

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 9 NO. 5

7 MARCH 2007

Searchable Archives with over 1,000 articles at <http://www.cacianalyst.org>

FEATURE ARTICLE

AS SNOW MELTS, AFGHANISTAN BRACES
FOR TALIBAN RESURGENCE

Diana Janse

ANALYTICAL ARTICLES

EU BROACHES PEACEKEEPING
POSSIBILITY IN GEORGIA

Jaba Devdariani and Blanka Hancilova

CHINESE COUNTER-TERRORIST STRIKE IN
XINJIANG

Andrew McGregor

IRAN'S EQUITIES IN THE TURKMEN
SUCCESSION

Stephen Blank

FIELD REPORTS:

KYRGYZ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, PARLIA-
MENT WANT TO LEGALIZE POLYGAMY

Erica Marat

KAZAKHSTAN SEEKS RUSSIAN ASSISTANCE
TO MODERNIZE ITS ARMY

Marat Yermukanov

GEORGIAN-NATO RELATIONS RECEIVE
BOOST FROM BRUSSELS

Kakha Jibladze

KULOV CITES GRAFT IN GOVERNMENT
AND PARLIAMENT

Nurshat Ababakirov

NEWS DIGEST



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING
VOL. 9 NO. 5
7 MARCH 2007

Contents

Feature Article

- AS SNOW MELTS, AFGHANISTAN BRACES FOR TALIBAN RESURGENCE** 3
Diana Janse

Analytical Articles

- EU BROACHES PEACEKEEPING POSSIBILITY IN GEORGIA** 7
Jaba Devdariani and Blanka Hancilova
- IRAN'S EQUITIES IN THE TURKMEN SUCCESSION** 10
Stephen Blank
- CHINESE COUNTER-TERRORIST STRIKE IN XINJIANG** 13
Andrew McGregor

Field Reports

- KYRGYZ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, PARLIAMENT WANT TO LEGALIZE POLYGAMY** 16
Erica Marat
- KAZAKHSTAN SEEKS RUSSIAN ASSISTANCE TO MODERNIZE ITS ARMY** 18
Marat Yermukanov
- GEORGIAN-NATO RELATIONS RECEIVE BOOST FROM BRUSSELS** 20
Kakha Jibladze
- KULOV CITES GRAFT IN GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT** 21
Nurshat Ababakirov

- News Digest** 23

THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

Editor

Svante E. Cornell

Assistant Editor, News Digest

Alima Bissenova

Chairman, Editorial Board

S. Frederick Starr

The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst is an English language global Web journal devoted to analysis of the current issues facing the Central Asia-Caucasus region. It serves to link the business, governmental, journalistic and scholarly communities and is the global voice of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center. The Editor of the Analyst solicits most articles and field reports, however authors may suggest topics for future issues or submit articles and field reports for consideration. Such articles and field reports cannot have been previously published in any form, must be written in English, and must correspond precisely to the format and style of articles and field reports published in *The Analyst* (www.cacianalyst.org) and described below.

The Analyst aims to provide our industrious and engaged audience with a singular and reliable assessment of events and trends in the region written in an analytical tone rather than a polemical one. *Analyst* articles reflect the fact that we have a diverse international audience. While this should not affect what author's write about or their conclusions, this does affect the tone of articles. Analyst articles focus on a newsworthy topic, engage central issues of the latest breaking news from the region and are backed by solid evidence. Articles should normally be based on local language news sources. Each 1000-1200 word analytical article must offer a concise and authoritative statement of the event or issue in question. An article must provide relevant, precise and authoritative background information. It also must offer a sober and analytical judgment of the issue as well as a clinical evaluation of the importance of the event. Authors must cite facts of controversial nature to the Editor who may contact other experts to confirm claims. Since *Analyst* articles are based on solid evidence, rather than rumors or conjecture, they prove to be reliable sources of information on the region. By offering balanced and objective analysis while keeping clear of inflammatory rhetoric, *The Analyst* does more to inform our international readership on all sides of the issues.

The Editor reserves the right to edit the article to conform to the editorial policy and specifications of *The Analyst* and to reject the article should it not be acceptable to our editorial committee for publication. On acceptance and publication of the edited version of the article, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of The Johns Hopkins University-The Nitze School of Advanced International Studies* will issue an honorarium to the author. The copyright for the article or field report will reside with the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. However, the author may use all or part of the contracted article in any book or article in any media subsequently written by the author, provided that a copyright notice appears giving reference to the contracted article's first publication by the "Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, The Johns Hopkins University-The Nitze School of Advanced International Studies."

Submission Guidelines:

Analytical Articles: Analytical articles require a three to four sentence Key Issue introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful judgment supported with concrete examples. The ideal length of analytical articles is between 1,000 and 1,300 words. The articles are structured as follows:

KEY ISSUE: A short 100-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: 100-200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

Field Reports: Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGdO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

Those interested in joining *The Analyst's* pool of authors to contribute articles, field reports, or contacts of potential writers, please send your CV to: scornell@jhu.edu and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

Svante E. Cornell

Research Director; Editor, Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program

Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University

1619 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, USA.

Tel. +1-202-663-5922; 1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785

Feature Article

AS SNOW MELTS, AFGHANISTAN BRACES FOR TALIBAN RESURGENCE

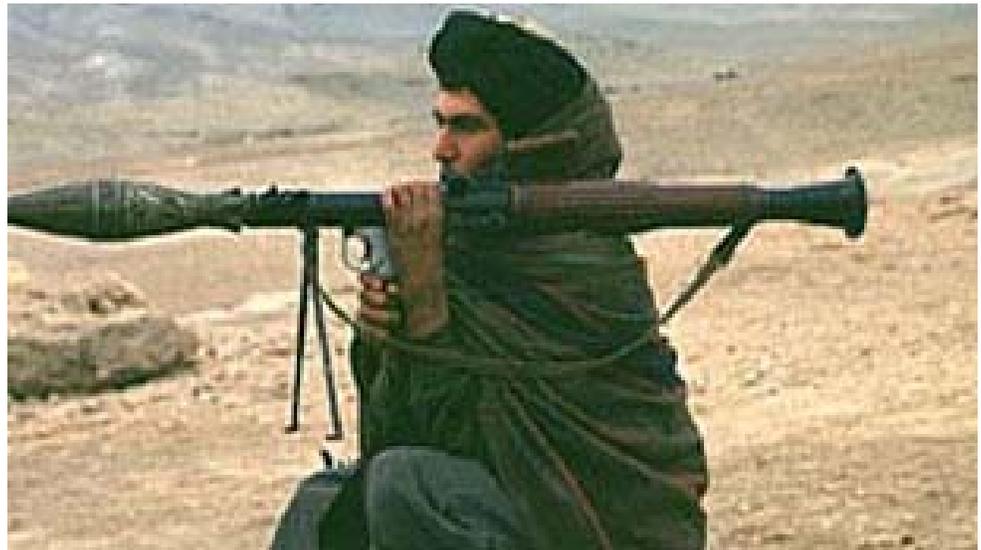
Diana Janse

Last week, a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself and dozens of others up outside Bagram air base near Kabul, while U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney was conferring with aides inside. This epitomizes the changing character of the battle unfolding in Afghanistan. Last year, Afghanistan saw the worst violence since the Taliban were toppled at the end of 2001, killing more than 4000 people. The escalating violence in Afghanistan is likely to pick up with Spring, forcing the coalition and the Afghan government to reconsider their approaches.

BACKGROUND: The number of violent incidents related to 'anti-government activities' in the last six months of 2006 was almost double that in the first six months. The Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) were among the prime targets, along with foreign troops and representatives of the new Afghan administration.

Since early 2005, in fact, the security situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating steadily, a trend which accelerated in 2006. The situation is at its worst in the southern and south-eastern, Pashtun-dominated areas along the Pakistani border, which used to be the heartland of the Taliban. But the area of rebel activity now stretches across the entire Pashtun belt, from the province of Farah in the west to Kunar and Nuristan in the east. Rebel activities have also gained a foothold in Wardak and Logar, two

provinces close to Kabul. The capital itself, as well as other parts of the country that long enjoyed relative calm and stability, are now experiencing increased instability.



Not only has the number of incidents increased; rebel tactics have also gradually changed. Suicide bombers, which used to be a marginal phenomenon in Afghanistan, have increased in number. Roadside bombs are now becoming widespread. The random and

occasional ambush and hit-and-run attacks carried out by a few Taliban have been replaced by large-scale attacks, where hundreds of rebels, equipped with mortars and machineguns, fight for hours, before retreating to areas where they can regroup. In some provinces bordering Pakistan, the insurgency approaches regular warfare between rebels on the one hand, and American-led coalition forces and the Afghan military on the other.

In 2006, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) expanded its mission area into the south and southeast, where it has replaced many of the American-led coalition forces. In August, ISAF assumed responsibility for the southern Helmand, Kandahar and Oruzgan provinces. Shortly thereafter, its expansion also stretched to Afghanistan's troubled



Guarding a Poppy Field (BBC photo)

eastern provinces. In order to rise to the much more demanding tasks it now faces, NATO has more than doubled its forces.

The United Kingdom has the largest contingent in the south. It has sent approximately 5,000 troops to the vast and lawless Helmand province, which alone produces a third of the world's opium poppies. In neighboring Kandahar, Canadian troops confront a similar challenge. NATO forces in this region have met with furious resistance. Former British Defense Secretary John Reid's hope that British troops would leave Afghanistan without firing a single bullet has

been replaced by croaking about a fourth Anglo-Afghan war.

These developments are the result of a complex set of circumstances. Since they escaped from Kabul in 2001, the Taliban have managed to regroup and reorganize. Rebel activities are directed from five different centers, which are to some extent cooperating and coordinating. The eastern centre is led by the notorious warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, while others are led by prominent Taliban leaders, all of whom enjoy strong support from outside Afghanistan. The Taliban benefit from being able to plan, recruit and train their soldiers in Pashtun areas at the other side of the Afghan-Pakistani border that were never truly ruled either by Pakistan or the British Raj. The Taliban have a strong ideological base in the Pashtun belt. Conservative

Afghans in the countryside look with great suspicion on the government's reform programs, and view them as a threat to traditional cultural and religious norms.

