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Former Soviet republics in Central Asia are tightening security amid continuing attacks by Islamic rebels and Russia has voiced concern about the situation.

Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev said the latest clashes on Kyrgyz and Uzbek territory were evidence of the far-reaching aspirations of the Islamic rebels.

He said the number of armed groups in Uzbekistan had increased and that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was now thought to number more than 5,000.

The rebels - allegedly trained in Afghan camps - have launched a series of incursions from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Mr Sergeyev and the defence ministers of six other former Soviet republics met in the Astrakhan region of southern Russia on Friday and drew up joint plans to boost security in the region.



Target: Islamic rebels want to overthrow the Uzbek president

Border clash

The Kyrgyz Defence Ministry said Islamic rebels attacked a Kyrgyz mountain border post at Kum-Bel on Thursday night, triggering heavy fighting, but they were beaten back towards Sokh in neighbouring Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, Uzbek troops have been searching for a group of 15 rebels in the mountains 100km (60 miles) east of the Uzbek capital Tashkent.

According to news reports on Wednesday, 10 people - one

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Uzbek officer and nine rebels - were killed in a shoot-out near Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan.

The Uzbek Government has renewed calls for increased vigilance by the population.

Kazakhstan is tightening security on the border with Uzbekistan, and sniper and hill units are getting intensive training to prepare them for surprise assaults.



Kyrgyz soldiers are struggling to stop the rebels in the mountains

Islamic leader arrested

An Islamic leader wanted in Uzbekistan on charges of attempting to overthrow the government and assassinate President Islam Karimov is reported to have been arrested in Russia, where he is now facing extradition.

According to Russia's Itar-Tass news agency, security officials detained the Imam, Khadzhi Khudzhayev, in the Siberian city of Omsk.

The charges against him are said to relate to a series of bombings last year in Tashkent, which the authorities blamed on Islamic extremists.

Destabilisation

The BBC's Eurasia analyst Malcolm Haslett says the rebels do not appear to be anywhere near launching the sort of concerted military campaign that the Taleban have mounted in Afghanistan.

Most of the groups which have penetrated Uzbekistan and its neighbours seem to be relatively small, intent on starting a destabilisation process, he says.

The fact that they have succeeded in finding youthful recruits is seen as evidence of a certain disillusionment with existing regimes, a reaction against the sometimes harsh measures taken against even peaceful displays of Islamic feeling.

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