

Central Asia

Caucasus

ANALYST

BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 5, NO. 5

Wednesday, March 10, 2004

VISIT THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST HOMEPAGE AT

<http://www.cacianalyst.org/>

**UPDATED FORTNIGHTLY
OVER 750 ARTICLES AND FIELD REPORTS IN ARCHIVES**

THE CENTRAL ASIA CAUCASUS INSTITUTE



JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY



BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/March 10, 2004

ANALYTIC ARTICLES:**GWADAR PORT NEARS COMPLETION, AHEAD OF TIME.....3***Rizwan Zeb*

The Pakistan-China joint venture to build the \$248 million deep-sea port at Gwadar is scheduled to be completed ahead of time. Pakistan intends to take in other gulf ports, especially Oman's Salalah and the UAE's Jebal Ali and offer central Asian states their most efficient warm water access for contacts both west and east. Meanwhile, road links to Gwadar will be the shortest route for the central Asian states and their proposed east and the west bound oil exports if the plan goes well.

ABASHIDZE'S MULTIFACETED RUSSIAN LINKS AND AJARIA'S AUTONOMY5*Giorgi Vashakidze*

The Tbilisi-Batumi announcement of a constructive dialogue on all outstanding issues between the parties offers hope for a regulation of the problems that have deteriorated the central and regional powers. However, beyond the immediate impact of mistrust, these relations also contain important potential changes for Georgia's democratic development. The autonomous region of Ajaria has long since been the setting in which the central and regional governments have projected their rivalry, consequently any major change in that competition raises opportunities of corresponding changes in Georgia.

TURKISH GAS IMPORT CUTBACKS THREATEN TURKMEN GAS EXPORTS.....7*Hooman Peimani*

Turkey is pushing for another round of negotiations with Iran over its gas imports from that country about a year after renegotiating its 25-year gas contract. Harsh economic realities since 2001 have forced the Turks to renegotiate gas imports agreements with both Iran and Russia. Ankara's inability to adhere to its commitments under its bilateral gas agreements with Iran and Russia suggests that its other yet-to-be-implemented agreements, particularly the one with Turkmenistan, will likely remain on paper at least in the foreseeable future.

IMPLICATIONS OF IRAN'S MAJLIS ELECTIONS ON TEHRAN'S FOREIGN POLICIES.....9*Christopher Boucek*

On February 20th, Iran elected its seventh Majlis in what has been termed its most controversial election since the Islamic Revolution. The defeat of the moderates was widely anticipated, and the conservatives' recapture of the legislature was largely a foregone conclusion. While the intricacies of Iranian domestic politics defy most attempts by western observers to make sweeping judgments on the future of the Islamic Republic, it is clear that the elections will have an impact on Tehran's Afghan, Central Asian, and Iraq policies. By extension, the policies of Iran's new powerbrokers will influence the future of US-Iranian relations.

FIELD REPORTS:**DRUG ADDICTION IN KYRGYZSTAN REACHED EDGE OF EPIDEMIC.....4***Aziz Soltobaev***FIRST COURT RULING FREES MOST DETAINED OPPOSITION IN AZERBAIJAN.....6***Fariz Ismailzade***WILL KAZAKHSTAN GO THE GEORGIAN WAY?.....8***Karim Sayid***"SKINHEAD" MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA'S CITIES: PERSPECTIVE FROM TAJIKISTAN.....10****NEWS BITES.....11**

EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

The 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, The Johns Hopkins University-The Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. 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. Each 700-900 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 the 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."

Analytical Articles:

Analytical articles require a three to four sentence 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.

Analytical article structure:

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

BACKGROUND: 200-300 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: 200-300 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.

Specifications for Field Reports:

Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGO. 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. 500-700 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: svante.cornell@pcr.uu.se and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

Svante E. Cornell, Editor
 Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst
 Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
 The Johns Hopkins University
 Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
 1619 Massachusetts Ave. N.W.
 Washington, D.C. 20036
 Tel. +1-202-663-7712; 1-202-663-7721
 Fax. +1-202-663-7785; 1-253-550-4390

GWADAR PORT NEARS COMPLETION, AHEAD OF TIME

Rizwan Zeb

The Pakistan-China joint venture to build the \$248 million deep-sea port at Gwadar is scheduled to be completed ahead of time. Pakistan intends to take in other gulf ports, especially Oman's Salalah and the UAE's Jebal Ali and offer central Asian states their most efficient warm water access for contacts both west and east. Meanwhile, road links to Gwadar will be the shortest route for the central Asian states and their proposed east and the west bound oil exports if the plan goes well.

BACKGROUND: Pakistan and China signed the deal to build the \$248 million deep-sea port on the Arabian Sea coast in Southern Baluchistan in 2002. The project was to be completed by March 2005. China provided \$198 million in a mixture of soft loans and grants; Islamabad is paying the remaining 50 million.

The mega-project to build Gwadar seaport was inaugurated in April 2002. The location of Gwadar is strategically significant, as it is just on the opposite end of the Gulf of Oman and the Straits of Hormuz. Pakistan's National Highway (NHA) and the frontier Works Organization (FWO) are tasked to build a 700 km coastal superhighway, which would link Gwadar with the world. This highway will link Karachi on the east to Jiwani to the west, near the Iranian border. It is estimated that this highway will most likely be completed along with the Gwadar port.

According to many analysts, this deep sea port project has the potential to reshape regional trade by creating a new trans-shipment facility on the Arabian sea. Pakistan's Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali paid the area an official visit last May. During this visit he said: "The development of the deep sea port of Gwadar is a link between east and the west and it will change the fate of this region as well as the national economy of Pakistan ... and will make this area an important junction in the international trade".

The port, 675 km west of Karachi, is now under construction. Engineers from the China Harbor Company claim that in keeping with the pace of work, they will complete phase one by September 2004. The Gwadar deep-water channel, which is more than 14 km long, will permit large vessels to anchor and some experts argue that it will eventually outsmart and overcome other transit ports in the region. Gwadar will most likely provide an alternative trans-shipment facility not only for the westbound but for eastbound cargoes and oil shipments as well, which at the moment start off from Dubai or Salalah ports.

Also underway is a master plan for the development of the area. This plan includes a modern airport, an elaborate network of roads linking Gwadar with the country's main cities in the east and the north, a tax free export processing zone and an industrial estate. A highway connecting the port with the central Asian states is also under construction. Earlier in 2003, the Asian Development Bank made a commitment to lend up to \$500 million for regional roads. If

the vision of the people at the helm in Islamabad and the Chinese builders is realized, in every likelihood, it will be transformed into a futuristic gateway for trade to the landlocked central Asia.

IMPLICATIONS: Phase one of the mega-project will likely finish in September 2004, almost six months ahead of schedule. According to one senior engineer of the China Harbour Company, Mr. Xia Yubin, the work is progressing smoothly: "We will finish our work in 2004", he stated. During this first phase, three multipurpose berths to accommodate ships of over 50,000 tons will be created. In the second phase which will start immediately after the completion of the first phase, two container berths, a bulk cargo terminal, a grain terminal, a roll on-roll off terminal. Two oil piers will be built and the future expansion of two berths will also take place.

China is Pakistan's partner in the creation and development of the Gwadar port since day one. Apart from being the "all-weather friend" of Pakistan, China is also interested in the development of Gwadar due to its own economic interests. This port, once it materializes, will have a very positive impact on Chinese economy – especially the economy of the Chinese Autonomous region of Xinjiang. The much shorter distance between Gwadar and this part of China as compared to its other seaports makes it a very important project, which can be used for enhancing the economic activity in this region that has suffered from separatist movements. Chinese participation and contribution in phase one of this project has created keen interest and attracted investments not only from Pakistani entrepreneurs. Many countries, particularly Afghanistan, Singapore and Japan have shown keen interest in the developments taking place in this part of the region.

Much importance rests on connecting Gwadar with the rest of the country through road and railway connections. It has been reported that Gwadar will be connected with a rail network on the Quetta-Zahedan line at Dalbandin, or with the Dodu-Jacobabad section. The Chaman-Quetta rail tract could also be upgraded to handle the activities of the Gwadar port. The highway that will connect Gwadar with the rest of the country is also nearing completion. Work is going on at full speed on the Karachi-Gwadar Coastal Highway. It has been reported that the Karachi-Ormera section is almost complete and more than half of the Gwadar-Pasni Section has been built. Observers and experts say that work on the

Pasni-Ormera section is due to begin soon. This highway is estimated to become operational three months ahead of schedule, in the last quarter of 2004, close to the completion of phase one of the Gwadar port. According to many analysts, this will reduce the traveling time for a truck between Karachi and Gwadar significantly. An important incentive is that it will be possible to unload cargo from a ship directly onto a long distance truck, which could reach Chaman on the Pakistan-Afghan border in just eight hours by road – a road that is already under construction through the financial support of the Asian Development Bank. By the end of this year, Gwadar airport will also be fully developed. The new runway will be capable of handling the landing of 747 aircrafts, and Airbus compatibility.