With time, the Taliban have also learnt how to circumvent the financial sanctions that followed their toppling. They are financed by sympathizers in Pakistan and in the Gulf, but also by the lucrative opium trade. Opium production in Afghanistan grew from 4,100 tons in 2005 to 6,100 tons in 2006, and the country now produces 92 percent of the world's opium. Cooperation between the Taliban and drug lords is potent. Quite apart from

the Taliban, growing criminality linked to the expanded opium trade is in itself a source of violence and instability.

IMPLICATIONS: The Taliban resurgence is not just a result of sympathy for their ideology. Circumstances in Afghanistan have helped Taliban recruitment. Although the mid-ranking rebel commanders consist mostly of Afghans recruited from the refugee camps and radical *madrasas* in Pakistan, the ordinary foot soldiers are predominantly recruited in Afghanistan, where extreme levels of poverty work in the Taliban's favor. With small amounts of cash, the Taliban can

buy themselves the needed support from young Afghans who feel deprived of a future and without jobs, and are driven by frustration and poverty rather than by ideology. The Taliban offer these young Afghans an opportunity to support their families, at a time and place where no other options are available.

There is also widespread disillusionment and disappointment among Afghans over the lack of progress since 2001. The enormous and largely unrealistic expectations on the new Afghan administration and on the international community have not been met.

Just as when the Taliban movement was born in 1994, this is a revolt against the government. Disenchantment with President Hamid Karzai's weak, fractured and corrupt administration, which has proven unable and unwilling to challenge the much-hated warlords, should not be underestimated. The Afghan security forces are notoriously corrupt and tend to work on the basis of their own interests, rather than on the interests of the people. The thinly spread and poorly equipped Afghan National Police (ANP) is as much a part of the security problem than its solution. A part of the Taliban supporters are hence more correctly seen as a movement *against* the government than as a movement *for* the Taliban cause.

Rivalry between different clans is another factor. Some Pashtun clans consider themselves marginalized by the central administration. Regardless of the fact that president Karzai himself is a Pashtun, he is widely seen as under the sway of the Tajiks, who still have a firm grip over the power ministries.

Fear has also been put to effective use. The Taliban have systematically killed representatives and supporters of the new government, in order to undermine Karzai's administration and frighten those who back it. Support for the Taliban is not necessarily active or positive, but may be a result of a calculation of risks. In a situation where the central authorities are so weak, many feel there is no choice

but to adapt to the Taliban presence, whether one likes it or not.

Other factors than the Taliban contribute to fueling the violence. The criminal networks, stronger and better equipped than before, are one factor; another is the illegal militias that have not yet been dismantled; a third is the windfall from the narcotics industry, which greases every wheel in the Afghan economy.

CONCLUSIONS: In the southern parts of Afghanistan, the Taliban have moved from controlling small areas where the central administration never had any control, to running entire districts in some provinces. Yet another disturbing factor is that the Taliban have managed to set up parallel administrations and courts in some areas. The geographical expansion of their attacks mirrors an aspiration to extend their struggle beyond their core areas in the south and southeast.

At the same time, the administration lacks a long-term strategy on how to tackle the security situation, a task that gets harder by the month. President Karzai has responded to the increased violence with blaming the outside world – Pakistan because it does not prevent the Taliban from using its territory as a safe haven;



Afghan Police (*Hemispheres photo*)

western countries because they have not contributed enough troops in response to the problem. President Karzai has also reintroduced the traditional, clan-based militias, the same groups that the international

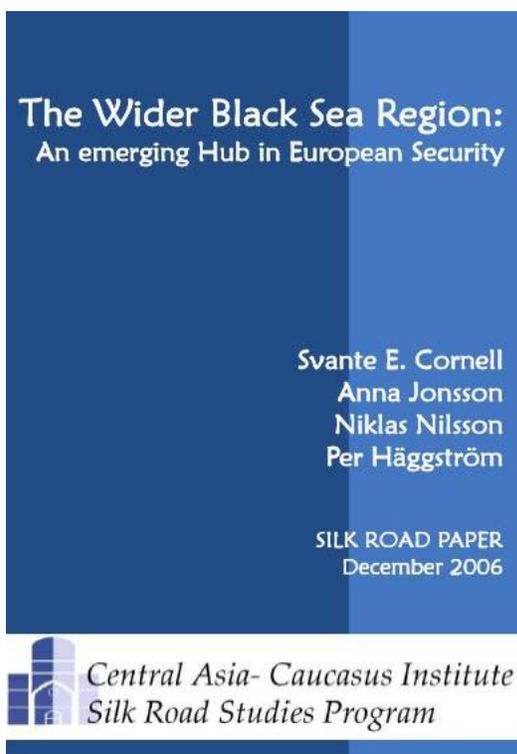
community has spent US\$150 million to try to disarm and disband over the past few years.

The long-term engagement which the international community has promised Afghanistan will be vigorously tested, as the Karzai administration backslides on its commitments and Afghanistan becomes more dangerous. Changes take time. The international presence in all its forms – political, military and development assistance – will be needed for a long time to come. The growing insurgency should not be allowed to overshadow the need to build the solid government institutions that Afghanistan requires to achieve stability. The West will need both patience and courage to press the Afghan leadership to stand up to its commitments. Stronger pressure is needed on Karzai and his government to reform, not least in the parts of the country where the Taliban do not yet have a foothold. Greater efforts are needed to reform the judiciary, and to put an end to the culture of impunity. There is also a need for a willingness on the part of the international community to back up the Karzai administration – not only with words but with brute force if necessary – when it does challenge the many powers that do not hesitate to destabilize the country.

Despite the latest reinforcement, the NATO force seems to be under-equipped for the challenges that confront them. There is a significant unwillingness among NATO countries to send additional troops. That is not least the case for the type of troops which have the necessary training and political backing at home to enable them to challenge the Taliban or a local warlord and troublemaker in their own heartland. A comprehensive, regional approach, to deal with the substantial Pakistani part of the problem, is also desperately needed.

When the winter lull comes to an end in the next few weeks, the security situation in Afghanistan is likely to deteriorate further. A huge challenge awaits the international community, if it is to stand by its commitments and not abandon Afghanistan and its peoples yet again.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Diana Janse is a Swedish foreign service officer, currently serving as a Deputy Director at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In 2004 to 2006, she worked as a Counsellor for Political Affairs in Kabul. The views expressed in this article reflect those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.



New Silk Road Paper!

The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security

by Svante Cornell, Anna Jonsson, Niklas Nilsson, and Per Häggström

This 120-page paper analyzes emerging role of the Wider Black Sea Region in European Security, and European interests there. It provides concise analysis of major challenges in the region, and policy recommendations for Europe's future policies there.

This 120-page paper is available from the offices of the Joint Center cited on the inside cover of this issue, or freely downloadable in PDF format from either www.cacianalyst.org or www.silkroadstudies.org.

EU BROACHES PEACEKEEPING POSSIBILITY IN GEORGIA

Jaba Devdariani and Blanka Hancilova

On February 28, EU Foreign Policy chief Javier Solana made the surprising remark that the EU could participate in peacekeeping in the Caucasus under specific conditions. EU foreign policy is inching towards seeing its interest in keeping the dormant conflicts in Georgia from escalating. This noble aim, however, can be accomplished in two ways – either by siding with Russia-dominated peacekeeping format, or by proposing new modalities for negotiations. EU officials seem to think that the two ways can be made compatible.

BACKGROUND: EU peacekeepers could be deployed to Georgia's breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, EU foreign policy Chief Javier Solana said after meeting with the Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili in Brussels on February 28. He added that the EU is ready to participate in missions "as long as those missions have a clear objective ...[that] can be achieved." Behind this cryptic comment might lie an EU intention to seek to modify the peacekeeping format with Russia's consent and participation.

Over the past years, as it expanded eastwards, the EU has grown increasingly conscious of the former Soviet space. After the first EU enlargement that brought in ten countries, including many from the former Soviet bloc, there is an increased knowledge about the region in the EU, but also increased suspicion about Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin's February 10 speech at the Munich conference on Security Policy also made many western governments uneasy about the way Russia is throwing its weight around in the former Soviet space.

Albeit with its trademark hesitancy, the EU has been gradually trying to upgrade its cooperation with the South Caucasus countries in general, and with Georgia in particular. After Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, the whole South Caucasus

region was included into the European Neighborhood Policy. In October 2006, the EU adopted five-year Action Plans with the three countries of the South Caucasus that are laying out the strategic objectives of cooperation. In the case of Georgia, the objective to support Georgia's further integration into European economic and social structures is clearly spelled out. This upgrade of EU cooperation with Georgia foresees much closer economic cooperation and discusses ways to ease visa requirements.

The attention to post-Soviet conflicts has also increased. With the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU in January 2007, the Transnistria conflict gained a higher profile on the EU agenda. For the first time in its history, the EU in November 2005 launched a border assistance monitoring mission to work with Moldova and Ukraine to harmonize their border management standards and procedures with those prevalent in EU member states.

So far, the EU has rejected calls for sending a similar mission to Georgia, where the OSCE border monitoring mission has been scrapped due to Russian objections. However, through its Special Representative Peter Semneby, the EU tries to find itself a niche in resolving Georgia's conflicts. Speaking to the European Parliament in Strasbourg

on 17 January, German Chancellor Angel Merkel said that “Russia's conflicts with its neighbors must not be taboo” in a dialogue between the EU and Russia.

Importantly, some EU members – Estonia, Latvia, Poland, and Greece – have expressed a willingness to consider sending peacekeepers to Georgia. Turkey and Ukraine also said they would consider doing so.

This growing attention was echoed in December 2006 by a surprisingly forward-looking EU Commission Communication on strengthening the ENP, which included mention of the possibility of involvement in “civil or military monitoring or peacekeeping operations”.

