

Central Asia

Caucasus

ANALYST

BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday, February 11, 2004

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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/February 11, 2004

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Prior to the 2003 presidential elections in Azerbaijan and Armenia this year, many hoped that the negotiating process between the two countries would revitalize and produce visible results in the post-election period. In 2003, talks were frozen since no serious compromises were realistic before the presidential elections in both countries, more so in the light of Azerbaijan's former President Heydar Aliyev's protracted illness. Externally, the war in Iraq further shifted the focus of major powers from the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and its fallout impacted negatively on the relations between the US, France and Russia, the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, the main mediating body for the conflict. However, months into the post-election period, prospects remain dim.

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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

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

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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:

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

BACKGROUND: 200-300 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 200-300 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

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

Specifications for Field Reports:

Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 500-700 words.

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

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HIV, STI'S AND DRUGS IN XINJIANG AND CENTRAL ASIA

Eric D. Hagt

Regional trade and national security were the focus of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's January summit in Beijing. However, HIV/AIDS and associated drug trafficking problems in Xinjiang and Central Asia are growing at an alarming rate and pose a real crisis for all countries involved. Social, economic and political factors have all conspired to increase injecting drug use, high risk sexual behavior, rapidly spreading sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV/AIDS. In addition to the enormous human cost of the disease, the region's stability will be in jeopardy if the SCO countries do not address these critical problems in a comprehensive and multilateral way.

BACKGROUND: Although the first case of AIDS was not officially reported until 1995, Xinjiang has emerged as China's most infected region after Yunnan province. By the end of 2001, there were 6,029 officially reported cases of HIV/AIDS, or 22% of the national total. However, UNAIDS believes that the rate of infection may be underreported by as much as 5 to 10 times. Similar to Central Asia, the vast majority (over 90%) of HIV infections in Xinjiang are injecting drug users (IDUs) and are under 30 years of age—the most sexually active age group. Also, the epidemic is concentrated in Urumqi, Yining and Kashgar, all cities that lay along the region's main illicit drug trading routes.

Xinjiang's geographic position along the arc of heroin trafficking between Central Asia and Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle has unique implications for the transmission of HIV/AIDS. Drug users in Xinjiang initially smoked opium, which presents no direct risk for HIV. The further along the trafficking route, however, the more expensive narcotics become and the more economical it is to inject heroin. Xinjiang lies far enough from major production centers in Burma and Afghanistan to bring up the street value of heroin to 800 RMB per gram, a high fee that has driven up injection use. In 1999, registered drug users totaled 21,000, but some experts estimate there may be as many as 800,000 unregistered drug users presently in the region, 90% of which are IDUs. Furthermore, the WHO believes the proportion of needle sharing between IDUs in Xinjiang is 100%. Unsurprisingly then, the prevalence of HIV among IDUs is also dangerously high.

Also complicating the nexus between drug use and HIV transmission are the many subtypes of the deadly virus springing up in the region. Subtype A is prevalent in Russia, B in Thailand, Burma and the rest of China, and C in Pakistan, India and Burma. A unique B/C recombinant form has been found in Xinjiang, reflecting the rapid spread across borders by injecting drug use and the rise of new HIV strains. All of this makes prevention and treatment measures highly problematic.

Complex socio-economic and political factors also play an important role in the spread of HIV/AIDS in Xinjiang. Poverty and unemployment are high among Xinjiang's minority groups. Dissident sources put the job placement rate of Uyghurs entering the work force at a mere 40%. Per capita income and government spending in Xinjiang are slightly above the national average but are higher in the cities where the majority of the

Han population resides, and lower in the countryside, which is almost exclusively minorities. The lack of opportunities aggravates dissatisfaction and increases boredom and hopelessness among Xinjiang's minority groups, leading to an overall increase in drug use and an increase in women commercial sex workers.

The rise of HIV/AIDS infection is also the result of economic growth that has occurred in the region and with it a shift in social mores and sexual behavior. Combined with low condom use among Muslim Uyghurs, these changes have drastically raised the rate of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which the WHO reports has increased at an annual rate of 30%. STIs in turn increase the transmission of HIV.

IMPLICATIONS: The high rate of HIV infection among IDUs makes China's drug policies crucial to addressing Xinjiang's AIDS epidemic. The crime rate has grown in tandem with drug use, thus the government is understandably keen to stamp out drug use. Its approach is uncompromising. Under 1997 amendments to the 1979 Drug Control Law, possession of more than 15 grams of heroin, for instance, is punishable by 15 years imprisonment to the death penalty. Treatment of individual drug users is also brisk. First time offenders are sent to compulsory detox centers for 3-6 months and re-offenders may be sent to 'education through labor'. An emphasis on catching rather than reforming offenders pushes IDUs further underground, making prevention, surveillance and treatment efforts far more difficult. Under these circumstances, modifying IDU behavior is far more difficult and the HIV epidemic could easily spread beyond high risk populations. Antenatal women infection rates (0.5% in 1998) and transmission rates from IDUs to spouses (0.1%) indicate that HIV is moving into the general population.

A rampant epidemic of HIV/AIDS in Xinjiang could also exacerbate political unrest. Exploitative policies, Han migration and repressive crackdowns against "splittist" activities have already incited Uyghur challenges to Chinese rule in Xinjiang, including violent uprisings. The spread of AIDS and its resulting vicious cycle of infection, economic devastation and social disintegration could have further destabilizing effects in the region.