Pakistan's Finance Minister Mr. Shaukat Aziz once said that this is a long-term project and at this stage only the first phase of the developments with the minimal infrastructure support is being built. The full potential of this project can only be realized if a strong public and private partnership is forged between the government and the private sector.

CONCLUSIONS: Through the port of Gwadar, Pakistan will be able to offer Central Asian states their most efficient

warm water access to both the west and the east, and the shortest route for Central Asian oil exports. Afghanistan and Central Asian states will therefore play a crucial role for the success of the Gwadar port. Islamabad has to work hard to establish trust and cooperation with Kabul. Indo-Pakistani rivalry in Afghanistan and the influence New Delhi enjoys with the Northern Alliance-dominated regime in Kabul should also be taken into account. In fact, in keeping with recent developments in the South Asian peace process, India can be approached to support the idea, from which it can potentially benefit. In light of all this, the decision made by the Pakistani government to develop a regional dimension to the project and initiate consultations with Afghanistan and Central Asian States to be followed up with regular intervals is very timely and appropriate. Gwadar will in all likelihood emerge as the true gateway to the Central Asia.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Rizwan Zeb is an Islamabad-based security Analyst and RCSS Mahbubul Haq Fellow. Currently he is working on book about Pakistan- Central Asia Relations.

DRUG ADDICTION IN KYRGYZSTAN REACHED EDGE OF EPIDEMIC

An overall increase of drug trafficking has led to increasing drug use in Kyrgyzstan. In ten years, the number of drug users has increased six times. If at the beginning of the 1990s a significant share of drug use consisted of cannabis use (65-70%), now opium and heroin dominate drug addiction, with over 70%. Of cases.

UNODC experts claim that 80,000-100,000 drug users could exist in Kyrgyzstan – a country with a population of five million persons. It seems to now have reached the edge of an epidemic development. The Republican Center for Narcology (RCN) represents a Ministry of Health branch responsible for revealing, registering and assisting drug users. According to results for 2003, the number of drug users registered reached 6,500 persons. "Annually, we register 800-900 new cases of first-time drug users. And there is a tendency of users becoming ever younger", the head of the RCN Asanov Tynchtybek told the Analyst.

However, most drug users try to avoid registration in governmental institutions, because it blocks job opportunities for them. Asanov Tynchtybek claims "The stigma is caused by the society, not medical offers, which is not yet ready to accept living and working with drug users or people infected with HIV/AIDS".

Kubatbekov Kurmanbek, head of Drug Control Agency of the Kyrgyz Republic, recently told parliament that "the relatively low rate of growth in drug addiction can be explained by a high rate of

mortality among registered drug users. By some estimates, annually a third of registered users die". Batma Estebesova, leader of the NGO 'Socium' noted that "Over 70% of our beneficiaries are not registered at the RCN". The NGO began working in 1997, and seeks to assist people being addicted to substances such as drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Drug users can anonymously come and receive any help they need, starting with a needle exchange program and legal assistance, and finishing with becoming part of a "twelve step" program that originated in the United States in the 1930s.

Nearly 7,600 drug users have used the services of 'Socium', and most of them did become members of the twelve step program conducted with the assistance of international organizations. Even though the number of private practices and private hospitals engaged in the treatment of drug addiction have increased, "all programs active in Kyrgyzstan focused on assisting drug users covers only four percent of the drug users", Estebesova stated. Asanov Tynchtybek presented the picture of the typical drug user as follows. "A young man aged 28-30 years, living with parents or having his own family. 80% are unemployed, even though they have a general education level. He has several convictions. He started using drugs, typically Cannabis, at the age of 20-21, and began injecting drugs (opium or heroin) at 27. Only 30% are women. 10 years passed before the typical drug user was registered at RCN". According to the estimates of "Socium", coherent with the reports of international organizations, 60-

70% of drug addicts live in the Chuy valley and Bishkek city, even though the focus of the world community is on the Osh oblast, the main transit region for drug trafficking.

A vital role in the deterioration of the drug situation is played by the country's domestic drugs base – cannabis and ephedrine, which are widely grown in the republic. In the Chuy valley, situated on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border, there are large plantations of wild-growing hemp (approximately 140 000 hectares). Drug users usually begin with "soft drugs" like cannabis, and then move toward the use of heroin. Currently, 60-70% of drug addicts use heroin and the share is constantly increasing. Forecasting the future development of drug addiction, Tynchtybek Asanov is not optimistic, and assumes that the estimates of international organizations at 80,000 drug users can be confirmed. Cannabis plantations have become sources for the first experimenting with drugs by new users, which then turns into opium or heroin addiction. Those revealed young drug users could become future consumers of "hard drugs", such as heroin, hence increasing the share of heroin addiction. Estebesova is calling for not curtailing international organizations' programs, such as needle exchange programs and rehabilitation programs like the twelve step program for drug users. In sum, drug addiction has reached the edge of a drug epidemic in Kyrgyzstan.

Aziz Soltobaev

ABASHIDZE'S MULTIFACETED RUSSIAN LINKS AND AJARIA'S AUTONOMY

Giorgi Vashakidze

The Tbilisi-Batumi announcement of a constructive dialogue on all outstanding issues between the parties offers hope for a regulation of the problems that have deteriorated the central and regional powers. However, beyond the immediate impact of mistrust, these relations also contain important potential changes for Georgia's democratic development. The autonomous region of Ajaria has long since been the setting in which the central and regional governments have projected their rivalry, consequently any major change in that competition raises opportunities of corresponding changes in Georgia.

BACKGROUND: Having been elected president of Georgia in January 2004 election, President Mikheil Saakashvili has a rare opportunity to implement democratic values and embark on proposals for the sustainable development of the country. One of his greatest challenges is to insure the country's stability and society's expectation after the revolution of November 2003. The election campaign was based on the promises of Georgia's territorial restoration and fighting against deep-rooted corruption. Corruption, instability, low living standards and a large shadow economy confront the country. The revolution brought attention to the country and the region in its entirety, while the two major conflicts in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia, with additional problems in the autonomous republic of Ajaria and in the Pankisi Gorge jeopardize the stability of Georgia.

The Autonomous Republic of Ajaria, a strategic region in Southwestern Georgia, has become a black spot for the future development of Georgia and one of the greatest and most immediate hurdles for the new government. Violations of human rights, impediments on freedom of speech, and the presence of a Russian military base there creates dissatisfaction between the regional and central governments, with the former using all necessary means in order to maintain their pre-eminent position in Ajaria.

Aslan Abashidze, the regional power-holder whose authoritarian policy strive to minimize dependence on the central government, largely ignores the allegations of President Saakashvili. Having traveled to Moscow many times without the mandate of the central government, Abashidze has clearly secured support from the Russian political establishment. The Russian military bases openly back his widespread influence in the region.

Having governed Ajaria for over ten years, Aslan Abashidze presides over a government marred by corruption and engaging in widespread violation of human rights. While all this is well known, his the nature of his links to Russia – especially links to Russian organized crime – are less widely publicized. Abashidze appears to have close relations to Grigory Loutchansky, who identifies himself as a “big Russian businessman and president of the Nordex group of companies”. Loutchansky contributed significant financial support for Abashidze's national election campaign already in the 1995 parliamentary election. It seems that Mr.

Loutchansky sought to use the Batumi seaport for his private purposes. As an award, he promised Mr. Abashidze submarine turbines for the electric supply for the region. Later, however, the deal was changed and expensive fertilizers were imported through the “Nordex” company and distributed for the harvest in Georgia's eastern Kakheti region. Mr. Abashidze's aim in the deal was to gain the popular support in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The “fertilizers for votes” campaign won Abashidze's political party, the “Union of Democratic Revival”, many seats in the parliament.

Corruption based on clandestine connections, creates an economical vacuum in the region as in the country as a whole. Money transfers from the region to the central budget has so far depended on the whims of Aslan Abashidze and not on the laws of the country. One of the Abashidze's assets is the perfectly friendly relation he enjoys with Yuri Lushkov, Mayor of Moscow, who is considered to be the man behind a huge resort project along the Black Sea shore in Batumi. Indeed, Lushkov could be considered one of the mediators between Abashidze and the Russian political elite.

IMPLICATIONS: Despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's promises to Mikheil Saakashvili to help the settlement of the conflicts on the basis of territorial integrity, recent events in Ajaria raise doubts about Moscow's non-intervention policy in Georgia's internal affairs. Local experts tend to consider that the policy of Aslan Abashidze deteriorates relations between the central and regional government.

