

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

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IN THE CONTEXT OF
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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program*

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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

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

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

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

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

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IS A U.S. STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA EMERGING?

Stephen Blank

The U.S. has started to formulate and implement more comprehensive policies for Central Asia. The deepening involvement in the war in Afghanistan is the principal, but not sole cause for this policy initiative. Russia's attempts to impose its hegemony upon Central Asia and oblige the U.S. to recognize it have triggered a reaction in Washington. Likewise, China's completion of the pipeline to Turkmenistan and major investment projects in Central Asia forced the U.S. to devise new ways to enhance its energy and economic profile there as well. As a result, in early 2010, we now see the elements of a new and stronger policy initiative towards Central Asia.

BACKGROUND: In 2009 it was difficult to discern a clear U.S. strategy for Central Asia as a whole beyond the AF-Pak strategy relating to the war in Afghanistan. Consequently, Russia and China sought to expand their presence there at its expense. Russia sought to become involved in massive hydroelectric projects, punish Turkmenistan for insisting upon higher prices for gas, and expand its military presence by adding a new base at Osh, thereby checking Uzbekistan's pressure on its neighbors. Moscow also sought to expel the U.S. from its base at Manas. Only timely U.S. resolve and Kyrgyz diplomacy allowed Washington to retrieve its position and strengthen Kyrgyzstan's posture vis-à-vis Russia.

China reacted by bailing out Turkmenistan from Russian pressure and completing its massive gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to China. While this strengthened China vis-à-vis Russia and the U.S. in Central Asia, it also deflected gas from Europe to China, making it harder for the U.S. to compete in gas-rich Turkmenistan.

By December, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Krol told the Senate that "The region is at the fulcrum of key U.S. security,

economic and political interests. It demands attention and respect and our most diligent efforts. The Obama Administration is committed to that very approach". Those were not just words. Other Administration documents recognize the fragility of the region's security situation. Therefore, the U.S. is now pursuing vigorous multi-dimensional initiatives going beyond the war in Afghanistan, which will allow it to maintain a presence in Central Asia after troops begin leaving Afghanistan in 2011. Krol announced the formation of a regular high-level dialogue with Central Asian states to help them resist both Russian and Chinese incursions on their independence, work with the U.S. towards that end, and foster regional cooperation. Obviously, this also means renewed U.S. interest in large-scale investments. More strikingly, high-level visits to the region have resumed.

President Islam Karimov's action plan of January 2010 to put bilateral ties on a more productive and serious basis and the recent tour of Central Asia by U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke underscore the U.S.-Uzbekistan rapprochement. That action plan states that Uzbekistan will "insist on high-level participation in the political consultations from



Richard Holbrooke

the American side – experts from the State Department, National Security Council, and other U.S. government agencies”, though no specific plans have yet been announced.

Holbrooke stressed that he regards the real security threat in Central Asia as coming from Al-Qaeda rather than the Taliban and indicated his desire to strengthen cooperation with Uzbekistan over security. Karimov also recently expressed “firm allegiance on behalf of Uzbekistan” to further develop ties with Washington to bring about lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. The U.S. also clearly wants to improve the bilateral relationship. Secretary of State Clinton is expected to visit Uzbekistan in late spring, as are delegations of U.S. businessmen. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN), the landline from Riga, Latvia through Russia to Central Asia and Afghanistan, which is working successfully, is expected to create substantial economic opportunities for Uzbekistan and discussions about military-technical cooperation with the U.S. have taken place.

Holbrooke also expressed U.S. desires to improve relations with Tajikistan because of its centrality to conflict resolution in Afghanistan and discussed both water and energy issues with the Tajik government. In Kyrgyzstan he conducted discussions about the renewal of the U.S. lease at Manas and also the U.S. intention to build a training center at Batken in Southern Kyrgyzstan with Kyrgyz support.

Kyrgyz political analyst Mars Sariyev suspects that once the facility is built, U.S. instructors will come in to train Kyrgyz regular and/or Special Forces. This move clearly looks like a defeat for Moscow. Similarly, Kazakhstan also indicated a desire to upgrade ties with the U.S. Finally, the U.S. is now seeking more vigorously than before to gain access to Turkmen energy projects.

IMPLICATIONS: The implications of this new vigor relate not only to the U.S. presence. Both Washington and Beijing are clearly showing Moscow that they will not allow Russia to dominate the region and that they possess the resources to back up this assertion. Moreover, they are now committed to using them on the ground, not just in Afghanistan, but also across a wide range of investments in energy and other forms of infrastructure. Likewise, they are attempting to become more involved with local agendas. Russia is announcing support for regional hydroelectric projects as is China, and the U.S. is now clearly interested in those projects as well.

Undoubtedly, the U.S. business and economic interests coming to the region and that are linked to the NDN will also lead it in the direction of broader economic involvement with the region. Because of Russia's fundamentally under-performing economy, Moscow will likely find it harder to compete with both China and the U.S. if they commit substantial resources to Central Asia. But Moscow will also find it politically harder than before to crack the whip because China's example in Turkmenistan and the U.S. example at Batken and Manas have told Central Asian states that they now have more options than before to obtain great power support for their independence and for projects they consider vital to their needs. They can thus resist Moscow with greater security than previously, especially as it appears that Moscow has reached or is close to reaching the effective limits of its capability to project power into Central Asia.

While Russia will hardly retreat from Central Asia, we can expect to see more direct U.S.-China competition in energy and economic projects, if not on military issues as well. Krol's remarks were unprecedented among previous U.S. administrations in underlining the abiding multi-dimensional importance of the region to the U.S. and the willingness of the Obama Administration to back up those words with tangible commitment of material and intangible political resources in support of that claim. Manas and Batken show that the U.S. will not let Russia push it out of Central Asia or operate there exclusively on the basis of Russia's sufferance. Likewise, we can expect more Chinese involvement as its investments in Central Asia grow and as the situation in Xinjiang, which drives much of its policy,

remains tense. This could lead to a situation in which Central Asia becomes added to the list of issues where U.S. and Chinese interests are in more overt political and economic competition if not open clashes.

CONCLUSIONS: The Obama Administration has evidently decided to make an important policy stand in Central Asia beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan. Moreover, it is likely to invest more high-level political resources there and actively promote expanded economic ties between the U.S. and Central Asian states. While those governments will undoubtedly welcome this support and investment of those resources because they add to their room for maneuver among their neighboring great powers, Russia and China will obviously strive to minimize the U.S. presence, thrust, and impact. But they will also simultaneously be competing against each other; a fact that can only contribute to the greater independence and freedom of action of Central Asian states, a primary goal of U.S. policy. To the extent that the U.S. deems it necessary to expand its presence in Central Asia to shore up its campaign in Afghanistan it will in many ways, both foreseen and possibly unforeseen, contribute to the ability of these states to stand on their own feet, an outcome that is necessary both in regard to the threat of terrorism emanating from Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their affiliates, and also in regard to the threat to their effective independence coming from Moscow and/or Beijing.

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ARMENIA AND GEORGIA IN THE CONTEXT OF TURKISH-ARMENIAN RAPPROCHEMENT

Vahagn Muradyan

The Turkish-Armenian protocols signed last year in Zurich raised concerns that the perspective of Georgia's decreased significance as a transit country for Armenia may boost nationalist demands around the Armenian minority in Georgia and cause new instability. While the protocols may not materialize in the foreseeable future, thus never inducing visible change in Yerevan's policies, developments observed since the activation of Turkish-Armenian negotiations suggest that in case of full normalization Yerevan may attempt more assertive policies to uphold the cultural rights of Armenians in Georgia, without supporting their political demands and calls for autonomy.

BACKGROUND: Armenian policies towards Georgia have been traditionally shaped by two factors: interest in safe transit for the Armenian and Armenia-bound goods through Georgia, and the situation with the Armenian minority in Georgia's Samtskhe-Javakheti region with the accompanying issue of preserving the Armenian cultural heritage in Georgia. Closed borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan, leaving Georgia as the only route to Russian and European markets, have developed a strong sense among the Armenian leadership of dependence on Georgia. This reality made Yerevan tailor its policies to the transit needs and cooperate with Tbilisi to manage the grievances of the Armenian minority in Georgia.

On the regional level, a lack of relations with Turkey has always been an important, although a non-active variable in Yerevan's interactions with Tbilisi. Animosity between Georgia and Russia, Armenia's strategic ally, on the other hand, has had a direct impact, which in recent years created at least two situations that tested Yerevan's commitment to stability in Georgia.

In 2005, the stated policy of non-interference in Georgia's domestic affairs amid the crisis over

the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki was an important occasion for President Robert Kocharyan, a hard-liner with a nationalist agenda, to demonstrate adherence to the already established line. The base was a source of employment for many and was also perceived as a security guarantee for the Armenian community populating a region bordering Turkey. The protests of Javakheti Armenians in March 2005 against the removal of the base triggered a visit of President Kocharyan to Georgia on April 1, 2005, at the invitation of Georgian President Saakashvili, and was widely perceived as a contribution on Armenia's part to stabilize the situation.