In addition to enormous human devastation, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in Xinjiang represents a grave threat to the security and stability of the region. The Chinese government has begun

to act with the "Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region HIV/AIDS and STD Prevention and Control Mid-long Term Plan" (2001-2010). Other initiatives, most notably the World Bank and Australia's HIV/AIDS Care and Prevention Project are partnering with the Chinese government to increase Xinjiang's capacity for an effective response to HIV. Whether a comprehensive and aggressive approach necessary to address Xinjiang's HIV epidemic is finally being implemented remains uncertain.

Moreover, the healthcare systems in the region are poorly positioned to stem the onslaught of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. There are few medical facilities to treat patients with full-blown AIDS, testing is prohibitively expensive, needle exchanges are nearly unheard of, and antiretroviral treatment is virtually unavailable. As HIV/AIDS moves from marginalized parts of societies into the mainstream population, national infection rates will increase dramatically and may overwhelm the system's capacities. A strong educational and institutional framework is necessary for as program to be effective. In China, it would be more effective to have a permanent organization with high priority political and financial resources.

CONCLUSIONS: The transborder nature of the threat of HIV/AIDS, drug trafficking and the rise of STIs necessitates that China and Central Asia work together openly and honestly. Repressive drug laws simply drive addicts further underground and shift illicit heroin trade elsewhere. Coordinated needle-exchange programs, drug-treatment and culturally sensitive prevention and education activities for STIs, including HIV, are crucial. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could offer a forum for a harmonized approach. Yet to date, there is little evidence this is happening. At the SCO summit in January 2004, enhancing anti-drug trafficking measures was tabled but little about the region's alarming HIV/AIDS problem was discussed. Anti-terrorism and interregional trade remain at the top of SCO's agenda. However, without adequately addressing HIV and related issues, health security within the region will continue to undermine the goals of economic stability and national security.

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IS AZERBAIJAN TURNING TOWARDS RUSSIA?

"Russia is our strategic partner and we will stay loyal to this partnership". These were the words of Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev during his last week's official visit to Russia. While the majority of the Azerbaijani public remains distrustful of its northern neighbor and considers Moscow as a supporter of Armenia, Azerbaijan's arch-rival, the newly elected president attempts to further boost bilateral relations.

During his three-day visit, Aliyev met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, Chairman of the Council of Federation Sergey Mironov and the Duma Chairman Boris Gryzlov. A previously unplanned meeting with Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov also took place. In addition to this, he made a speech at the Institute of International Studies in Moscow and held a press conference at ITAR-TASS news agency. As a result of these negotiations, four intergovernmental agreements were signed. These included an agreement between the state information agencies AzerTac and ITAR-TASS; an agreement on mutual assistance in intelligence information; a protocol on the abolishment of tariff provisions from the free trade regime and a cooperation agreement in the humanitarian sector. Besides, the two presidents signed the "Moscow declaration", which outlines the main points of bilateral cooperation.

Speaking to journalists, Ilham Aliyev said, "I am glad how bilateral relations are developing in all spheres. Today the political dialogue between Russia and Azerbaijan is at the highest level."

The two countries have been at odds since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan blamed Russia for supporting Armenia in the war over the Azerbaijani autonomous province of Nagorno-Karabakh. In 1997, a major political scandal broke out between the two neighbors, as Russian military officials admitted that they had illegally supplied Armenia with weapons worth \$1 billion. Russia in turn looked suspiciously to Baku for its efforts to cooperate with western military and security institutions as well as attempts to bring Western oil companies into the Caspian region. Russian security forces also blamed the Azerbaijani government for supporting Chechens rebels.

This trend slowly changed since the election of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency. Former Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev quickly found a common language with the new Russian leader and bilateral relations between the two countries warmed up. Agreements on the Russian lease of the Qabala Radar Station in Azerbaijan and the division of the Caspian Sea were subsequently signed.

Local analysts believe that the recent attention of the Russian leadership to Azerbaijan is related to the increasing U.S. presence in the Caucasus and the possible plans to open military bases in Azerbaijan. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld traveled to Baku two months ago to discuss these plans as well as the overall participation of Azerbaijan in the war on terrorism. It is likely that Putin has decided to play sticks and carrots with the newly elected Azerbaijani president to prevent the establishment of these bases in its "near abroad."

"Those difficulties that we faced in post-Soviet period will not longer hinder our cooperation. I am sure that the visit of Ilham Aliyev will serve as a catalyst for the further development of bilateral relations in all spheres," said the Russian President following the his meeting with Ilham Aliyev. Putin also seems to want more Azerbaijani cooperation regarding the Chechen problem. On the day of Ilham Aliyev's visit a terror act in the Moscow metro took 39 lives and once again reminded of the problem of terrorism around the world. "The mutual fight against terrorism is one of the main topics of our meetings. We will further unite our efforts in this issue. I don't doubt that our law-enforcement bodies will develop a successful cooperation on this issue. I know that in Azerbaijan relevant measures are taken to fight terrorism. Only by uniting our efforts, we can fight this disease of the twenty-first century," noted Vladimir Putin.