Since the revolution of roses, a cold war has begun between Tbilisi and Batumi. Abashidze's statement to defend the territorial integrity of the region by all necessary means shows that Batumi and Tbilisi are still far apart. Saakashvili's recently ordered Abashidze to investigate human rights violations and put an end to pressures on mass media. The only visible result was the brutal beating of Vakho Komakhidze, a reporter with investigative news program 60 Minutes broadcast on private television channel Rustavi 2, by an Ajarian special task force on March 4.

Logically, Abashidze's policies have no approval from the central government. Mr. Saakashvili sharply criticized the existence of a ministry of internal affairs of Ajara as a violation of Georgia's Constitution, and ordered its

abolishment. However, Abashidze ignored the demand. Tbilisi insists on the investigation of the assassination of the deputy of the ministry of interior affairs of the autonomous republic, who was killed in January 2004 under mysterious circumstances. Abashidze does not have an interest to investigate the case – since the victim was a supporter of the central government. Saakashvili and Abashidze also have serious disagreements over the constitution of the autonomous republic that confers extensive powers on Abashidze, which Saakashvili is seeking to limit.

Abashidze's position may in fact be stronger than normally assessed, given the fact that his links to Russia are much more widespread and deep-rooted than is apparent from his political relations with Moscow or the presence of a Russian military base. Abashidze has clandestine connections with Russian political, but also economic circles, including deep links to Russian organized crime. As such Aslan Abashidze's capacity to effectively manipulate between Tbilisi and Moscow with apparent ease is considerable.

The present situation in Ajara gives Abashidze the opportunity to maintain the current authoritarian regime. The legal and illegal business activity of Abashidze's family gives him and his adherents the opportunity to threaten the

stability of the country and oppose the liberal development of Georgia and the entire the region. The external economical and political interests of various groups in the region further worsen existing tensions.

CONCLUSIONS: Few observers believe this state of affairs will bring about stability for the country. In fact, the rivalry could have catastrophic consequences for the new government of Georgia if it pushes the issue too hard and it backfires. It seems, however, that Mikheil Saakashvili does not consider the dangers that could arise if he and Abashidze do not find an arrangement allowing both parties to work together. The coming parliamentary elections in the country could lead to a thawing of relations between Ajaria and the center. Both parties expect to take seats in the new parliament. Most likely, the status quo will be sustained following the elections: destructive and non-cooperative relations. Despite the strong allegations of both sides, there is little that suggests that the situation will be changed in the near future, certainly not in a peaceful manner.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Giorgi Vashakidze is MA candidate at Uppsala University the Department of Peace and Conflict Research.

FIRST COURT RULING FREES MOST DETAINED OPPOSITION IN AZERBAIJAN

The long-expected court ruling on the cases of the detained opposition members was announced on March 5, when Azerbaijan's court on heavy crimes found 23 opposition activists guilty, but only seven were sentenced to various terms in prison. The rest were put on probation and released from the courtrooms to go home.

These cases, held under the chairmanship of judges Faik Gasimov, Abid Abdinov and Tofik Pashayev, were part of the overall trial of over a hundred opposition activists, who were detained as a result of the violence during and after the Presidential election last October. The opposition Musavat party came second to the ruling party's candidate Ilham Aliyev, who gathered over 70% of cast votes. During that violence, protestors clashed with police and army, the result of which was one dead person and dozens wounded. The protestors were objecting to electoral fraud and used various heavy tools to damage the city's infrastructure. Police, in turn, used tear gas and sticks to disperse the crowd.

Despite the completed court cases, the defense side is not pleased with the results and claims that the judges were biased and pressured by the executive authorities. Defense attorney Mirismail Hadi told the independent daily *Ekho* that "The guilt of the opposition activists was not proven. The decision of the court was absolutely political." Hadi also said that he would appeal the decision of the court regarding those members of the opposition

Musavat party who were sentenced to serve a prison term.

Other defense lawyers also stated that the decisions of the judges could have been easily predicted in advance, because the authorities had no intention to arrest all the detained people, instead wanting to release them gradually.

A majority of local analysts believe that release of a majority of detained activists was due to international pressure. Following the arrests, various international organizations such as Human Rights Watch, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and foreign governments including the U.S. State Department, have expressed concerns regarding the arrests and called for free and fair trials of the arrested people. "The international pressure affected the court decisions," says Hadi.

Several ranking members of the opposition parties, including deputy chairmen of Musavat party Sulheddin Akbar and Arif Hacili are still waiting for their trial to begin. The opposition claims that authorities are artificially prolonging the investigation, while the office of the general prosecutor argues that time is necessary to gather all evidence and initiate trials.

Among the arrested people is Rauf Arifoglu, editor in chief of the popular opposition daily *Yeni Musavat*. Arifoglu also serves as a deputy chairman of the Musavat party and authorities claim that he was one of those who personally organized and

prepared the post-election violence. Meanwhile, the daily claimed that the authorities are launching a new stage of intimidation and harassment against the publication and its staff, as they were required to pay court fines of \$150,000 as a result of lost lawsuits in 2003.

The Musavat party on March 6 issued a public statement, in which it called the attention of the international community to the court procedures, which it claimed are marred by "major violations and the use of false evidence". Musavat called upon the authorities to release all the detained people and compensate them for moral and material losses.

Similar appeals had been made earlier by representatives of NGOs and the intelligentsia. Several NGO activists like Kamil Veli Nariman oglu, Leyla Yunus and Ilgar Altay called for public forums of reconciliation and mutual dialogue. Other human rights activists noted that the release of the detained opposition activists could help fix the image of Azerbaijan in the international arena.

The court cases will continue and most probably will result in the release of the majority of the detained persons. It is not in the interest of newly elected President Ilham Aliyev to keep this issue in the press headlines. The gradual liberalization of the political scene is likely to open up new opportunities for the further economic and social reforms in the country.

Fariz Ismailzade

TURKISH GAS IMPORT CUTBACKS THREATEN TURKMEN GAS EXPORT

Hooman Peimani

Turkey is pushing for another round of negotiations with Iran over its gas imports from that country about a year after renegotiating its 25-year gas contract. Harsh economic realities since 2001 have forced the Turks to renegotiate gas imports agreements with both Iran and Russia. Ankara's inability to adhere to its commitments under its bilateral gas agreements with Iran and Russia suggests that its other yet-to-be-implemented agreements, particularly the one with Turkmenistan, will likely remain on paper at least in the foreseeable future.

BACKGROUND: Turkey and Iran signed a 25-year gas deal in 1996 to supply Turkey with up to 10 billion cubic metres of Iranian gas annually. The \$30 billion deal was a major breakthrough for Iran. It has since remained the only significant export contract for a country that has the world's second largest gas resources, but whose share of international exports is about 0.5 percent. Despite Iran's enthusiasm, Turkey's serious financial problems delayed the construction of the required pipeline (2,577 kilometre) connecting Ankara to Iran's northeastern city of Tabriz, which is in turn linked to the gas resources of the southern Iranian Province of Khuzestan. The pipeline became operational in December 2001, but Turkey stopped gas imports in September 2002, citing their poor quality. The October visit to Tehran of then Turkish Energy Minister Zeki Cakan to renegotiate the Turkish-Iranian gas deal suggested that this may have been an excuse for the Turks to decrease their committed amount of annual imports and to reduce the price.

Turkey's phenomenal financial crisis of 2001, followed by a severe recession, sharply decreased its gas requirements calculated in the 1990s, based on a very optimistic long-term economic growth rate. It therefore sought to secure gas suppliers to meet its expected growing gas consumption in the first decade of the 21st century through agreements with many gas exporters, including Iran and Russia. Facing a free fall of its economy in 2001, it neither needed nor could afford huge amounts of gas imports. Thus, it first demanded and received a nine-percent discount from Russia, which could not leave idle its undersea Blue Line pipeline built exclusively to supply Turkey. Building on that precedent, Cakan demanded and obtained an unknown price reduction on imports from Iran, while removing its legal commitment under the 1996 agreement to import large and growing amounts of gas from that country.

IMPLICATIONS: The same reasons that forced Ankara to seek a price reduction previously, prompted it to call for another round of negotiations with Tehran in 2004. Turkey's Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, Hilmi Guler, is expected to visit Tehran in early March to negotiate with Iranian Minister of Oil Bijan Namdar Zanganeh. Quoted in Iranian daily *Siasat-e Rouz*, Guler clearly stated that Turkey could no longer import gas from Iran at the current price. He also made it clear that his desired price reduction would not solve Turkey's import problems even in the short term. Thus,

presumably, economic pressures would likely force it to demand further reductions in the future as he would "discuss with Iranian officials the addition of a clause to the two countries' energy agreements in order to be able to change prices at 'certain times'".

