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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

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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: Ideal length between 1000 and 1200 words.

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

BACKGROUND: 300-400 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: 300-400 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.

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Svante E. Cornell

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KYRGYZSTAN'S REVOLUTION: WHAT WENT WRONG?

Rafis Abazov

On October 20, Kyrgyz member of parliament Tynchbek Akmatbayev was assassinated in Bishkek. Just weeks earlier, his colleague Bayaman Erkinbayev met the same fate. Supporters of ex-General Prosecutor Azimbek Beknazarov organized mass rallies protesting against his dismissal. Seven hundred protesters seized plots of public land in the outskirts of capital Bishkek. These news hardly indicate that Kyrgyzstan is on a firm track toward political stabilization. These developments do not fit well with the ideals of the March 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan. The political arena in the republic is fragmented as never before, and there are no political parties ready to step in to stabilize the political process. The question that arises now is: what went wrong with the revolution?

BACKGROUND: It is not the first time that Kyrgyzstan experiences a period of serious political turmoil. Back in 1990-1991, the country was on a brink of political collapse and uncertainty. There were even fears that the inter-ethnic and political conflicts that started in the southern Osh region in the Summer of 1990 would escalate into civil war. Then as now, national political leaders showed their inability to face the challenge of the country's economic and social problems, while paying lip service to the democratization process. The political agenda was increasingly dominated by a rivalry between two major regional groupings, the so-called southern and northern clans. The situation worsened further when the country's leaders badly mismanaged the situation in Osh, leading to numerous human casualties. Complete anarchy reigned and mobs ruled the streets of cities and towns in the South.

This was the situation when several political parties and organizations stepped in. They were weak and disorganized, and ridden by deep-seated regional divides. Absamat Masaliyev, the communist ruler, exploited the rivalries between them to weaken the opposition further. Nevertheless, the opposition leaders were able to overcome their differences. In 1990 they established the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan (DMK), uniting several political groups and parties. The DMK came up with a viable political program, and set up convincing and realistic goals that attracted many people to its ranks. Ultimately, the political

arena was transformed from chaotic to orderly. Many political, social and community groups found their place in this process, and restored their trust in an orderly political process. The DMK facilitated the defeat of comrade Masaliyev and the election of Askar Akayev as the first president of the country.

However, President Akayev was never comfortable with the presence of the opposition. Akayev chose to weaken the very same political parties and groups that brought him to the power. Instead of supporting the emerging multiparty and pluralistic political system in Kyrgyzstan, he turned back to the practices of his predecessor, engaging in behind-the-scene bargaining with regional clans. President Akayev neither established his own party, nor did he associate himself with any. Akayev co-opted conformists into the government, but severely punished those who disagreed with him. Many political parties were intimidated and reduced to irrelevance by a never-ending chain of political and legal manipulations and intimidations.

To be fair, the opposition parties were not free of mistakes. They had great difficulties in establishing cohesive political platforms, had no organizational strategies, and rarely put their feet outside the major metropolitan areas. They also failed to recruit and promote young people into their ranks. This limited political participation to relatively small groups of comrades in their forties and fifties. This practice

excluded a large segment of the society, the youth, from the political process, especially in rural areas.

Political life at the *raion* (district) and *oblast* (province) level became increasingly dominated by the so-called *New Kyrgyz* – a symbiosis of local government officials and business people. In this environment, a new class of politicians gradually emerged: those who preferred to rely on the patronage and clan networks of kinship groups. Political competition in the country degenerated into a competition between individuals, not between political ideas. This led to what could be termed a tribalization of Kyrgyzstan's political process. Many politicians began to believe that political parties could not be a vehicle of political success in this highly fragmented society. This was especially true in the rural areas, home to two thirds of the population. Local politicians began organizing paramilitary or militia-style groups of supporters for radical actions, such as mass demonstrations and the seizure of public or government buildings. This proved to be especially effective in remote constituencies, as the government often listened only to politicians who organized private militias. This process gained strength in the South in the early 2000s, and gathered steam after the shootings of civilians in the Aksy district in 2003. Private militias, sometimes with links to the organized criminal underworld, had by early 2005 appeared in all provinces of the country, and consisted mainly of people who were largely excluded from the political process – rural youth in their twenties and thirties. For young villagers, it was the only way to end the vicious circle of political and social marginalization.

The situation was so tense, and the political environment so chaotic and uncontrollable, that even a small incident could ignite mass disturbances and riots. The political and regional confrontation and public anger over manipulation and fraud during the parliamentary election campaign in late 2004 and early 2005 proved to be the catalyzer that brought chaos to many areas in the country, in turn sparking off the March 2005 Revolution.

IMPLICATIONS: The absence of strong political institutions in Kyrgyzstan significantly undermined the political stability in the country and led to the tribalization of the political process. This became

particularly obvious in a time of social unrest and instability, with at least five implications. First, after a decade of political reforms and manipulations, Kyrgyzstan's political environment degraded into a 'grab-all' political system. Both sides – the government and the opposition – showed little respect for the rule of law or political norms. All sides strongly believed that they could and should manipulate the political system for their short term gains. Second, the opposition parties proved to be weak and ineffective. This is hardly a new phenomenon in the post-communist world, but what makes Kyrgyzstan different is that instead of strengthening political parties and building political coalitions, politicians turned to establishing and using private paramilitary and militia-style groups, based on tribal and clan loyalties. This further deepened the divide in the country, and undermined perspectives for stabilization. Third, the easiness with which these politicians recruited young supporters into such groups shows that young people are ready to actively participate in the country's politics by all means, and disproves the assertion that they are either passive or indifferent to the political process. Fourth, Kyrgyzstan's political system increasingly resembles those in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other countries with strong tribal traditions, where regional political elites acquire great autonomy and power through the use of tribal networks and patronage rather than through free and open competition on the basis of ideas and political organizations. Fifth, the democratic channels of communication broke down and all political participants relied mainly on the intricate patronage and personal networks that excluded many segments of society from the political process.

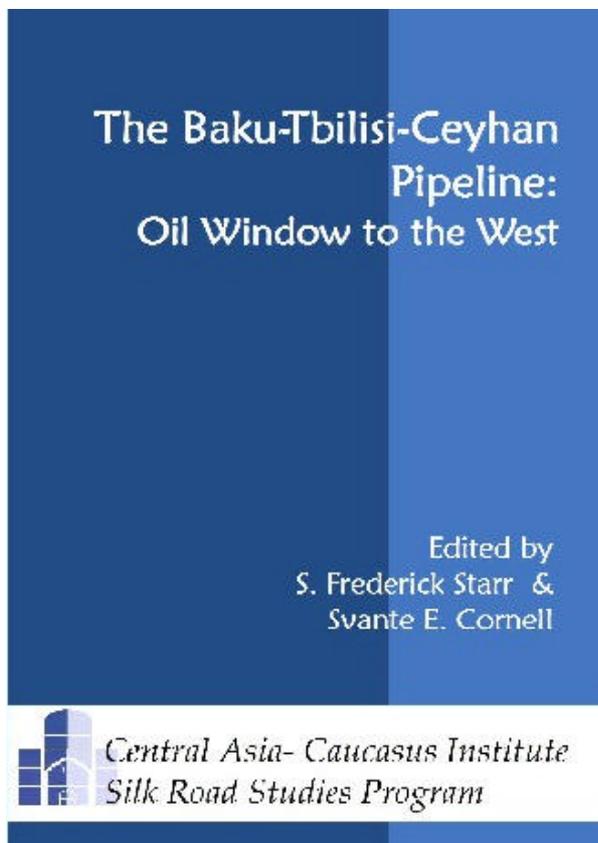
CONCLUSION: The March 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan cannot and will not resolve the existing problems. Society remains extremely fragmented; the political discord between the southern and northern clans runs even deeper. At the local level, the political process is being monopolized by local political leaders who frequently rely on and enforce their political demands through paramilitary groups. In order to break the vicious circle of instability and chaos, the leadership and all political forces face the task of

strengthening political institutions and reinforcing a competitive political process that is based on the participation of and competition between strong political parties, but not paramilitary groups or individual ambitious politicians.

Unfortunately there are no simple and straightforward formulas or strategies, but several conclusions can be drawn from the past. Kyrgyzstan's experience indicates that the so-called super-presidential system, which in one way or another was established in many CIS areas, tends to achieve a short term goals at the expense of long term stability and even aggravates the instability in time of power transition. Delegating more power from the presidential office to the parliament and strengthen its role in the policy-making process is one option that is currently discussed in order to achieve sustainable stability in the country. Second, the electoral system of single-member majoritarian districts for parliamentary elections has contributed to fragmentation and prevented attempts to involve major competing clans and fractions in society into the party-

based political process. Reinstating the party-list proportional elections in the parliamentary elections is one option to address this issue. Third, the present parliament shows clear tendencies of turning into the arena for regional, clan and individual completion. This can only be mitigated by enticing MPs to work intensively with political parties and ideally recruiting them into their ranks, pushing parliament members to begin competing and bargaining according to political programs and party platforms. Fourth, a main destabilizing element of Kyrgyzstan's politics so far is its failure to involve youth – something that needs acute attention of the political leadership, in order to convince people that an orderly political process, not sticks and rocks, will promote the resolution of their problems.

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PRESIDENT ALIYEV'S SHAKEUP: A CHANGING PORTRAIT

Alman Mir Ismail

President Ilham Aliyev's recent dismissals of several high-ranking ministers changed his political image. If before, Aliyev was regarded as a soft politician unable to get rid of the conservative and powerful "old guard", now he is seen as holding enough power to deal with his opponents even within the ruling party without destabilizing the country. Indeed, Aliyev's recent moves were reminiscent of his father's tactics. Whereas Aliyev prefers the institutional and gradual pace of changes inside the country, his reform agenda does not exclude harsh and determined actions when needed. Looking and acting strong has strengthened President Aliyev's position both among the general public and inside the ruling elite. The stereotype that the government is really run by powerful figures behind the scene has been crushed and the strength of these officials seemed to have been overestimated.