Despite economic and security items on the agenda of Ilham Aliyev's visit, Azerbaijan's number one hope from this visit is Russia's help to resolve the 16-year long conflict on Nagorno-Karabakh. Ilham Aliyev expressed his desire to see more active Russian participation in the peace process within the OSCE's Minsk group, charged with finding a peaceful settlement to this territorial conflict.

While many believe that the visit will boost the bilateral relations, few expect concrete results on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Azerbaijani opposition has already criticized Aliyev for making too many concessions to Russia.

Fariz Ismailzade

GEORGIA'S CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS: A SETBACK FOR DEMOCRATIZATION?

Sabine Freizer

Less than two weeks after being inaugurated into office, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili presented a series of amendments to the Constitution to change the structure of central government to Parliament on 5-6 February. The post of Prime Minister was created; more significantly the President was provided with new powers to dissolve Parliament. But the public was given no time to discuss these amendments; and it was passed by a de-legitimized parliament just ahead of parliamentary elections. The amendments are unlikely to promote democratization or conflict resolution in the country.

BACKGROUND: Having obtained over 96% of the vote in the 4 January 2004 elections, and significant support from Western leaders, President Mikheil Saakashvili has a unique opportunity to address the deep political and developmental crisis facing Georgia by embarking on substantial reforms. One of his greatest challenges is to increase the state's legitimacy and efficiency after a revolution that demonstrated the population's deep dissatisfaction with government.

The 1995 Constitution of Georgia provided for three distinct branches of government, and a clear system of "checks and balances." Unlike in other countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Parliament was an engaged and transparent institution. Political debate and access to decision-making existed within its halls. However in practice, power was centralized in the hands of the President. As the head of the executive, he appointed ministers and regional governors. He could be impeached only if found guilty of a crime by the Supreme or Constitutional Court. The Constitution also established a highly centralized state where the internal territorial division of the country was to be determined "after the full restoration of the jurisdiction of Georgia over the whole territory of the country" (Art 2.3)

Reforms of state structures were arguably necessary for two reasons. Firstly, they were needed to help restore citizens' trust in government and sense of engagement in decision-making. Secondly, they were essential to facilitate decentralization and prepare the ground for national reconciliation with breakaway Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The amendments that passed at a special Parliamentary session on 5-6 February gave the President the right to dissolve Parliament – when it fails to ratify the budget – and to dismiss the Cabinet of Ministers. The post of Prime Minister was created to head the Cabinet of Ministers. President Saakashvili, who had repeatedly promised that the position will go to his revolutionary ally Zurab Zhvania, appointed the latter subsequently. With three fifths of its members, the Parliament will be able to pass a vote of no confidence against the government but not to impeach the President. The amendments will not effect Presidential control over the appointments of governors and the ministers of defense, interior and security.

IMPLICATIONS: The constitutional amendments have been the subject of heated discussion in Georgia among policy makers, government officials and NGO activists for the past weeks. Domestic analysts and legal experts tend to consider that the amendments strengthen the presidential system and maintain a centralized state. The President is likely to play a key role in the country's transformation, largely guiding and regulating state institutions and political processes. The Prime Minister will be answerable first and foremost to the President. On the flip side, however, it is unlikely that citizens and political parties will be guaranteed maximum public participation and the necessary tools to engage in decision-making.

Another concern is the extent to which the model of a strong and centralized state will mesh with alternative models calling for the transformation of Georgia into a loose federation. Abkhazian, South Ossetian and Ajarian conceptions of the central state are likely to be much more minimalist than the one being currently envisaged. They are likely to envision a self-restrained central government that shares much decision and policy making with federal bodies, if they at all are to think of taking part in a Georgian state.

By rushing the passage of the amendments, President Saakashvili did not promote a democratic process. He urged Parliament to vote before he was to appoint the new government, thus reducing the time available for public discussion. According to law, amendments to the Constitution are to be made public for discussion one month before being voted upon. The President nevertheless denied the public an opportunity for full participation, claiming that the amendments had been a subject of public debate since May 2001. With Parliamentary elections due on 28 March, he also tasked a de-legitimized and weak body - which was elected in 1999 - to decide upon an issue of fundamental importance for the future of the state.

CONCLUSIONS: Mikheil Saakashvili's policy decisions will be closely scrutinized and measured against his pledge to advance democracy and conflict resolution. With a significantly weakened political opposition Saakashvili had little need to bargain to guarantee that his amendments passed in Parliament – though the Traditionalists Party, as

well as the Socialists and several independent MPs made highly critical statements in Parliament on 5-6 February. Saakashvili and Zhvania successfully outweighed Nino Burjanadze, former Interim President and current Speaker of Parliament, and their erstwhile revolutionary ally. However, Saakashvili should be wise to consider how the reforms will affect political competition and public participation in the future and promote power sharing. This is particularly important when the amendment issue is linked to the negotiation process with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Since independence, each new government in Georgia has been able to work under the constitution of its choosing. The Georgian constitution has been repeatedly amended. Today, it risks becoming a document that is more widely identified with the party in power than as a representation of the fundamental law of Georgia.

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ELECTION CODE CHANGES IN KAZAKHSTAN

The second reading of a draft of amendments to Kazakhstan's Law "On Elections" will occur on Feb. 20, after both Kazakh parliamentary houses overwhelmingly approved the amendments on Jan. 26 in a joint session. The parliamentarians' approval was somewhat surprising, as political experts had predicted a battle over several controversial provisions, especially the composition of the regional election commissions. But after 102 members of parliament voted for the law and only two against it, even oppositional sources have refrained from significant criticism of the amendments.