IMPLICATIONS: Solana’s statement is a major change in the EU rhetoric about conflicts in Georgia, though the real change of EU policies is not quite palpable yet. Previously, the EU has followed NATO’s line which supports Georgia in resolving the conflicts, but has no interest in sending peacekeepers to the region. The change in the EU rhetoric is symptomatic of several underlying shifts in EU relations with the South Caucasus and Russia.

Russian policies towards Georgia over the past year, including a trade embargo and the suspension of diplomatic relations, made EU officials conscious of the extent of the problem. EU Special Representative Peter Semneby commented in October 2006 that Russia’s actions “have added weight to the Georgian argument that Russia is not a neutral participant in the peacekeeping arrangements and negotiation formats... that the

current status quo is not tenable, that in fact it is not a status quo but is gradually deteriorating.” Several high-level EU delegations, including the Troika, have visited Georgia and met with the leaders of the breakaway provinces since then.

While the EU increasingly appreciates the Georgian position on the need to change the Russia-dominated peacekeeping format, Russia poses problems in another painful area. President Putin

has been vocal in tying the Kosovo agenda to the post-Soviet conflicts resolution threatening Georgia and Moldova with recognizing Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria should Kosovo become independent. The EU, and its foreign policy chief personally, have been closely involved in the Kosovo issue. The EU is wary about the Kosovo potential to destabilize the Balkans and the EU leadership is compelled to prevent political fallout in yet another sensitive region of the world – the Caucasus. In this context, Solana’s statement keeping an option of the EU peacekeeping at the Russian border open might be seen as a



Javier Solana

deterrent to Russia’s overzealous attempts to influence the outcome of the Kosovo status negotiations.

There are also other long-term considerations. For several years, the EU tries to reduce its dependency on suppliers such as Russia and the Middle East. In this context, Georgia’s importance has been raising due to two major projects - the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which is operating since summer 2006 and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, which is currently under construction and will be transporting gas from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to Europe.

All of these considerations compel the EU to move. But inherent disagreements within have long prevented it from formulating a clear policy. While trying to maneuver between the incentives of France and Germany to keep as good relations with Russia as possible, and new members' drive to stop what they see as Russian expansionism, the EU's bureaucrats are prone to choose the middle way.

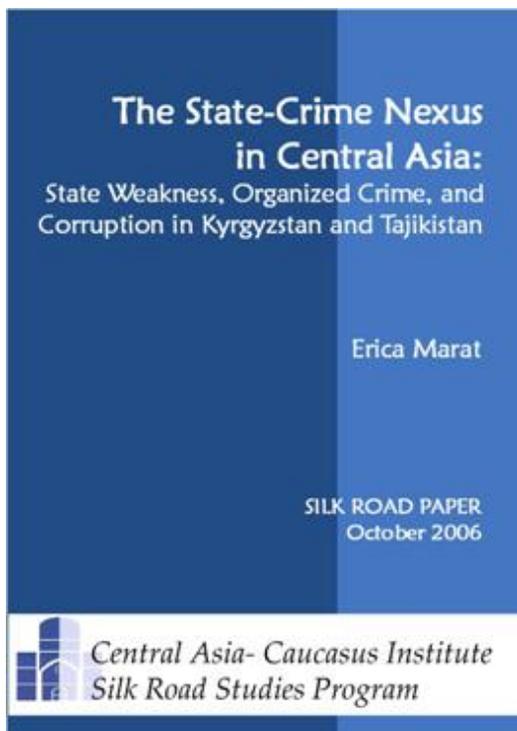
CONCLUSIONS: The EU seems to be trying to cajole Russia into accepting a change in the negotiating formats in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts, keeping Russia's participation but diluting it with an EU component. Georgia's Foreign Minister, Gela Bezhuashvili, in his recent statements stressed that Tbilisi does not intend to bring about the cessation of Russian participation in peacekeeping forces or in the political format of negotiations, but wants a modification of these formats to include Europe.

Although such a solution may constitute progress for Georgia, its benefits are far from clear and are beset with potential pitfalls. Russia might agree to EU participation in a political format, but keep its

exclusive – and possibly this time EU-blessed – role in the military component of peacekeeping. This would correspond well to the war-wariness of many EU countries. However, following Putin's Munich speech which openly stated resentment towards all foreign influence in what Putin considers Russia's backyard, even such a scenario is far from certain.

The EU has compelling reasons to engage in finding solution to frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space. The EU is prone to take mild, conciliatory approach towards Russia and to try to persuade Moscow to agree to a gradual modification of the peacekeeping formats in the post-Soviet conflicts. While this is a step forward an might be a good way to deal with a newly assertive Russia, the risks are high. In this new game, Georgia and Moldova are likely to become the grounds for some precarious experimentation.

AUTHORS' BIO: Jaba Devdariani is the founder of Civil Georgia (civil.ge) and works at the OSCE mission in Belgrade. Blanka Hancilova, Ph.D., specializes in international development. The article reflects the opinion of the authors only.



New Silk Road Paper!

The State-Crime Nexus in Central Asia: State Weakness, Organized Crime and Corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

by Erica Marat

This paper analyzes the divergent forms that relationships between organized crime and the state have taken in the two worst hit Central Asian states in the past decade.

This 138-page paper is available from the offices of the Joint Center cited on the inside cover of this issue, or freely downloadable in PDF format from either www.cacianalyst.org or www.silkroadstudies.org.

IRAN'S EQUITIES IN THE TURKMEN SUCCESSION

Stephen Blank

Iran has vital strategic interests in Turkmenistan. Iran sees itself threatened by an American-led program of strategic encirclement and in the last five years has reached out to Asian, including Central Asian states, to frustrate that threat. Specifically, it most fears U.S. military presence anywhere in the Caspian littoral. Iran's policies towards Turkmenistan must be understood in the context of its larger policies toward the other non-Russian Caspian littoral states. While Iran can threaten Turkmenistan if it chose to do so, has increased that capability since 2001, and greatly desires to be recognized as a major Caspian power, its implicit capabilities make that unnecessary.

BACKGROUND: Tehran's capabilities for mischief-making include its ability to sponsor terrorist or insurgent forces throughout the Caspian littoral. Iran's attitude toward the groups that it sponsors is wholly instrumental. Although they are maintained and kept on hand for when they may be needed, they are not activated until and unless Iran's relationship with one of the neighboring states, either in the Middle East or in the former Soviet Union, deteriorates. The closer a country is to Iran's borders, the less likely is Iran to let its hand be seen in fomenting insurgency, particularly if Russia is on the other side of that country's borders. Thus if covert or overt support for such groups jeopardizes critical security relationships like that of Tehran with Moscow, then those groups are shelved as happened in Tajikistan in the 1990s.

Iran thus needs not activate its capabilities in order to secure tangible benefits in its diplomacy and defense policy. The combination of Iran's conventional and unconventional capabilities represent a formidable regional deterrent against American or NATO interests in placing their forces in and around the Caspian littoral.

However, Iran's ability to influence its Caspian neighbors does not depend exclusively on its ability or willingness to threaten their vital interests. Since 2001, a 'smile offensive' has been the order of the

day in Iranian strategy. That strategy concentrates on instituting a comprehensive program of high-level exchanges with its South Caucasian and Central Asian neighbors, including Afghanistan, and the invocation of major trade, transportation, and energy deals in order to create allies for Iran there. These deals encompass oil, gas, and electricity because not only do some of those states depend on imports; Iran too faces an energy crisis due to its lack of refining capacity. Thus, while Iran subsidizes its domestic consumption, it must also import energy products from neighbors like Turkmenistan even as it exports to states like Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia who all depend on foreign energy sources. The point of this strategy is to create enduring political and economic ties so that its northern neighbors, including Turkey, will think twice before allowing America to deploy any form of military power to the Caspian region lest those states lose valuable political and economic ties with Iran.

Meanwhile these ties include talk of joint cooperation against terrorism with Turkey, provision of energy to Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan (including electricity) and importing of energy from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The fact that Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have plentiful uranium sources is also a matter of concern to Western intelligence sources.

Indeed, there have been reports that Iran is using middlemen in Armenia and Azerbaijan to gather expertise in nuclear and missile technology throughout the former Soviet Union. This effort allegedly comprises over 200 front companies, government offices, and academic institutions that supposedly engage in “weapons research.” In the meantime, these negotiations or deals with regional governments also can involve calls for defense cooperation with Azerbaijan, or for creation of regional security blocs with all of the South Caucasian states, including Turkey and Russia, as a way of excluding U.S. influence from the area or enhancing regional security with states like Tajikistan.

IMPLICATIONS: These diplomatic and economic initiatives must be seen as key elements of a strategy which has successfully deterred local governments (with considerable assistance from Russia) from thinking of allowing U.S. forces to use their lands in the event of a military contingency against Iran. Iran’s policy towards Turkmenistan must be understood within this policy framework. In July 2006, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Ashgabat and negotiated a series of agreements with Turkmenistan and President Saparmurad Niyazov. The most important of these deals centered on security, natural gas trade and economic partnership. Both sides paid special attention to the issue of delimiting the Caspian Sea in order to develop its hydrocarbon resources. And they also discussed selling gas to Europe. In their communiqué, the two states called for a new summit of Caspian littoral states in Tehran to boost, trade, economic, and energy cooperation. They affirmed mutual support for peace, stability, and non-interference in each other’s domestic affairs, and of most importance to Iran, they stated that “The sides will not allow [anyone] to use their territories against each other.” Undoubtedly, Iran’s interests in the Turkmen succession are going to be directed towards consolidating and preserving the gains which it had made with Niyazov and continuing to ensure that no American presence emerges that can threaten its

security. And it will also seek advantageous energy deals with Turkmenistan to facilitate its own energy security and that of Turkmenistan.

Although Iran has not had much to say publicly about the succession in Turkmenistan, Iranian Radio has warned against both Russian and American objectives there, and Tehran should not be expected to be silent either privately or publicly. Iran is likely to back those forces in Turkmenistan who will continue the agreements reached in July 2006, continue to oppose support for American pressure against Iran, and try to gain support for its position on Caspian delimitation, giving it and Turkmenistan large shares of the Sea in which to conduct energy exploration. It should not be assumed that the struggle for influence over Turkmenistan’s energy holdings, policy, and pipelines will be confined to Russia, China, and America. Iran’s interests in Central Asia go beyond the desire for stable governance that Russia and China share for the entire region, i.e. a continuation of the domestic status quo in each country. Iran’s interests also encompass vital strategic issues to which it displays unremitting attention and it should be expected to weigh in both privately and publicly on the new Turkmen leadership during the current period of consolidation, but not on the side of liberalization.