BACKGROUND: When President Ilham Aliyev was elected to the presidency in October 2003, many expected sweeping political and economic reforms and significant cadre changes. After all, President Aliyev was young and had extensive experience working with Western companies as well as democracy building organizations, such as the Council of Europe and OSCE. Yet the slow pace of cadre changes made many both inside and outside Azerbaijan believe that Ilham Aliyev lacked the charisma, power and determination to deal with the "old guard", implying members of the administration that had served under his father and since then grew into corrupt, powerful and well-networked power centers in the country. Among these, the chief ones were Head of Presidential Administration Ramiz Mekhtiyev, Health Minister Ali Insanov, Interior Minister Ramil Usubov, National Security Minister Namik Abbasov, Economics minister Farhad Aliyev, Customs head Kemaleddin Heydarov. Indeed, compared with his father, President Aliyev seemed rather weak. Within the two years of his presidency, he had fired only four ministers (of which only truly influential one, Namik Abbasov) and a dozen local governors.

The recent arrests of high-profile officials in Baku showed another side of President Aliyev. On October 19, the powerful Minister of Economic

Development Farhad Aliyev and his brother Rafiq were arrested in connection with an alleged 'planned coup' against the government. Farhad Aliyev, who is not related to the president, was in control of major monopolies in the country and had an extensive network of business loyalists. The next day, the very powerful minister of health Ali Insanov and a head of department at the President's office Akif Muradverdiyev were also fired and arrested. Both were known to head one of the most powerful groupings within the ruling party the so-called 'Yer-az' grouping of Azerbaijanis originally stemming from present-day Armenia ('Yer' for Yerevan, 'Az' for Azeri).

Insanov was deemed so powerful that he was thought to be untouchable. Local media and analysts have long speculated that President Aliyev cannot stand Insanov due to his independent behavior and lack of respect, but few thought that Insanov would let himself be fired without putting up a real fight. Dozens of local media outlets, political parties, businesses and high-ranking officials were said to have ties to (or be dependent on) Insanov, and his departure will mean a split within the ruling regime – something that President Aliyev was not believed to be ready to risk. It is noteworthy that Insanov's supporters, with the exception of a group of his loyalists that had held a press conference and

demanded his freedom, did not dare to oppose the President's decision and instead organized a briefing in which they condemned Insanov's actions.

To the last weeks' developments should be added the events in March this year, when the President ordered the arrest of several high-ranking officials within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who were accused of having kidnapped and murdered several influential businessmen and politicians in the country throughout the past decade, though sparing a weakened Minister of Interior. Following that, Aliyev also sacked on charges of corruption the influential deputy minister of Justice Aydin Gasimov, who had been in charge of the penitentiary system for nearly a decade and was thought to have ties with the criminal circles. His dismissal, which even resulted in prison riots in Baku, was a very risky action for the President.

IMPLICATIONS: President Aliyev's recent actions significantly increased his credibility among ordinary people, who doubted that he could get rid of corrupt and powerful officials. The majority of the population traditionally looked at Aliyev as a soft and liberal politician, but have now turned to believe that he does possess the necessary determination to fight his opponents in his father's style. In retrospect, President Aliyev's policy in terms of cadre changes shows that in spite of prevailing stereotypes, Aliyev indeed does hold an increasingly firm command over the country and is the principal decision maker in the domestic political process. Arguments on his dependence on – or fear of – the “old guard” have proven to be overestimated, as has the power of oligarchs and influential ministers.

In many ways, the current situation in Azerbaijan is very similar to 1993, when President Heydar Aliyev came to power. At that time, the country's political spectrum was full of independent warlords, each of which had paramilitary groups and used them to fight for power. It was dangerous times for the President, who had to manage these armed groups and their leaders. But within a few years, Heydar Aliyev arrested and crushed all these groups and established his command over the country. In

Georgia, President Eduard Shevardnadze did very much the same in 1994-96.

Today's Azerbaijan is in some sense comparable, because power centers within the ruling regime possess not only large groups of loyalists, but also significant financial resources and, as widely speculated in the local media, armed gangs. To establish a strong, powerful presidency in this situation could be as difficult as it was in 1993. Most of the influential members of the old guard have a deeply entrenched systems of clan and family networks, and the entire governmental apparatus is filled with their loyalists. Sacking or fighting them is a very risky venture for President Aliyev. In spite of this, in the past months Aliyev has taken the risk of making moves that even his father did not dare to do.

CONCLUSIONS: The process of cadre changes in Azerbaijan is likely to take a different pace now. With the President's show of power and the absence of virtually any opposition to his moves on the part of the sacked officials, it is likely that the President's authority and reputation will further increase, depending in great part on the way the parliamentary elections on November 6 are held and the international reaction to it. Powerful oligarchs and ministers are likely to lower their ambitions, as their respect for the young President increases. In this situation, President Aliyev will be in a position to press further with cadre changes and political and economic reforms.

Meanwhile, it is likely that the recent dismissals will cause a long-term fragmentation inside the ruling party and the formation of a new opposition inside the country, financed and supported by the sacked officials. With the total failure of the current political opposition to produce a credible alternative to the ruling regime, the new opposition might spice up the domestic political scene in Azerbaijan.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Alman Mir-Ismael is a freelance journalist based in Baku.

GEORGIA'S SCAPEGOAT: THE OSCE IN SOUTH OSSETIA

Markus Bernath

After another summer of discontent, Georgia is now quickly moving forward to a showdown with South Ossetia, one of its two separatist provinces. Tbilisi is not only aiming at Russia, which installed a de facto protectorate over the province, but also at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. More than ten years of conflict resolution by the OSCE has left the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia very much unresolved. By blaming one of the oldest and biggest field missions of the OSCE, leaders on both sides hope for gains on their respective agenda. While most observers agree the current mechanism is absurd, tensions between the West and Russia within the OSCE make a change for the better unlikely.

BACKGROUND: Georgia's French-born former Foreign minister Salome Zourabishvili, who was forced out recently, put it bluntly: "We cannot believe that this is the organization that can solve our problems", she said after a series of incidents on South Ossetia's "independence day" on September 20, referring to her year-long history of growing frustration with the OSCE. Zourabishvili several times traveled to the OSCE Permanent Council in order to plead for an increase in military observers in South Ossetia, and for the prolongation of the OSCE border observation mission on Georgia's border with Chechnya, Ingushetia and Daghestan. But Russia only conceded to some three more observers and blocked the mission.

The end of the border mission on January 1, 2005, angered Zourabishvili to the extent that she removed Georgia's ambassador to the OSCE, Giorgi Burduli, who proved unable to gather enough support from western states. The OSCE's incapacity to shed light on arms transfers to South Ossetia and to discipline the awkward joint Georgian-Ossetian peacekeeping effort under Russia's guidance exasperated Tbilisi to such an extent that nothing but a complete remake of the peace framework in the separatist province seems acceptable for the government. "The role of the OSCE has been brought to the minimum in South Ossetia", stated even Giorgi Khaindrava, the dovish Minister for Conflict Resolution. In fact, the OSCE's primary task in Georgia is to oversee the implementation of the Sochi Agreement from June 1992 between then-Russian

president Boris Yeltsin and Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze. The Sochi agreement ended the short Georgian-Ossetian war – the latter party supported by the Russian military – and led to the installation of a Joint Control Commission (JCC) with representatives of Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia and the Russian Republic of North Ossetia. Facing a three to one majority in the JCC, Georgia always considered the OSCE as a counterbalance. For the same reason, the current Ossetian government dislikes the OSCE and wants its Head of office in Tskhinvali to be removed.

The mission started with a fault: the OSCE's original mandate was to monitor the entire territory of South Ossetia, up to the highly strategic Roki tunnel – Ossetia's link to Russia. This mandate was never enforced – neither by the OSCE member-states in the Permanent Council, nor by the Georgia field mission. With its five observers on the ground, the OSCE claims it can report a fair picture of the military situation within the so called "area of responsibility", a corridor of ten kilometers on each side of the administrative line between Georgia proper and South Ossetia, as well as the later added concept of "the conflict zone" – a perimeter of about 15 kilometers around the provincial capital, Tskhinvali.

Georgia's recent furor against the OSCE, however, came after the breakaway region's self-proclaimed 'independence day' on September 20. Ossetians paraded heavy armor in Tskhinvali that – following JCC

decisions – was not supposed to be in the town. Georgia asserted that these weapons appeared to be newly delivered by Russia. A still unexplained mortar attack on the day of the parade in Tskhinvali, which left ten people wounded, nevertheless put the Georgian government into an embarrassing position.

Georgia's parliament drafted a resolution that called for an end to joint peacekeeping and for the withdrawal of the Russian forces from South Ossetia if by February 10, 2006, Georgia's government does not see any improvements on the security side. Tbilisi already started to boycott sessions of the JCC and calls for mediation through the EU and the United States instead of the OSCE. The same resolution set out an ultimatum for Russian troops in Abkhazia for July 2006.

IMPLICATIONS: The OSCE mission in Georgia lacks two main conditions for crisis management: a commitment to a peace agreement by all sides and the possibility to impose sanctions in case of violations of existing agreements. In fact, the OSCE mission in Georgia has failed to deliver what it was brought in for in the first place 13 years ago – i.e. to “facilitate the creation of a political framework, in which a lasting political conciliation can be achieved on the basis of CSCE principles and commitments”, as the November 1992 mandate reads. This failure appears even larger as diplomats were not able to use the opportunities of the political shake-up in the region that is taking place since Georgia's Rose Revolution in November 2003. On the contrary, from the vantage point of the OSCE mission and its way of managing the conflict, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his young “reformers” have created more problems rather than opportunities for conflict management.