The parliamentary working group on the amendments is currently considering hundreds of suggestions from other deputies and deciding which to work into the new draft. Nonetheless, most observers expect these changes to be minor, compared to the significant work that has already taken place.

Many sources have said the reason for uncontroversial approval of the amendments last month was the extensive discussion that has already taken place, and the willingness of the working group to compromise. President Nursultan Nazarbaev presented the first governmental version Sept. 2, 2002, and established a working group, and for months there were three versions of suggested amendments—a governmental version, a version from the political party "Otan," and a version from the political party "Auy." However, Otan withdrew its version in December, saying it was in agreement with the governmental version, and Auy leader Gani Kalieva declared on the day of the vote that the majority of the party's members supported the governmental draft as well, citing constructive dialogue with the government.

Kazakh news agencies reported active debates in the working group while it considered these versions, and some provisions are still controversial. The most controversial one concerns how the regional election commissions will be formed. The governmental draft originally allowed the akims, or mayors, to appoint the commissions, but the deputies compromised, and according to Kazakh news sources, the deputies will be appointed by the Maslikhats, or local legislative bodies. This will give a degree of greater independence to the regional election commissions.

Still, the debate on how to choose them is not over. Deputies are now debating the contradictory language in the code: Each commission should have seven members, the code stipulates, but the code also requires each commission to have a member from all parties participating in the election. There are nine registered parties in Kazakhstan, and although many will not be running in each region, in regions like Almaty or Astana, there is likely to be too few spots in the commissions for the parties. Deputies now debate how they will decide whom to refuse a spot on the commission, a controversial discussion.

Also controversial is the wording on observers. The current wording is a vast improvement over the original version, which forbade direct or indirect financing of sociologists, journalists, independent observers from Kazakhstan by international NGOs, foreign governments, and other foreign sources. This would have barred all local NGOs receiving foreign money from monitoring the election, but the OSCE, NGOs and other politicians worked to remedy this problematic wording. The current wording, according to the OSCE report, allows foreign-funded observers, but the government will not accredit them. The

groups that send them, however, will be able to individually accredit the observers. Still, the Almaty-based political NGO Echo points to clauses in the code that would allow commissions to remove observers for infractions, which could be used improperly.

Regarding media, the law requires media outlets to publish paid information from any parties, regardless of the ownership of the media outlet. Opposition parties have claimed this is a positive development that gives them as much right to publish their opinions as pro-governmental parties. On the other hand, Echo claims it is negative because it can be used as a mechanism for shutting down media outlets, as it puts more restrictions on the media.

Despite these existing problems, most political observers say the new law is a vast improvement over the old one. OSCE's official evaluation of the law claimed it was an improvement, and has also worked extensively with parliamentarians on the law. The head of the work group and member of the Mazhilis parliamentary house Zhazbek Abdiev said the new law would comply with international standards, and one of the stated purposes of the new law is to reduce governmental ability to meddle in elections. Nonetheless, Abdiev said the changes to the code did not mean that previous election results were "illegitimate."

Not everyone is optimistic about the new law. Independent journalist Sergei Kozlov wrote in an article published online that he was pessimistic. "It is all being added together, it seems to me, to be used for the authorities, like always." And the OSCE's report noted that despite the improvements, the authorities still have enough mechanisms for controlling the elections if they choose to do so.

Olivia Allison

INDO-PAKISTANI NEGOTIATIONS: WHAT'S IN THEM FOR CENTRAL ASIA?

Stephen Blank

The Indo-Pakistani announcement of a composite dialogue on all outstanding issues between them offers hope of an amelioration of the problems that have bedeviled these two states, if not hope for a more general process leading to peace between them. But beyond their immediate impact upon South Asia, these negotiations also contain important potential changes for Central Asia as well. Central Asia has long since been another venue into which these two states have projected their rivalry, consequently any major change in that rivalry raises possibilities of corresponding changes in Central Asia.

BACKGROUND: One of the key theaters of Indo-Pakistani rivalry has been Afghanistan. For a long time, Pakistan has sought to gain decisive influence over that state, seeing Afghanistan as a strategic hinterland in its rivalry with India and as a gateway to expanded trade, political, military, and religious ties to Central Asia. During the nineties, Pakistani intelligence agencies were also involved in recruiting Jihadis from these states as well as in forming the Taliban. India, for its part, has sought to counter this Pakistani drive, and in the new Afghanistan has been a prominent supporter of the new regime of Hamid Karzai and a long-standing ally of the Northern Alliance. It has also established flourishing trade and military ties with Afghanistan and Central Asian states as well as with Iran to threaten Pakistan's rear, and to project influence of a military, commercial, and political nature across the region. This endeavor corresponds with directives from the highest levels of India to make India into a leading power projector throughout Asia.