CONCLUSIONS: Given Russian, Chinese, and Iranian hostility to American policy, it is likely that concerted efforts by these powers will be seen to prevent the emergence of a pro-Western leadership that could undermine their security and economic interests. Indeed, at Niyazov’s funeral, Russian and Chinese officials were already coordinating strategy.

The two key interests here are the continuation of Turkmenistan’s pipeline dependence upon Moscow and refusal to allow American military presence. Their efforts to uphold those objectives will include weapons exports and military training, side payments in the form of bribes, the use of political subversion and intelligence penetration carried out in tandem with the Russian security organizations, government, and energy firms; and a willingness, if

necessary, to dispatch military force in return for adhesion to Russian-sponsored defense and security organizations in Central Asia.

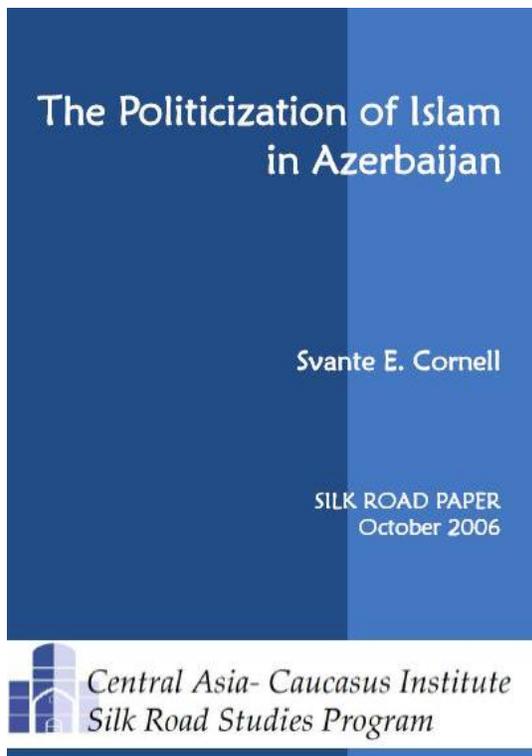
But most of all, these states will show their continued willingness to back the new incumbent leadership, anoint it with their blessing, and confer legitimacy and power upon it by signing or continuing energy deals, even if they must pay more for the gas than before. These “side payments” not just to the successor but to his retinue are likely to include Russian promises of regime protection.

In return, the Turkmen leadership will be expected to reject new pipeline alternatives that do not go through Russia except possibly for existing contracts with China. These would include the “TAP line” from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan and Pakistan to India, supported by Washington. It will also be expected to renounce its neutrality and join the panoply of Russian security organizations such as the CIS, Eurasec (Eurasian Economic Community), the Collective Security Treaty

Organization (Moscow’s defense alliance), the Russian sponsored CASFOR (Caspian Force), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and reject any idea of a U.S. military presence in Turkmenistan or assistance to its naval and ground forces as regards the Caspian Sea.

These are the vital stakes for Iran and Russia in the Turkmen succession and their importance goes beyond regional concern and show that despite Niyazov’s best efforts, Turkmenistan’s and Central Asia’s security cannot be isolated from the contemporary global agenda.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Professor Stephen Blank, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013. The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, Defense Department, or the US Government.



New Silk Road Paper!

The Politicization of Islam in Azerbaijan

by Svante E. Cornell

This 75-page Silk Road Paper analyzes the increasing Islamic revival in Azerbaijan, as well as the potential for politicization of Islam. The report discusses the background and reasons for increasing Islamic sentiment in the country, as well as external influences linked to this phenomenon and government policy toward the issue.

The paper is available from the offices of the Joint Center cited on the inside cover of this issue, or freely downloadable in PDF format from either www.cacianalyst.org or www.silkroadstudies.org.

CHINESE COUNTER-TERRORIST STRIKE IN XINJIANG

Andrew McGregor

In the midst of the lead up to next year's Beijing Olympics and a power struggle in the Chinese Communist Party, a January raid on an alleged terrorist training camp in Xinjiang killed 18 terrorist suspects and one policeman. Seventeen more suspects were reported captured. Twenty-two homemade 'hand grenades' were seized, along with material for another 1,500. The raid was also said to have provided new evidence of ties between the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) and 'international terrorist forces'. The raid marks the latest clash between Muslim Uyghur separatists and Chinese security services suppressing opposition to regional Sinification.

BACKGROUND: The Uyghur separatist movement is badly divided, with dozens of groups with different agendas claiming to represent the interests of the Uyghurs, a Turkic people. Some groups renounce violence as a political tactic while others embrace it. Until recently the Uyghurs were the majority in the Central Asian region they call East Turkistan (known to the Chinese as Xinjiang, or 'New Territory'), but a massive and continuing migration of Han Chinese into the region has left the Uyghurs with only 45% of the population of 18 million.

The 'counter-terrorist' raid occurred in the remote Akto County on the Pamir Plateau, close to the Chinese-Kyrgyz border. After the raid, Chinese security forces tightened their control of the borders with both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China's official press suggested that al-Qaeda had helped the ETIM 'infiltrate' the region, though it did not say why the Uyghurs needed such aid in their own territory. In 1990, Akto County was the site of a bloody uprising led by Uyghur militant Zahideen Yusuf, killed in the fighting along with fifty others.

Most Uyghurs are members of Islamic Sufi orders and lack the interest in Salafist Islam that is a prerequisite for involvement with al-Qaeda. There are few examples of Sufis cooperating with al-Qaeda; indeed, their form of worship is attacked by Bin Laden and his associates as a type of heresy that must be exterminated. Though some Uyghurs

sought military training from the Taliban in the 1990s it appears that they did so in order to mount separatist operations in Xinjiang rather than join Bin Laden's anti-American jihad. Some Uyghurs may even have received training from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

The ETIM is one of the most obscure of the Uyghur militant groups, barely known even to other Uyghur activists. According to a Chinese government report released in 2002, ETIM members received training in camps run by al-Qaeda or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) throughout Afghanistan prior to the 9/11 attacks. The report almost certainly exaggerated the size of the ETIM, claiming it commanded a formation known as the 'Turkistan Army' that included a "China Battalion of 320 terrorists from Xinjiang". This was just one of a number of large-scale Uyghur 'terrorist' formations China claimed were active in Afghanistan, including some whose existence is dubious, such as the 1,000 strong 'Central Asian Uyghur Hezbollah'. The same report alleged that Hasan Mahsum met with Osama bin Laden in 1999 and obtained al-Qaeda financing for the ETIM, though its leader, Hasan Mahsum, denied any such connections. There has been little ETIM activity since the death of Mahsum at the hands of the Pakistani army in October 2003.

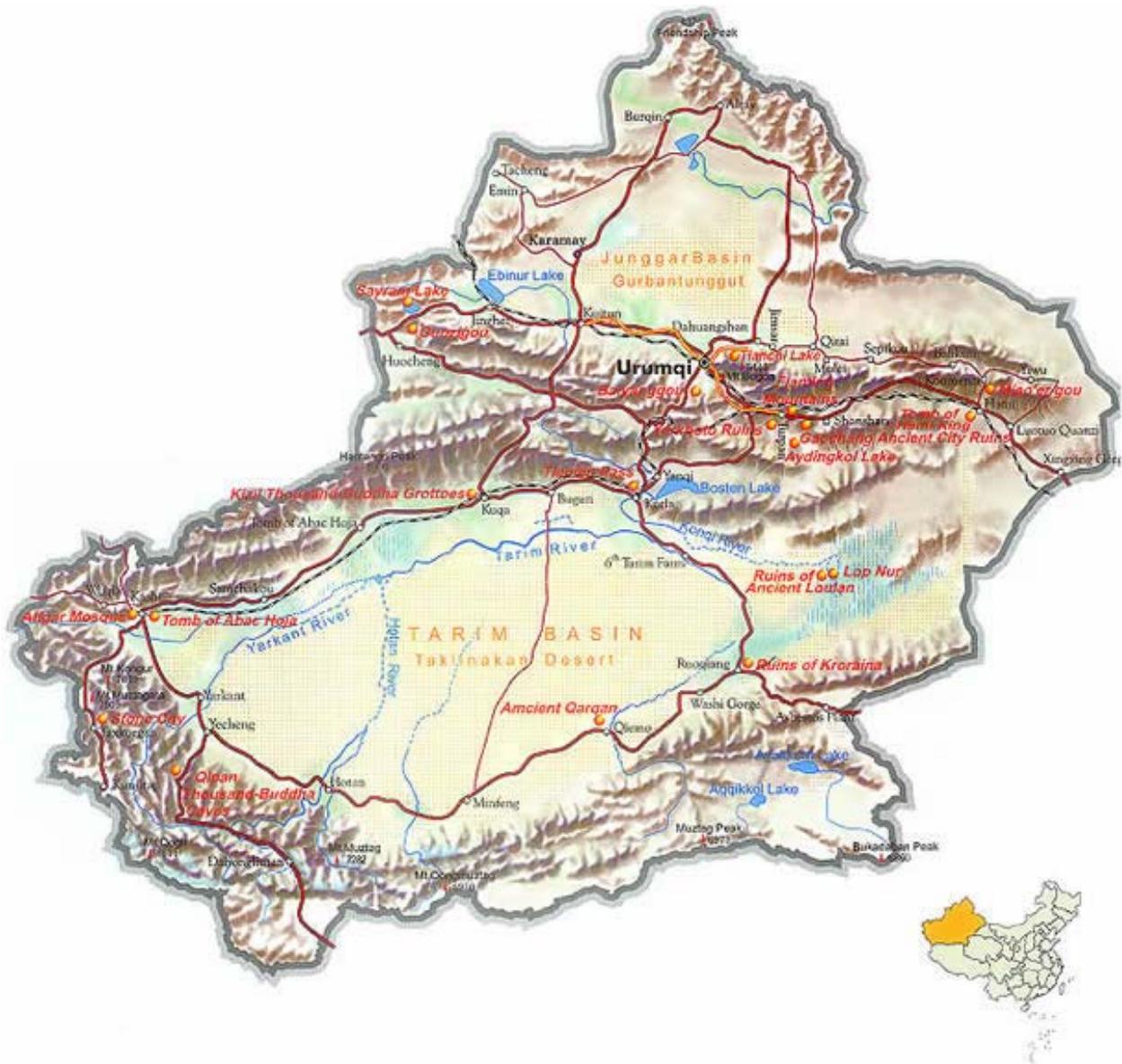
While some Uyghurs fought alongside the Taliban or the late Juma Namangani's Afghanistan-based

IMU, others joined the Chechen mujahidin during the early years of the second Russian/Chechen war that began in 1999. The total number of Uyghurs active in various foreign-based jihadist groups in 2001 was probably not more than several hundred, with a significant decline in numbers since. It is important to note that the jihadist/Islamist component of the Uyghur separatist movement comprises only a fraction of a political trend that has widely varied aims and methods.