To the OSCE as to most western countries, Georgia's policy towards South Ossetia in the past eighteen months has appeared poorly coordinated and at times quite contradictory. For example, the OSCE did not learn about Saakashvili's peace plan for South Ossetia and his offer for the “broadest possible autonomy” until after the Georgian President presented it to the Council of Europe in January 2005. Georgia first mounted tensions in South Ossetia in 2004 by filling up its peacekeeping battalion to the legal limit of 500 soldiers,

but then subsequently dropped it to some 60 soldiers in a sign of disinterest in the Russian-led JPKF. There is evidence that U.S.-trained Georgian troops conducted reconnaissance beyond the “conflict zone” and close to the Roki tunnel in summer 2004. Tbilisi was rebuked by Washington for its demeanor in South Ossetia in Summer 2004, and the State Department called on Georgia to investigate the shelling of Tskhinvali on September 20. These moves cause doubt whether NATO and EU countries would move in and take on a greater role, or why Russia and its Ossetian proxy-regime would agree to any reform of peacekeeping that replaces a diminished but suitable OSCE.

For the moment, Tbilisi and Tskhinvali seem to think about tactics, not answers. By escalating the conflict and further sidelining the OSCE, both sides may hope for gains: Eduard Kokoity, President of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, counts on Russia's harsh reply to Georgia to move closer to his declared aim – a union of South Ossetia with North Ossetia. For his part, Saakashvili and his government want to demonstrate that the Ossetian conflict is “unfrozen” and therefore needs renewed western engagement. At the same time, Georgia's Defense minister, Irakli Okruashvili – known as the most unsmiling man in Tbilisi – may indeed be considering a military reconquest.

CONCLUSIONS: A Fundamental change in the pace and format of the conflict management mechanism in South Ossetia seems long overdue. Unofficially at least, even OSCE diplomats acknowledge that peacekeeping according to the rules set forward by the 1992 Sochi Agreement is an absurd mechanism. Whether they will be allowed to speak out now is doubtful. The OSCE's security role in South Ossetia is weakened, but the context now is the renewed conflict between Russia and the West within the organization. Georgia's head-on-tactics could, at best, generate some new mutual understanding on crisis containment in the South Caucasus between Russia on the one side and the U.S. and the EU on the other. At worst, it will make Russia dig in further in South Ossetia.

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KAZAKHSTAN LAYS LEGAL BASIS FOR DEEPER COOPERATION WITH NATO

Roger N. McDermott

Kazakhstan's Senate on October 12 adopted a law on the ratification of a security agreement concluded between Kazakhstan and NATO. The document has been submitted to President Nazarbayev for signing. The agreement itself, originally signed in Brussels in July 1996, aims at strengthening the mutual commitments to protect sensitive information exchanged as part of cooperation within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Ratification will make it possible for Kazakhstan to take full-fledged part in PfP, laying a legal foundation to deepen further cooperation between Kazakhstan and the Alliance.

BACKGROUND: On October 5, Ambassador Robert Simmons, Special Representative of the NATO Secretary-General for the Caucasus and Central Asia, held forthright talks with Army General Mukhtar Altynbayev, Kazakhstan's Defence Minister, exploring options on how best to deepen the level of Kazakhstan's existing PfP cooperation, aimed at promoting regional security and modernising the Kazakhstani armed forces. The Kazakhstani MoD plans to create a regional center based on its Peacekeeping Battalion (KAZBAT) to train bomb disposal experts for possible future service in international peace support operations. Simmons mooted the idea of utilizing the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) project to include setting up a team by 2007 to react to disasters, including those that resulted from the use of weapons of mass destruction or major terrorist incidents.

Bolat Utemuratov, Secretary of the Kazakhstani Security Council, believes that an individual partnership plan (IPAP), which provides for entering a higher and efficient level of cooperation with NATO, will be ready by the end of 2005. This plan will only succeed if it is suitably tailored to address Kazakhstan's security needs, and assists with its key military reform plans. Altynbayev also hopes to secure access to NATO's trust funds to organize professional retraining for its servicemen after their retirement from the army. NATO has also announced that it has appointed Tugay Tuncer as its special representative

on communication and cooperation with Central Asian countries. He will be based between Astana and Almaty, liaising with the Kazakhstani and other regional governments. By choosing Kazakhstan, NATO planners had to calculate the risk of triggering Kazakh-Uzbek regional rivalry, but given the security environment after the events in Andijan, NATO decided to ride out the storm from Tashkent. Uzbekistan's reaction to the decision was predictably hostile; but if it wants repair the damage it has undoubtedly suffered to its international reputation, it may in time lay aside such reservations.

IMPLICATIONS: Such practical cooperation initiatives, and plans to make PfP more user friendly for Kazakhstan, signals a window of opportunity for the Alliance. The ongoing deployment of elements of KAZBAT in Iraq, despite open domestic hostility to the involvement of Kazakhstani servicemen there, demonstrates the potential for Kazakhstan to supply future niche capabilities in Alliance operations. That would be of interest to Kazakhstan, since unlike its deployment in Iraq, such operations would have a greater multilateral and legal basis; less controversial options would suit the regime, as well as assuaging possible criticism from its traditional allies of being pro-American.

Recent presidential speeches emanating from Astana have placed a high premium on Kazakhstan's relations with Russia, China and the U.S. while also referring to developing ties with the EU. President Nursultan

Nazarbayev values bilateral relations with Russia to such an extent that he will clearly be most careful about public statements on cooperation with NATO. In order to secure the future success of NATO's PFP cooperation plans with Kazakhstan, determined political will on Nazarbayev's part must remain forthcoming. Should Nazarbayev waver in the face of Russian and Chinese disapproval, the whole process could be undermined.

On October 11, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev, addressing an international conference entitled "Strategy 'Kazakhstan-2030' in action" in Astana said that Kazakhstan would remain a reliable U.S. partner in fighting terrorism. Equally, Tokayev stressed that Kazakhstan will continue to do everything in its power to attract American investment in the country. Political analysts in Kazakhstan considered the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Central Asia on October 12-13 a part of Washington's efforts to reinvigorate its strategic influence within the region. America's influence has been waning, not least since the Central Asian states recently moved closer to Russia in their pursuit of enhanced security, and the general picture worsened as a result of the deterioration in U.S.-Uzbek relations since Andijan.

In this environment, Kazakhstan seems ideally situated to benefit from these factors. But rather than prioritizing bilateral security assistance from the U.S. and focusing on the U.S. as a key strategic partner, Nazarbayev's regime has chosen to avoid the backlash such a policy may bring from Russia and China, by quietly and consistently focusing on deepening ties with NATO.

CONCLUSIONS: The ratification of the agreement between NATO and Kazakhstan, which paves the way for greater levels of defense and security cooperation, may appear a small step, however it is nonetheless a highly significant one. Many Kazakhstani political statements since 9/11 have promised deeper relations with NATO, but all too often serious attempts to work out the practicalities of this stance have been severely hampered by the legislative restrictions in sharing sensitive security information with foreign powers. The committee on

international affairs, defence and security of the parliament's Majlis (the lower chamber) now decided that the law on state secrets also provides for giving information that is regarded as a state secret to those foreign countries with which international agreements have been signed. Since NATO is a multilateral security body and cannot be considered as a foreign country, the law does not apply to information requested by NATO within the PFP program. But it is a breakthrough that after many years a way around this problem has been found, opening up the prospect of Kazakhstan's PFP participation becoming a real engine of change. The timing is also interesting, since Astana may regard the recent problems suffered by Uzbekistan as providing an opportunity to eclipse its regional rival.

NATO must be cautious not to inadvertently promote such rivalry, but also to avoid specifically concentrating on the issue of improving Kazakhstan's defense forces; attention must be given to developing a regional component to NATO's involvement in Central Asia. The idea of developing a regional center based on KAZBAT, for instance, is one that could be furthered by NATO's assistance, cultivating carefully the participation in such regional centers of servicemen from all other Central Asian states. If these initiatives get off the ground, Tashkent will have to calculate the risk in isolating itself from regional security plans. Kazakhstan will also remain cautious and require much reassurance that the Alliance is not simply functioning as an umbrella for U.S. strategic advancement in the region. All this, of course, will be scrutinized in Beijing and Moscow. By ratifying this security agreement, the initiative has been placed in the hands of NATO: it is now up to Brussels to follow through with meaningful dialogue with the Kazakhstani security structures and conflate its programs accordingly.

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FIELD REPORTS

BADAKHSHAN: MORE POVERTY AFTER RUSSIAN WITHDRAWAL

Zoya Pylenko

The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region, which borders Afghanistan, China and Kyrgyzstan, is one of the most isolated and unreachable regions of Tajikistan – even for locals. Apart from the necessity to get special permission for entering Badakhshan, people face another problem: to traverse the bad road – known among some locals as the way to hell – to the region.

Apart from traveling by road, one can fly to Badakhshan, usually with a small, 17-seat Antonov AN-28 plane, which tries to find its way through the Pamir mountains because it can't fly over all the summits. But in winter, when the mountains are shrouded in clouds, the road is the only option available. And the road to Badakhshan is narrow and very rarely asphalted. Depending on weather, it can take up to 24 hours to get there from the capital, Dushanbe. But those who eventually arrive in Badakhshan will not only be impressed by the magnificent nature but also marked by the extreme poverty of the region.

Afghanistan is easily visible from Badakhshan. The border is the still small river Pyanzh (or Amu Darya) that locals can be seen crossing without hindrance. This didn't use to be so easy. Until last year, Russian border guards protected Badakhshan's border. But in 2004, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmonov said it was time for Tajikistan to start defending its borders on its own, and he asked for the Russian border guards' withdrawal. On 19 October 2005, an official ceremony was held to mark the completion of the handover, the process of

which had started at the Tajik-Chinese border and finished in July 2005 at the western end of the Tajik-Afghan border.