Iran is clearly dissatisfied with another demand for price reduction. Late in February, the National Iranian Gas Company's Chief (Mohammad Mallaki) even rejected any reason for renegotiating the Iranian-Turkish gas deal. However, economic imperatives pressured the Managing Director of the National Iranian Gas Export Company (Roknoddin Javadi) to soften that firm position by saying that his company was "considering Ankara's call on Tehran to renegotiate the gas prices." It is almost certain that the same considerations, which made Tehran accept Ankara's 2002 demand, will likely incline it to accept a new price reduction. Additionally, Russia's recent discount on gas exports to Turkey, the second since 2001, has put Iran in a tight spot in the pricing of its gas exports. Hence Guler expressed hope on February 26 that he would convince his Iranian counterpart to accept a lower export price based on that reality.

Regardless of its degree of success in its talks with Iran, Turkey is clearly unable to import any additional amount of gas from any new supplier, including Turkmenistan. In 1996 Turkey signed a trilateral contract with Turkmenistan and Iran for exporting Turkmen gas to Turkey and Europe via Iran. The contract is yet to become a reality, although Shell conducted a feasibility study in 1997 with positive results. In that year the American government's reluctant exclusion of the contract from its sanctions on Iran as requested by Turkey and Turkmenistan facilitated its implementation as it eliminated U.S. punitive measures against would-be non-American investors in the pipeline project. Lack of investors to connect the Turkmen gas pipeline to the Iranian-Turkish gas pipeline has since been a major obstacle to its implementation. The growing involvement of especially European oil companies in Iranian energy projects is now creating hope for its financing. Yet, funds availability is insufficient for its implementation. Turkey's economic problems is still a major hurdle since it cannot possibly import large amounts of Turkmen gas in addition to its current imports. In such situation, the lack of a project to connect the Iranian-Turkish pipeline to Greece or Bulgaria

removes the possibility of implementing the trilateral project to export Turkmen gas to Europe via Turkey in the short term.

CONCLUSIONS: Iran's heavy investment in its infrastructure to export gas to Turkey will likely force Tehran to show flexibility in its negotiations with the Turks for fear of a total cut off of Turkish imports. While this reality should address Turkey's import problems for a while, Ankara's policy of renegotiations with Iran and Russia has questioned the survival of the Turkey-Iran-Turkmenistan gas deal. Ankara's inability to commit to a steady import of Russian

and Iranian gas at an agreed price even after renegotiations suggests that this factor, among others, will likely prevent the Turkmenistan gas deal's implementation at least until certain changes take place: these include, a major and sustainable economic recovery in Turkey to substantially increase its domestic gas requirements; and/or the construction of a pipeline connecting the Iranian-Turkish pipeline to Europe to make feasible Turkmen gas exports to Europe.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dr. Hooman Peimani works as an independent consultant with international organizations in Geneva and does research in International Relations.

WILL KAZAKHSTAN GO THE GEORGIAN WAY?

Avtandil Veltauri, chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Georgia, received a thunderous standing ovation from delegates when he rose to the podium to address the founding congress of the Democratic Party of Kazakhstan in Almaty on February 24. Amid the prolonged applause the guest speaker said he firmly believed that Kazakhstan would enjoy the glorious day of democracy some day.

Significantly, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) was the only political organization in Kazakhstan to send its representatives to attend the inauguration ceremony of the democratically elected Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. The leadership of Kazakhstan, which earlier did not miss the opportunity to rush to Baku as Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan was inaugurated as President, conspicuously ignored the official event. The pro-government media still remains tight-lipped about the "velvet revolution" in Georgia. This awkward silence, however, is more eloquent than any words given the political conditions of Kazakhstan.

The bloodless change of power in Georgia stirred up political movements in Kazakhstan to more decisive steps. The leader of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, transformed from a popular movement into a political party, Assylbek Kozhakhmetov, said that the trip to Georgia, timed to the inauguration of Mikheil Saakashvili, was also effectively used to establish ties with democrats there. Even the most conservative pro-presidential "Otan" party seems to pick up the scent of changes in the political climate. An advisor to the chairman of "Otan", Bolatkhan Taizhan, startled his fellow party members with a statement that "top state bodies, even the administration of the President for that matter, should be formed on a multiparty basis".

To hush up grumblers from the opposition, the government skillfully juggles economic figures. And this produces the desired effect on the masses. The National Statistical Board registered 8.8% economic growth in 2003. GDP increased to \$30 billion. Per capita income in Kazakhstan is much higher than in other Central Asian countries. Sober economic

analysis, nevertheless, reveal that last year's GDP exceeds 1991 level only by 6.3%. In January, compared to December of 2003, food prices hiked up to 1.2%. In the oil-producing Atyrau and Mangystau regions, 40.9 and 46.2%, respectively, of the population live below the poverty line. Last year, according to independent analysts, Kazakhstan lost its leading position in GDP growth to Armenia, Azerbaijan and even Tajikistan. The economy is strangled by a foreign debt of over \$3 billion.

Yerlan Karin from the Almaty-based International Institute of Modern Politics says that by exaggerating economic achievements, the government risks to fall into a pitfall. If the economy is thriving, it is quite logical for people to demand accelerated political reforms as the next step. But the slow pace of political reforms is the Achilles' heel of Kazakhstan.

According to experts at the Adil Soz Foundation for monitoring the media situation, Kazakhstan's media law is the toughest in Central Asia. Journalists, as in communist times, are placed under close police surveillance. They are often barred from attending rallies organized by the opposition. To cite only one case, only two journalists appeared to a press conference held by the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan Party in Petropavlovsk (North Kazakhstan) on March 4. Both were from non-government papers.

The political agenda of the DCK included radical political demands such as the introduction of amendments to the Constitution, the election of akims (governors) and judges, enhancing the power of local legislative bodies, while limiting presidential power. Amid growing clamors for fair elections and pressure from the OSCE, the Central Election Committee hastened to announce the proposed introduction of an electronic vote counting system. But this belated move is hardly practicable in a country with a chronic shortage of funds. At any rate, it is almost certain that the coming parliamentary elections in autumn will be held under the old regulations which leave uncountable loopholes for the manipulation of election results.

Some events, such as the release of opposition leader Galimzhan Zhakiyanov from his prison cell, the registration of the DVC party, promises of a new election law etc. may signal a positive impact of the Georgian velvet revolution on political events in Kazakhstan. But it would be too optimistic to say, as some experts assert, that Kazakhstan will be the next country in the CIS to follow the Georgian example. The specific political culture of Kazakhstan, the mentality of the nation, and economic factors should all be taken into account. Despite the worsening economic situation, the living standard in Kazakhstan is not as low as it is in Georgia.

The present alignment of political forces does not favor the opposition. While the "Asar" party founded by Dariga Nazarbayeva, the daughter of the president, is expanding its influence using unlimited administrative power, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan sees itself without reliable allies. The relations between the DVC and "Ak Zhol" Party have turned lukewarm as a result of divergences over tactical issues. Communists are grappling with dissent within their own ranks that finally led to the creation of two opposing factions.

Furthermore, the majority of the population has grown weary of the endless succession of political processes and unfulfilled promises. What people in the countryside want more are palpable social changes concerning their day-to-day needs. According to Nurbolat Masanov, a prominent political scientist, 95% of the population in Kazakhstan is left outside the political processes going on in the country. Many do not desire any changes in the existing system. This discouraging fact shows the wide gap between political parties and the population. With parliamentary elections approaching, both the opposition and the regime are more concerned with approaching battles for seats in parliament rather than with Georgian lessons.

Karim Sayid

IMPLICATIONS OF IRAN'S MAJLIS ELECTIONS ON TEHRAN'S FOREIGN POLICIES

Christopher Boucek

On February 20th, Iran elected its seventh Majlis in what has been termed its most controversial election since the Islamic Revolution. The defeat of the moderates was widely anticipated, and the conservatives' recapture of the legislature was largely a foregone conclusion. While the intricacies of Iranian domestic politics defy most attempts by western observers to make sweeping judgments on the future of the Islamic Republic, it is clear that the elections will have an impact on Tehran's Afghan, Central Asian, and Iraq policies. By extension, the policies of Iran's new powerbrokers will influence the future of US-Iranian relations.

BACKGROUND: Prior to the elections, close to 2,500 reform candidates, including many of currently serving in the Majlis that garnered the greatest number of votes four years ago, were disqualified. In all, over 80 currently serving MPs were barred from participating. First Deputy Speaker Mohammad Reza Khatami—the president's brother and leader of the Participation Front—as well as Behzad Nabavi, Mohsen Mirdamadi, and Mohsen Armin, among many others, were disqualified by the hard-line Guardian Council. These moderate MPs served on some of the most important Majlis committees, including Foreign Affairs, National Security, and Judicial Affairs, and their disqualification marks a significant setback for the moderate elements in Iranian politics.