The August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent was yet another predicament. It put Armenia under pressure, prompting President Serzh Sargsyan to publicly pose the question of recognition of the two entities and elaborate a position that would both find understanding in Russia and reassure Georgia. In his annual speech to the diplomatic corps delivered on September 3, 2008, Sargsyan stated it was impossible to consider the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Nagorno-Karabakh – an entity in

a similar situation – remained unrecognized by Armenia.

Cautious policies of the political leadership have always been in sharp contrast to public demands for adopting a harder line on problems in Javakheti, especially frequently voiced by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation – Dashnaktsutiun Party as well as many Yerevan-based Javakheti Armenians who have successfully organized themselves around this idea in Armenia's political system.

IMPLICATIONS: How would possible Turkish-Armenian reconciliation influence Armenia's policies towards Georgia? The generally skeptical outlook for full and rapid normalization does not allow any definite conclusions. However, certain new features displayed after the activation of the process, as well as societal expectations in Armenia, imply that a potential opening of the border could make Yerevan more responsive to the cultural demands of Armenians in Georgia.

President Sargsyan's understanding of Turkey's role has already marked a departure from his predecessor's policies that sought to isolate Turkey from regional affairs.

The first and so far most serious sign that reconciliation with Turkey may impact the usual format of Georgian-Armenian relations came on September 1, 2009, the day after the Turkish-Armenian protocols were made public. In an unprecedented statement, President Sargsyan mentioned the protection of Armenian monuments, registration of the Armenian Church in Georgia and recognition of Armenian as a regional language in Javakheti as cornerstones for strengthening Armenia's friendship with Georgia. While the speech announced aspiration for a more assertive role in advocating the rights of Georgia's Armenians, the exhaustive nature of the three principles – strictly confined to cultural demands – also implied a delimitation of the areas where Yerevan felt it could legitimately intervene and by default underscored

Armenia's attention to Tbilisi's concerns about political objectives advanced by national minorities.

The speech also signaled a significant shift from Kocharyan's vision for the region, where Turkey was perceived as a security threat and maintaining unproblematic ties with Georgia outranked initiatives with Ankara. Consistent with this line, Kocharyan, while upholding non-interference in Georgia's internal affairs, showed sympathy for the security concerns of Javakheti



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Armenians vis-à-vis Turkey. In contrast, cultural demands were given less prominence, and Armenians were urged to learn Georgian instead of seeking an official status for the language.

On the societal level, the expectation that the rapprochement will bring about a harder line resonated well with the organizations advocating the cause of Javakheti Armenians. Shirak Torosyan, an MP from President Sargsyan's Republican Party and chairman of "Javakhq [Javakheti] Compatriot Association" stated that after alternative routes are opened, Armenia will toughen its stance on problems in Javakheti.

Divisions over the protocols in Armenian society were also replicated in discussions about Georgia, indicating opposition to sharp policy revisions. The Civilitas Foundation – established by Vartan Oskanyan, Foreign Minister in Kocharyan's administration and an opponent of the protocols – cautioned in its 2009 report against "complacency" regarding Georgia, even after opening of the border. This understanding was adequately grasped in Tbilisi too. Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri pointed out that the opening will not affect transit prices for Armenia while visiting Yerevan in January 2010.

Concerns about "complacency", however, may have been exaggerated. As the reopening on March 1 of the Upper Larsi checkpoint between Russia and Georgia showed, President Sargsyan, while seeking relations with Turkey and probing a new tone on Javakheti, continued to prioritize relations with Tbilisi and worked on restoring communications through Georgia. This became evident with Sargsyan's February 27 trip to Georgia to discuss the reopening with Mikheil Saakashvili, and was confirmed by statements that since October 2009 Armenia

played a key mediating role, alongside with the Swiss, to secure the opening. This effectively showed that even in the fall of 2009, when a rapid ratification of the protocols was widely expected, Armenia did not regard Turkey as an alternative to Georgia.

This attitude seems to have been reciprocated by the Georgian side. Georgian officials announced that the checkpoint was opened at the request of Armenia, the main beneficiary of the overland link with Russia. However, against the backdrop of Turkish-Armenian talks, the opening also revealed Georgia's interest in buttressing its position as a transit route for Armenia, besides demonstrating Tbilisi's commitment to neighborly relations.

CONCLUSIONS: A possible opening with Turkey would enhance Armenia's regional role and offer a better bargaining position with Georgia. However, serious policy revisions that may endanger relations with Tbilisi are unlikely. The low level of trust between Armenia and Turkey will sustain Armenia's sense of dependence on Tbilisi even in the event of an actual opening of the border. Avoiding adventurous policies towards Georgia has been the hallmark of all successive governments in Armenia, and any policy shifts introduced as a result of normalization with Turkey would likely be limited to more emphasis on cultural demands with continued consideration of Tbilisi's concerns and expectations. A failure of the reconciliation process, on the other hand, will likely result in backtracking to Kocharyan's vision of the region and discourage Yerevan to attempt a more active role in advocating the cultural rights of Javakheti Armenians.

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RUSSIA SENDS MESSAGES TO WASHINGTON IN NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE

Dmitry Shlapentokh

Dmitry Rogozhin, Russian representative to NATO, and General Boris Gromov, a general who fought in Afghanistan, recently published an open letter about NATO in The New York Times. NATO was presented as an alliance lacking a will to fight, where especially the Europeans members were ready to cut and run in Afghanistan. They concluded this would be a great disaster and that the West should remember that the USSR had defended “Western civilization” at large in Afghanistan. Still, the U.S. should not expect much cooperation from Russia. A considerable segment of the Russian elite continues to be quite suspicious of U.S. intentions and its general ability to pursue realistic policies in Afghanistan.

BACKGROUND: The sense that Muslim extremists could pose a much greater danger to Russia than to the West, and that the West’s weakness could create serious problems for Russia has increased recently as Russian observers watch NATO’s increasing problems in Afghanistan. These observers have obviously noted the recent changes in NATO tactics, attempting to modify the “Vietnamization” of the conflict with an emphasis on the expansion of Afghanistan’s army and police. This certainly differs from the Vietnam War through the strategy to buy the loyalty of part of the Taliban forces. Russian observers are implicitly skeptical of the capacity of this program to stabilize Afghanistan without a considerable presence of NATO forces.

One of the major reasons for their skepticism is Russia’s own experience with the “Chechenization” of the North Caucasian conflict. In the beginning, this strategy seemed successful through lavish subsidies to Ramzan Kadyrov for “outsourcing” the fighting with the resistance to Chechen forces under his command. However, recent developments indicate that this policy might not be working. Not only has Kadyrov been unable to eliminate

the jihadists – the explosion on the Nevsky Express being a clear indicator of that – but Kadyrov himself has also increasingly become a problem. Russian observers have little reason to believe that the attempt to relieve NATO forces from fighting in Afghanistan would be more successful than Russia’s similar attempt in Chechnya.

There is clear anxiety in Russia that if the last design fails, NATO would cut and run starting with its European allies, and wrapping its retreat in statements acceptable to the public. In such a case, Russia could well face a Taliban spillover to Central Asia and beyond, regardless of Taliban declarations that they are only interested in liberating Afghanistan from foreign occupiers. The Russian elite is also concerned that retreating NATO forces, and especially those of the U.S., could well nudge the Taliban and similar Islamist extremists to focus more on Russia and Central Asia. This is seen as a potential strategy of NATO and the West in general, diverting the extremists’ attention from Western targets. Under such a scenario, Russia has few forces at its disposal. While a broad alliance with the Central Asian states exists on paper, their ability to coordinate



Dmitry Rogozhin (AP)

Afghanistan now rather than during the Bush administration is not only due to fear of an Islamist explosion of Central Asia. The Kremlin assumes that the U.S. will scrap the anti-missile defense shield in Europe. The U.S. has claimed that the shield will not be directed toward preventing a potential retaliatory strike from Russia. U.S. officials have repeatedly proclaimed that the shield is designed to protect Europe from a possible Iranian strike. However, regardless of

military efforts and fight together is seriously under question. Uzbekistan has serious problems with neighboring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have approached China and the U.S. despite Moscow's objections.

It is thus questionable whether these states, together with Moscow, could counter a spillover of Islamism from Afghanistan. The underlying reasoning behind Rogozhin's and Gromov's message to the U.S. on Moscow's behalf is that Russia in no way objects to NATO, and especially the U.S., fighting in Afghanistan. This even implies that Russia could well increase its help to the U.S. and the alliance in general –obviously in exchange for a hefty geopolitical payment. This is however hardly in accordance with the strategic planning of the Obama administration and thus the prospects for close cooperation between NATO and Russia continues to be quite unclear.

IMPLICATIONS: Russia's desire to increase its cooperation with the U.S. in



Boris Gromov

the actual reasons for the U.S. to deploy a missile defense shield in Europe, the Russian elite have regarded the shield as being directed against Russia. The decision to install the defense shield in Europe was taken during the Bush administration and was one of the major reasons why the relationship between Russia and the U.S. soured at the end of the Bush presidency. And Obama's initial hints that the decision would be reconsidered induced the Kremlin to soften its stance in dealing with Washington. However, the fact that the plan is still in place signals, from Moscow's perspective, that the U.S. and NATO continually sees Russia as the enemy.