Badakhshan was the first region the Russians left. The consequences of this are now visible. According to locals, the border is defended in a much weaker way now than under the Russians, who they say were more experienced than today's border guards that are often young and badly trained conscripts from the Tajik army. And, when seeing locals cross the border, you think they might have a point. The US and EU are now giving Tajikistan (financial and training) support to help improve its control over the border. Some Russians advisers are still there as well.

However, apart from practice and experience, money is still lacking the Tajiks. Food and warm clothes for border guards (the winters are very cold in Badakhshan, where mountains rise as high as 7,000 meters) are often insufficient. According to an NGO worker in the regional capital Khorog, local organizations have taken "patronage" over different checkpoints, supporting the soldiers there with food whenever they can afford to.

Apparently insufficient protection of the Tajik-Afghan border, as in Badakhshan, is causing concern, mainly because of the booming drug industry in Afghanistan. Badakhshan is believed to be a major drug smuggling route from Afghanistan to Europe. According to officials, drug trafficking decreased after the Russians left the border. But the Badakhshanis have a different opinion, pointing to

the rising number of expensive cars and villas in Khorog since the Russian withdrawal.

But even if a minority might really prosper from the drug trade, over-all the economic situation in Badakhshan has gotten worse. "We used to ask the Russians to help us by selling some of their food [rations] for half the price... Now we try to help hungry soldiers who go around the houses to ask for bread to eat," says one woman in Khorog, adding, "Is it possible to defend the border while thinking about food?"

Not only the Tajik border guards but many others also experienced a change for the worse after the Russian withdrawal. Most people in places like Khorog try to survive by trading at local markets. Food is usually brought from Dushanbe and clothes from China. According to one of the women-traders at the bazaar of Khorog, "It's much more difficult now to earn sufficient money to survive. The Tajiks [border guards] can't afford to spend as much as the Russians did." The wages for Tajik border guards are some \$10, while wages under the Russians were up to \$300. Quite a few Tajiks that were serving with the Russian border forces – getting the same salary as their Russian colleagues – left the army instead of continuing to serve in the Tajik border forces for a much smaller salary. Instead, they started small businesses.

One positive change for locals after the Russian withdrawal was the opening of the Tajik-Afghan border and the establishment of weekly Afghan-

Tajik markets at the three border crossings near Khorog, Ishkashim and Darwaz. But this is not enough by far to neutralize the effect of the withdrawal of the Russians with their big pockets.

One of the most promising trades to help Badakhshan escape from poverty is tourism, which is already growing in the region. But Badakhshan is still a special border zone and nothing seems to be done yet to make access to the region less cumbersome or to diminish the many checkpoints in the region that hardly encourage tourists to venture out there.

In the meantime, the biggest benefactor of Badakhshan remains the Aga Khan Foundation, set up by the Aga Khan who is the spiritual head of the Ismaili Muslims that form a majority in Badakhshan. Thanks in large part to the AKF, a school, a university, and many roads were built in the region. It also supports the production and sale of traditional handicraft to tourists. However, this alone is not enough to end poverty in Badakhshan and develop the region. Many Badakhshanis – as other Tajiks – continue to migrate to Russia in search for work. With the current under-guarded border, it might also become increasingly attractive for them to turn to profitable drug smuggling.

NAZARBAYEV CLEARS HURDLES AHEAD OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Marat Yermukanov

If there is one devoted disciple of American democracy in Central Asia, that is Kazakhstan. It is not accidental that two months before the presidential elections scheduled for December Astana received American policymakers of all

calibers, ranging from Henry Kissinger to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The conspicuously friendly tone of discourses in Astana was construed as a token of support for Nursultan Nazarbayev in

his endeavor to stay at the helm for another seven years.

With a few weeks to the polls, the administration of President Nazarbayev was certainly following the parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan. Thousands of miles apart from each other, the two countries have many similarities. The economies of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan heavily depend on mining and oil industry, and the majority of the rural population in both countries, behind the façade of economic growth, is living from hand to mouth. In a sense, for Astana the Azerbaijani election is a litmus paper to show to what degree the population can tolerate old regimes.

The overwhelming majority of political analysts, including the few remaining sympathizers of the opposition, do not doubt that the incumbent President Nursultan Nazarbayev will appear as the clear winner in the elections. What lends a democratic gloss to the presidential elections is that 18 contenders, including three female candidates, have been registered with the Central Election Committee, a record number never witnessed in the election chronicles of the country. But only 5 of the registered candidates – Nursultan Nazarbayev, Mels Yeleusizov of the Environmental Association, Alikhan Baymenov, the leader of Ak Zhol Democratic party, Zarmakhan Tuyakbay, a nominee of the For Fair Kazakhstan election block and communist leader Yerasyly Abylkasymov – will take part in the final battle for the presidency on December 4, other candidates failing the Kazakh language test and falling short of constitutional requirements. An opinion poll conducted by the Eurasian rating agency from October 20 to 27 concludes that 67% of population would cast their votes for Nazarbayev and that second-rated Zharmakhan Tuyakbay would get 13% of the votes. This estimate comes close to popularity rating results made by the Association of Sociologists. The opposition paper *Vremya* admits that in Kazakhstan, a ‘colored revolution’, which triumphed in Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, knocked on the wrong door. The main opposition candidate, Zharmakhan Tuyakbay, has more than a

million daily copies of newspapers working for him, an enormous publicity tool not enjoyed even by Nursultan Nazarbayev, is no match for the incumbent President in terms of popularity. Nazarbayev skillfully appeals to the sentiments of the masses, and more importantly, possesses immense power of conviction supported by the spectacular social and economic achievements recorded over the last six to seven years. Speaking on October 31 at the congress of the Federation of Trade Unions of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev promised better social protection for working people and legal protection of small business. In return, he got the unanimous support of the audience for his election platform. In another positive development, Nazarbayev succeeded in easing tensions in the oil business by substantially reducing gasoline prices. But rising inflation, disparities between incomes of foreign-owned companies and miserable payments received by local workers, unemployment among youth and women are still high on the agenda. However, these social ills can hardly affect the positive image of Nazarbayev created by powerful presidential media at home and abroad.

In this situation, complaints and critical voices of opponents to Nazarbayev are drowned in the public applause for the incumbent president, and minor breaches of the law on the part of the executive power are not addressed. The Central Election Committee has registered multiple cases of refusal on the part of regional governors to provide premises for opposition candidates. The Deputy Minister of information, Yerlan Baizhanov, told journalists that two thirds of information spread by the national news agency Kazinform was dedicated to President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

The generally calm atmosphere of the pre-election period is occasionally disturbed by scuffles with the opposition. On October 28, the Prosecutor General's Office requested Parliament to strip Senator Zauresh Battalova of her immunity from prosecution. Battalova, a supporter of Zharmakhan Tuyakbay, was accused of staging an unauthorized rally in the central area of Almaty on October 8 in support of press freedom and the jailed opposition

leader Galimzhan Zhakiyanov. Parliament did not give its sanction to detain Zauresh Battalova, but Galimzhan Zhakiyanov was released from prison on probation after this incident. Politically correct methods used by Nazarbayev in dealing with his opponents are duly appreciated by the West. On the plus side of his home policy is also the growing sense of national dignity and optimism recovered by Kazakhs under Nazarbayev's presidency. Russians and other ethnic minorities fear that interethnic peace may be threatened if anyone else comes to the office.

For many analysts, the main puzzle is not the question who wins the elections, but what shape the

new government will take after Nazarbayev's re-election and what changes into the existing system will be introduced. Earlier, addressing the business elite, Nazarbayev did not conceal his dislike for parliamentary rule. Apparently he does not favor radical changes in administrative policy either. Changes in political life and a young president is what Alikhan Baimenov, the leader of the Ak Zhol Democratic party, demands. But the majority of the population would be quite happy with the present state of affairs. Obviously, Nazarbayev is the best choice also for Washington.

CRIMINALS BREAK INTO POLITICS IN KYRGYZSTAN

Nurshat Abubakirov

On 20 October Tynychbek Akmatbaev, the chairman of the Kyrgyz parliament's defense and legal affairs committee, was killed during turmoil in one of the high-security prisons near Bishkek. He was the third parliamentarian that has been killed during the last six months. His death led to protests in front of the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) building demanding the resignation of the Prime Minister, Felix Kulov, for alleged involvement in the murder. According to observers, this modest protest can be a serious challenge to the resolve of Kurmanbek Bakiyev's government.

"Destructive forces interested in the escalation of the situation are trying to take advantage of this tragic event, playing with the emotions of the killed parliamentarian's relatives and close friends by spreading misleading information about Prime Minister Felix Kulov's and the Jogorku Kenesh's involvement in this incident" was the official description of the situation given by the Prime Minister on 27 October. In a decree, the Prime Minister also required the municipalities, the ministries, and the law-enforcement agencies to

take all the necessary measures in order to prevent the further complication of the situation.

Parliamentarian Tynychbek Akmatbaev, parliamentary staffer Talas Omorov, and the head of the penitentiary system Ikmatullo Polotov were on a tour inspecting the Novopokrovskaya prison colony #3 and the Moldovanovskaya colony #31 after reports of prison riots and murders. Negotiations with inmates of colony #3, who demanded better living conditions, were easily resolved. However, while visiting the colony #31, the inmates apparently attacked the inspectors killing Tynychbek Akmatbaev, Talas Omorov, and Akmatbaev's bodyguard, and wounding Ikmatullo Polotov and Akmatbaev's second bodyguard. The same day, Prime Minister Felix Kulov visited the colony to recover the corpses and wounded hostages. Ikmatulla Polotov died in hospital later on 27 October.

The next day, around 200-300 people, mainly sportsman-looking young men, gathered on the main square of Bishkek demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Felix Kulov. Tynychbek

Akmatbaev's brother, Rysbek, rumored to be a local mafia boss, lead the demonstrations and accused the Prime Minister of complicity with the murder and connections with Aziz Batukaev, a rival criminal authority, who is being held on criminal charges at colony #31. According to demonstrators, the Prime Minister could not have negotiated alone to recover the corpses without protection from within; otherwise, demonstrators argue, the inmates would have attacked the Prime Minister as well.

