of wheat and 16 million tons of maize” being “frozen in these two countries” since these grains cannot be transported out of the region. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization’s Food Price Index [reached](#) “a new all-time high in February.”

The International Fund for Agricultural Development President Gilbert F. Hounbo warned that the continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war “will be catastrophic for the entire world, particularly for people already struggling to feed their families,” according to a [UN report](#). “This area of the Black Sea plays a major role in the global food system, exporting at least 12 percent of the food calories traded in the world,” Hounbo said.

One of the great problems of globalization has been that the vulnerabilities in one part of the world almost immediately impact other parts of the world. In 2010, droughts in China, Russia and Ukraine raised the price of food grains, which then “[heightened](#)” the Arab Spring. Ideas of “food security,” a [phrase](#) used by Tokayev during his State of the Nation speech, have been around since the first [World Food Conference](#) in 1974; at that meeting in Rome, the member states of the United Nations reflected on the famine situation in Bangladesh and [called](#) for measures to ensure international stability of food prices and to make governments responsible for the abolition of hunger in their respective countries. The current situation of food inflation and of food instability in the global commodity chain has refocused attention on the need for ensuring enhanced domestic and regional production rather than placing reliance on distant producers and unstable international markets.

Domestic Food Production

In October 2021, the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR) held an expert [meeting](#) on the problem of food production in the region. Nurlan Atakanov of the Food Security and Nutrition Program of the Kyrgyz Republic said that local farmers were unable to grow sufficiently high-quality wheat “due to limited cultivation areas and climatic conditions.” His country imports a third of its wheat from neighboring Kazakhstan. Daulet Assylbekov, an expert from Kazakhstan who is a senior analyst with the BLM Group, meanwhile, said that wheat harvests in Kazakhstan decreased by 30 percent due to the pandemic restrictions. This has had an impact on food prices within Central Asia.

Tajikistan’s wheat yield is currently 27-30 hundred kilograms per hectare, far short of the yield in Russia’s Rostov region of 67-70 hundred kilograms per hectare, [according](#) to CABAR. Economist Khojimahmad Umarov said during the CABAR meeting that if

Tajikistan had access to mineral and organic fertilizers and if it improved its agricultural knowledge, yields could rise to 90 hundred kilograms per hectare. But agriculture has been neglected, and countries like Tajikistan have been encouraged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to import food and export cotton and aluminum.

Uzbekistan's Ministry of Agriculture has now [urged](#) its farmers to increase production of wheat from 6.6 million tons of grain in 2021 to 7.6 million tons this year as well as to enhance the domestic production of sugar to meet the country's internal demand despite the temporary ban on exports by Russia; Uzbekistan has traditionally [relied](#) on Russian wheat and Brazilian sugar.

Meanwhile, like Uzbekistan, the government of the Kyrgyz Republic [imports](#) sugar, vegetable oil and wheat each year from other countries, and the current Russia-Ukraine war could result in a bleak situation in terms of ensuring food security and curbing inflation of food prices in the Kyrgyz Republic. At the start of the war in Ukraine, the poorest households in the Kyrgyz Republic—the [second-poorest](#) country in Central Asia after Tajikistan—[spent](#) 65 percent of their income on food; the current inflation will be catastrophic for them. The Kyrgyz Republic's Cabinet of Ministers, led by Akyzbek Japarov, [held](#) an emergency meeting with food processing companies in Bishkek to discuss how to increase food production and prevent increased levels of starvation in the country.

At the [Antalya Diplomacy Forum](#), leaders of the Central Asian countries called not only for a [cessation](#) of hostilities in Ukraine, but also for regional integration of their countries with South Asia. Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov [said](#) that his country is eager to play the role of a bridge to unite these areas. The general verdict among countries in Central Asia is that greater self-sufficiency is important—particularly in food production—but also that regionalism needs to be emphasized. One of the problems with regional integration in Central Asia is that there are very poor [options](#) for the transport of goods from one country to the other—Kazakh wheat travels by train to the Kyrgyz Republic, and then is transferred onto trucks to traverse tough mountain roads. Regionalism is not simply a concept. It had to be realized through the creation of food processing plants, better transport systems and easier cross-border trade rules.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine have alerted the governments of Central Asia to pay much more attention to the question of food security. What the IMF says about liberalization of food chains makes little sense these days. Worries of starvation and bread riots resulting from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the ongoing pandemic are a good wake-up call for countries to focus on finding more sustainable local and regional solutions and to solve problems that have been part of the economic, social, and political fabric of Central Asia for decades.

This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is the chief editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He is a senior non-resident fellow at [Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies](#), Renmin University of China. He has written more than 20 books, including [The Darker Nations](#) and [The Poorer Nations](#). His latest book is [Washington Bullets](#), with an introduction by Evo Morales Ayma.