In August 2002, the United States designated the ETIM as a terrorist organization after pressure from

China. The announcement followed a pledge by China to restrict missile technology transfers to countries like Iran, and preceded a visit by the Chinese President to the United States. The United Nations also put the ETIM on its terrorist list a month later. China lists four Uyghur organizations as 'terrorist groups', though the ETIM is the only one to have this designation internationally.

Two months before the raid in Akto County, a 32-minute video was released through the al-Fajr Information Centre inciting the people of 'East Turkistan' to take up jihad against the 'infidel'



Map of the Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Province

Chinese communists. The video portrays Uyghur 'mujahidin' training with firearms, possibly in Afghanistan.

IMPLICATIONS: Beijing has raised the specter of Uyghur terrorist attacks on the 2008 Olympics, though overplaying this hand as a means of stifling separatist opposition in Xinjiang could have the effect of scaring away tourists. Police in Beijing are preparing to work with foreign intelligence services to prevent terrorist attacks at the games. The maturation of the transnational Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has made it extremely difficult for Uyghur militants to operate from neighboring Central Asian countries. The SCO (consisting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) has introduced new intelligence-sharing and cooperative counter-terrorism measures. China's economic expansion has largely defused the threat of separatist militancy by integrating its Central Asian neighbors into its economic and security planning, thus eliminating the cross-border bases essential to most successful resistance movements.

Pan-Turkism enjoyed a brief popularity in Turkic states and regions in the early 1990s, but has since recoiled in the face of twenty-first century political realities. Pan-Islamic sentiment survives in Xinjiang, but is not the dominant force behind Uyghur separatism. Unemployment, religious repression, assimilation pressures and the activities of the Communist Party of China are more potent recruiting forces for Islamic militants in Xinjiang than any call for a Central Asian caliphate. Compared to the regional government (which includes nominally Muslim Uyghurs), the Communist Party in Xinjiang is politically stronger, exclusively atheist and dominated by Han Chinese.

Hu Jintao, China's President and Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, has been promoting Party leaders from northwest China (including Tibet and Xinjiang) to important positions in the Beijing government over the last year, much to the displeasure of the traditional East-coast power base of the party. This has caused a rift in the party, and

the attack by the Xinjiang police services will cast doubt on Hu's boasts that he has pacified the region at a time when he is under pressure to give up his post as President to Chinese VP Zeng Qinghong.

Many Uyghurs seek U.S. support and attempt to present Xinjiang as a kind of Muslim Tibet. This effort has been hurt in the past by incidents like that of May 2002, when two ETIM members in Kyrgyzstan were arrested for plotting an attack on the U.S. embassy in Bishkek and deported to China. In April 2004, FBI director Robert Mueller suggested that there were militants in China who advocated terrorism, "whether you would call it Al-Qaeda or a group loosely affiliated with Al-Qaeda and Al-Qaeda's leadership."

CONCLUSIONS: The timing of the police strike is puzzling, as it emphasizes an al-Qaeda/Uyghur terrorist threat at a time when violence and separatist sentiment in Xinjiang is in decline. China has repeatedly demonstrated its ruthlessness in repressing local militants, a lesson understood by many young Uyghurs who see integration into the dominant Chinese culture as the only path to success. Beijing is counting on economic development and Han migration to eventually take care of Xinjiang's separatist troubles.

Was a raid on an illegal mining operation transformed into an anti-terrorist operation for political reasons? Chinese security forces have not offered a description of the assault itself. Illegal mining operations are common in China and explosives are commonly used in mining activities. The high death total of the raid nevertheless functions as a reminder to Xinjiang's Uyghurs that separatist activities of any type will not be tolerated as the Beijing Olympics approach. As the world turns its focus onto China in an unprecedented way, the Communist Party is determined to manage its public image down to the finest detail.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dr. Andrew McGregor, Aberfoyle International Security Analysis, Toronto, Canada.

FIELD REPORTS

KYRGYZ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, PARLIAMENT WANT TO LEGALIZE POLYGAMY

Erica Marat

In the mid-1990s, Kyrgyzstan was among the world's most progressive countries in terms of gender representation in public institutions. Kyrgyzstan was often compared with Sweden, the country with the highest rate of female representatives in politics, as the proportion of women leaders in the Kyrgyz government was roughly 30 percent. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan was the leading post-Soviet country in women's participation in political life.

Since then, Kyrgyzstan's gender representation records has drastically worsened, placing the country behind all other post-Soviet states. In fact, Kyrgyzstan today is comparable with countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, where parliaments do not feature a single female representative.

The recent initiative by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice to remove polygamy from the criminal code, and make it a matter of moral judgment, is partly a result of poor female representation in the governing structures. According to Minister of Justice Marat Kaiypov, allowing polygamy could potentially reduce poverty and prostitution. Furthermore, men sharing a household with more than one woman should not be treated as criminals.

The issue of polygamy was already considered in the Kyrgyz parliament in the late 1990s. It then raised widespread discussions in local mass media outlets. Today, the chances that the parliament will legalize polygamy are relatively high.

According to Tokon Shailiyeva, chair of the Novaya Sila political party, the president is unlikely to sign the bill even if the parliament approves it. Shailiyeva comments that women comprise 52 percent of the Kyrgyz population and 80 percent of them are from rural areas.

Although not represented in the parliament, Kyrgyz women are most active in the NGO sector. A number of female leaders speak out on a weekly basis on political, economic, and social issues. Aziza Abdurasulova, a civil rights activist, was the key leader of the movement against the Heavily Indebted Countries Initiative. President of the Foundation for Tolerance, Raya Kadyrova, was actively involved in designing constitutional reform and pushing President Kurmanbek Bakiyev to delegate his powers during the mass protests of November 2006. Former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva is also a known public figure and an active opposition leader.

In the mid-1990s, the number NGOs dealing with gender issues in Kyrgyzstan soared due to the availability of external funds for gender-related projects. Such NGOs usually dealt with family abuses and women's health issues. However, they did not focus on women's participation in politics. A political party, "Moya Strana," proposed to elect 15 female representatives to the parliament to meet the present constitutional provision that requires a 90-member parliament. The proposal raised widespread condemnation among the Kyrgyz public.

Some Kyrgyz experts think that by bringing up this controversial issue, Kaiypov tried to please Bakiyev, who is known to have a second informal wife and children. Many other Kyrgyz politicians and businessmen also have second and third wives registered by a Mosque. Most local Islamic clergymen register religious marriages after the first wife's consent. In cases of divorce, however, women registered under Islamic law are not able to legally claim property, and the religious community does not support them either. Widespread cases of bride kidnapping are another alarming trend in Kyrgyzstan. Although a basic legislative base prohibiting bride kidnapping exists, acts of forceful marriages are rarely persecuted.

A religious movement, Mutakalim, actively supports Kaiypov's initiative and speaks out for a greater role of Islam in politics. In particular, Mutakalim's Chairwoman Jamal Frontbek kyzy frequently calls for the legalization of polygamy. She also insists that women should be allowed to wear a hijab on passport photographs. Mutakalim collected 40,000 signatures in support of this idea. According to Frontbek kyzy, hundreds of women wearing the hijab throughout the country are not able to receive passports because they refuse to be photographed bareheaded. In case the government declines Mutakalim's appeal, the movement's supporters say they will stage public demonstrations. Up to 30,000 women are ready to stand for their rights, Frontbek kyzy told the *24.kg* news agency on February 14. Frontbek kyzy also thinks that holidays such as St. Valentines Day on

February 14 undermine moral values among younger generations and harm social cohesion.

One reason why polygamy turned into a controversial issue is Kyrgyzstan's new constitution, adopted in December 2006, that omits the stature on secularism. The previous constitution defined the Kyrgyz state as secular, but the stature was neglected in the December 2006 constitution, partly because the secular nature of Kyrgyz politics was a generally accepted fact. Former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev occasionally referred to "God" or "higher powers" in his public speeches and books. His references were rather metaphorical than political, and did not raise any controversies.

However, the lack of women representatives in the government and parliament is still the main reason for proposals such as legitimization of polygamy. The situation may change in the next parliamentary elections for two reasons. First, women are already active civil society actors. Second, according to the new constitution, 50 percent of mandates will be distributed according to party lists. This will help female representatives to rely on their party's support, whereas they fare worse in single-member constituencies that benefit business interests.

The major challenge for female representation, however, could in fact be the generally lower financial capacity among women. In local government, the percentage of female representative is slightly higher, but most women candidates are wives of known political figures or successful businessmen.

Indeed, in authoritarian countries like Belarus, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, women's representation in the parliament is unlikely to influence the political process. However, Kyrgyzstan cannot claim to have a more open political system unless women have better chances for political representation.

KAZAKHSTAN SEEKS RUSSIAN ASSISTANCE TO MODERNIZE ITS ARMY

Marat Yermukanov

One of the reasons for the recent and sudden dismissal of Kazakh defense minister Mukhtar Altynbayev from his post was arguably his failure to bridle the rampant corruption in army ranks. In spite of huge military spending, he did not have much to chalk up as a military reform success.