In response, Prime Minister Felix Kulov denied all charges, saying that he could not have met or talked to criminals because from 2000 to 2005 he was a political prisoner held in a separate prison. "I am ready to resign if they provide enough evidence of my involvement," said the Prime Minister. Around 200 to 500 people also held a rally in support of Felix Kulov at central Alatoo Square for three days after Akmatbaev's supporters moved to another location in front of the Parliament building.

President Kurmanbek Bakiev's silence brought speculation that the president or his administration wanted to use Rysbek Akmatbaev and his supporters to bring down the Prime Minister or damage his rising popularity and charisma. Some journalists even embarked upon claims that Kulov is left alone, expressing doubt that the "tandem" between the president and the prime minister is functioning.

During a meeting between the president and foreign donors and investors, U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Donald Lu said "nothing is more destructive for the trust of investors and donors than the realization that the government is closing its eyes to the activity of organized crime." German Ambassador Frantz Eichinger voiced similar concerns at the meeting.

On 28 October, the Coalition For democracy and Civic Society, a non-governmental organization, organized a demonstration for political stability and against criminal groups' political demands. From 1,000 to 1,500 people gathered with slogans saying "People are United Against Criminals," "No Civil War," "Do We Have a President?". Edil Baysalov

also added that he sees the demand for Kulov's resignation as "a challenge to the society, the nation, and the authorities; an attempt to show that the criminal world is going to govern the country.

Speculations abound regarding the motives for the murder. Many think it was mere a result of the rivalry between Aziz Batukaev and Rysbek Akmatbaev as the heads of the large criminal groups. Aziz Batukaev's brother was killed in a criminal clash over territorial control in 2002. Others believe that a third party ordered the parliamentarian's assassination in order to destabilize the situation in the country, while others suspiciously look to the government, with presumptions that it is cleaning the parliament from criminals.

Parliamentarian Bayaman Erkinabaev, a businessmen and alleged criminal leader, was killed a month earlier. Another parliamentarian, Jyrgalbek Surabaldiev, also an owner of big businesses in Bishkek, was shot dead in June 2005. Tynychbek Akmatbaev, who was elected to the Parliament in 2005, had been charged with complicity in murder, kidnapping, and for using forged documents in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, he was freed in 2004 due to a lack of sufficient evidence. Meanwhile, court hearings are being held in Bishkek, in which Rysbek Akmatbaev is charged with the violation of 10 capital laws and cases, including the murder of police general Chyngyz Aliev, killed in November 2004.

On 27 October, the demonstrations organized by Rysbek Akmatbaev, who is believed to be taking the first steps to enter Kyrgyz politics, were temporarily suspended after a delegation of demonstrators, headed by human rights activist Topchubek Turgunaliev, father-in-law of the late Tynychbek Akmatbaev, met with President Bakiev. However, the threat of a political crisis and criminal instability looms large of Kyrgyzstan in the aftermath of the 'Tulip revolution'.

TURKMENISTAN AND UKRAINE: WHAT THEY WANT FROM EACH OTHER?

Muhammad Tahir

After sharp criticism by Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov over Ukraine's unpaid bills for natural gas, Kiev reached an agreement with Ashgabat on October 13. According to Turkmen media, a Ukrainian delegation headed by fuel and energy minister Ivan Plachkov was received by President Saparmurat Niyazov on October 12. Niyazov criticized them harshly over continual delays of payments for gas Ukraine has purchased.

Turkmen official sources say the current deadlock was broken when the Ukrainian side agreed to pay US\$484 million of its debt, which dates back to the years when Turkmenistan shipped its natural gas to Ukraine at US \$58 per 1000 cubic meter, paying half of it in goods and half in cash. According to the new understanding between the two parties, Kiev will pay this amount by the end of this year in hard currency, goods or services. If Ukraine fails to do so, then Kiev will be given 30 days to pay this amount in cash. It is unclear what would happen if Ukraine couldn't fulfill these commitments and what Turkmenistan's the next step would be.

Judging by the strong language the Turkmen president used in his 12 October meeting with the Ukrainian official, due note was taken. Turkmenistan could suspend its gas supplies to Ukraine, which would be the second time this year that occurred. On January 1, 2005, Ashgabat cut supplies for the same reasons. That dispute was solved with a pledge by Ukraine to clear its debts. Yet according to Turkmen officials, only US\$8.7 million of that amount has been received by Ashgabat so far.

It was the third bilateral high-level meeting over gas payments since President Viktor Yushchenko came to power following the "orange revolution" in Ukraine. But so far no permanent solution has been

found, which from time to time causes hot discussions between officials of the two countries.

The latest example was the October 12 meeting in which Turkmen President used the strongest language ever against his Ukrainian counterparts. "Bring money, don't give us empty promises ... I can't understand you people, if you don't have a solution, why do you repeatedly come to Turkmenistan? Why don't you give up?" The Ukrainian side reacted calmly to Niyazov's criticism. Reuters quoted one Ukrainian official as saying "President Niyazov is often too emotional when speaking on television, so let's wait and see." According to Turkish expert on the Caspian Region Mehmet Halaci, "Ukrainians cannot afford to offend Niyazov, since President Viktor Yushchenko is trying to take Ukraine out of the Russian influence. Russia enjoys monopolies in several sectors of the former Soviet Republics, including the gas sector, and Ukraine is exerting tremendous efforts to change this since it is one of the largest gas consumer in the world."

Dr. Halaci also said that despite the financial disputes between Turkmenistan and Ukraine, Ashgabat cannot afford to cut down its gas supplies to Ukraine for long since gas exports are the main source of income upon which the entire Turkmen economy depends. Ukraine is one of the major destinations of Turkmen gas exports, accounting for up to 49 percent of Turkmenistan's total exports. But Turkmenistan also faces a difficult situation, not finding alternative routes for gas exports. Little progress has been made in the so-called TAP "Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan" gas pipeline project, which is the great hope for exporting Turkmen gas to Pakistan and possibly Indian markets.

If both countries need each other, why do these problems keep occurring since Yushchenko took over the Presidency? Dr. Jamshid of the Central Asian Strategic Studies Center in Islamabad believes that "since Yushchenko took office, a huge number of corruption cases have been in Ukraine's oil and gas company, which was responsible for dealing with Turkmenistan. And the Turkmen president himself was involved in this corruption at some level. When the new leadership in Ukraine started to reform the gas sector, the Turkmen leadership understood that these arrangements might no longer work. So Niyazov took two measures to clean up his past dealings. First, he put the former oil and gas bosses of the country in prison [who actually were playing key roles for the Turkmen president in his corrupt business]. Second, he demanded a new agreement with Ukraine for gas exports, which pushed the Ukrainian side to agree in July 2005 on a price of US \$44 per 1000 cubic meters of gas in cash. This new deal put a tremendous burden on the Ukrainian economy since it was already in crisis. This action made

Ukraine refrain from investigating corruption further."

Another explanation suggested by Dr. Halaci is that it could be a political trick played by Russia, which also has interests in Turkmenistan. Both countries could be playing to counter the new Ukrainian leadership's orientation toward the West." Niyazov's comments at the meeting of October 12 corroborate this: he clearly rejected Ukraine's proposal for a long term gas agreement by arguing it is not a realistic approach without the participation of Russia.

Niyazov's strong language seems to have "solved the problem" at least on a temporary basis, but the ability of the Ukrainian side to pay off outstanding debts remains questionable. As Turkish Expert Mehmet Arslan argues, such disputes will continue in the future since Turkmenistan cannot cut off its gas supplies for long due to financial reasons but also because cutting gas for a long time may technically not be possible. If Turkmenistan suspends gas supplies to Ukraine, to whom could it sell its gas?

NEWS DIGEST

KYRGYZSTAN WANTS THE U.S. TO PAY MORE FOR AIR BASE

2 November

Kyrgyzstan is drafting a new agreement on the location of the anti-terror coalition's air base. It requires the U.S. to increase the amount it pays for it, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev told the press on Wednesday. "Ours and the U.S. figures on spending on the air base at Manas airport differ. According to our sources, the U.S. pays less in taxes and its other spending is smaller," Bakiyev said. "The American side has different figures. They argue that their spending is larger and that they pay more in taxes. Our experts will re-calculate everything and achieve an agreed opinion," Bakiyev said. "The air base is no longer a pressing issue. We are drafting a new agreement requiring the U.S. to pay more. Prices have risen manifold since the air base was relocated in Kyrgyzstan," the Kyrgyz president said. "The U.S. must pay for each square meter at world prices," he said. (Interfax)

BRITAIN SAYS RUSSIA'S CASE AGAINST ZAKAYEV WEAK - AMBASSADOR

2 November

British Ambassador to Russia Tony Brenton said Russia has still not provided evidence that a British court could find credible enough to order the extradition of Chechen separatist emissary Akhmed Zakayev. In an interview with Interfax, Brenton noted that taking into account the new level of relations between Moscow and London, and considering that both countries are strong opponents of any forms of terrorism, Britain regrets that a man charged with terrorism is staying on its territory. Brenton suggested that if Zakayev's direct involvement in committing terrorist acts is difficult to prove, Russia could probably prove that he might have encouraged terrorism. If this is done, a British court might find it easier to resolve the problem of his extradition, he said. (Interfax)

FORMER KYRGYZ PRESIDENT NOW MOSCOW UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

3 November

Former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev is now working for Moscow University. The Kyrgyz embassy in Moscow is ready to give him support,

Ambassador Apas Jumagulov told a Thursday press conference. "Askar Akayev is currently a professor at Moscow University. We are not in contact, but if he calls or makes any request, we will help him," he said. The ambassador said he knew nothing about any investigation against Akayev, who currently resides in the Moscow region. (Interfax)