For these reasons any progress toward peace between India and Pakistan correspondingly reduces the opportunities and freedom of maneuver for terrorists inside Pakistan, along Kashmir's frontier, inside Kashmir, and within India to act. Progress toward peace with India will lead to an erosion of their support since elements of the Pakistani government will no longer be able to support them. But beyond that, progress in this negotiation will also ultimately undermine the Taliban and Bin Laden's ability to carry out terrorist attacks inside Pakistan and Afghanistan. Naturally, an upsurge of such attacks to derail the consolidation of these talks and of the new Afghanistan until conclusive success in these negotiations takes place is only to be expected.

IMPLICATIONS: Beyond a short-term increase in the number of terrorist attacks that could then lead to a gradual diminution of such attacks in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, if not India as well, we can expect major strategic changes in the way both India and Pakistan relate to Central Asia as well. To the extent that these two states can arrive at a modus vivendi and a way to confront outstanding issues in their bilateral relationship, we can also expect their rivalry in Central Asia, a rivalry that contains commercial and military elements, to diminish as well. Acts of economic warfare, the closing of transportation corridors, blockades, etc. will also

gradually cease, thereby opening up major opportunities for the establishment of lasting trade and transportation corridors to and from Central Asian states. These avenues for trade and for the movement of people and for goods and services can also ultimately come to encompass not just pipelines and trade routes, but also multilateral projects that include both Pakistan and India, e.g. the projected gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Indian Ocean which has been stalled in no small measure due to this rivalry.

If these states can gradually come to eschew a debilitating and multi-dimensional rivalry in their bilateral relations and policies toward Central Asia, they will thereby foster that region's greater openness to outside trade and transportation not just with India and Pakistan but with the outside world more broadly. This will go a long way to overcome some of the most important obstacles to economic development in Central Asia, namely the region's isolation from the sea and from major international trade routes. Construction of a viable trade and transportation infrastructure, connecting Central Asia with South Asia and the rest of the world, can provide a mutually beneficial outcome with diverse and generally positive political consequences as well for both South Asia and Central Asia. It also will facilitate a process that counteracts the further importation of external rivalries into the already troubled and volatile Central Asian zone. That would be a win-win outcome for everyone.

IMPLICATIONS: Progress towards peace in South Asia not only helps avert the specter of an Indo-Pakistani war that could raise the threat of nuclear attacks or the collapse of the Pakistani government. It also has potentially major positive consequences for the entire Central Asian region. First of all, a genuine peace process, if not a genuine peace between those two states, entails a serious degradation in the ability of terrorist forces to hide out in Pakistan and Afghanistan and to use those territories with impunity for their operations. In other words, both Bin Laden and the Taliban, not to mention Kashmiri organizations, will come under serious pressure from any true progress in these negotiations. Second, not only will terrorism that threatens Central Asia diminish, the importation of the Indo-Pakistani military-political rivalry into Central Asia will also be reversed and contribute to a

general lowering of the regional potential for violence. Third, trade and transportation possibilities that have hitherto been blocked by this rivalry will open up. That will allow for a major expansion of both regional and global trade that will contribute substantially to overcoming some of the most intractable obstacles to regional progress in Central Asia. All these considerations make Central Asia and all those who have a substantial interest in its development more than interested bystanders in those negotiations. Few possibilities in international affairs offer as much potential for mutually

positive outcomes than do these negotiations. Therefore their progress is and will continue to be of vital significance not only to South Asian governments and people, but also to the peoples and regimes of Central Asia.

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THE MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEM IN KYRGYZSTAN ON THE VERGE OF BREAKDOWN

The mental health system in Kyrgyzstan is on the verge of crisis. The main problem is an outdated management system, due to which the national program on reforming the mental health system is not implemented. There is no independent supervisory expert committee that could monitor and provide adequate feedback for the system.

The NGO "Psychic Health and Society", the most actively working NGO in the field of improvement of the mental health system claims "it is necessary to decentralize and bring patient care institutions to homes so that the mentally ill do not drop out of the community, and relatives could visit them regularly". The Republican Center for Mental Health (RCMH) that manages the system also makes such a statement. However, the head "Psychic Health and Society" Burul Makenbaeva said "the RCMH is not going to do it, since it has promised to for the last three years, yet there's a lack of real actions and results".

The RCMH argues it has a lack of "sufficient financing" and states that "everything is going in accordance with plan developed up to the year 2010. Those issues that did not require money have already been resolved". An official inquiry "on the condition of mental health in the south of the Kyrgyz Republic and the activity of RCMH" shows that "despite work on the improvement of the mental health service, its reforming and quality remains unsatisfactory".

The mental health system started to develop in Kyrgyzstan due to the formation of the Soviet Union. However, as chief psychiatrist of Bishkek city, Kenesh Usenov, said, in view of the ideological war between communism and the rest of the world, Soviet doctors practiced different treatment methods and approach to

mental health. Thus, the ideas of Freud, Jung and of other prominent psychiatrists were ignored and not practiced at all.

Earlier, patients gathered to the large centralized hospitals, where they were isolated from the community. They were treated with large doses of first generation neuroleptics and "correctors". These drugs had negative side effects on patients' health; however, the strong side of the mental health system in Soviet Union was sufficient financing.

According to the recent official inquiry, the system had not changed. "Patients are held in hospitals not only due to objective reasons, but also to an archaic manner of doctor-patient relationship, due to which patients' rights to take decisions and actions independently are not admitted, even if the psychotic symptomatology has not been revealed. Such unjustified holding of patients in hospitals has led to the transformation of large psychiatric hospitals to long term "shelters" where almost two thirds of patients do not need permanent treatment, according to the document.