The same Rogozhin who called on the U.S. and NATO to join Russia in confronting Islamists has expressed his displeasure with the U.S. decision to keep the defense shield in Europe. In one of his op-ed pieces in the semi-official *Izvestiia*, he posed the rhetorical question of how one should relate the recent manifestations of the U.S. unfriendliness with its call on Russia to cooperate in the Middle East in general and Afghanistan in particular.

The Russian pundits see the U.S. not only as unfriendly to Russia but also as a risky and, in some ways, irrational player. U.S. policy in the Middle East, and especially Iran, indicates all of these considerations. The sense that the U.S. is both still hostile to Russia and not always rational in its geopolitical posture in the Middle East shapes Russian attitudes toward U.S. policy in Afghanistan.

The wobbling and lukewarm approach to cooperation with the U.S. is clearly visible in

Russia's approach to Iran. The approach to Afghanistan is equally inconsistent and tempered. To start with, Russian authorities have stated that Russia would help the U.S. to transfer goods by using Russian planes, but that it would do this only "on a commercial basis". Thus, the U.S. and NATO should pay for everything – and Russia would demand a high price. This implies that Russia's engagement in the war in Afghanistan is not so much of a political as of a commercial nature, scarcely different from its involvement in other enterprises such as the building of the Bushehr nuclear plant in Iran. As if to emphasize Russia's limited involvement in Afghanistan, Rogozhin stated that Russia would never again send troops to Afghanistan.

CONCLUSIONS: It is clear that Russia is alarmed by the possibility of a total defeat of the U.S. and NATO's and their withdrawal from Afghanistan, potentially leaving the Taliban in full control of the country. Still, the Kremlin has not so far received the geopolitical payment it expected from the Obama administration. Even those who expect the alliance to stay in Afghanistan until the situation is stabilized are quite suspicious of U.S. intentions and even question Washington's ability to make rational decisions at a time when the U.S. is in decline. Consequently, Russian assistance to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan can be expected to remain quite limited.

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THE US-KYRGYZ MILITARY CENTER AND KYRGYZSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY

Roman Muzalevsky

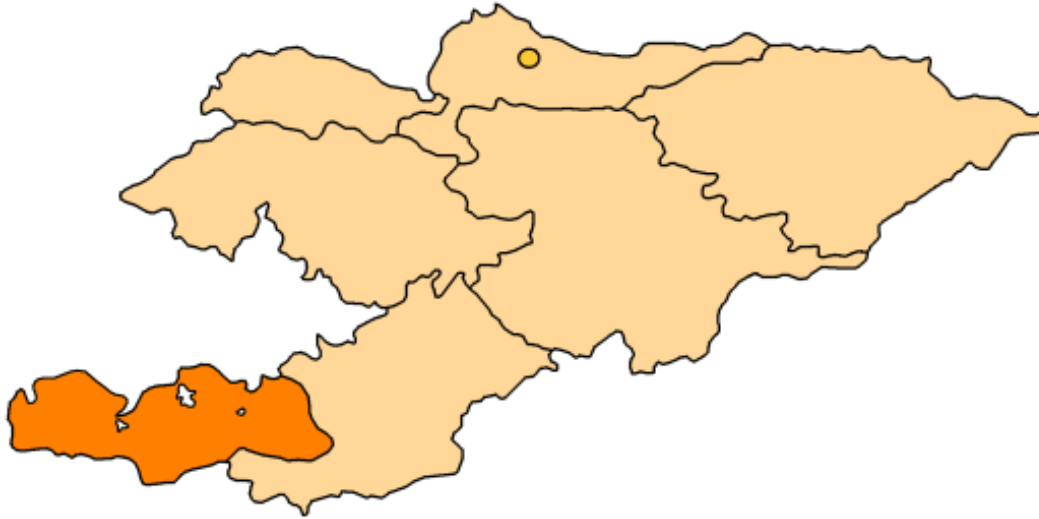
The U.S.-Kyrgyz negotiations on opening a military center in Batken have raised controversial security and geopolitical considerations that might become momentous for the Fergana Valley and Kyrgyzstan's multi-vector foreign policy. Kyrgyzstan entertains legitimate concerns about its poorly protected borders that have seen activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and drug trafficking networks extending from Central Asia to Europe. But amidst intensified water and border disputes, competition of great powers, an enhanced ability of the Central Asian states to influence regional dynamics, U.S. plans to withdraw from Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan's own unstable domestic position, the center might well spur militarization of the region.

BACKGROUND: On March 9, the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek announced that the U.S. had earmarked US\$5.5 million for constructing a military training center that would belong to Kyrgyzstan and defend the porous borders identified by Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev as “the biggest threat” to the nation’s security. The center will be located in Batken province in the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley bordering Tajikistan’s Tavildara area, which was once a safe haven for Islamic forces affiliated with the IMU, and provide training to the Kyrgyz armed forces as part of an overall effort to address radical, terrorist, and narcotics trafficking activity.

The announcement came a day before the meeting of U.S. CENTCOM Commander David Petraeus with Bakiev on March 10 that focused on the bilateral efforts in Afghanistan and the continuing U.S. presence at Manas, and several days after the visit by U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke to the region seeking to boost support for the military campaign as NATO forces prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan by 2011.

The *Belyi Parus* newspaper reports that talks on the center date back to 2008. But as then, no related agreements have been signed. An unidentified source close to the President suggested in an interview to *Gazeta.ru* that the related negotiations were not even taking place and that such a center would not be constructed. There is also no clarity regarding the lease of the Manas transit center that expires in June 2010 and requires a 180 day advance notice before the deadline to terminate the lease. Otherwise, it will automatically renew for one more year. However, Pentagon officials and Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Kadyrbek Sarbaev stated that no lease extension agreements had been concluded during Holbrooke’s visit.

The military center will certainly upset Moscow, despite Petraeus’ reassurances that the U.S. does not intend to deploy another base in Kyrgyzstan. While there is no evidence, the timing of the decision on the center, visits by Holbrooke and Petraeus to Kyrgyzstan, and Russia’s plans to establish a base in the south of the country might suggest that the U.S. attempts to counter Russia’s moves in the



Batken

militarizing Fergana Valley through opening of such center.

In 2009, Kyrgyzstan agreed to the deployment of a second Russian base in Kyrgyzstan as part of the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force. But the deal has been stalled ever since. Three possible interpretations on the delay, unsubstantiated with evidence, could be advanced. First, planning and bureaucracy might be standing in the way. Second, both sides may have disagreements on the location and financial arrangements. Kyrgyzstan, which is interested in promoting development of its provinces and strengthening its military preparedness given the perceived hostility from its neighbors, has insisted on Batken as the preferred location for the base. Russia, in turn, had its eyes on the southern city of Osh, which houses an international airport. Finally, the delay may be related to Russia's promised but now suspended loan to Kyrgyzstan for the construction of the Kambarata-1 and the announcement on the military center in Batken.

In this context, Uzbekistan's opposition to military bases in the vicinity of its borders and the water projects of its neighbors might have

affected the delay of the Russian base in Kyrgyzstan and impacted Kyrgyz interest in establishing the military center close to Uzbekistan's border. Russia now supports Uzbekistan's call for international feasibility studies of the Tajik

Rogun and Kyrgyz Kambarata-1 dams, which may leave Uzbekistan with reduced regional leverage and a plethora of economic ills if constructed. Possible concerns about the growing U.S.-Uzbek military cooperation and Kyrgyzstan's supposed failure to remove the U.S. base from the country in return for the 1.7 billion Kambarata-1 loan might have induced Russia to side with gas-rich Uzbekistan and withhold the loan to Kyrgyzstan. This, in turn, suggests that the U.S.-Kyrgyz center deal could be a way for Kyrgyzstan to force Russia to reconsider its suspension of the loan, proceed with Russian base deployment on Kyrgyz terms, or both, especially given that Kyrgyzstan has reportedly not secured a similar loan from China. However, no evidence exists to support these considerations.

In the interim, tensions have escalated between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, especially after the former announced plans to construct the Kambarata-1 dam. As a result, several people have died on both sides of the joint border since 2010. Uzbekistan also closed a large border crossing with Kyrgyzstan and the railway

connection to its areas in the Fergana Valley through Tajikistan.

IMPLICATIONS: Kyrgyzstan has recently faced severe energy, border security and financial problems that have come to represent a serious challenge to the incumbent regime – a challenge not exclusively coming from the domestic audience dissatisfied with corruption, poverty, and failed policies. The international community and regional states now question the extent to which the Kyrgyz multi-vector foreign policy can bring multiple benefits to the country and its partners, as well.

This does not negate the need for cultivation of the U.S.-Kyrgyz relations or the effectiveness of the center to achieve its stated objectives. After all, the center seeks to interdict terrorist and drug trafficking activity that might only intensify after the U.S. military disengagement from Afghanistan – an exit bonus all concerned parties should welcome. It will be recalled that the IMU militants, some of whom are currently driven back to Central Asia from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas by NATO operations there, already infiltrated Kyrgyz territory in 1999 and 2000 in an attempt to enter Uzbekistan and undermine its secular regime.