After ten years of widely publicized military reform, Kazakhstan's defense industry is almost non-existent. The deplorable state of the country's defense system challenges the ability of Danial Akhmetov, newly appointed defense minister, to heal the wounds left by the crisis in the army.

On February 16, a Russian-made MiG 31B interceptor jet fighter of the Kazakhstani Air Force crashed under unknown circumstances six kilometers north of Qaraghandy in Central Kazakhstan. The accident occurred when the crew was returning from a training flight and

approaching the air base to land. The crew, Captain Denis Fedotov and co-pilot Andrei Leontiev, were killed without having the time to send a distress signal. Some residents in the area, who witnessed the crash, said the jet was flying too low on the approach, level with rooftops. But Vladimir Shatskov, chief of staff of the Central Military District and other military experts ruled out a pilot error or non-compliance with instructions, asserting that the pilots were qualified enough to avoid any fatal mistake. Defense minister Danial Akhmetov said the pilots displayed a great heroism refusing to eject and preventing the plane from crashing into residential areas. The crash site was immediately cordoned off by the military and investigators found the cockpit flight recorder, but days after the crash, experts still did not release any comprehensive accounts of the accident.

Technical failures of that kind are not rare in civil and military aviation of Kazakhstan, but the latest crash of Mig31B became a gossip item in military and journalistic circles that calls to question the much-lauded high level of modernization of Kazakhstan's air force. Jet fighters of MiG31B type have been manufactured in Russia since 1979



Mig 31B Aircraft (aeronautics.ru)

and the Defense Ministry, one of the largest purchasers of Russian arms in CIS, has had a preference for the reliable and relatively low-priced MiGs. Most of these planes, put into combat service in 1998, are obsolete and spare parts are not available in Kazakhstan. Military experts say the Defense Ministry of Kazakhstan cannot provide adequate technical maintenance service for MiG fighters, and even lack properly equipped hangars to repair and maintain the planes.

Most of the pilots that operate the sophisticated MiG31B interceptor jets are trained in Russian flying schools and are enlisted in the Kazakh Air Force on a contract basis. They carry Russian passports and do not wish to receive Kazakh citizenship. Contract-based military service was introduced in Kazakhstan under former Defense minister Mukhtar Altynbayev as part of the military reform process. Military statistics indicate that 65 percent of current military officers in the Kazakhstani army consist of contracted servicemen. Some experts believe the introduction of contract military service, as opposed to obligatory enlistment, implies the recruitment of volunteers to serve in the army and therefore raises the defense capability and moral of military forces.

For Kazakhstan's army, with barely 76,000 manpower outnumbered by the military force of most of its neighbors, contract military service seemed a dire necessity rather than a face-lifting reform. Even with steadily growing GDP and oil revenues, Kazakhstan cannot afford to feed a large but potentially unreliable army. Military officers on average receive 120,000 tenge per month, which is the highest salary level among Central Asian militaries.

Even so, military reform in Kazakhstan is inching forward very slowly. Despite the impressive military budget, the military is chronically short of funding. Officers of air squadrons deployed in Central Kazakhstan complain that pilots are

inadequately trained for flying due to a shortage of aviation fuel and the high cost of training flights in new generation aircraft. Most of them cannot log the necessary flying hours to maintain their qualifications and skills.

Unfortunately, the problems of modernization of the Kazakhstani air forces and air defense system is tied to the Russian defense industry. Last December, a Kazakhstani military delegation headed by Colonel Serik Ismailov paid a visit to Russia's Almaz arms manufacturing company to bargain for the new Favorit anti-aircraft missile launcher. The Russian company hoped to sell some of its new generation weapons to Kazakhstan, but the sides could not reach an agreement over the price of the equipment. The Kazakhstani military also requested the Almaz company for assistance in modifying the obsolete anti-aircraft installations that Kazakhstan inherited from the old Soviet stock, but was unable to get a positive response.

The controversial nature of military cooperation between Astana and Moscow stems from a lack of confidence and from mutual suspicion. On the one hand, the Russian military needs a strong Kazakhstani anti-aircraft defense system to protect its air space in the south, and the stated common defense goals within the Collective Security Treaty Organization commits Russia to render technical assistance to its military partner. At the same time, Russia is uncertain about future developments in the Caspian region and the role that Kazakhstan will play in case of a conflict over energy resources. For Kazakhstan's military, the Kremlin, with its great-power rhetoric and constant muscle-flexing, is likewise unpredictable. But Kazakhstan, with no military industry of its own, is in need of Russian weapons, and poor partners, even strategic ones, cannot afford to be picky.

GEORGIAN-NATO RELATIONS RECEIVE BOOST FROM BRUSSELS

Kakha Jibladze

Georgia's NATO ambitions received an extra boost of support from Brussels in the past two months. While the North Atlantic Treaty Organization has refrained from offering Tbilisi any concrete dates or deadlines, statements from NATO officials over the past month have been more positive than in the past.

On February 27, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili met with NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in Brussels. The meeting followed a generally positive report from a NATO assessment team that spent five days in Tbilisi. According to Scheffer, while the "road" to NATO is "long and winding," Georgia is "on track."

"I never give time frames, or dates, or months, or years; it is a performance-based process... And Georgia has performed well and it is performing well," Scheffer said. "Go on working and at a certain stage other steps will follow."

While Georgia has claimed NATO aspirations for years, little was done to move toward the organization under former president Eduard Shevardnadze. However, since Saakashvili came to power in 2003, the country has aggressively courted the alliance as a potential balancing force for Russia's influence in the region.

NATO has responded in turn, although the alliance has fluctuated from slight encouragement to downright praise as Tbilisi has gone through the prerequisite steps to receive the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Currently Georgia is fulfilling the Intensified Dialogue stage of the process. While this is an important step for Georgia, it does not guarantee membership.

Despite the uncertainties regarding Georgia's eventual membership – or when the country will receive the coveted MAP – Moscow's reaction to

Tbilisi's ambitions has been swift and severe. In a February 28 interview with *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia "will not permit" NATO expansion to reach its borders, in a thinly veiled reference to Georgia that apparently ignores the NATO membership of the Baltic states on Russia's border.

However, Georgian politicians, for the most part, have flaunted their new status. On March 1, the Georgian parliament decided to create a special "pro-NATO declaration." The exact contents of the document is still unknown, although lawmakers say it will express Georgia's desire to integrate into NATO, and the organization's role as a stabilizer in the region.

Saakashvili has also downplayed suggestions that Moscow can dictate which path the country takes. Without naming names, during Ukrainian president Victor Yushchenko's visit last week he stated "No country can put its veto on the development of relations between

NATO and Georgia."

In addition to the construction of a second, NATO-standard military base, the Georgian president also told CNN that the country was prepared to send "several hundred" soldiers to aid the NATO effort in Afghanistan. There are currently around 800 Georgian soldiers in Iraq and Saakashvili added that more could be sent.

NATO support in Georgia is not universal, however. In February, opposition groups like the National Forum and the Industrialists began to question if NATO membership would have an adverse effect on Georgia's attempts to regain its territorial integrity. Support for NATO is around 80 percent in the country according to polls, yet analysts noted that most support is tied to the

population's belief that NATO membership will mean the quick return of the two secessionist territories – Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Members of the ruling National Movement decried the speculations against NATO membership as “Russian propaganda”, and both Saakashvili and Scheffer have taken pains to address the rumors. According to Scheffer, while NATO supports Georgia's territorial integrity and the resolution of

the conflicts, the alliance “is not seeking a direct role in the solution of these conflicts.”

While NATO membership is widely considered a crucial step toward Georgia's ambitions to create a stable and democratic country, it is clear that Russia does not want to face NATO expansion into its own ‘near abroad.’ However, if Tbilisi can maintain its positive reform record with the alliance, it will be easier to face down Russian threats and ploys.

KULOV CITES GRAFT IN GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT

Nurshat Ababakirov

The widely expected “convincing” actions by former Prime Minister Felix Kulov, now in opposition, to fight corruption and gain public confidence have begun. Kulov revealed that first deputy prime minister Daniyar Usenov, a close ally of the president, spent \$300,000 on parliamentarians to achieve his position. Since Felix Kulov's statement remains unsupported by concrete evidence, its authenticity can be questioned. Yet, true or not, such rhetoric seems to directly challenge the president and the parliament.

“I had to pass through parliament!” Daniyar Usenov according to Kulov justified himself before President Kurmanbek Bakiev. Kulov's February 28 statement to Delo N newspaper also mentions how the first deputy prime minister allegedly complained to President Bakiev that his current position as a “manager” costs him much more than his actual \$300 salary.

On the first days following the announcement, the first deputy prime minister seemed slow to respond to such loud and rigorous accusations, adding to the impression that he had been seeking to coordinate with the president and the pro-Bakiev parliamentarians. On the fifth day, he bluntly

rejected the statement in front of the parliament, referring to it as an attempt to discredit the government, emphasizing Kulov's failure to bring the case up while being in power, and subsequently vowing to sue Kulov for libel.

Usenov showed his determination to keep working in his position unless a court proves his guilt,



Daniyar Usenov (nts.kg)

despite the worries of some opposition parliamentarians and public activists over the image of government as well as a possible violation of the criminal code. “Why are you asking me? Kulov

said this and you should ask him,” Daniyar Usenov argued in parliament in apparent bewilderment, stressing the presumption of innocence and reducing the statement to calumny.

Felix Kulov also alleged that Daniyar Usenov paid \$500,000 from his own pocket to Edward Lieberman, an international advocate who was involved in the criminal cases against six associates of former president Askar Akaev following the March 2005 upheaval. Usenov refused to disclose the source of the money, and rejected the supposition of Parliamentarian Temir Sariiev that it was Ineksim bank, in which Daniyar Usenov is believed to have a stake. “If you owe somebody, you start providing service. Therefore, you must reveal the source,” insisted the parliamentarian. But the first deputy prime minister avoided further questions. The allegations also spilled over to Usenov’s wife, who, according to Melis Eshimkanov, among other violations acquired the license for the ITEK AIR Company through illegal means. The shenanigans in the parliament were not included in pro-government media outlets.