After independence, new problems and challenges arose. The focus of the government was on more vital "issues" to the country. Thus 1991-1998 were stagnant years to the mental health system. Only in 1998m a national program for the reform of the mental health system scheduled for the years 2000-2010 was developed; the required legislation was passed in 1999. Experts, overall, think the law on "psychiatric service and human rights" is good, but has not been implemented.

The basic goals of the national reform program is to destigmatize the mental health system, decentralize it, and integrate it into the general medical system.

According to RCMH, the implementation is going well and the only problem is insufficient financing, which is not provided by the Ministry of Healthcare. However, international organizations and mass media claim the human rights of patients are violated. The staff of "Psychic Health and Society" said in an interview that "doctors will continue to violate human rights, because they do not know any other way of patient treatment; they are not trained for it". Most specialist working with RCMH studied in Soviet schools of psychiatry. Representatives of RCMH said that "in some places, human rights are still violated, but we gradually train them".

Together with the International Helsinki Bureau on Human Rights, "Psychic Health and Society" proposed to RCMH to educate personnel on how to observe the human rights of patients. Already, in the Kyrgyz State Medical Academy, future specialists are since two years trained in a program that fit international standards of work in the mental health system.

Decentralization has not happened; in fact in 2000, two of three large mental health institutions were centralized under one leadership. The Ministry of Healthcare defended this with a reduction administrative costs.

The Executive director of RCMH, Mr. Nazarkulov stated in an interview that "by the year 2010 we plan to open 5-10 bed psychological centers in 70-80% of local hospitals. We have already cut twice the number of beds in large hospitals and will further decrease it. However, on a local level, we face resistance, because they do not want to work with mentally ill patients".

Aziz Soltobaev

NO CLOSER PROSPECTS FOR THE SETTLEMENT OF THE KARABAKH CONFLICT

Shahin Abbasov

Prior to the 2003 presidential elections in Azerbaijan and Armenia this year, many hoped that the negotiating process between the two countries would revitalize and produce visible results in the post-election period. In 2003, talks were frozen since no serious compromises were realistic before the presidential elections in both countries, more so in the light of Azerbaijan's former President Heydar Aliyev's protracted illness. Externally, the war in Iraq further shifted the focus of major powers from the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and its fallout impacted negatively on the relations between the US, France and Russia, the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, the main mediating body for the conflict. However, months into the post-election period, prospects remain dim.

BACKGROUND: The development of the situation in Azerbaijan and Armenia, statements of both sides, and the behavior of the mediators all indicate that the hopes for a solution are unlikely to materialize. The co-chairs have already announced that they will not bring any new offers or ideas on settlement to the sides and described their planned visits to the region as "fact-finding."

One rationale for expecting progress in the negotiations was that once presidential elections in Armenia and in Azerbaijan took place amid falsifications and irregularities, the international community, mostly the USA, would receive additional levers of influence on official Baku and Yerevan. However, while the elections were problematic and fell short of international standards in both countries, the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh is not an area where the two presidents can be expected to make serious compromises even under a very strong international pressure. On the contrary, after the victory in less than democratic elections, presidents Robert Kocharyan and Ilham Aliyev tend to take populist, "patriotic" steps for the greater legitimization of their own authority.

Public opinion in both Armenia and in Azerbaijan is decreasingly conducive to a compromise. Armenia, which occupies almost 20 percent of Azerbaijan's territory, is not interested in losing its advantage and compromises resulting in "losing" Nagorno-Karabakh. Public opinion in Azerbaijan, however, is divided into supporters of a peaceful solution and of the military option. As the occupied territories and huge numbers of internally displaced people constitute a serious psychological and emotional factor, the supporters of the military option are growing. However, even the supporters of a peaceful solution are not ready to agree with the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh. This makes the situation for the presidents to embark on policies contradicting strong feelings of their electorates improbable.

Beginning his second presidential term, President Robert Kocharyan stated that he is not going to recede from his earlier stance: to achieve the independence of his native unrecognized Nagorno Karabakh, or to annex it to Armenia. In Baku, Ilham Aliyev speaking at his inauguration, once again pledged to continue the policy of his father and stressed that Azerbaijan will do everything to keep its territorial integrity. He also stressed that

if Azerbaijan fails to achieve this by peaceful negotiations, territorial integrity will be restored by force.

The regional background does not promote trust of the conflicting parties either. Despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's promises to Ilham to help the settlement of the conflict on the basis of territorial integrity, recent developments raise doubts about Moscow's sincerity. Putin's Minister of Defense has since November 2003 confirmed that "Armenia is Russia's strategic ally of Russia in the South Caucasus," recalling that the largest Russian military base in South Caucasus is located in Armenia, and "we want to build our relationship so that the Russian military feel comfortable and the Armenian citizens feel safe and understand that our joint efforts are directed to the protection of our common interests". Baku reacted by stating that Russian-Armenian military cooperation promotes Armenia's uncompromising position in the negotiations.

IMPLICATIONS: Very few people in both countries now believe the peace process will be revitalized. Sergey Ivanov, representing a mediator nation, emphasized in Yerevan that he sees "foggy perspectives" for the settlement of the conflict. Moreover, the statements of the Armenian and Azerbaijani Ministers for Foreign Affairs at a November 2003 conference in Berlin show that Armenia and Azerbaijan are still far apart today.