However, addressing the implicit concerns of its partners about the U.S.-funded center will be hard for Kyrgyzstan given its commitments within the CSTO, SCO, CIS and dependence on Russian oil and gasoline, Uzbek gas, Kazakh electricity, and Chinese goods. Indeed, a multitude of “sticks” exist that could be utilized by the country’s neighbors. Cutting deliveries of jet fuel re-exported by Kyrgyzstan to coalition forces in Afghanistan, currently bringing US\$ 36-80 million in annual revenues is one. Kyrgyzstan might also face a slim chance of joining the Customs Union that comprises Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.

Kyrgyzstan can further suffer from additional customs regulations undermining its re-exports of Chinese goods to other markets. Russia alone accounts for 30 percent of the trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan.

Meanwhile, Iran’s Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki stated on March 8 that foreign military bases in the region do not enhance security and stem from “interventional and expansionist aims”. The statement comes after Iranian special forces allegedly captured an agent on February 23 who was trained by Western intelligence services and heading to the transit center at Manas in Kyrgyzstan to meet with U.S. officials. This affair galvanized portions of the Kyrgyz population which feel that the country’s relations with neighbors only suffer as a result of military cooperation with the U.S., Russia, or both.

CONCLUSIONS: In this connection, and given the potential expansion of the U.S. and Russian military presence in Central Asia, the center might trigger militarization of the Fergana Valley and provisionally shelve Kyrgyzstan’s multi-vector foreign policy. Being the only country in the world hosting both a U.S. and a Russian military base, Kyrgyzstan has stood on two “legs” and accommodated the short-term interests of these major powers in the region for years. But some feel that the mistrust generated by the country’s recent policies and new initiatives, including with partners far afield, might corner Kyrgyzstan, leaving its seemingly crippling multi-vector foreign policy with too little room for maneuver.

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FIELD REPORTS

PRESIDENTIAL PARTY WINS LANDSLIDE IN TAJIK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Alexander Sodiqov

The February 28 election to Tajikistan's lower house of parliament predictably ended in a landslide victory for the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDPT), headed by President Emomali Rakhmon. With 43 elected party members and 12 nominally independent candidates that had been fielded and supported by the party, the PDPT has extended its control of the 63-seat parliament for another five years. The remaining eight seats went to the Agrarian Party (APT), Communist Party (CPT), Islamic Revival Party (IRPT) and the Party of Economic Reforms (PERT) which will be represented in the parliament with two seats each. Another three parties – the Democratic Party (DPT), Social-Democratic Party (SDPT) and Socialist Party (SPT) – failed to pass the electoral threshold.

International observers and opposition parties have accused the authorities of widespread fraud. The election monitoring arm of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said the polls failed to meet many key international standards for democratic elections. The election watchdog's sizeable team of observers reported "serious irregularities", including massive family and proxy voting, ballot stuffing, voting without proper identification, media bias in favor of the ruling party, and most notably flawed vote counting and tabulation processes. A statement from the United States embassy in Dushanbe noted similar irregularities observed by its staff present at various polling stations.

Major Tajik opposition parties, including the CPT, DPT, IRPT and SDPT, called the ballot unfair and

undemocratic and promised to file complaints, although all previous attempts to challenge fraudulent election results through the Tajik legal system have been unsuccessful. The Islamic Revival Party – Central Asia's only official Islamic party and Tajikistan's main opposition movement – said the party was robbed of its rightful share of the vote. Speaking to journalists on March 3, the IRPT leader Mukhiddin Kabiri said the party would stage street protests and hunger strikes if Tajik courts fail to properly consider complaints filed by the party's activists. Addressing a news conference on the day after Kabiri's statement, Sayfullo Safarov, deputy director of the government-run Strategic Research Center, said such threats endangered security in Tajikistan.

The IRPT's disappointment with ballot results could well be anticipated given the massive efforts and resources the party had invested in image building and voter outreach since the last election. Independent observers agree that the IRPT was the most visible party throughout an otherwise passive election campaign. Many analysts predicted that the party would do much better at the polls than just retaining the two seats it had held in the outgoing parliament. Mukhiddin Kabiri argues that the IRPT won around 30 percent of the vote through party list voting, but the final ballot results were falsified in favor of the ruling party. Despite strong frustration with the election, the IRPT decided to participate in the work of the new parliament in a move aimed at maintaining "peace and stability in Tajikistan", according to Kabiri.

The Communist Party which has lost one of the three seats it held in the outgoing parliament also voiced a rare harsh criticism of the election. Speaking to journalists shortly after the results were announced, CPT leader Shodi Shabdolov called the ballot a "parody" and claimed widespread fraud had been committed by the electoral authorities.

The two youngest Tajik political parties that will be represented in the new parliament, the Agrarian Party and Party of Economic Reforms, have little reason to complain about the ballot results. For both, it was their first parliamentary election, and their success has been widely regarded as a manipulation by the Tajik authorities to create an appearance of a pluralist and democratic system. Tajik political analyst Parviz Mullojonov believes that the APT and PERT are "essentially two branches of the ruling party".

Facing such criticism, the Tajik election authorities and the ruling party leaders deflected claims of vote fraud that might deprive the election of legitimacy.

The head of Tajikistan's Central Commission for Elections and Referenda (CCER) Mirzoali Boltuev said there were only minor violations to the poll which did not affect the election outcome. PDPT deputy leader Safar Safarov dismissed the OSCE's claims of massive irregularities, suggesting that observers deployed by the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as the ruling party's own observers did not identify significant violations.

In an effort to prevent further alienation of opposition parties, President Emomali Rakhmon urged representatives of different parties to put aside political disagreements and join efforts in addressing major issues facing the country. Addressing the first session of the new parliament on 16 March, the Tajik leader said he had instructed his executive office to carefully review the opposition parties' election programs and use their strongest components in developing government strategies and policy documents.

IRAN SEEKS A ROLE IN KARABAKH SETTLEMENT

Mina Muradova

As the peace talks on Nagorno-Karabakh continue, the interest and involvement of regional players increases. In recent months, Iran appears to seek to increase its role in Caucasus along with its competitors, Turkey and Russia. This also seems connected with the reduced activities of the U.S. in the region.

The 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia drew the attention of the international community, and especially of the main regional actors, to the "frozen" but unresolved Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The events pushed the great powers, all with their own economical and political interests in the South Caucasus and the oil-rich Caspian region, to accelerate the peace process.

Turkey started actively promoting its Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform to reinforce its

influence in the Southern Caucasus. Later on, Turkey even proposed a chairmanship for itself within the OSCE Minsk Group on conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh, a format consisting of co-chairs from the U.S., Russia and France.

In 2009, the Minsk Group co-chairs held six meetings with the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Three meetings were initiated by the Russian President, a strong indication of Russia's desire to lead the process.

In February 2010, Mammadbagir Bahrami, Iran's Ambassador to Azerbaijan, publicly accused the OSCE Minsk Group of being unable to solve the conflict and presented the opportunity of a "fair" solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by "using the potential" of Iran.

The Iranian diplomat stated that “The OSCE Minsk Group has been dealing with the conflict for over 18 years but has failed to settle it. Whether it was not able to or did not want to do this, the fact is that the problem still remains unsettled. Perhaps, the co-chair countries are watching over their own interests...”

Bahrami added that Iran believes regional problems should be settled by the countries of the region themselves, and therefore proposed to use Iran’s potential to assist in finding a fair solution to the Karabakh issue. Tehran started actively promoting its assistance after the “consent of Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev”, as reported by the Fineko agency on February 25. Such consent was allegedly expressed during the visit of Azerbaijan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov to Iran in December 2009.

Indeed, following his meeting with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Iran’s Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki stated that negotiations on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were in a “stalemate” and that Iran was ready to fill a mediating role in its settlement. In response to this, Mammadyarov expressed his hope that Iran would continue its efforts to restore peace and stability in the region.

Iran has also forwarded concerns over a potential peacekeeping force in the Karabakh conflict zone. The deployment of a peacekeeping force is one of the principles on Karabakh settlement which were proposed by the OSCE Minsk Group. Iran’s Ambassador to Armenia, Seyed Ali Saghayyan, said at a press conference in Yerevan in February that “Iran certainly has its own considerations and views about the composition of a peacekeeping force that might be deployed in the conflict zone”. The ambassador did not specify whose participation in such a peacekeeping operation would be unacceptable to Iran. However, Iran’s Parliament Chairman Ali Larijani pointed out that “the deployment of foreign troops in the region only makes the issue more complicated, which is not favorable to any regional country.”

Iran has previously, unsuccessfully, served as a mediator in the Karabakh conflict. Iran started its mediation initiatives in March 1992 when it invited high-ranking delegations from both countries to Tehran for discussing a temporary ceasefire, lifting of the embargo on Armenia, the deployment of observer forces, and the exchange of prisoners of war. This led to a seven-day ceasefire as a first step in the peace process. However, in spite of this the war continued and intensified. Armenian forces took control of the entire Nagorno-Karabakh region and then Lachin, which opened a corridor between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan deteriorated after the installation of a Turkist government in Baku in the summer of 1992. In result, Iran instead deepened its relations with Armenia. Expanded economical cooperation with Iran relieved Armenia from the economic embargo which it has been under throughout the last decade due to the closure of its borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey.