Pro-Bakiev parliamentarians, such as Ishak Masaliev and Kamchibek Tashiev, who adamantly advocated the passage of the constitution in December that strengthened the power of the president, are calling on the parliament not to meddle in the issue and refrain from taking the matter to courts. They see the affair as Kulov’s “PR step” and a “petty quarrel,” from which the parliament should stay afar, to be concerned instead with its main task – legislation and “vital issues.” They consider it as a matter of “dignity” not to turn to courts.

The opposition parliamentarians, in turn, are at pains to prove the opposite. Omurbek Tekebaev, leader of the Atameken party, suggested using a lie detector on parliamentarians and on the accused first deputy prime minister. Azim Beknazarov, the co-founder of the Asaba party, proposed to find a

solution through a closed-door meeting in which every parliamentarian should determine their positions considering the country’s “grave condition”. This seem to be what the opposition parliamentarians could accomplish, given the pro-Bakiev majority in parliament and to that the fact that parliament in any case has little influence on the composition of the government until 2010.

Nevertheless, Kulov was not left untouched by his own statement. Critics contend that Kulov should not have brought this kind of “private” and “ungrounded” issues to the public, underlining Kulov’s political weight as one of the national leaders. Burgeoning corruption in the parliament and government is often mentioned in the newspapers, but they never received due attention given the absence of concrete evidence.

Kulov’s statement has apparently begun to take effect. Parliamentarian Dooronbek Sadyrbaev, the oldest member of parliament, criticized both sides and called on the Prosecutor General to investigate the case by bringing action against Daniyar Usenov, Felix Kulov, or the parliament and warned that if it fails to do so, it will be the first to be challenged. If corruption actually took place, the parliament has to be dissolved since it will no longer have a “moral ground” to work, he argued.

In general, this case, according to Parliamentarian Kubatbek Baybolov, an opposition member and former KGB officer, signifies the first precedent when a dismissed state official officially discloses corruption cases in the government. Though remaining mere rhetoric, which inflamed much flurry in the public, the statement appears a solid ground for the opposition to condemn the president and the largely pro-Bakiev parliament.

NEWS DIGEST

TWO MILITANTS KILLED IN A DAGESTAN SWEEP

24 February

At least two militants were killed during a sweep operation against an armed group barricaded in the ruins of a house in Dagestan's Kizlyar district, a source in the republic's Interior Ministry told Interfax on Saturday. Police are picking through the rubble for the body of the third militant, he said. The house, with three armed group members inside, two from Dagestan and one from Chechnya, was surrounded by police in the morning. An officer of the Federal Security Service is believed to have been wounded in the operation. (Interfax)

TAJIKISTAN LIMITS ELECTRICITY SUPPLY

26 February

Tajikistan limited the supply of electricity to households and organizations in the capital of Dushanbe to 17 hours a day starting on February 26. The limitations, which were brought about by a drop in power generation at the Norak power station because of low water levels in the station's reservoir, will remain in effect until mid-March. The country's other regions receive only four to six hours of electricity a day from October to March. (Itar-Tass)

FIVE POLICE OFFICERS KILLED IN BLAST IN CHECHNYA

26 February

Five police officers were killed and others were injured in a blast in Chechnya. The incident occurred at the Chechen Interior Ministry base in the Gudermes district, a source in the Southern Federal District's law enforcement services told Interfax by phone. Chechen Interior Ministry spokesman Magomed Deniyev confirmed to Interfax that a blast had been reported at a police base in the village of Oiskhar in the Gudermes

district. "The incident is being investigated," Deniyev said. (Interfax)

TAJIKISTAN HOSTS RUSSIAN MILITARY EXERCISES

27 February

Pavel Konev, an assistant to Russian Major General Aleksei Zavizyon, the commander of the Russian base in Tajikistan, announced on February 27 the opening the day before of a five-day military exercise at the Lohour training grounds located 20 kilometers southeast of Dushanbe. The exercise, comprising units from the rapid-deployment force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), includes simulated combat maneuvers in both mountainous and desert terrain and "a special combat operation against illegal militant groups intruding from a neighboring state." Participating infantry units will also complete a 300-kilometer forced march from Lohour to the Mumirak training grounds in the Khatlon region near the Tajik-Afghan border. The complete exercise is to involve some 500 military personnel, along with armored vehicles, artillery, air-defense batteries, and ground-support aircraft, and will close on March 2 with a final phase at the Mumirak training grounds featuring live-fire missions with ground-attack aircraft and combat helicopters. Russia first established the 201st military base in Tajikistan in 2004 with a contingent of several thousand personnel from a motorized infantry division stationed in Tajikistan. (Asia-Plus)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT, AZERBAIJANI MINISTER DISCUSS GAS SHIPMENTS

27 February

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov met with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev in Astana on February 27 to discuss oil and gas cooperation. Mammadyarov told journalists after the meeting that the two discussed Kazakhstan's interest in the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum

gas pipeline. "Azerbaijan is launching the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline this year from a field on the Caspian Sea," Mammadyarov said. "The Kazakh side is also interested in this pipeline." Mammadyarov said that the two countries are currently discussing the technical details of shipping Kazakh gas through the pipeline because "there are many questions in the area of tariffs, customs duties, and the establishment of technical parameters." (Kazinform)

REPORT SAYS FORMER TURKMEN PARLIAMENT SPEAKER SENTENCED TO FIVE-YEAR PRISON TERM

28 February

Ovezgeldy Ataev, a former speaker of Turkmenistan's parliament, has received a five-year prison term in a closed trial, ferghana.ru reported on February 27. Ataev was reportedly convicted of driving his fiancée to commit suicide for reasons of "tribal animosity." Ataev had been next in line to succeed former President Saparmurat Niyazov when the latter died suddenly in December, but Ataev was sidelined, paving the way for the appointment of acting President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, when a criminal case was opened against him. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT OUTLINES NATIONAL PRIORITIES

28 February

In his annual report to parliament, President Nursultan Nazarbaev outlined on February 28 his vision of Kazakhstan's national priorities and stressed the need for a strategy to ensure economic competitiveness. Nazarbaev noted that the ongoing goal of doubling the country's 2000 gross domestic product by 2008 is "quite attainable," but called for the further "demonopolization" of the economy, specifically identifying the energy, railway, and electricity sectors. He added that economic integration within regional groupings such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) remains a top priority. Commenting on political reform, Nazarbaev said that Kazakhstan will continue to pursue "our own model" of gradual democratization not based on "a copy of foreign experience or an abstract theory," but defined by "the needs of our society and Kazakhstan's realities."

Unlike previous years, the presidential address was not televised live but was recorded prior to its broadcast. (Itar-Tass)

SPETSNAZ CAPTAIN CLAIMS HE WAS ORDERED TO EXECUTE CHECHEN CIVILIANS

28 February

Testifying on February 27 to the North Caucasus Military Court, Eduard Ulman said he received explicit telephone orders from a superior officer, Major Aleksei Perelevsky, in January 2002 to execute five Chechen civilians detained in the village of Day in Shatoi Raion during an operation to apprehend Chechen field commander Khattab. Ulman's men opened fire on the car in which six Chechens were traveling, killing one of them, and on his command subsequently shot the other five in cold blood and burned their bodies and the vehicle. Juries acquitted Ulman, Perelevsky, and two other officers in April 2004 and May 2005, but the Russian Federation Supreme Court overturned both acquittals, and in April 2006 the Russian Federation Constitutional Court ruled on the basis of a formal request from then pro-Moscow Chechen administration head Alu Alkhanov that a jury trial is inappropriate in cases involving war crimes committed in Chechnya. (RFE/RL)

EU, NATO PRAISE GEORGIA'S PROGRESS

28 February

Following talks on February 27 with visiting Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso described as "impressive" the reforms implemented in Georgia over the past three years, RFE/RL's Brussels correspondent reported. Barroso said the EU will continue to support Georgia, but at the same time he made clear that cooperation will be limited to the framework of the EU's European Neighborhood Policy. Saakashvili also met on February 27 with EU Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs and with NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. De Hoop Scheffer too praised Georgia's reforms, adding, however, that "there are also still points of concern." He repeatedly declined to make any predictions about when Georgia might qualify for a NATO Membership Action Plan, the final stage before a formal invitation is issued to join the Alliance. Saakashvili, who construed very cautiously phrased comments made by de Hoop Scheffer at the Munich security conference on February 10 as a cast-iron promise of NATO

membership by 2009, said on February 27 Georgia "is on track" for NATO accession. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER DISCUSSES RELATIONS WITH GEORGIA

28 February

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an extended interview published in "Rossiiskaya gazeta" on February 21 and 28 that "we have warned Georgia, and those...who actively encourage Georgia to join NATO, that we shall not permit this." Lavrov said that in addition to the crucial need to preserve stability in the South Caucasus, Russia is motivated by its "responsibility" for the tens of thousands of residents of the unrecognized republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who have acquired Russian citizenship. He denied that the distribution of Russian passports in those unrecognized republics is part of a broader campaign to undermine Georgian sovereignty, arguing that after the conflicts in those republics were "frozen," the regions in question remained outside the Georgian judicial system. Their citizens, deprived of social support from Tbilisi, then appealed to Russia for help, Lavrov explained. He further claimed that Romania, now an EU member, is similarly distributing passports to citizens of Moldova. Lavrov said the return last month to Tbilisi of Russian Ambassador Vyacheslav Kovalenko was a response to unspecified "changes" in the approach of the Georgian leadership. He added that any further improvement in bilateral relations will be contingent on Georgia's future steps with regard to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, specifically, on the signing of protocols on the nonresumption of hostilities. Lavrov described Georgia's refusal over the past year to sign such pledges as inexcusable. (RFE/RL)