Likewise, the heavy-handed pre-election policies of the Council of Guardians worked against many of the hard-line candidates such tactics were intended to help. Many conservative candidates expressed displeasure at the measures taken to assure their victory as these implied that they could not win on the strengths of their platforms. Many hard-line candidates felt this election would be a repeat performance of the 2002 regional elections when the conservatives easily beat their rivals. Thus, for many, there is the fear that the Guardian Council's obvious favoritism diminished their standing in the eyes of the Iranian electorate.

With the defeat of the moderates aligned with President Mohammad Khatami, the stage is now set for a showdown within Iran's conservative movement. The pragmatic realists and technocrats identified with former president and current chairman of the Expediency Council Hashemi Rafsanjani and the absolutist hard-line fundamentalist ideologues will face each other in a bid to set the course of Iranian policy and dictate the future of the regime. Rafsanjani's educated professionals have obvious advantages: under his guidance, the Expediency Council has evolved from just its legislative oversight mandate into a sophisticated strategic policy and planning apparatus. Many issues are at stake as Tehran works through its domestic politics. Iran's nuclear program and relations with the United States will both increase in importance. Similarly, Tehran's policies in Afghanistan and Central Asia, as well as Iraq, will also continue to consume increasing amounts of the leadership's time and energy.

IMPLICATIONS: Some regional diplomats have expressed fear that a presumptive return to power of Rafsanjani's coterie could mean a revival of Iranian attempts to garner influence in the region. Increased Iranian activism—perhaps by its intelligence and security services—in western Afghanistan and Central Asia, while the fear of many observers, nevertheless seems unlikely. Iran is at present far more concerned with securing its own borders, stabilizing its neighbors, and avoiding preemptive American military action than it is in exporting its revolution or seeking to spread Khomeinism. Tehran's attempts in the past to use its interpretation of Islam as a bridge in the region have failed, and now the government is considerably more concerned with reviving its own moribund economy and determining the future of the Islamic Republic. This does not mean, however, that Iran will not play a more active role in the region.

On the contrary, Tehran is seeking to build constructive links with western Afghanistan. In Ismail Khan, Iran has a regional leader with whom they can cooperate. Indeed, elements of the Iranian government would like to see a greater role for Tehran in Afghanistan, especially in securing reconstruction contracts and supplying much-needed infrastructure materials. For their part, some Afghans have expressed dissatisfaction with the American objective of isolating Iran as Iranians have much to offer their neighbor.

Under the new Majlis, Iran will continue to participate as much as it can in the development of western Afghanistan. It will also seek to improve border controls, regulate customs and tax regimes, and aim to control the spread of Afghan narcotics from spilling into Iran. The construction of new border posts and greater cooperation with European police and customs officials will help in these efforts. Iran will also seek to protect the Shi'a communities in Iraq and Afghanistan—especially after the recent *Ashura* massacres—and express an interest in fighting the fundamentalist Sunni Islam that inspires such vehement anti-Shi'a violence.

It is painfully apparent to the regime in Tehran that the United States has fully engaged—politically, economically, and militarily—in the region, and militarily surrounds Iran. With American forces deployed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Central Asia, and the Gulf, the Iranian military is acutely

aware of that it could become the next American 'project' in the region. President Bush's 2002 State of the Union declaration of Iran's membership in the "Axis of Evil" still painfully echoes in Tehran today.

CONCLUSIONS: The results of the Iranian elections, while written off by many, will likely see the moderate realists grapple for power with the hard-line *hezbollahi* ideologues bent on maintaining their strict interpretation of the Islamic Revolution. It remains to be seen whether the pragmatists will face the same obstructions and impediments by the hard-liners as was the case during Rafsanjani's presidency when many of his government's policies fell victim to political infighting.

It is likely, however, that Tehran will continue its unofficial policy of what one astute Iran watcher termed "de-containment"—measures by which Iran can foil Washington's attempts at political isolation. Thus far, Iran is not at present on America's hit list for regime change, and the pragmatists know that they can manage the way in which relations with Washington are developed. As long as the hard-line ideologues can be sidelined, and Iran is not seen to be a force of destabilization in the region, the future may yet hold further US-Iranian cooperation.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Christopher Boucek is the editor of the *Homeland Security & Resilience Monitor* at the Royal United Services Institute in London, and has just returned from his most recent trip to Iran.

"SKINHEAD" MOVEMENT IN RUSSIA'S CITIES: PERSPECTIVE FROM TAJIKISTAN

Every day hundreds of Tajiks leave for Russia to earn a living. Trains from Dushanbe to Astrakhan run every week and flights from various Tajik cities to Moscow fly every day. The post-civil war Tajik economy is deeply dependent on Russia in many ways. Not only does Tajikistan have a huge external debt, but border and military controls are in Moscow's hands. Moreover, according to expert estimates, the annual remittance of Tajik migrants working in Russia comprises around US\$300 million – an amount equal to Tajikistan's GDP. Virtually every family in Tajikistan, especially in rural areas, is dependent on monetary transfers from relatives working in Russia. But life and work in the country of hopes is not easy. For a Tajik citizen, living in Russia is often full of challenges coming from local law-enforcement agencies unable to protect them by means of legal registration, and illegal neo-fascists formations threatening their personal safety with nationalistic hatred.

Russia does not welcome labor migrants from former Soviet states with open arms. Not only is Russia's economic situation occupied with a multitude of problems of its own, but the attitude of the local population towards labor migrants creates infinite difficulties for them to secure living. The personal safety of migrants is hardly protected due to the lack of proper legislation that would set procedures of authorized registration for Tajik citizens. Every year, the number of deported, imprisoned and murdered Tajiks increases. In 2003, according to various sources, more than 600 died at the hands of criminals. Aggressions carried out by "Skinhead" movements is a frequent phenomenon.

The case of nine-year old Khursheda cruelly killed by a group of teenagers in St. Petersburg on February 9, 2004, aggravated anxiety among Tajiks at home and abroad about their fellow citizens. Tajik newspapers reported – in minute detail – the tragedy of a small girl who was beaten to death by a group of ten teenagers. Kursheda and two other family members were coming back home when they were surrounded and attacked by members of a neo-fascist movement. Her death has been a symbolic and, at the same time, awakening incident, which reminded the local public of the danger coming from criminal groups in Russia. Numerous letters from various parts of Tajikistan were sent to the Russian Ambassador to Tajikistan, with appeals to find ways to enhance the safety of migrants.

"Skinheads", or "Britogolovye", is another name for such movements, representing extreme violent forms of xenophobia. Foreigners, especially of non-European races, are threatened on the streets of Russia's large cities. In St. Petersburg alone, twenty-two thousand young people between 16-22 years of age are members of informal groups propagating racist and nazi ideas. "We know that it is better to keep away when we see drunk teenagers dressed in short leather jackets and with bald heads", says Tolip, a seasonal worker, who is about to head towards Astrakhan from Dushanbe's train station. "But there is no other way out, I need to feed my family and there is no work at home", replies another migrant.

90% of Tajiks working in Russia do not speak Russian. Tajik and other migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus usually carry

out the hardest work for the lowest payment. They comprise the cheapest labor market throughout southwestern territory of Russia. While leaving to Russia, many are not aware of possible threats from illegal groups of aggressive youngsters, nor are they informed about migrants' legal rights.

"I have been living in Moscow for four years, but never visited the Red Square and the famous monument of a Tajik woman. Every walk in the city will cost me a hundred rubles in bribes to the police who check my registration documents", says twenty-year old Muzaffar. Migrants encounter problems in legalizing of their stay in Russia, and only very few receive official registration. The Open Society Institute published a booklet with a list and explanation of migrants' legal rights in Russia. The booklet is aimed at increasing legal awareness among migrants, and is distributed in trains, airports and in special kiosks in Dushanbe.

Although neo-fascist criminal formations are largely condemned in Russia and Kursheda's death was not left out of public attention, legislation that could protect Tajik migrants' safety remains underdeveloped for several years. Tajik experts from the governmental and NGO sectors see this problem as embedded in the deeper issue of Russia's military presence in the country. Political, military and economic dependence on Russia does not allow the local people to set forward their own interests in bilateral relations with the region's superpower.