It seems that the role of regional actors is now undergoing change. Russia is not considered an impartial actor despite its intensifying role in mediation. Azerbaijan’s hopes for Turkish support may come undone if the normalization process between Turkey and Armenia continues, though that is presently unlikely. Azerbaijan is concerned that Turkey may drop its demands for the withdrawal of Armenian troops from Karabakh as a precondition for improved Turkish-Armenian relations. Official Baku is therefore looking for all possible means to intensify the Karabakh peace process and involving Iran is one such mean. A spokesperson of Azerbaijan’s Foreign Ministry stated that “considering Iran’s close cooperation with Armenia, Tehran can provide the mechanism for a fair solution”. He added that Iran borders both Azerbaijan and Armenia. Moreover, a part of the Azerbaijani territories bordering Iran are under Armenian occupation.

BERDIMUKHAMMEDOV CALLS FOR MAJOR REFORMS IN TURKMENISTAN

Chemen Durdiyeva

Speaking at the extended Cabinet meeting on February 18, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov announced that Turkmenistan should register new political parties that would compete with the sole existing Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. At another meeting with the State Security Council on March 1, the president also declared his plans to liberalize Turkmenistan's major legislation on criminal law.

After its last amendment in 2008, article 30 of Turkmenistan's constitution guarantees the rights for Turkmen citizens to form political parties and public associations. The former Communist Party, which was renamed the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan following the country's independence in 1991, was the only functioning political party under late president Niyazov's chairmanship. The major banned opposition parties such as the Republican Party of Turkmenistan, the United Turkmen Opposition and the Watan socio-political movement have been unable to push for any change, acting underground in exile mainly from Russia and Europe.

"We could register a new political party this year within the framework of the constitution if someone comes up with the initiative to do so ... this could be either an agrarian party or a party of any other direction" said Berdimuhammedov at a televised speech. He further stressed that the new parties should be able to share the goals of the ruling Democratic Party and this way the country "will continue to develop in a democratic way". Nurberdy Nurmammedov, leader of the unregistered Turkmen opposition group Agzybirlik and the only opposition leader still living in Turkmenistan, welcomed the news as a step forward in an interview for RFE/RL's Turkmen Service. At the same time, Nurmammedov spoke of the lack of a clear legal basis for the creation and registration of

political parties with the Justice Ministry of Turkmenistan.

Although officially allowing the creation of opposition parties might sound as a step forward, any optimistic view of possible reforms should not disregard the fact that former president Niyazov used to make similar public announcements in response to international criticism of his totalitarian rule. However, real political reforms never took place. Whether such a sensational announcement actually means giving up the single party system, and if any current government officials or public figures will dare to criticize government policies by creating an opposition party remains unclear and unlikely. Unless real legal reforms to guarantee the safety of any possible opposition party are made, such announcements are unlikely to bring any qualitative changes into the existing single party system. Some local analysts view the president's call as a move to create a positive reformist image amidst the constant criticism of Western human rights groups that have been trying to attract attention to human rights issues in the midst of Turkmenistan's lucrative business deals with foreign companies. The Freedom House report of 2009 included Turkmenistan as one of the world's worst human rights violators whereas Reporters without Borders ranked it alongside North Korea in terms of its press freedom index.

Another 'surprise appeal' made by President Berdimuhammedov was the call for the liberalization of the country's criminal code and making it more compatible with international standards. The president told the parliament to draft a new criminal code that will reduce the maximum criminal penalty from 25 years in prison to 15 years. He also mentioned that convicts of minor crimes should be allowed to pay monetary fines instead of going to jail. One month prior to the president's call for reform of the criminal code, the Netherlands-

based Turkmenistan's Independent Lawyers Association (TILA) and Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights released a joint report, stating that Turkmenistan has extremely high rates of incarceration and highly criticized the government for miserable conditions in the country's jails and other penitentiary facilities such as correctional colonies and SIZOs (pre-trial detention facilities). According to the report, the total imprisonment capacity in the existing colonies and prisons is 8,100 inmates (excluding BLHK – the penal battalion for convicted military personnel) but the number of inmates was 26,720 prior to the annual amnesty announced in December 2009. Timur Misrikhanov, the head of the Association of Independent Lawyers

of Turkmenistan, says the government needs to completely overhaul the legal profession in addition to the criminal code and also grant the defense lawyers the right to protect the individuals in custody.

Unlike neighboring Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan has never experienced a multi-party system, since all opposition parties were outlawed by the previous administration. If the president's announcements are implemented, this will be a major political breakthrough. On the other hand, such an optimistic view remains unrealistic as long as the country's legal system remains heavily based on the Soviet system.

RUSSIA AND ABKHAZIA AGREE ON MILITARY BASE IN GUDAUTA

Joanna Dziuba

On February 17, Russia and Abkhazia signed a treaty on building a military base in Gudauta during the official visit of Abkhazia's president Sergei Bagapsh in Moscow. The document is a result of the general agreement on military cooperation between Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia established in September 2009. The Russian land base will be established using and modernizing the existing military infrastructure in Gudauta, where 1,700 soldiers are already deployed.

The agreement on the land base is part of the evolving military cooperation between Abkhazia and Russia. The next moves in this sphere will likely be an airbase in Gudauta and navy base in Ochamchire, situated very close to the administrative border with Georgia and the ports in Poti and Supsa, which are important to Georgia's transportation of energy resources. Moscow is already in control of Abkhazia's railway, airports and borders.

The military base will be rented for 49 years with a possibility of prolongation if both sides agree. It has

a planned capacity of housing up to 3,000 servicemen, including Federal Security Service (FSB) border guards, which have been controlling Abkhazia's administrative borders since April 2009. No reliable data exist on the exact number of Russian soldiers stationed in the breakaway region of Georgia, although referring to different sources they could amount to 4,000-5,000. According to the signed document, the two sides will create joint forces and cooperate on military technology development, besides the base establishment. Currently, it has not been specified whether the land forces stationed in Gudauta will also consist of units from the Kodori Gorge or if an additional base will be established in the mountainous region. The upper part of the Kodori Gorge was taken by Russian troops in the 2008 August war after Tbilisi had established control over it in 2006.

The process of deepening cooperation between Abkhazia and Russia seems to be a main priority of the Sukhumi government, not only on military matters but also in the economic and cultural

spheres. The development of such policies under President Bagapsh, who was recently re-elected for a second term, meets strong criticism both within and outside Abkhazia. The first critical voices were heard in early summer 2009, when the previous government of Abkhazia proposed a law allowing Russian citizens to buy land, gain citizenship, and settle with their families in Abkhazia. Originally, such rights were to be reserved for Russian soldiers stationed in the region after the August war, but was later expanded to also include civilians.

The critique of Bagapsh's foreign policy has increased after later agreements were signed. Especially the Gudauta land base treaty has brought a new wave of objections. The opposition to the incumbent president argues that such deepened cooperation with Russia will lead to excessive dependence on the Russian Federation and its potential incorporation of Abkhazia. This would prevent Abkhazians from building the fully independent, stable and sovereign state for which they have been fighting over the last two decades. On the one hand, the public is pleased with the new development perspectives opened by Russian financial involvement and the decrease of the Georgian threat (according to Abkhazian rhetoric) due to its military presence. On the other hand, Abkhazians are not in a demographic majority in the region and there is a concern over the consequences that an increase of Russians acquiring

Abkhazian citizenship and property could have for the region's ethnic composition and political direction.

The growing number of Russian soldiers in the region as an effect of the signed treaty is not only viewed as problematic by Abkhazian civilians, but is also a potential threat to Georgians living in Abkhazia (mostly in the Gali region), as well as to the Georgian state.

The FSB border controls impedes communication between the Gali and Zugdidi regions, the latter remaining under Tbilisi's control. Additionally, the establishment of the three land, navy and airbases enables Russia to react immediately in the case of future tensions not only between Tbilisi and Moscow, but in the South Caucasus at large, whereas the Greater Caucasus mountain ridge had previously prevented Russia from any larger military maneuvers in the South Caucasus during winter. Additionally, the Georgian side argues that the treaty violates international law (as *de iure*, Abkhazia remains part of Georgia) and the six-point ceasefire agreement signed in 2008. NATO representatives also underlined their support for Georgia's position on the Russian-Abkhazian treaty, arguing that the deepening military cooperation between Sukhumi and Moscow threatens Georgia's territorial integrity and is counterproductive to the process of re-establishing positive Georgian-Abkhazian relations.



New Book:

The Guns of August 2008

Edited By Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr

M.E. Sharpe, New York, June 2009,
290pp

This book is designed to present the facts about the events of August 2008 along with comprehensive coverage of the background to those events. It brings together a wealth of expertise on the South Caucasus and Russian foreign policy, with contributions by Russian, Georgian, European, and American experts on the region.