TENSION AS AZERBAIJAN POLLS LOOM

4 November

Campaigning is drawing to a close in Azerbaijan as the country prepares for parliamentary elections on Sunday. Nearly 2,000 candidates are running for 125 seats in the first vote since Ilham Aliyev replaced his father, Heydar Aliyev, as president in 2003. That election was widely criticised for voting irregularities and violence. There has been little sign of campaigning in the capital Baku, but the run-up to this vote has been full of tension and controversy. On Friday, the last day of campaigning, only one party has been allowed to mark it publicly. The ruling New Azerbaijan Party is preparing for a rally in support of the government of President Ilham Aliyev. The opposition Freedom bloc say they were refused permission to hold a similar event in the same square. President Aliyev promises that Sunday's election will be free and fair. The government, he says, has invited hundreds of international observers and introduced plenty of measures, including inking of voters' fingers, to prevent fraud. But these changes are overshadowed by reports of irregularities and violence throughout the campaign. International observers have condemned the widespread voter intimidation and what they called excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators. Over the past two weeks dozens of government officials, including high-ranking ministers, have been arrested on charges of plotting a coup and covertly supporting the opposition. And more than 500 candidates to the country's 125-seat parliament have pulled out of the race. Many say they were forced to quit. (BBC)

KYRGYZ PRISONERS HAND OVER ARMS

4 November

Inmates at several jails in Kyrgyzstan have begun to surrender their weapons ahead of a deadline on Sunday, prison authorities have said. According to the head of the prisons system, inmates at four jails have

so far turned over a total of 130 weapons. But in other jails, prisoners are continuing to refuse to co-operate. They are demanding better conditions and an explanation into the deaths of at least four inmates during riots throughout the jail system on Tuesday. The authorities have warned that if the prisoners do not turn in all their weapons by the newly extended deadline of Sunday, the security services will enter the jails with force. Prison chief Kapar Mukeyev said that some inmates had already begun to surrender knives and other banned items to officials outside their jails. "Overall, the situation is getting back to normal," he said. But he said some prisoners had retained their firearms and were "not rushing to hand them over". He told the Associated Press that there were seven jails where inmates were refusing to comply with the authorities' request. Guards have reportedly been placed outside these buildings. Tuesday's unrest was sparked by the removal of a high-profile inmate from one prison to another. The inmate, Aziz Batukayev, is one of 28 suspected of involvement in the killing of MP Tynychbek Akmatbayev, who was shot while visiting one of the prisons last month. Correspondents say the authorities in many prisons in Kyrgyzstan and other former Soviet republics hand over the day-to-day running of the prison to inmates, who are often led by a top criminal boss. Kyrgyzstan has witnessed several violent incidents since the overthrow of ex-President Askar Akayev in March. (BBC)

AZERI RULING PARTY 'WINS' POLLS

7 November

Azerbaijan's ruling party has won parliamentary elections, according to partial official results. With around 90% of votes counted, the New Azerbaijan Party had won 62 of the 125 seats in parliament, the electoral body said. The main opposition Azadlyq bloc, among those who accuse the authorities of vote-rigging, got five seats. Observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe are due to give their assessment shortly. A spokesman for the Central Election Commission said there had been no reports of serious violations. The commission said about 47% of the voters cast their ballots. Sunday's elections are seen as an important test for democracy in the oil-rich former Soviet republic. They are the first since President Ilham Aliyev replaced his father, Heydar Aliyev, in 2003. Hundreds of international observers are monitoring the poll, and the US government has sponsored one exit poll as a check on the official count. Asked at a news briefing after the polls closed if the ruling New Azerbaijan

Party had reached its pre-election target of retaining its 75 seats, Executive Secretary Ali Ahmedov said: "Our information is that, yes, at the very least we have achieved that target." About 4.5 million voters were registered to choose between more than 1,500 candidates - including President Ilham Aliyev's wife - competing for places in the assembly, or Milli Majlis. The first lady is reported to have won her seat. Earlier, while casting his ballot, President Aliyev expressed confidence that the election would be free and fair. "Equal conditions were provided for all the candidates and, in general, the whole election process was smooth and peaceful," he said. The Azadlyq bloc has said it recorded thousands of irregularities, including boxes being stuffed with pro-government ballot papers, multiple voting and intimidation of opposition supporters. Ali Kerimli, one of the bloc's three main leaders, told the BBC that the opposition would challenge the results in court and would stage street protests. But another opposition leader expressed hope that the balloting, no matter how imperfect, could lead to change. "I know that in any case, today is the beginning of a drastic democratic transformation," Musavat Party leader Isa Gambar said after casting his ballot. (BBC)

1,183 INTERIOR TROOPS KILLED IN NORTH CAUCASUS IN TWO ARMED CONFLICTS

9 November

1,183 Interior Troops have been killed in the two armed conflicts in the North Caucasus, Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Interior Troops Col. Gen. Yevgeny Baryayev has announced. "In the wars in the North Caucasus, Interior Troops have lost 1,183 people. The title of Hero of Russia has been conferred upon 86 soldiers and officers, to 48 of them posthumously," he said on Wednesday at a traditional meeting with families of the servicemen who died in action in the North Caucasus. (Interfax) -

KAZAKHSTAN'S PARLIAMENT OK'S 2006 BUDGET

9 November

Kazakhstan's parliament on Wednesday approved the oil-rich Central Asian nation's 2006 budget, sending the draft to President Nursultan Nazarbayev for his signature. The budget forecasts economic growth of 8.3 percent for 2006, up from an estimated 7.9 percent growth rate this year. The budget envisions a deficit equal to 1.4 percent of gross domestic product, down slightly from 1.7 percent in 2005. Revenues are forecast to rise 25 percent from 2005 to 1.5 trillion tenge (US\$11.2 billion, euro9.5 billion) and expenditures are expected

to total 1.6 trillion tenge (US\$12 billion, euro10.2 billion), a 33 percent increase from 2005. Compared to seven years ago, Kazakhstan's economy has grown by 75 percent. Nazarbayev, who has 15 days to approve the budget, is expected to sign it. (AP)

CENTRAL ASIAN NATIONS MEET IN AFGHANISTAN TO REVIVE TRADE

10 November

Ten Islamic, mostly Central Asian nations met in Afghanistan to push their aim of slashing tariffs and freeing up trade in the region once spanned by the Silk Road. Afghanistan, after decades of war and occupation, told the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) it hoped to become a "land bridge", revitalising the ancient trade route that linked Europe and the Far East. The ECO groups Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which together make up six percent of the world population, according to the organisation. Integration of the 10 ECO nations was essential to build up trade in the region, Afghan Commerce Minister Hedayet Amin Arsala told ministers, officials and other delegates at the two-day meeting in Kabul. "It is only through regional cooperation and greater economic integration that we will be able to use the enormous resources that we have in the region for the betterment of the lives of our people," he said on Wednesday. The Afghan government wanted to establish "an open trade regime which would allow Afghanistan to capitalise on its position as a land bridge between the Central and South Asian region," he said. Afghanistan has the lowest tariffs among the 10 countries -- on average just over four percent -- compared to Pakistan's tariffs of up to 120 percent. Members had committed to cutting tariffs to no more than 10 percent within 10 to 15 years, although some items may be exempt, said Afghanistan Investment Support Agency vice president Suleman Fatimie, an organiser of the meeting. Central Asia's proximity to rapidly growing markets such as China and India made clear the rationale for cooperation, said Asian Development Bank Afghanistan head Brian Fawcett. The transit of goods through the region was still hampered, with truckers and traders facing daily road closures and border restrictions, he said. (AFP)

NATO PEACEKEEPING MISSION IN S. CAUCASUS PREMATURE - MAMEDYAROV

10 November

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mamedyarov said that the location of NATO peacekeepers in the zone of

the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would be premature. "When we are talking about peacekeeping missions, we should primarily discuss the mandate of these missions. But we have not even started developing it," Mamedyarov told the press. NATO envoy in the South Caucasus Romualds Razuks earlier said in Yerevan that NATO would be prepared to locate a peacekeeping contingent in the South Caucasus, if required. "Azerbaijan, Armenia and the co-chairmen of the Minsk Group understand that peacekeeping forces must not represent the countries co-chairing the Minsk Group or neighboring states. If a peacekeeping mission is opted for, it must be performed within the framework of the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe," the Azeri foreign minister said. Azerbaijan's position on the location of foreign military contingent is absolutely clear, Mamedyarov said. "We are not in favor of foreign military presence in Azerbaijan. The law bans the location of foreign military base in our country," he said. (Interfax)

CALLS FOR RUSSIAN TO LOSE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE STATUS VOICED IN BISHKEK

10 November

The Headquarters for the Protection of the State Language, a union of Kyrgyz non-governmental and political organizations, has called for Russian to be stripped of its status as an official language in Kyrgyzstan. "When Russian was accepted as an official language, Kyrgyz was pushed even further back into the shadows. Russian has become the dominant language at all official levels," the organization's representative said on Thursday in Bishkek. According to the organization, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev should switch all legal affairs in the country to the Kyrgyz language. In addition, the organization requested Bakiyev not to raise the question of introducing double citizenship in Kyrgyzstan. Russian became an official language in Kyrgyzstan in 2000. (Interfax)

KYRGYZSTAN NOT CONSIDERING ANOTHER RUSSIAN AIR BASE - FOREIGN MINISTRY

10 November

Kyrgyzstan has no plans to host a Russian air base in Osh, Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Alikbek Jekshenkulov announced on Thursday. "The issue of the deployment of a Russian air base in Osh is not under discussion. First, we need to create a fully-fledged air base in Kant," he told Interfax. (Interfax)