Erica Marat

NEWS BITES

KAZAKHSTAN AND INTERNATIONAL OIL GIANTS SIGN AGREEMENT ON KASHAGAN FIELD

25 February

Kazakhstan's state oil-and-gas company KazMunaiGaz signed an agreement in Astana on 25 February with the members of the international consortium that is developing northwest Kazakhstan's Kashagan oil field. The field was scheduled to start producing in 2005, but the consortium will be unable to meet the deadline. Kazakh Prime Minister Akhmetov told journalists on 25 February that according to the revised schedule, oil will start flowing from Kashagan in 2007 or 2008. It is estimated that the field will produce 56 million tons of oil per year by 2015. It has 4.8 billion tons of proven reserves, making it one of the largest oilfields in the world. The development consortium is led by Italy's AGIP, and includes British Gas, ExxonMobil, Shell, Total, ConocoPhillips, and Inpeks. (RIA-Novosti)

RUSSIA DENOUNCES QATAR'S ARREST OF INTELLIGENCE ANALYSTS

26 February

Acting Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov has denounced as a "provocation" the arrest in Qatar of three Russian special-services employees accused of involvement in the 13 February car bombing that killed former Chechen acting President Zelimkhan Yandarbiev. Qatar's Interior Ministry announced on 25 February that two of the three suspects detained for questioning since 19 February have been charged with murder, but he did not identify them. "Our country has nothing to do with the indicated incident," Ivanov said in a statement posted on the Foreign Ministry's website. "Therefore the attempts by the Qatari authorities to shift responsibility for the attack on Yandarbiev to the Russian citizens they arrested is without any foundation. They were not in any way involved in the incident. The Qatari authorities' insinuations cannot be seen as anything other than a provocation." The statement demanded that Qatar "immediately free the illegally detained Russian citizens and allow them to return to their homeland unimpeded." (newsru.com)

ARMENIAN STUDENTS WALK OUT OF MEETING WITH DEFENSE MINISTER

26 February

Students walked out of a 25 February meeting at Yerevan State University with Defense Minister Serzh Sarkisian to protest his refusal to amend proposed legislation that would abolish the possibility for graduate students to postpone their compulsory military service until after they have completed their course of study, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported.

Students launched a boycott of classes last week to protest the proposed changes. Sarkisian, however, dismissed arguments against abolishing the existing exemptions and deferments as "just a pretext to dodge the draft." While the rationale officially cited for abolishing deferments is to target corruption within the higher-education system, observers point out that demographic constraints -- the need to maintain the numerical strength of the armed forces despite the dwindling pool of eligible draftees -- are also a factor behind the proposed legislation. (RFE/RL)

IRANIAN INTELLIGENCE HEAD MEETS WITH ARMENIAN OFFICIALS

26 February

Visiting Yerevan on 23-25 February, Iranian Intelligence and Security Minister Ali Yunesi met with Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian, Prime Minister Andranik Markarian, and President Robert Kocharian, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau and Armenian media reported. Topics discussed included bilateral relations; regional conflicts, including the Karabakh conflict; and expanding economic cooperation. Armenian statements issued following Yunesi's talks with Oskanian and Markarian stressed the need to move ahead on construction of the planned pipeline to export Iranian natural gas to Armenia. Official communiques failed to say whether a date was discussed for Iranian President Mohammad Khatami's planned visit to Armenia, which was originally scheduled for late 2003. (RFE/RL)

ADJAR OFFICIALS ANTICIPATE GEORGIAN AGGRESSION

26 February

Adjar Supreme Council Chairman Aslan Abashidze said in Batumi on 25 February that the central Georgian government is planning "armed aggression" against his autonomous republic. Abashidze claimed that 500 Georgian service personnel who graduated from the U.S.-funded Train and Equip Program are on standby to be deployed to Adjara, together with nine tanks and 23 armored personnel carriers. Adjara's permanent representative in Tbilisi, Hamlet Chipashvili, said on 25 February that sending troops to Adjara would be "a great mistake." Caucasus Press reported. Chipashvili said the tensions between Abashidze and the central government must be resolved peacefully. Georgian National Security Council Secretary Vano Merabishvili denied that troops will be sent to Adjara, while Deputy State Security Minister Amiran Meskheli told the independent television station Rustavi-2 that while no such deployment is planned at present, "we can send troops to any part of the country if necessary." (Caucasus Press)

U.S. CRITICIZES RUSSIA ON HUMAN RIGHTS**26 February**

The U.S. administration has sharply criticized several countries for human rights violations. Among the countries mentioned in a report on human rights violations released by the U.S. State Department on Wednesday are China, Cuba, and Russia. Konstantin Kosachyov, chairman of the Russian State Duma committee on international affairs, believes this sharp criticism of Russia will not affect bilateral relations. "The complaints made are not new, but I think it is not very appropriate for the Americans to take such mentor positions, especially considering the international community's criticism of the U.S. policy on Iraq and the Guantanamo base in Cuba," he said. At the same time, Kosachyov expressed confidence that the conclusions stated in the State Department's report will not lead to any practical actions by the U.S. "We have conducted and will continue to conduct a dialogue with the Americans, and I am confident that the real development of events in our country will prove to them in the nearest future that the critical conclusions made in the State Department's report are ungrounded," he said. (Interfax)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT ACCUSES ABKHAZ OF ETHNIC CLEANSING**27 February**

Addressing the UN Security Council on 26 February, President Mikheil Saakashvili accused the authorities of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia of pursuing a policy of deliberate ethnic cleansing. RFE/RL's UN correspondent reported. Saakashvili alleged that "we are talking about a situation in which just being ethnically Georgian automatically means being killed if you enter that territory." Members of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia say, however, that thousands of ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia's southernmost Gali Raion during the 1992-93 war have returned and live permanently or semi-permanently in their old homes. The International Criminal Court in The Hague last year rejected a demand by the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz government in exile to bring formal charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing against the Abkhaz authorities. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIAN LAWYERS FLY TO QATAR TO DEFEND DETAINEES**29 February**

Russian lawyers flew to Doha, the capital of Qatar, on Sunday, to provide legal defense to two Russian citizens arrested on suspicion of killing Chechen separatist leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, a Russian diplomat told Interfax from Doha. On Saturday, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov said that Russian lawyers would work in Doha "to defend the rights of the detained Russian citizens, are seriously preparing for their defense." Three Russians attached to the embassy in Qatar were arrested in Doha early on February 19, "with the use of weapons and force." One of them, a holder of a diplomatic passport, was later freed as

a result of efforts by the Russian Foreign Ministry. Yandarbiyev was killed in a car bombing in Qatar on February 13. (Interfax)

PUTIN WINS RUSSIA'S FIRST CELL-PHONE STRAW POLL**1 March**

The Russian Foundation for Free Elections held a straw poll on 29 February in which mobile phone users could express their preference in the upcoming presidential election. President Putin carried the day with the backing of nearly 64 percent of the more than 108,000 mobile-phone users who took part in the straw poll. Irina Khakamada finished second with some 18 percent, followed by Sergei Glazev with 5 percent. Communist candidate Nikolai Kharitonov received 1.8 percent, and the other three candidates -- Ivan Rybkin, Sergei Mironov, and Oleg Malyshkin -- each received less than 1 percent. (RIA-Novosti)

KHAKAMADA WINS A COURT VICTORY**1 March**

The Supreme Court ruled on 1 March that the Central Election Commission (TsIK) should reconsider a complaint filed by presidential candidate Irina Khakamada regarding federal television stations' live broadcast of a 12 February speech by President Putin to his campaign workers. Khakamada's lawyer, Daniil Katkov, said his client is seeking recognition that the broadcasts violated election law. TsIK Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov on 13 February acknowledged that "certain state television channels slightly overdid it" with their coverage of Putin's speech. (ITAR-TASS)

FSB ARRESTS QATARI CITIZENS IN APPARENT TIT-FOR-TAT**1 March**

The Federal Security Service (FSB) arrested two citizens of Qatar on 28 February, just days after Qatari authorities charged two detained Russian special-services employees with the 13 February murder of former acting Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Russian media reported. "Izvestiya," citing the Qatar News Agency, reported on 29 February that the two detained Qataris are members of Qatar's national judo team who had flown from Minsk to Moscow en route to Belgrade to participate in a qualifying tournament for the 2004 Athens Olympics. The two were arrested at a Moscow airport. Interfax on 28 February cited an "an informed source in Arab diplomatic circles in Moscow" as saying the two men have been charged with "offenses related to the activity of illegal armed groups on the territory of Russia." Qatar's "Al-Sharq" newspaper called the arrests "piracy and kidnapping," while another Qatar daily, "Al-Rayah," accused the Russian government of "acting like mafia." Al-Jazeera television reported on 1 March that the Qatari and Russian authorities will release each other's nationals shortly. (RFE/RL)

CHECHEN GROUP CLAIMS RESPONSIBILITY FOR MOSCOW METRO BOMBING

1 March

A group calling itself Gazoton Murdash has sent three e-mail messages to the Chechen website kavkazcenter.com claiming responsibility for the 6 February suicide bombing in the Moscow subway that killed at least 40 people. The signatory to the e-mails said the bombing was carried out in retaliation for the execution by Russian forces of dozens of Chechen civilians in an operation in the Grozny suburb of Aldy four years earlier. An investigation at the time concluded that Russian forces were not responsible for those killings.