"The population of Nagorno-Karabakh has always been and continues to be Armenian", said Vardan Oskanyan, adding that "expectations that Armenia will give Nagorno Karabakh to Azerbaijan are unrealistic." His counterpart Vilayet Guliyev in turn sharply criticized the OSCE Minsk Group. He recalled that not a single inch of Azerbaijan's occupied territory had been liberated as a result of the mediation, and that not a single refugee has returned home thanks to the talks. He also expressed disbelief at demands for Azerbaijan to set up economic relations with Armenia.

Azerbaijan and Armenia also have serious disagreements over the format of a possible settlement. Azerbaijan insists on a "step-by-step" model, beginning with the return of occupied territories outside Nagorno-Karabakh and the repatriation of refugees; and only then, negotiations on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, Armenia accepts only a "package" version of a settlement, i.e. solving both the questions of occupied territories and the status issue simultaneously. Both sides believe that time is

playing in their favor. Azerbaijan expects successes in economic development that would allow it to strengthen Baku's position vis-à-vis Yerevan. Armenia, on the other hand, is confident that regional economic cooperation is inevitable even with the conflict still unresolved.

CONCLUSIONS: The elections haven't and could not have changed much in terms of the likelihood of a negotiated settlement. In fact, the elections did not affect public opinion in the two countries. The conflict is the problem, resolving which needs support of the public. Most likely, the status quo will remain the same in the next year – slow and inefficient negotiations, whether personal meetings of the two presidents or under the Minsk Group framework. All this will occur against the background of an uneasy cease-fire. Despite the strong statements of both sides, a renewal of hostilities can hardly be expected in the near future. But it is also impossible to completely exclude such a possibility. The situation of “neither war, nor peace” cannot last indefinitely. It cannot be excluded that Baku's patience will run low. With every year, the unsettled conflict is a growing factor of instability in the South Caucasus.

The mediators and the conflicting parties need to undertake new, more serious efforts, for the settlement of the conflict. An interim proposal that could suit both parties was floated in late 2002, that still hold promise: according to this plan, Armenia, under international guarantees of security for Nagorno-Karabakh, at a first stage withdraws forces from the four occupied regions of Azerbaijan on the southern border, where the bulk of internally displaced persons come from. In response, Azerbaijan restores economic relations with Armenia, especially railway communication. After that, negotiations concerning other areas and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh begin. Such a decision could become a first step in the solution of the conflict, and would strengthen trust between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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SEVERE FLOOD HITS SOUTH KAZAKHSTAN

Residents of the dozens of villages located along the Syrdarya River have to be evacuated to safe places. The decision of the Emergency Agency of Kazakhstan came too late for people whose houses had already been washed away by rising floodwaters. As has been the case many times before, the government proved to be totally helpless in the face of a man-made calamity.

The first warnings of the impending flood came from environmental groups in early December. These sources said that the level of the Syrdarya River which is shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan was rising rapidly. But these warnings were not heeded in time by clumsy government bureaucracy. In fact, risings of water levels in the river occur every year. However, this year it was caused by the abnormally increased amount of water discharged from Toktogul hydroelectric power station in Kyrgyzstan. The Naryn River which feeds the Toktogul power station flows into Syrdarya.

Earlier, Kazakhstan used to provide the coal-fired power station in Bishkek with relatively cheap coal. This year Kazakhstan failed to cope with its deliveries, and Kyrgyzstan had to turn to hydroelectric stations, thereby dramatically increasing the discharge of water into Syrdarya. Until recently, the southern regions of Kazakhstan had been more or less reliably protected from flooding by the Shardara water reservoir with a holding capacity of 5.2 billion cubic meters. But given that a gigantic mass of water of up to 1500 cubic meters per second is incessantly pouring into Shardara, the reservoir will be very soon overfilled.

This eventuality is the worst fear of the population in Kyzylorda region in the South.

On February 7, for the first time since the disaster began, Emergency Agency officials admitted publicly that many houses in some villages in the area had been irreparably destroyed and village residents were to be evacuated without delay. This admission is little solace for those who were left homeless by flooding. The water is continuing to overflow the banks of Syrdarya in many places paralyzing the life in villages, schools and hospitals. Authorities in Kyzylorda say that all attempts to prevent flooding by building dams and digging dikes had been fruitless.

It is feared that if further rising water levels are not to be stopped, more than 30 settlements in Kyzylorda and South Kazakhstan regions with a total population of 151,000 will be struck by floodwaters. It was reported by government sources that \$1,240,700 were allocated from the state budget to combat the flooding. Nobody is sure that the lion's share of the funds will not land up in the pockets of high officials.

On many occasions, the government has been assuring the public that there was nothing serious to be afraid of. The government media made front-page stories out of the talks in Shymkent, where deputy ministers of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan gathered to discuss the ways of averting flooding. Kyrgyzstan formally agreed to reduce the amount of discharge from the Toktogul hydroelectric power plant. Uzbeks, usually very tough customers for Kazakhstan, declared their readiness to increase the outflow of water from the

upstream of Syrdarya River into Arnasay lowlands to 650 cubic meters per second. In the same breath, Uzbek officials expressed fear that the huge mass of water into Arnasay would destroy irrigation barrages in Uzbekistan. To compensate for the damage Kazakhstan would have to pay \$4 million. The sum is more than the state with a meager budget can afford.