NEWS DIGEST

FORCED MOVE PUTS CENTRAL ASIAN LIBRARY'S RARE COLLECTION AT RISK

6 March

One of the most prestigious libraries in Central Asia has been forced to move, potentially endangering some of its ancient and rare documents, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports. The buildings housing the Alisher Navoi Library in Tashkent -- which with 10 million books in 75 different languages is among the region's largest -- were demolished on March 4. The library also has some of Central Asia's most important historical documents. In 2003, the library lost its original building in downtown Tashkent, which was demolished to make room for a new building for the Senate, the upper chamber of the Uzbek parliament. Officials had since moved the library to buildings vacated by the Tashkent city administration and the Committee of State Security. Library director Malika Matmurodova told RFE/RL that the books, historical documents, and manuscripts are currently being transported to various different government buildings around the Uzbek capital. Farida Nosirova, the chief of the library's preservation department, told RFE/RL that all the books -- especially manuscripts that are centuries old -- need to be kept under special conditions that do not exist at present. She said there are many ancient manuscripts written in Farsi and Arabic that need extremely urgent care or they could be damaged beyond repair. The Alisher Navoi Library was established in Tashkent in 1870 but has not functioned normally since it was moved in 2003. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA SAYS ISLAMIST REBEL LEADER KILLED

6 March

Russia's Federal Security Service chief on Saturday confirmed the death of a prominent Islamist rebel who he accused of plotting a bomb attack on a Moscow-to-St Petersburg train that killed 26 people last year. Alexander Tikhomirov, also known as Said Buryatsky, was among eight rebels killed in a

two-day raid in the volatile Caucasus region of Ingushetia in early March, FSB head Alexander Bortnikov told Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

"Material evidence was found on the scene of the special operation directly connected to the train blast organised by this group of bandits in November last year," Bortnikov said in comments broadcast on the Russian TV channel Rossiya 24. Islamic militants from Russia's North Caucasus claimed responsibility for the attack on the Nevsky Express and vowed further "acts of sabotage." No major attacks have followed. But Buryatsky himself had never claimed responsibility for the bombing, and Bortnikov's comments were the first time he had been directly linked to the attack. Buryatsky's death is a major victory for the Kremlin in its battle against an Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus, which analysts have said appears to be mutating from a grassroots separatist movement toward global jihad. Violence in the North Caucasus region in the form of shootings and suicide bombs, particularly in the Muslim-majority republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan, has escalated over the last year. Russia's most wanted guerrilla, Chechen-born Doku Umarov, has vowed on Islamist websites to spread his attacks from the region to other parts of Russia. Tikhomirov renamed himself Said Buryatsky after his native Buryatia region in eastern Siberia. He became a cleric and spent several years in Egypt, where he learned fluent Arabic, political analysts say.

Last August he claimed responsibility for organizing the deadliest attack in the North Caucasus in the last four years, when a suicide bomber killed at least 20 and injured 138 at a police headquarters in Ingushetia.

Ingushetia's leader, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, also confirmed reports that Buryatsky had been killed in a gun battle near Nazran, Ingushetia's largest town. (Reuters)

GENOCIDE LABEL THREATENS U.S.-TURKISH TIES

8 March

A U.S. Congress panel's decision to label the mass killings of Armenians during World War I as genocide has damaged relations with Turkey, a key ally linking the West and the Middle East. The resolution labels the 1915-23 killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians genocide and calls on U.S. President Barack Obama to use the word in his yearly statement on the issue. After the House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee passed the nonbinding resolution last week, opening the door for a vote in full House, Turkey recalled its ambassador from Washington. Turkish leaders over the weekend slammed the resolution, saying it would hurt U.S.-Turkish relations if passed. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan called it a comedy. "Let me say quite clearly that this resolution will not harm us," he said in remarks on Turkish television. "But it will damage bilateral relations between countries, their interests and their visions for the future." The Turkish Embassy said in a statement that the resolution, if adopted, would "impede the efforts for the normalization of Turkey-Armenia relations." Observers say the vote threatens an already stalled peace process that hit its high last October when Turkey and Armenia after decades of conflict signed two documents to re-establish ties and reopen the countries' mutual border. Washington has tried everything to contain the damage. "The Obama administration strongly opposes the resolution that was passed by only one vote in the House committee and will work very hard to make sure it does not go to the House floor," U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Friday. A similar resolution was introduced in 2007 but failed to make it to the House floor because it was blocked by President George W. Bush. (UPI)

AHMADINEJAD ARRIVES IN AFGHANISTAN: GOVT

10 March

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad flew into Kabul on Wednesday for summit talks on a visit overlapping with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who was in Afghanistan to review a US troop surge. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's office confirmed Ahmadinejad's arrival as Gates toured a training centre for Afghan army officers and non-commissioned officers at Camp Blackhorse outside the Afghan capital. "They will discuss bilateral relations between the two countries and

expansion of economic relations between the two countries," Karzai spokesman Siamak Hirawi told AFP. They were scheduled to discuss economic projects such as a railway line from Tajikistan through Afghanistan to Iran, Hirawi said. The two leaders were scheduled to hold a news conference later Wednesday after their first meeting since their controversial re-elections in 2009. Ahmadinejad has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of US-led troops from Afghanistan, on Iran's eastern border, while US officials have long accused Iran of maintaining links to Islamist insurgents in the country. Speaking at a brief press conference at the military training centre, Gates said the United States wanted Afghanistan to have "good relations" with all its neighbours. Despite their rivalry, Washington and Tehran are both sworn enemies of the extremist Sunni Muslim militia which ruled in Kabul from 1996, before being overthrown in the 2001 US-led invasion. Washington has made a number of efforts to involve all of Afghanistan's neighbours, including Iran, in restoring stability to the country. But they have been complicated by the lack of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Washington, and the standoff over Iran's nuclear programme. Wednesday's overlapping visits came as Washington struggled to rally international support for fresh sanctions over the Iranian nuclear drive, with China and Russia still apparently reluctant to sign on. Israel's UN ambassador on Tuesday said prospects for crippling UN sanctions against Iran were "grim" because Russia and China want to use diplomacy to persuade Iran to scale back its nuclear ambitions. Shiite Iran, which has close ethnic and religious ties with Afghanistan, has long suffered from the effects of opium production in its neighbour, with easily available heroin fuelling a big rise in drug use at home. Afghanistan is the source of 90 percent of the world's heroin. (AFP)

USA WON'T HAVE MILITARY BASE IN SOUTHERN KYRGYZSTAN - EMBASSY

10 March

The United States does not plan to have a military base in southern Kyrgyzstan, a source at the U.S. embassy in Bishkek told Itar-Tass on Tuesday. The regional media said earlier that the Pentagon was contemplating possible deployment of a military base in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The United States will build a training camp for Kyrgyz servicemen and members of anti-terrorist units in southern Kyrgyzstan in keeping with intergovernmental agreements. The project will cost \$5.5 million. The

construction of the training camp will begin next year.

The camp will train Kyrgyz servicemen only. The United States has opened a training center for specialized units of the Kyrgyz Defense Ministry in Tokmak and a military hospital. A U.S. Air Force base was deployed in Kyrgyzstan in December 2001. The base was renamed into a transit center last summer. It provides support to the NATO anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan. (Trend News)

TAJIKISTAN COURT SENTENCES 56 ISLAMISTS TO JAIL AND FINES

10 March

Tajikistan's Supreme Court has sentenced 56 people to jail terms or heavy fines for belonging to the banned Tablighi Jamaat Islamist movement, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday.

Tablighi Jamaat (Society for Spreading Faith) is an international spiritual movement - legal in many other countries - with millions of followers, mainly in South Asia, DPA reported. The court sentenced and convicted all of the individuals of publicly calling for violent measures to overthrow the country's authorities, and sentenced 23 to between three and six years in prison.

The remaining 33 were ordered to pay fines of up to 16,000 dollars. The average yearly salary in the impoverished Central Asia republic is around 1,000 dollars. The authoritarian government in Tajikistan, which borders Afghanistan, fears a revival of Islamism. In the 1990s Islamist rebels fought a bloody civil war against government troops. (Trend News)

CUTBACK IN MILITARY BUDGET OF AZERBAIJAN TO BE A PART OF SETTLEMENT PROCESS OF KARABAKH CONFLICT

11 March

Cutback in the military budget of Azerbaijan has become a part of the settlement process of the Karabakh conflict. Special representative of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for Nagorno Karabakh conflict and Georgia, Goran Lenmarker, said on March 11 at the seminar of NATO Parliamentary Assembly Rose-Rot, the agency reports citing News of Armenia - NEWS.am. According to G. Lenmarker, the more the settlement process of the Karabakh conflict is prolonged, the more the economies of Armenia and Azerbaijan will suffer. Therefore, we need to find

fast solution to the Karabakh conflict. (Kazakhstan Today)

DATE OF KAZAKH PRESIDENT'S VISIT TO UZBEKISTAN ANNOUNCED

11 March

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's visit to Uzbekistan will take place on March 16-17, a government source reported. It is expected that presidents Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov will review the current condition and prospects of bilateral cooperation, as well as discuss issues of regional policy. During the visit, there are plans to sign a joint declaration of presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, an inter-governmental agreement on mutual provision of land plots for construction of buildings for diplomatic missions, the program of cooperation between the Foreign Ministries for 2010-2011 and several other documents. It is expected that the visit would bring bilateral relations to a higher, qualitatively new level and give new impetus to further strengthening the mutually beneficial relations. According to State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan ranks the fifth among the largest foreign trade partners of Uzbekistan, which accounted for up to 6.2 percent of country's turnover in 2009. (Trend News)