(Reuters)

TBILISI, BATUMI RELEASE DETAINED GEORGIAN STUDENTS

1 March

Two students from Batumi who were detained in Tbilisi last week on suspicion of illegal possession of weapons were released on 27 February. They were then temporarily detained at the Tbilisi airport the same day, having given a pledge not to leave Tbilisi. However, following the intervention of Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, they were permitted to fly home to Batumi, where they were given a heroes' welcome. In what Adjar Supreme Council Chairman Aslan Abashidze likened to "an exchange of wartime hostages," the Adjar authorities released on 28 February two members of the Georgian student movement Kmara! (Enough!), who were arrested in Batumi on 6 January (RFE/RL).

DESPITE YUKOS SCANDAL, IT WAS A GOOD YEAR FOR RUSSIAN BILLIONAIRES

2 March

"Forbes" magazine this month released its annual list of the world's billionaires, with Russia's representation increasing from 17 in 2003 to 25 this year. Jailed former Yukos CEO Khodorkovskii remains the richest person in Russia, at No. 16 on the "Forbes" list with an estimated worth of \$15 billion. Fellow Yukos shareholders Leonid Nevzlin, Mikhail Brudno, Vladimir Dubov, Platon Lebedev, and Vasilii Shakhnovskii -- all of whom have faced criminal fraud or tax-evasion charges since July -- also made the 2004 list. Leading Sibneft shareholder Abramovich ranked No. 25, followed by Alfa-Group head Mikhail Fridman (73), Interros head Vladimir Potanin (85), and Norilsk Nickel General Director Mikhail Prokhorov (90). Moscow has more billionaires than any city in the world with 23, except for New York (31). "Forbes Russia" Editor Paul Klebnikov told "The Moscow Times" that because Russian company shares continue to be "massively undervalued," the number of Russian billionaires will likely continue to rise. (RFE/RL)

PRIME MINISTER-DESIGNATE -- TECHNOCRAT, ECONOMIST

2 March

Media and analysts were caught short by President Vladimir Putin's surprise 1 March nomination of Russian envoy to the

EU Mikhail Fradkov as the next prime minister, Russian media reported on 2 March. In the flurry of press reports about Fradkov following Putin's announcement, the term "technocrat" was often used. Writing on politcom.ru, Center for Political Technologies Deputy Director Aleksei Makarkin suggested that one of the reasons Putin picked a "technocrat" was that the president is not interested in creating a "diarchy or making the prime minister a co-ruler." Fradkov, according to Makarkin, cannot be considered a possible successor to Putin. He also can serve the function of "accepting responsibility for a series of unpopular reforms," Makarkin wrote. Ekspertiz foundation head Mark Urnov predicted that Fradkov will serve only the first half of Putin's second term, assuming -- as widely expected -- that Putin wins the 14 March presidential election. After that, "it will be necessary to declare a successor," Urnov said. (RFE/RL)

U.S. PROBE AL-QAEDA TIES OF RUSSIAN IN GUANTANAMO

2 March

The extradition decision on the eighth Russian held at the U.S. Guantanamo naval base will be made after an investigation by the country's special services. "The American side has offered the explanation that the suspected ties of this person with international terrorists are being investigated," Deputy Prosecutor General Sergei Fridinsky told Interfax on Tuesday. He quoted the U.S. as saying that the eighth Russian national was seized in Afghanistan together with al-Qaeda fighters. Seven of eight Russians fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan were extradited to Russia last weekend. Fridinsky said the seven former Guantanamo inmates have been taken to different detention facilities in Stavropol territory. "They are being charged, under three articles of the Russian Criminal Code, with illegal border crossing, acting as mercenaries and participating in a criminal community. However, the charges may be changed after the completion of the investigation," he said. Officials from the Prosecutor General's Office visited Guantanamo at the beginning of 2002, and identified the Russian nationals held there. Official requests for their extradition were later filed. One more official traveled to the base this year. The names of the Russian Guantanamo inmates are Shamil Khazhiyev and Ravil Gumarov from Bashkortostan, Rasul Kudayev and Ruslan Odigov from Kabardino-Balkaria, Ravil Mingazov and Airat Vakhitov from Tatarstan, Rustam Akhmerov from Chelyabinsk and Timur Ishmuradov from Tyumen region. The Prosecutor General's Office says that all of them were recruited by radical Islamic organizations and taken to Afghanistan, where they fought for the Taliban. (Interfax)

RUSSIA CONFIRMS DEAD CHECHEN WAS TOP COMMANDER

2 March

Russia said Tuesday it was certain it had killed Ruslan Gelayev, a top Chechen rebel commander and one of Moscow's most wanted men. Russia's NTV television showed

a bearded corpse lying almost fully covered by a black plastic sheet on a metal table, as medical and military officers looked on. "We can say today with certainty that this is Gelayev's corpse. There is a wound on the leg that we knew about," said Sergei Ignatchenko, the main spokesman for the FSB, a successor agency to the Soviet KGB security force. "He also had with him his dagger, which we know he would never leave behind," he told Russian television channels. There was no confirmation or denial of the death from separatist news sources. Kommersant newspaper reported he was killed by border guards who recognized him as he was visiting his home village. The timing of its announcement will reinforce the certain re-election chances on March 14 of President Vladimir Putin who came to power four years after talking tough on Chechnya. Gelayev led the mainly Muslim Chechen forces to some of their most spectacular victories as they fought to drive Russian troops out of their tiny mountainous homeland -- a goal they achieved in 1996. Gelayev briefly served as deputy prime minister of the de facto independent state. Gelayev, also known by the name Khamzat, led a series of raids into areas bordering Chechnya, including an attack on Dagestan late last year that killed around a dozen border guards before the separatists melted away. Salambek Maigov, previously the separatist envoy to Moscow, said Gelayev would be mourned in Chechnya. "He saw this war as a war against the Chechen people. Because of this he had great respect among Chechens," he told Ekho Moskvyy radio. (Reuters)

GEORGIAN PEACEKEEPERS' DEPARTURE FOR IRAQ AGAIN DELAYED

2 March

A contingent of 74 Georgian service personnel -- engineers, sappers, and medical personnel -- flew home to Tbilisi on 2 March after a six-month tour of duty with the international stabilization force in Iraq, Georgian media reported. But a further 217 Georgian service personnel who were supposed to replace them in Tikrit are unable to leave Georgia because of a lack of forms to apply for identification documents, Chief of the General Staff Major General Givi Iukuridze told Caucasus Press on 2 March. Iukuridze said no new date for the peacekeepers' deployment to Iraq has been set. The troops were originally scheduled to leave for Iraq last month, but unnamed Defense Ministry officials said the departure was delayed because the United States had not made transport aircraft available. (Caucasus Press)

FIVE RUSSIAN SOLDIERS KILLED IN CHECHNYA

3 March

Rebel attacks and land mines killed five Russian soldiers in Chechnya over the previous day, an official in the Moscow-backed Chechen administration said Wednesday. Three of the Russian soldiers were killed and another five were wounded as federal outposts came under rebels' fire 20 times, the official said on condition of anonymity. Two others were killed and one wounded in two separate land mine

explosions, he said. On Wednesday, the top federal military commander in Chechnya said up to 80 guerrilla units are still operating in Chechnya, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported. Col-Gen. Valery Baranov also warned of possible attacks on polling stations before or during the presidential elections on March 14, the agency said. In political developments, Chechnya's Kremlin-backed leader Akhmad Kadyrov announced that Chechen Prime Minister Anatoly Popov would be replaced, news agencies reported. Popov was medically evacuated five months ago after what some claim was an attempt to poison him. He has not returned to Chechnya. Russia's first, 20-month war with Chechen separatists ended in the troops' withdrawal in 1996, leaving Chechnya de-facto independent and largely lawless. The Kremlin sent troops back into Chechnya in September 1999, after Chechnya-based fighters made incursions into neighboring Dagestan and after some 300 people died in apartment bombings blamed by officials on the insurgents. (AP)

RUSSIAN OFFICIAL SAYS TAJIK BASE TALKS DEADLOCKED

4 March

A highly placed official in the Russian Defense Ministry said talks with Tajikistan on the transformation of Russia's 201st Motorized Infantry Division into a military base are "deadlocked." According to the source, Tajikistan wants Russia to forgive \$300 million in Tajik sovereign debt to Russia and to pay \$50 million for the use of a military communications facility in Nurek. "The Tajik authorities have gone so far as to consider their own property all of the Russian weapons, equipment, and infrastructure facilities located in the republic," the Russian Defense Ministry source told the news agency. Russia's 201st Division has been deployed outside of Dushanbe for many years, and Russia would like to transform it into a permanent military base. (ITAR-TASS)