FORMER KYRGYZ PREMIER ACCUSES CABINET OFFICIAL OF CORRUPTION

1 March

Feliks Kulov accused recently appointed Deputy Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov on February 28 of paying some \$300,000 in bribes in exchange for support for his promotion. Kulov leveled the accusation in an interview with the Kyrgyz "Delo No" newspaper. He also accused other lawmakers of accepting bribes to reject his own nomination as prime minister. Kulov joined the opposition to President Kurmanbek Bakiev on February 14, after losing his post when Bakiev failed to reintroduce his candidacy to parliament after two negative votes. At

that time, Kulov also accused Bakiev of violating the "tandem" agreement according to which Kulov gave up his presidential bid and supported Bakiev for the presidency in 2005. (RFE/RL)

ARMENIAN OPPOSITION PARTIES FAIL TO CEMENT ELECTION ALLIANCE

1 March

The leaders of the Hanrapetutiu and Zharangutiun parties and the National Democratic Union (AZhM) admitted on February 28 that they failed during last-ditch talks the previous evening to agree on terms for creating a bloc to participate in the May 12 parliamentary elections. They did not offer any explanation for that failure. Hanrapetutiu leader and former Prime Minister Aram Sargsian said Hanrapetutiu will not form an alternative alliance with the Armenian Pan-National Movement of former President Levon Ter-Petrossian, but will almost certainly run independently. AZhM chairman Vazgen Manukian said his party may boycott the election; Vartan Khachatrian, the nominal chairman of Zharangutiun, which was founded by former Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannisian, said that party has not yet decided whether to participate in the election independently. Meanwhile, 18 deputies from the outgoing parliament have announced their intention to seek reelection under the majoritarian system. (RFE/RL)

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT VISITS GEORGIA

1 March

Visiting Tbilisi on March 1, Victor Yushchenko discussed with his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili bilateral relations and cooperation, their respective countries' bids for NATO membership, and regional cooperation, including within the GUAM group. Speaking at a subsequent joint press conference, Yushchenko reiterated earlier offers by Ukrainian leaders to contribute a contingent to an international peacekeeping force to be deployed in Abkhazia under the UN aegis. The two sides signed several bilateral agreements, including one facilitating the permanent residence of citizens of one country in the other, and a second on facilitating the export to Ukraine of Georgian wine and mineral water. (Caucasus Press)

IMF OFFICIALS ARRIVE IN KYRGYZSTAN

2 March

A delegation of officials from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) arrived in Bishkek on March 1 for a two-week mission aimed at reviewing the Kyrgyz government's economic strategy. The head of the IMF team, Paulo Neuhaus, expressed concern over the recent Kyrgyz cabinet decision to reject participation in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, an IMF-sponsored debt-relief program. Officials suggested the HIPC program could have provided for the reduction of about half of Kyrgyzstan's \$2 billion in external debt, while critics argued that it would have given international financial institutions too much influence over domestic policy. (RFE/RL)

FORMER GEORGIAN PRESIDENT'S REMAINS DISCOVERED IN CHECHNYA

3 March

A coffin containing the remains of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was elected Georgian president in May 1991 and ousted seven months later, was discovered on March 3 at an undisclosed location in Grozny following a search ordered by Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov, Gamsakhurdia's son Tsotne and his widow Manana Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia told regnum. Gamsakhurdia fled to Chechnya following his ouster, and died in late December 1993 under circumstances that remain unclear. The precise location of his grave in the grounds of his home in Grozny was reportedly impossible to establish in the wake of the destruction wrought by two successive Chechen wars. (regnum.ru)

TSKHINVALI CLAIMS GEORGIAN BOMBARDMENT OF VILLAGE, POLICE POST

5 March

South Ossetian authorities have claimed a new bombardment of the breakaway republic by Georgia. "The Ossetian village of Pris and a nearby South Ossetian police post came under intensive fire from the Georgian side at about 8:00 p.m. Moscow time on March 4," a report posted on the South Ossetian government website on Monday says. "The gunfire from the Georgian village of Argvitsi lasted for about 30 minutes and Ossetia was forced to respond," the report says. "Georgia shells Ossetian villages and police posts almost daily," the report says. "This adds to tensions in the conflict zone and shows that the Georgian authorities, which allegedly want peaceful settlement of the

Georgian-Ossetian conflict, are actually trying to resume hostilities," it says. (Interfax-AVN)

KADYROV INVITED TO HEAD MS. WORLD ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

5 March

Ms. World 2007 contestants have invited Chechen president elect Ramzan Kadyrov to head the organizing committee. A letter by Ms. World President David Marmell, which was signed by the winners of 30 national contests, was received on Monday, Chechen presidential adviser Tatiana Georgiyeva told Interfax. "We have visited the Chechen Republic and seen that peace has come to the Chechen land. There was joy in children's eyes; they were radiating hospitality. "We realize that you are carrying a huge burden and have no free time. Nevertheless, we invite you to visit Sochi on March 8 and either head the organizing committee, become a jury member, or a guest of honor," the letter says. Georgiyeva said that a decision on Kadyrov's participation has not yet been made. (Interfax)

EUROPEAN UNION POSTPONES UZBEK SANCTIONS REVIEW

6 March

EU foreign ministers decided on March 5 in Brussels to postpone until May a review of the sanctions currently in force against Uzbekistan. Germany, which currently holds the EU's chair, expressed cautious optimism over what it believes may be signs that Uzbekistan may be willing to meet some of the bloc's human rights concerns. German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told his colleagues that Uzbek Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov has promised further talks on Andijon and the government's treatment of human rights activists. Steinmeier said that possible Uzbek concessions would involve granting the International Committee of the Red Cross access to prisons; holding a further round of talks with EU experts on the events that took place in Andijon in May 2005, where hundreds of protesters died after clashes with government troops; and launching a human rights dialogue allowing the EU to raise individual cases. (RFE/RL)

FORMER KYRGYZ PREMIER SAYS OPPOSITION WANTS EARLY PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

6 March

Feliks Kulov said in Bishkek on March 5 that the newly formed opposition movement the United Front For a Worthy Future for Kyrgyzstan, which he leads, is calling for an early presidential election but not the resignation of President Kurmanbek Bakiev. RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service quoted Kulov as saying, "Some of the voters voted [in the presidential election] precisely for the 'tandem' [of Kulov and Bakiev], and it is necessary to establish today what part of the voters voted for the 'tandem,' whether it was a larger part or a smaller part. In order to do that, this issue should be resolved in a legitimate way. In other words, this can be established by early elections." Kulov also criticized the country's new constitution, which expands presidential powers. He said, "Even many members of parliament didn't read those [amended] articles [of the new constitution] and they voted in bulk, so to speak, to adopt the constitution, and the population didn't even understand which articles they were talking about. Those articles were not discussed in parliament or among the population. So, the question is, who is to blame? The legitimacy [of the new constitution] comes into question." (RFE/RL)

KAZAKHSTAN WEIGHS BUILDING OIL REFINERY**6 March**

President Nursultan Nazarbayev said Tuesday that energy-rich Kazakhstan is considering building an oil refinery in Georgia's Black Sea port of Batumi, the official news agency Kazinform reported. Nazarbayev's announcement, after a meeting with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili in the Kazakh capital Astana, appeared to underline Kazakhstan's commitment to ship oil through a U.S.-backed pipeline running from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Turkey. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which opened in May 2005, allows the West to tap oil from rich Caspian Sea fields estimated to hold the world's third-largest reserves, bypassing Russia and Iran. Kazakhstan lies on the eastern shore of the Caspian, opposite Azerbaijan. "The Caucasian corridor that provides an outlet to Europe (and) the Mediterranean Sea is becoming important for us," Nazarbayev said. "Georgia is our active partner in that area." Nazarbayev also said Kazakhstan's national oil company KazMunaiGaz was in a process of buying the controlling stake in the Batumi port, considered a possible transit points for transporting oil from Kazakhstan's giant Tengiz

oil field near the Caspian with the planned increase in production there in the next several years. Kazinform quoted Saakashvili as saying the construction of an oil refinery in Batumi "is a huge project worth about US\$1 billion (euro760,000 million). It's very important not only for Georgia's economy, but for the entire (Caspian) region." Kazakhstan signed up to the BTC pipeline in June last year, saying it planned to ship 25 million tons (27.5 million short tons) of oil through it annually. Kazakhstan currently exports most of its oil via Russia, but has been seeking to establish alternative routes. The Kazakh government has also been seeking to increase its revenues from the energy sector by developing its own oil refining industry. Kazakhstan possesses the largest oil deposits in the Caspian Sea that it shares with Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. It produces about 1.3 million barrels a day. By 2015, its daily oil output is expected to reach 2.6 million barrels. (AP)

MEDIA IN AZERBAIJAN SUE FOR TRIAL ACCESS**7 March**

Independent and opposition newspapers in Azerbaijan have filed a lawsuit, demanding that officials allow journalists from non-state-run media to cover the high-profile trial of a former health minister accused of abuse of office and other crimes, activists said Wednesday. Officials at the Baku Court for Grave Crimes have said there were too few seats to accommodate all the journalists seeking to cover the trial of Ali Insanov, one of several former senior government officials who were sacked or arrested in the run-up to parliamentary elections in 2005. However, opposition and independent journalists charge that only representatives from state media outlets were being allowed inside the court and say the proceedings should be open to all journalists. Lawyer Intigam Aliev said nine well-known and smaller newspapers had joined the suit. An Azerbaijani media freedom group charged that authorities were blocking independent journalists from covering the trial in order to keep Insanov's critical comments about the ruling party from being printed. The Institute for Freedom and Safety of Reporters said officials should set up a video camera and monitor to broadcast proceedings if there were too few seats in the courtroom. "In reality, there are plenty of empty spaces in the hall. This problem shows the Azerbaijani government's suppression of the freedom of speech," the organization said in a statement. Insanov went on trial on Feb. 15, facing

charges that include abuse of power, receiving bribes, forgery and major embezzlement. He was arrested in the fall of 2005, in the tense run-up to parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan and police said an estimated \$2.3 million in U.S. and European currency was found in his apartment. Also sacked or

arrested that year were former finance minister Fikret Yusifov, former economic development minister Fardakh Aliev. Several face charges of plotting to seize power in the oil-rich Caspian Sea nation, which is tightly controlled by President Ilham Aliev. (AP)