FOUR MILITANTS KILLED IN POLICE OPERATION IN CHECHNYA - KADYROV

11 March

Four militants were killed in a special police operation in the mountainous south of Chechnya, in Russia's North Caucasus, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov said on Thursday. "The operation was conducted near the village of Nokhtch-Keloi in the Shatoi district of Chechnya... Four militants were killed in the operation," Kadyrov told journalists. Three of the killed militants have been already identified, he said, adding that no police or law-enforcement personnel were injured in the operation, which was still ongoing in the area. Moscow announced an end to its decade-long antiterrorism campaign against separatists in Chechnya in April 2009, but has since had to step up the fight against militants as skirmishes and attacks on police and other officials have continued. (RIA Novosti)

TOTAL OF 14 COACHES SET OFF TRACK BY BOMBING OF RAILWAY IN DAGESTAN **12 March**

A total of fourteen coaches of an empty freight train were set off the track and the drive engine received insignificant damage when a bomb planted in the railway's groundwork went off in Makhachkala, the capital of the North Caucasian region of Dagestan, a source at the transport police department of the North Caucasus branch of Russian Railways said. "A crater of about 30 centimeters deep emerged at the epicenter of the explosion, which also knocked out several sleepers and damaged a small section of a rail," the source said. Earlier, sources indicated that the empty train was en route to Makhachkala from the town of Derbent. They also indicated that no one was killed or injured in the incident, which occurred at around 21:40. At the time of reporting, demolition experts were examining the track to see if more explosives devices might have been planted there. After the examination is over, repair teams will get down to work. In the meantime, the incident may cause delays of passenger trains. Transport police officials said two passenger trains, Baku-Tyumen and Tyumen-Baku, are to pass the affected section of the line overnight to Friday and the delay looks indefinite for the time being. (Itar-Tass)

TURKISH-SWEDISH ROW OVER GENOCIDE LABEL

12 March

Turkey recalled its ambassador to Sweden and canceled bilateral meetings after lawmakers in Stockholm called the mass killing of Armenians by Ottoman-era Turks genocide, a few days after rowing with Washington over the same issue. Ankara also canceled a March 17 summit between the nations and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's corresponding visit to Sweden. The diplomatic crisis comes a week after Ankara recalled its ambassador to the United States because a congressional committee approved a similar resolution. Erdogan's office strongly condemned the Swedish resolution, which labels the 1915-23 killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians genocide, saying in a statement it was "unsubstantiated," and "replete with immense errors." It added the resolution was adopted to please domestic voters ahead of the September national elections in Sweden. "This resolution adopted with domestic political motives does not benefit Turkey-Sweden relations and the close cooperation and friendship between our

peoples," the statement reads. "Those who believe that historical facts and Turkey's opinion regarding its own history will be changed by decisions adopted by foreign Parliaments for political gains are gravely mistaken." The Swedish government also criticized the resolution, which passed by one vote.

"Historical events should not be judged at a political level but should be left to the parties concerned to discuss on the basis of current research," Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said in a statement posted on a Swedish government Web site. "The decision will not help the debate in Turkey, which has become increasingly open and tolerant as Turkey has developed closer relations with the European Union and made the democratic reforms these entail." Observers say Turkey's recent conflicts with Washington and Stockholm over the genocide label threatens an already stalled peace process that hit its high last October when Turkey and Armenia, after decades of conflict, signed documents to re-establish ties and reopen the countries' mutual border. The "genocide" label is important to Armenians scattered around the world. An estimated 5.7 million Armenians live abroad, including 1.4 million in the United States, significantly outnumbering the 3.2 million living in the small, landlocked country itself. (UPI)

KAZAKH TOWN DESTROYED AFTER DAMS BURST, 35 DEAD

13 March

At least 35 people have been killed and thousands evacuated from the southeastern Kazakh town of Qyzylaghash and nearby villages after floodwaters destroyed two dams in the area, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Ilyas Biyakhmetov, a spokesman for the Almaty Oblast governor, said that 70 percent of Qyzylaghash is completely destroyed. Melting snow and days of heavy rain in the area burst a dam in a district north of Almaty -- Kazakhstan's largest city -- while the other dam broke in the Karatal district. Rescue operations to the affected area are being hindered by damage to the main highway connecting the area with Taldy-Qorghan and Almaty. President Nursultan Nazarbaev said at a government meeting today that the owner of the privately owned dam whose rupture destroyed Qyzylaghash, a village of 3,000 people, could face prosecution for failing to take adequate safety measures against annual spring flooding. One of the evacuated residents of Qyzylaghash, Razbek Alyqqan, told RFE/RL that relatives who live close to one of the dams warned him that the water level

was reaching a critical point and urged him to flee the town with his family. "We left everything, including our livestock. Everything is destroyed, but thank God we are alive," Alyqqan said. Kazakh officials expect the death toll to increase. A woman who managed to escape the area told RFE/RL in Taldy-Qorghan that many people are missing and presumed dead. Hundreds of Qyzylaghash residents are at the Taldy-Qorghan morgue trying to obtain information about or to identify missing relatives. (RFE/RL)

FOUR MILITANTS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED IN A SPECIAL OPERATION IN DAGESTAN.

13 March

Four militants have been destroyed in a special operation in the settlement of Zubutli-Miatli of Dagestan's Kizilyurtovsky region. As ITAR-TASS learnt at the press service of the Russian Federal Security Service Department for Dagestan, "three of the destroyed militants were identified as active members of the Khasavyurt terrorist group, all of them are natives of the settlement of Toturbi-Kala of the Khasavyurt region." According to the press service, two of them are brothers Rustam and Biisultan Dzamalov, as well as Abdulbek Dzabrailov. The militants were blocked in one of private house holdings on Saturday morning. They were offered to surrender, however, they opened fire." The destroyed militants had with them three submachine-guns, magazines for them and other ammunition. There are no losses among commandos and officers of the Federal Security Service and the Interior Ministry. (Itar-Tass)

VULNERABLE KANDAHAR REELS AFTER BLASTS

14 March

The beleaguered southern Afghan city of Kandahar is in mourning after a series of bombings that killed at least 30 and wounded 50 more. Among the dead in the **March 13 blasts** were 10 women and children who were attending a wedding celebration in a hall next to a targeted police station. In the wake of the bombings, Kandahar's Governor, Turyalai Wesa, demanded more security assistance from Kabul. Speaking to journalists on March 14, Wesa asked for more troops to protect Kandahar and urged greater coordination between NATO and Afghan forces to improve security. Analysts say the bombings highlighted Kandahar's weak security as

NATO and Afghan forces build up their numbers before confronting the insurgents in a fresh offensive. The new campaign is expected to build on operation Moshtarak -- NATO's largest offensive to date that reclaimed Marja -- a major insurgent stronghold in neighboring Helmand Province. In a statement released on March 14, Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi said the bombings show the insurgents are still able to operate despite the buildup of international troops in the south in preparation for a push into Kandahar province. Kandahar is the second-largest city in the country. It is the birthplace of the Taliban movement in mid-1990s and a major battleground for their insurgency during the past few years. Wesa said that attacks targeted a newly fortified prison and police headquarters and confirmed that at least six police officers were among the dead. (RFE/RL)

KAZAKHSTAN DRAFTS BILL FOR ISLAMIC FINANCING, ZHAMISHEV SAYS

15 March

March 15 -- Kazakhstan has drafted a bill to borrow via Islamic financing, Finance Minister Bolat Zhamishev said in the capital Astana today. The funds will be used to cut the budget deficit, he told a conference. (Bloomberg)

CASPIAN LITTORAL COUNTRIES AGREED ON MAIN PRINCIPLES OF SAFETY COOPERATION IN CASPIAN SEA

15 March

The near-Caspian countries agreed on the main principles of safety cooperation in the Caspian Sea, the agency reports citing the news agency Trend News. "We managed to reach arrangements on all main principles of cooperation in safety issues in the Caspian sea and within the limits of the third session, over which we will be working within the next one-two months, we intend to define the list of structures, which will be involved in this cooperation, Halaf Halafov, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan, said at a briefing on Friday, following the results of the 23rd session of Vice Ministers for Foreign Affairs of the near-Caspian countries taken place on March 11 - 12 in Baku. He said, "The near-Caspian countries are ready to cooperate in the field of safety." According to Trend News, the Baku session participants discussed the questions of coordination of the draft agreement of boundary customs services cooperation and Internal Affairs Departments in safety area in the Caspian Sea. (Kazakhstan Today)