RUSSIA'S TOP COP ADMITS COUNTRY HAS SKINHEAD PROBLEM

4 March

For the first time, a senior federal-level official has admitted the existence of "right-wing, extremist, fascist youth groups" in Russia, "Izvestiya" reported on 3 March. According to the daily, acting Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev told a meeting of top law enforcement officials on 2 March that Russia "is threatened by extreme manifestations of extremism in the youth sphere." According to the daily, federal officials have not previously acknowledged the existence of the fascist youth movement, devotees of "white power" or skinheads. Incidents that appeared to be racially motivated are normally attributed to soccer fans or hooligans. "Nezavisimaya gazeta" on 3 March commented that in the recent past, high-level officials have openly stated that there are no skinheads in Moscow or anywhere else. Nurgaliev called on his ministry and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to weaken the groups by "neutralizing" their leaders. (RFE/RL)

POLICE CONDUCT SWEEP OF MOSCOW MOSQUES

4 March

Nafigulla Ashirov, co-chairman of the Russian Council of Muftis, told Ekho Moskvyy on 3 March that Moscow police have been conducting passport checks of worshipers at two mosques in Moscow since 27 February. Since that time, about 80 people have been taken away from one of these mosques, Ashirov said. He complained that the checks and detentions occurred on the main Muslim holy day of the week, Friday, and that the police officers have behaved "rudely and unprofessionally." He concluded that such activities are discrediting law enforcement organs in the eyes of the Muslim community. Deputy Interior Minister Sergei Shchadrin told the station that he has no information about such checks, although the police have the right to conduct such operations. Grani.ru quoted an unnamed representative from the organized-crime department of the Moscow police as saying that the detentions were made in the context of the antiterrorism effort Operation Whirlwind. (RFE/RL)

43 ABDUCTED IN CHECHNYA IN 2004 - HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

4 March

Forty-three citizens were kidnapped in Chechnya in 2004, Executive Director of the Memorial human rights center Tatiana Kasatkina told Interfax on Thursday. "As far as we know, 37 people went missing in January, five in February and one in March," she said, adding that this information is incomplete. The number of abductions could increase in February, Kasatkina said. "Seventeen of the 37 Chechen residents abducted this January were released or ransomed, two were found dead and there is no information on the other 18," she said. Memorial monitors abductions on 25-30% of the territory in Chechnya, she added. "We estimate the total rate of crimes against civilians in the Chechen Republic as approximately three to four times higher than the data we have," Kasatkina said. Human rights activists believe that law-enforcement departments and rebel units are responsible for the abductions in Chechnya. "Both of them are behind the abductions. There are cases of abductions by rebels, but the federal troops or law-enforcement agencies subordinated to [Chechen President Akhmad] Kadyrov are behind this in the absolute majority of cases," Memorial head Oleg Orlov said earlier. (Interfax)

GEORGIA AND AZERBAIJAN BUILD ON PIPELINE TIES WITH SAKASHVILI VISIT

4 March

Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili met with his Azeri counterpart Ilham Aliyev during a visit designed to reinforce friendly ties between the two neighbours and partners in a strategic oil pipeline project. Good relations between the two nations are seen as crucial to the multi-billion-dollar (euro) Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which will export crude from the landlocked Caspian Sea, across Azerbaijan, Georgia

and Turkey, to world markets. It was the first time the leaders of the two former Soviet republics in the Caucasus had met. Both men came to power within the past six months, Saakashvili in a bloodless revolt and Aliyev when he succeeded his father as president. The BTC pipeline, currently under construction, will pump up to one million barrels of oil a day from a terminal at Sangachal, 30 kilometres (18 miles) south of Baku, to a tanker terminal on the Mediterranean Sea. It is being built by a consortium of multinational oil companies, with backing from the US government, and the bill for construction will come in at around three billion dollars (2.4 billion euros). The pipeline, due to start pumping oil in the first quarter of 2005, is seen as key to harvesting the oil riches of the Caspian Sea, home to some of the world's largest untapped hydrocarbon reserves. Saakashvili re-stated his commitment to the project, which will provide much-needed transit revenues for his country, saying that "for Georgia, the pipeline is a question of survival." Away from energy projects, Saakashvili floated the idea of an economic and customs union between Azerbaijan and Georgia which, he said, would help lift the two countries out of poverty. (AFP)

12 JAILED FOR POSTELECTION CLASHES IN AZERBAIJAN

5 March

In five separate court cases that ended on 4 and 5 March, 12 people have been sentenced to prison terms of three to six years for their alleged participation in the clashes in Baku between police and opposition supporters in the wake of the disputed 15 October presidential election. A further 26 defendants received suspended sentences. In a statement released on 5 March, the opposition Musavat Party condemned the sentences as based on fabricated charges substantiated by false testimony and false witnesses. The statement said judges ignored all evidence produced by the defense. (Turan)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT INTENDS TO TAKE CONTROL OF AJARIA

5 March

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, after returning to Tbilisi from Baku on Friday, commented on Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze's statement about the Georgian authorities' intention to take total control of Ajaria. "I declare that I do want to take control of Ajaria, and I will take it," Saakashvili said. "Enough with disorder and lawlessness; I am not [former president] Shevardnadze, and I do not intend to break up Georgia," Saakashvili said. "The old song that the Georgian president's intention to restore order is criminal won't do anymore," the president said. (Interfax)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT ENDS OFFICIAL VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA

6 March

Nursultan Nazarbaev returned to Kazakhstan on 6 March, ending an official visit to Saudi Arabia that began on 2 March,

Khabar Television reported on 6 March. Summing up his visit, Nazarbaev stressed the possibility of future bilateral energy-sector cooperation. "Today there exists a tremendous potential for bringing in specialists from Saudi Arabia's oil industry, and especially SABIC [Saudi Basic Industrial Corp.], which produces oil and gas equipment, builds petrochemical plants, and makes petrochemical products." Nazarbaev invited Saudi Arabia's king and crown prince to visit Kazakhstan, an offer Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah accepted. In addition to meeting with Crown Prince Abdullah, Nazarbaev held talks with ministers and visited the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where he performed the Umra, or lesser pilgrimage. (RIA-Novosti)

A SENIOR AID WORKER HAS BEEN SHOT DEAD IN AFGHANISTAN

7 March

Armed men on a motorcycle killed Mohammed Isha, director of the Afghan Red Crescent in the southern province of Zabul, on Saturday. Eight suspects have been arrested in connection with the killing, security officials said on Sunday. It is the latest attack on civilians involved in reconstruction or relief in Afghanistan - five aid workers have died in the past three weeks. Humanitarian agencies fear the upsurge signals a new campaign of violence against them orchestrated by Islamic militants. Mr Isha was shot dead as he travelled home from work in Qalat, the provincial capital of Zabul. Armed assailants on motorbikes forced his vehicle to stop, then opened fire, according to officials. (BBC)

US CONDEMNED FOR AFGHAN 'ABUSES'

8 March

The actions of US military and intelligence units in Afghanistan have been heavily criticised in a new report by an international human rights group. US-based Human Rights Watch accuses US personnel of using excessive force, carrying out arbitrary detentions and mistreating people in custody. Washington keeps about 9,000 troops on Afghan soil, involved primarily in fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda. But the human rights body says many US actions violate international law. The report is damning. Entitled Enduring Freedom - Abuses by US Forces in Afghanistan, it focuses on

the American system of detaining people at bases across the country, which it describes as "almost entirely outside the rule of law". According to Human Rights Watch, at least 1,000 Afghans and other nationals have been taken into custody since 2002. These arrests have often been accompanied by excessive or indiscriminate force, it says, leading to death and injury to innocent civilians. Helicopter gunships have been used to fire on residential areas, when US troops were facing no opposition. Once in custody in places like Bagram airbase north of Kabul, mistreatment is common, the human rights group says - detainees are frequently subjected to sleep deprivation, extremes of temperature and in some cases beatings. Two people have died in US detention in Afghanistan, and both cases have been ruled as homicide. Human Rights Watch says these incidents have still not been adequately explained by the Pentagon. The report's writer fears "appropriate criminal and disciplinary action may never take place". (BBC)

PUTIN ANNOUNCED APPOINTMENTS TO NEW CABINET

9 March

President Vladimir Putin has announced key appointments in the new Cabinet of Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov. At a meeting with the leaders of the Kremlin administration and several acting Cabinet members, he announced that Alexander Zhukov was appointed deputy prime minister, Sergei Lavrov foreign minister, Sergei Ivanov defense minister, Alexei Kudrin finance minister, Rashid Nurgaliyev interior minister, Sergei Shoigu emergency situations minister, German Gref economics and trade minister, Alexei Gordeyev agriculture and fisheries minister, Viktor Khristenko industry and energy minister, Mikhail Zurabov health and social development minister, Andrei Fursenko education and science minister, Alexander Sokolov culture and information minister, Yury Trutnev natural resources minister, Yury Chaika justice minister and Igor Levitin transport and communications minister. Dmitri Kozak was appointed chief of the government staff in the rank of minister and Igor Ivanov was appointed Security Council secretary. The new government will comprise 17 instead of 30 ministries. (Interfax)