CNPC WINS KAZAKH GOVT SUPPORT FOR PETROKAZ TAKEOVER

10 November

Kazakhstan has approved the \$4.2 billion takeover of oil producer and refiner PetroKazakhstan by China's state-owned oil firm CNPC, CNPC President Chen Geng said on Thursday. "The president expressed his support for CNPC's takeover of PetroKazakhstan," Chen told journalists after meeting Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. He gave no further detail. Shareholders of PetroKazakhstan, which is listed in Canada but has all its operations and assets in Kazakhstan, approved the deal last month, but it was up to the Kazakh government to give its final approval for the deal to go ahead. Kazakhstan's parliament rushed last month to adopt a law allowing the government to block sales of foreign-held stakes in companies developing the nation's natural resources, raising concerns that CNPC's takeover of PetroKazakhstan could be blocked. PetroKazakhstan produces oil in the southern Kyzyl Orda region and owns a refinery at Shymkent which is the most modern of only three such plants in Kazakhstan, but had difficult relations with the Central Asian state's government. Senior officials have accused the Calgary-based firm of raking in "monopoly profits," cashing in on high prices for its oil products sold in the south, and of seeking a furtive deal with CNPC behind the government's back. Kazakh national oil and gas firm KazMunaiGas signed a memorandum with CNPC last month, agreeing that 33 percent in PetroKazakhstan must be sold to the Kazakh state once the takeover had taken place. Kazakh Energy Minister Vladimir Shkolnik has said that Kazakhstan aims to ensure control of the Shymkent refinery through a 50-50 joint venture with CNPC. He has said this will allow the government to control fuel prices in the south. (Reuters)

UZBEKISTAN 'FACING OIL CRISIS'

10 November

Uzbek businessmen say the country's oil shortages will continue to worsen unless the government gives up its monopoly control over the oil industry. Most of the country is already short of petrol. Recent rises in world oil prices may be bringing Uzbekistan's oil problem to a crisis. But as so often in Uzbekistan, the authorities have pulled a veil of secrecy over what is happening in the oil business. While motorists throughout the country have been queuing for scarce petrol for weeks, the government insists that nothing is wrong. Only the capital, Tashkent, is usually protected from what appears to be a worsening fuel

crisis. Private businessmen involved in the oil industry say a major cause is the government's insistence that Uzbekistan should be self-sufficient in oil. While it has oil reserves, mostly in the west, they are not sufficient for the country's needs. But critics say officials exaggerate production figures to suggest they are. New technology could boost production, they say, but instead, cost-cutting and poor management have led to the rapid exhaustion of oil fields. Many Uzbek oil experts have left to work in Kazakhstan or Russia. Economists say Uzbek oil production is falling by about 20% a year, so the current deficit can only get worse. Uzbekistan needs to import oil, but the government cannot afford to, especially at current high world prices, and will not admit it needs to. Private businessmen rarely speak publicly to avoid government reprisals. But increasingly, they say the only solution is to end the government monopoly where the authorities set petrol prices, control distribution and restrict imports. Neighbouring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan already have a free market in oil. Economists say that ending rigid government controls in Uzbekistan would rapidly enable private suppliers to fulfil the country's oil needs at market prices. (BBC)

SENIOR MEMBER OF AZERI ASSOCIATION IN RUSSIA MURDERED

11 November

Businessman Mirgadzhi Guseinov, head of a regional branch of the All-Russia Azeri Congress, an association of ethnic Azeri organizations in Russia, was murdered outside his apartment block in Astrakhan on Friday, the Astrakhan prosecutor's office told Interfax. Set up in 2001, the Congress, the brainchild of former Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev, brought together Azeri organizations that already existed in Russia. (Interfax)

GAZPROM SEES JOINT KAZAKH GAS VENTURE BY YEAR-END

11 November

Top Gazprom managers said on Friday they planned to set up a joint venture with Kazakhstan by the end of this year to process gas from the Central Asian state's mammoth Karachaganak field in Russia. Earlier this year the Kazakh government gave up plans of building its own processing plant at the field and accepted Gazprom's offer to process gas in nearby Orenburg across the Russian border. "We talked about the Orenburg gas processing plant where a joint venture will be set up," Gazprom Chief Executive Alexei Miller told reporters after meeting Kazakh

President Nursultan Nazarbayev. "A long-term contract on Karachaganak gas deliveries is in the works." Gazprom's Deputy Chief Executive Alexander Ryazanov said the contract with Karachaganak operators could be signed this year. "We would like to put this issue on the Gazprom board's agenda already in November," he said. The Orenburg project is estimated at \$300 million, and Ryazanov said annual Karachaganak deliveries to the plant could amount to 15 billion cubic metres. Karachaganak is operated by British energy company BG which holds 32.5 percent in the project. Italy's ENI holds the same stake, while ChevronTexaco and Russia's LUKOIL own 20 and 15 percent respectively. (Reuters)

PRESIDENT OF TURKMENISTAN AND IRANIAN MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS DISCUSSED THE ISSUES OF CASPIAN

11 November

President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov met with Iranian foreign minister Manuchehr Muttagi on his official visit to Turkmenistan. During the meeting, the two sides discussed development of bilateral relations and mentioned that the trade turnover between the two countries makes \$1 billion. The issues on status of the Caspian was also discussed at the meeting. (AzerTag)

FINAL AFGHAN ELECTION RESULTS OUT

12 November

The process of counting and checking results from the parliamentary and provincial elections in Afghanistan in September has finally been completed. An election official told the BBC that the election commission had certified results from Kandahar, the final province to be completed. President Hamid Karzai's brother, Abdul Qayyum Karzai, has been elected to the lower house of parliament. Meanwhile, councils are voting for their upper house representatives. Results from the September election had already been published from 33 other provinces, but the results from Kandahar were delayed while officials checked fraud allegations. The joint Afghan and United Nations election commission has now also certified results for the Kuchi - or nomad - population. The BBC's Andrew North in Kabul says the length of time it has taken to check fraud allegations and finalise the election results has left many Afghans confused and suspicious. In Kandahar, election officials say at least one candidate lost his place because of the discovery of widespread ballot-rigging. However, the candidate's backers have complained of a vendetta against him, including from

supporters of President Hamid Karzai, Andrew North reports. Kandahar is President Karzai's home province and two of his brothers stood for election there. One, Abdul Qayoom Karzai, won the most number of votes in the province for a parliamentary seat. The other, Ahmed Wali Karzai, came top of the list for the provincial council. Most candidates running in the elections stood as independents. This means that it is hard to develop a picture of the overall political complexion of the new parliament. But, political analyst Ali Amiri told Associated Press news agency: "The government [of Hamid Karzai] has the support of more than 50% in the parliament." (BBC)

CONSTRUCTION OF \$140MLN PIPELINE TO BEGIN IN KAZAKHSTAN

13 November

The construction of a gas pipeline linking Karachaganak, Aksai and the Urals is to begin in the Western Kazakhstan Region in spring 2006. The presentation of the project was held at the Karachaganak oil and gas condensate field, where the project developer, Karachaganak Petroleum Operating (KPO) is to begin construction. "The project has been approved and is being evaluated, President of Kazakhstan's KazMunaiGaz national oil and gas company, Uzakpai Karabalin, told the press. The project has an estimated cost of about \$140 million and will be financed by KPO. "The new project will provide further backup to the program for the gasification of rural regions, which KPO has been implementing for the past few years, KPO Director General Paolo Capelli told the audience. "This is a social project which we must implement quickly. Stable domestic prices for energy are very important for us," said Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Vladimir Shkolnik. "The Uralsk thermal power plant is to receive cheap gas, which will guarantee low prices for electricity and heat," Nurgali Ashimov, governor of the Western Kazakhstan Region, said. The construction of a 150-kilometer gas pipeline linking Karachaganak, Aksai and Uralsk was approved in May 2005 and a memorandum of cooperation was signed between the regional authorities, KPO and KazMunaiGaz. Under the agreement, up to 500 million cubic meters of gas will be supplied to local consumers each year. The joint committee provided \$6 million for the drawing up of a feasibility study. Two automatic gas distribution stations and junctions will be built to supply gas to the Burli, Terekte, Syrym, Karatobe and Akzhaik districts. KPO is developing the Karachaganak oil and gas field, one of the world's largest with a reserve of

over 1.2 billion tonnes of liquid hydrocarbons and 1.3 trillion cubic meters of gas, under a 40-year production sharing agreement. Eni and BG each hold a 32.5% stake in KPO, Chevron - 20% and LUKOIL 15%. (Interfax)

AZERBAIJAN PROTEST DRAWS 20,000

13 November

About 20,000 people have attended a protest in Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, a week after a parliamentary election they say were rigged. It was the second protest this week, aimed, the opposition says, at sparking a movement like the Orange Revolution that forced regime change in Ukraine. President Ilham Aliyev, whose New Azerbaijan Party won the election, says he will not allow that to happen. International observers said the poll did not meet democratic standards. The protests have been organised by an opposition alliance of the main Azadliq (Freedom) bloc and a number of smaller groups. The earlier protest, on Wednesday, drew 15,000 people. Organisers had hoped for a greater turnout on Sunday to spark a campaign like last year's Orange Revolution in which Viktor Yushchenko was swept to power in Ukraine following a re-run of rigged presidential elections. The protesters in Baku waved orange flags as they marched to Victory Square, directing chants of "resign" to President Aliyev. Top Azadliq leader, Ali Kerimli, said: "Let no-one think that this struggle will end. We will wage it until the end." Protester, Ruslan Asadov, 19, said: "We were told not to come here, but we did anyway. We want new elections. Everybody needs to unite for democracy." About 800 riot police were on duty. The BBC's Natalia Antelava in Baku says some of the protesters asked the police to join them. Protest leaders urged the crowd to pursue a peaceful demonstration, at which point thousands sat down and said they wanted to stay in the square beyond the time the march was allotted by authorities. But the leaders said they should go home to avoid a confrontation and the rally broke up peacefully, our correspondent says. President Aliyev's party won more than half the seats in the 125-seat parliament. Internationally-overseen exit polls in a number of districts were at odds with the official results. (BBC)