GEORGIAN'S OPPOSITION LEADER'S RELATIVE DISMISSED FROM DIPLOMATIC POST

15 March

Georgia's ambassador to the Netherlands says she was dismissed because she is a relative of opposition leader Irakli Alasania, RFE/RL's Georgian Service reports. Maya Panjikidze, who is the sister of Alasania's wife, has been a member of the Georgian diplomatic corps for 16 years. She has served as ambassador in The Hague since 2007 and her posting was not due to expire until 2011. Panjikidze told RFE/RL that she was not officially informed why she has been recalled from Holland nor has she been offered another diplomatic post. She said she was told that her term as ambassador in The Hague ended on March 14. But she said she was told unofficially that she was dismissed in the wake of an incident in which a senior Georgian official and his wife were suspected of shoplifting on a visit to the Netherlands but were subsequently exonerated. The official reportedly felt Panjikidze did not provide adequate support and assistance to him and his wife. She added that she suspects that she was fired because of her family ties to Alasania. Panjikidze told RFE/RL she has always considered herself a representative of the Georgian people, not of the government. She said all aspects of Georgia's foreign policy are acceptable to her. Panjikidze says she has no intention of going into politics. She said she may seek work in a local school as a German language teacher. Her previous diplomatic posting was as ambassador in Berlin from 2004-07. Alasania, chairman of the Alliance for Georgia, is Georgia's former ambassador to the UN and a prospective opposition candidate in the Tbilisi mayoral elections in May. He is also being tipped as a potential presidential candidate. (RFE/RL)

UN CHIEF TO VISIT SOVIET NUCLEAR TESTING GROUND IN KAZAKHSTAN

16 March

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon plans to visit the Soviet-era Semipalatinsk nuclear test facility during his visit to Kazakhstan next month, the United Nations Development Program said on Tuesday. "During his visit the UN secretary general... will visit the Semipalatinsk region and especially the territory of the former nuclear testing ground," the UNDP's Kazakhstan office said in a statement. Ban is due to visit the vast Central Asian country on April 6-7. The Semipalatinsk testing facility in northeastern Kazakhstan was the main

location for Soviet nuclear tests for four decades and the area is highly polluted by radiation. The first Soviet nuclear test took place there in 1949 and by the time the site was closed in 1989 at least 468 nuclear tests had been carried out, including 55 airborne or above ground explosions. An estimated 1.6 million people were subjected to radiation during this period due to Soviet authorities' failure to take the necessary measures to protect the population. (RIA Novosti)

AFGHANISTAN CONFIRMS BLANKET PARDON FOR PRE-2001 WAR CRIMES

16 March

Afghanistan today confirmed for the first time publicly that it had enacted into law a blanket pardon for war crimes and human rights abuse carried out before 2001. Human rights groups have expressed dismay that the law appeared to have been enacted quietly, granting blanket immunity to members of all armed factions for acts committed during decades of war before the fall of the Taliban. President Hamid Karzai had promised not to sign the National Stability and Reconciliation Law when it was passed by parliament in 2007. Human rights groups say they learned only this year that the bill had been published in the official gazette, making it law. Karzai's spokesman, Waheed Omer, today said that the bill had become law because it was passed by two-thirds of the parliament and therefore did not require Karzai's signature. Parliament is made up largely of lawmakers from former armed groups, some of whom are accused of war crimes by rights groups and ordinary Afghans. "This law was passed with a two-thirds majority in our parliament, and according to our constitution, when a law is passed with a two-thirds majority, it does not require the president to sign it," Omer told a briefing. It was the first time the palace had confirmed that the measure had become law. Brad Adams, Asia director for watchdog Human Rights Watch, said there was still mystery surrounding the process, and why it apparently took more than two years for news of the law's enactment to be made public. "This law is absolute disgrace. It's a slap in the face to all the Afghans who suffered for years and years of war crimes and warlordism," Adams told Reuters. He called on the international community and the United States to apply pressure on Afghanistan to repeal the law. "The U.S. needs to decide whether they're with the victims or the perpetrators, and make their views known publicly," he said. During Karzai's eight years in power, he has consistently

included former commanders of armed factions in his government and inner circle, including many accused by the West of war crimes and other abuses. Both of Karzai's two vice presidents are former leaders of armed groups whose factions squabbled for control of Kabul in the 1990s, when thousands of civilians were killed and hundreds of thousands fled their homes. Supporters of the amnesty say prosecuting old allegations would risk restarting years of civil war. But critics say providing a blanket pardon for former warlords allows them to retain their grip over the economy and public life. (Reuters)

KAZAKHSTAN FLOOD DEATH TOLL RISES TO 37

16 March

The number of victims of last week's flood that destroyed a village near Kazakh financial hub Almaty has risen to 37, a deputy prime minister said Tuesday. "According to the preliminary data of the Emergencies Ministry, 37 bodies have been recovered already," Aset Isekeshviev told a government meeting. The previous toll was 34. Eager to show decisive leadership at a time of economic hardship, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has ordered the government to investigate the rupture Friday of a dam, and bring to justice those responsible. In a statement issued after Nazarbayev's order, the interior ministry said it had detained five officials including the mayor of Kyzyl-Agash, a village which was completely destroyed when the nearby dam burst, flooding hilly pastures north of Almaty. Spring flooding is a frequent occurrence in Central Asia but a sudden rise in temperatures following weeks of heavy snow storms has exacerbated the problem this year. (Reuters)

IMEDI HEAD DENIES INFORMING OFFICIALS OF FAKE REPORT BEFOREHAND

16 March

The head of the Georgian TV channel, which created nationwide panic by a bogus TV news report of a Russian invasion, denied that the country's top officials were informed about the program beforehand. The Imedi TV channel sparked panic in Georgia on Saturday with a broadcast that said Russian tanks had invaded the capital and the country's president was dead. The broadcast by Imedi TV, which used the channel's normal news graphics, began on Saturday with a warning that the program showed a sequence of

possible events that could occur "if Georgian society is not brought together against Russia's plans." Those viewers who missed the program's introduction took what was shown for real, thinking a new Russia-Georgia war erupted. On Monday some Georgian media made public a record of a phone conversation, in which a person whose voice is similar to Imedi head Georgy Arveladze, talks with a woman, who seems to be the TV host of the disputed program, Eka Tsamalashvili. "[The Georgian law] says that we might lose our [broadcasting] license for creating groundless panic in the society... You should take notice of it. You'd rather write everywhere that this is a fictitious report... Otherwise, we might face the consequences," the woman on the record says. The man answers that he informed "Misha" (apparently the country's president, Mikheil Saakashvili) about the program the day before and the latter advised him against a warning, saying that the program will otherwise "lose its zest." Georgy Arveladze said no such talk ever took place, saying that the record was a compilation of several recorded conversations. "All phrases were taken from various dialogs. It is easy to compile my conversation with whoever and on whatever subject that way," Arveladze was broadcasted as saying by the Maestro TV channel. He also dismissed allegations that Saakashvili was informed about the broadcast beforehand and said that "no state officials took part in preparing the program." "We consulted only with some political experts. Experts could only see the script, not the program itself. Of course, the broadcast was based on the script," Arveladze said. He said earlier on Monday that the special report was a warning against possible danger. "Our objective was not to scare society but to show the dangers facing our country," he said. He added that he assumed full responsibility for the report and apologized for its negative consequences. Georgia's National Media Commission ordered Imedi to apologize to the public for the report and examine complaints from all "victims" – people who had reportedly suffered heart attacks and experienced other health problems over the report. (RIA Novosti)

GEORGIA COULD SIGN VISA DEAL IN JUNE, EU PRESIDENT SAYS

17 March

Georgia could sign in June an agreement that would give its citizens easier visa access to the European Union, the bloc's president Herman Van Rompuy said on Tuesday, dpa reported. The deal, to be

accompanied by a parallel agreement on repatriation of Georgians caught staying illegally on EU territory, would speed up procedures and drop visa prices from 60 to 35 euros (48 dollars). "We hope that we can soon fix a date for signature, possibly early June," Van Rompuy said in Brussels after meeting with Georgia's Prime Minister Nika Gilauri. Van Rompuy also said "it should be soon possible" for Georgia and the EU to start negotiations on an Association Agreement, which would include setting up a free-trade area. But in the short-term, the visa deal is likely to matter most to Tblisi's rulers, as it would end the de-facto preferential treatment of people living in territories that have broken away from Georgia with Russian backing, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Their population currently enjoys easier access to the EU by using passports issued by Russia, which has already signed visa-facilitation deals with Brussels. That creates resentment in Tblisi, since Abkhazia and South Ossetia have no international recognition, except from Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru, a tiny island nation in Micronesia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been de-facto independent since the early 1990s, but their

isolation from Georgia proper increased in the wake of the 2008 Russian-Georgian conflict, which led Moscow to set up military bases in the two territories. Van Rompuy said the EU continued "to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia" and urged Russia "to fulfil all (the) commitments" dictated by an EU-mediated ceasefire agreement, which include an obligation not to expand its military presence. (Trend News)

AFGHAN PRESIDENT TO VISIT IRAN 17 March

Afghan President Hamid Karzai will pay an official visit to Iran on his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's invitation, Fars news agency reported. One of the spokesmen of the Afghan President's office Siyamak Heravi said that the exact date of the visit is not scheduled, but approximately it will take place in the next two weeks.

Fars News Agency reported that Presidents of Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan will meet in Tehran March 26. (Trend News)



New Silk Road Paper:

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**By Ekaterine Metreveli, Niklas Nilsson,
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Yakobashvili**

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