RELATIVE OF SLAIN KYRGYZ LEGISLATOR SETS SELF ON FIRE

14 November

Asan Erkinbaev, the elder brother of murdered deputy Bayaman Erkinbaev, set himself on fire in Jalalabad on 11 November to protest what the slain

legislator's relatives have termed a lax investigation, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Firemen managed to douse the flames, but Erkinbaev was hospitalized with burns. Acting Jalalabad Governor Jusup Jeenbekov arrived on the scene, and Murat Jusupov, Asan Erkinbaev's nephew, reiterated the protestors' demands: the release of Bayaman Erkinbaev's bodyguards and relatives from detention by evening, the arrest of those responsible for Erkinbaev's death within three days, and the return of the slain deputy's property to his relatives. Erkinbaev's relatives said that they will set themselves on fire if their demands are not met by 15 November, Kyrgyz Television 1 reported. Also on 11 November, Kyrgyzstan's National Security Service (SNB) announced that five people have been charged in connection with Erkinbaev's death, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Four of them are currently in custody; a fifth is in hiding in a neighboring country, the SNB said. The preliminary investigation has reportedly revealed that the suspects are members of an organized-crime group and that the murder was not committed for political reasons. (RFE/RL)

MORATORIUM ON RALLIES IN KYRGYZSTAN UNCONSTITUTIONAL - OMBUDSMAN

14 November

Kyrgyz human rights commissioner Tursunbai Bakir uulu has described the two-year moratorium on rallies proposed by the Kyrgyz Writers' Union as unconstitutional. "Commenting on the recent appeal of the Writers' Union to the president and speaker of parliament on the need to impose a two year moratorium on rallies and meetings in Kyrgyzstan, the ombudsman said that the demand contradicts the constitution," the press service of the ombudsman told Interfax on Monday. "The ombudsman notified parliament speaker Omurbek Tekebayev that the proposed moratorium won't conform with the provisions of the constitution or the Law "on Free Organization of Peaceful and Unarmed Rallies and Demonstrations." Therefore, the ombudsman considers the imposition of a moratorium on rallies unjustified," the press service said. (Interfax)

CRITIC OF KAZAKH LEADER FOUND DEAD

14 November

An outspoken critic of President Nursultan Nazarbayev was found shot to death in his home, his family's lawyer said Sunday. Zamanbek Nurkadilov was found lying face-down by his wife Saturday night, shot twice in the heart and once in the head,

said the family lawyer, Serially Musin. Nurkadilov, 61, fired as emergency situations minister last year after criticizing Nazarbayev, was supporting the opposition candidate in next month's presidential elections in this former Soviet Central Asian nation. Police chief Moldir Orazalin ruled out any political connection in the death. "We do not consider such a theory," he told reporters. Nazarbayev ordered an investigation into the death and expressed condolences to the family, describing Nurkadilov as a "prominent statesman," according to a statement. Orazalin said a revolver belonging to Nurkadilov was found next to his body and that closed-circuit television cameras monitoring Nurkadilov's home compound had not filmed any strangers entering it on Saturday. He said police had not found any traces of intrusion or fight. Nurkadilov had accused Nazarbayev of authoritarianism and demanded his resignation. (AP)

UZBEK COURT CONVICTS 15 IN UPRISINGS

14 November

Uzbekistan's top court on Monday convicted 15 men for organizing a May uprising that killed more than 180 people, ending a trial that was criticized as a government-orchestrated show with testimony coerced by torture. All 15 defendants had pleaded guilty, but human rights groups alleged the confessions came as the result of torture. Judge Bakhtiyor Jamolov said the trial had been objective and fair and passed sentences in line with prosecutors' requests, giving five defendants 20 years in prison, one man 18 years, three 17 years, two 16 years and the remaining four 14 years. "The trial was conducted in line with the law, and the verdict was based on an objective assessment of the testimony from many witnesses and defendants themselves," Jamolov said. U.S.-based Human Rights Watch, which sent observers to watch much of the proceedings, said that, among other problems, defendants did not have a chance to speak to their lawyers privately and the lawyers were appointed by the state. "Human Rights Watch has serious concerns about the fairness of this trial," said Andrea Berg, a researcher for the organization in Uzbekistan. Uzbek rights activist Surat Ikramov said in September that he believed the defendants were forced to confess under torture. Western human rights groups also released reports alleging that Uzbek police had coerced people to confess membership in extremist groups. The defendants told the court that they lured civilians into participating in demonstrations and opened fire on government troops. They said they had received funds

from unidentified "external destructive forces," as well as Islamic terrorists, including the leader of the Islamic Movement of Turkestan, Tohir Yuldosh. The sentences were announced hours after Jamolov began reading the court's lengthy verdict, which focused in part on the origins of the Akramia group, which is accused of being behind the alleged plot to destabilize the government. The court linked the group's jailed alleged leader Akram Yuldashev to 1999 bombings in Tashkent and armed incursions by Islamic militants in 1999-2000. Jamolov also repeated prosecutors' earlier accusations that Western journalists were biased, portraying the uprising as a peaceful demonstration instead of an attack by militant Islamists. Trials are scheduled in coming months for 106 other defendants, charged with lesser, related crimes. The trials are to take place in venues throughout Uzbekistan. (AP)

RUSSIA AND UZBEKISTAN SIGN TREATY

14 November

Putin and his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov signed a bilateral-cooperation treaty on 14 November, Russian news agencies reported the same day. Speaking at a press conference after talks in the Kremlin with Karimov, Putin said the treaty takes Russia and Uzbekistan "to the closest possible degree of interaction." The agreement paves the way for long-term cooperation in trade and security, including defense coordination and intelligence sharing, mutual use of military facilities, and cooperation in battling terrorism and drug trafficking. "We think there is a need to do everything possible to neutralize the narcotic and terrorist threat coming from Afghanistan, and we will, of course, continue to provide our neighbors with help in developing their economic and social infrastructure," Putin said. The agreement also aims to boost trade and cooperation in the energy, food, and agricultural sectors. Speaking at the same Kremlin press conference, Karimov said on 14 November that he hopes the new treaty will strengthen Russia's position in Central Asia. The "consolidation of Russia's presence in Central Asia will be a reliable guarantee of peace and stability in the region" and will benefit Russia, Uzbekistan, and the rest of the world, Karimov said. At their talks, Putin and Karimov also discussed Uzbekistan's pending membership in the Eurasian Economic Community, which comprises Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan is scheduled to join by the end of the year. (RIA-Novosti)

ARMENIAN PRESIDENT ENVISAGES PROGRESS ON KARABAKH SETTLEMENT IN 2006

14 November

Meeting in Athens during an official visit to Greece with members of that country's Armenian community, Robert Kocharian said that the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmen are urging a meeting in January 2006 between himself and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Kocharian said now the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections are over, the co-chairs perceive a window of opportunity for resolving the Karabakh conflict, a window that will again close in 2007-2008 when parliamentary and presidential elections are due in Armenia. He referred to a "favorable option for the conflict settlement," but did not elaborate. U.S. Minsk Group co-Chairman Ambassador Steven Mann met on 8 November in Ankara with Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul to discuss how Turkey could contribute to the Karabakh peace process, according to the "Turkish Daily News" on 10 November. Mann too spoke of a "window of opportunity," noting that the settlement process is "moving in the right direction." (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT FIRES ANOTHER LOCAL GOVERNOR

15 November

Ilham Aliyev dismissed Zakatala Governor Vagif Ragimov on 14 November for failing to comply with his May and October decrees on ensuring that the 6 November parliamentary election was free, fair, and transparent. On 12 November, the Central Election Commission annulled the voting results in Constituency No. 110 (Zakatala) on the grounds that final protocols appeared to have been falsified at 19 of the 41 polling stations to ensure a win for the candidate representing the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan party. On 13 November, police in Zakatala used force to disperse opposition supporters who staged a protest against the election outcome. Fifteen participants were arrested, of whom two were sentenced the following day to seven and 10 days' imprisonment. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKHSTAN THREATENS TO SUE COMEDIAN

15 November

Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry threatened legal action

Monday against a British comedian who wins laughs by portraying the central Asian state as a country populated by drunks who enjoy cow-punching as a sport. Sacha Baron Cohen, who portrays a spoof Kazakh television presenter Borat in his "Da Ali G Show," has won fame ridiculing Kazakhstan, the world's ninth largest country yet still little known to many in the West, on British and U.S. channels. Cohen appears to have drawn official Kazakh ire after he hosted the annual MTV Europe Music Awards show in Lisbon earlier this month as Borat, who arrived in an Air Kazakh propeller plane controlled by a one-eyed pilot clutching a vodka bottle. "We do not rule out that Mr. Cohen is serving someone's political order designed to present Kazakhstan and its people in a derogatory way," Kazakh Foreign Ministry spokesman Yerzhan Ashykbayev told a news briefing. "We reserve the right to any legal action to prevent new pranks of the kind." He declined to elaborate. (Reuters)

EU IMPOSES VISA BAN ON 12 UZBEK OFFICIALS

15 November

In a 14 November press release on the Council of the European Union's website (<http://ue.eu.int>), the EU announced that it has adopted a common position on sanctions against the Uzbek government for excessive use of force in Andijon, including a visa ban for 12 Uzbek officials and an embargo on EU arms sales to Uzbekistan. The measures, which will be in effect for one year, ban Interior Minister Zakirjan Almatov, National Security Service head Rustam Inoyatov, Defense Minister Kadir Gulamov, and nine other mid- and high-ranking officials "who are directly responsible for the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force in Andijan" from travel to the EU. After one year, the EU will review the sanctions on the basis of the conduct of future trials, detention and harassment of dissenters, Uzbek "cooperation with any independent, international rapporteur," the "outcome of any independent, international inquiry," and "any action that demonstrates the willingness of the Uzbek authorities to adhere to the principles of respect for human rights, rule of law and fundamental freedoms." (RFE/RL)