It turns out now that all these promises were nothing more than mere words. “We were trying to solve the problem on an intergovernmental level since the year 2000. Our parliament members have also repeatedly appealed to their Central Asian counterparts. But Uzbeks are invariably avoiding any contacts on a parliamentary level” complains the member of parliament Toleubek Kosmambetov. At the end of January, the parliament fraction of the Agrarian Party of Kazakhstan renewed its appeal to parliamentarians of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Messages were also sent to the governments of these countries. There were no encouraging responses from the neighbors.

It is becoming quite clear that Kazakhstan is left alone to grapple with the threat of flooding. Some economic advisors suggest building a new water reservoir on Syrdarya River. But government is not likely to give a go-ahead to the project which will cost, estimates say, \$190 million. While people at the top are looking for easy solutions, residents of disaster areas are anticipating the springtime with growing alarm.

Marat Yermukanov

NEWS BITES

UZBEKISTAN RECOGNIZES NEW U.S. AMBASSADOR

28 January

The new U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan presented his credentials to the president Wednesday, and the government of this former Soviet republic said it had "regular contacts" with Washington concerning human rights. John Robert Purnell presented his credentials to President Islam Karimov, who has ruled this Central Asia nation since the 1991 Soviet collapse. Uzbekistan became the United States' main regional partner in the war on terror after the Sept. 11 attacks. Hundreds of U.S. soldiers are deployed at a southern Uzbekistan air base near the Afghan border. Earlier relations were complicated by Uzbekistan's internationally criticized record on human rights. "We have no problems," Uzbek Foreign Ministry spokesman Ilkhom Zakirov said Wednesday. "We have regular contacts with our American counterparts where we openly discuss all sorts of issues such as human rights or reforms." (AP)

NEW KAZAKH PARTY HOLDS FIRST CONGRESS

31 January

The Asar party -- which was registered in December and is led by President Nursultan Nazarbaev's eldest daughter, Darigha -- held its first congress on 31 January. According to party Political Council member Yerlan Karin, among the suggestions for party activities that were put forward at the congress was encouraging a dialogue among the government, the opposition, and society to draw up a joint reform program. Karin also introduced to congress participants an initiative intended to ensure clean elections, and promised that the party's newly established parliamentary faction will take an active role in assessing draft legislation on the media and on elections that is making its way through the parliament. Karin said the draft media law neither meets Kazakhstan's needs nor guarantees free access to information. (gazeta.kz)

GERMANY PLEDGES AID FOR GEORGIA

2 February

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder assured visiting Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili in Berlin on 30 January that Germany will send specialists to advise on reforming the Georgian customs service and to train diplomats, the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" reported the following day. Economic Cooperation and Development Minister Heidemarie Wiczorek-Zeul

pledged 26 million euros (\$32.4 million) for Georgian economic development and to help combating corruption. (RFE/RL)

ARMENIA RULES OUT 'PARTIAL SOLUTION' TO KARABAKH CONFLICT

2 February

Yerevan will not agree to any "partial solution" of the Karabakh conflict, Armenian Foreign Minister Oskanian told a press conference in Yerevan on 30 January, according to "The Russia Journal." Oskanian was referring to an EU report suggesting that Armenian troops be withdrawn from the Agdam, Djabrail, Fizuli, Gubadly, and Zangelan districts of Azerbaijan in return for the restoration of rail communication between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Several senior Azerbaijani politicians have signaled their readiness to accept that proposal. But the independent daily "Ekho" on 30 January quoted opposition Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan co-Chairman Araz Alizade and Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (reformist wing) Deputy Chairman Fuad Mustafaev as expressing reservations about it. (Groong)

AZERBAIJAN OUTLINES MEASURES TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

2 February

The Azerbaijani Interior Ministry and the independent Press Council established last year have drafted measures to minimize the likelihood that journalists covering political demonstrations will be targeted by police in the event that a demonstration turns violent. Press Council Chairman Aflatun Amashev explained that 500 special jackets will be manufactured at a cost of 20 million manats (\$4,091) and distributed to editorial offices. Special access to the site of demonstrations will also be provided for journalists, and a group comprising Interior Ministry and Press Council representatives will monitor demonstrations and take immediate action if journalists are endangered. In the event of police violence against journalists, the monitoring group will insist on an investigation. (Turan)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT WILL SEEK RE-ELECTION IN 2006, SAYS AIDE

2 February

An adviser to President Nursultan Nazarbaev, Yermukhamet Yertysbaev, told journalists in Almaty on 31 January that Nazarbaev will definitely run for re-election in 2006. Yertysbaev said that the president revealed his re-election plans on 16 January, and the president also

predicted that he would win. The next presidential election must be held in December 2006. Kazakhstan's 1995 constitution specifies that a person may serve only two consecutive seven-year terms as president. Since Nazarbaev has been elected only once under this constitution, he may run again, although he has served as president since 1990. Yertysbaev has said repeatedly that the issue of the next president of Kazakhstan will not arise until 2013. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

SOME 700 RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS FREED UNDER UZBEK AMNESTY

2 February

Zuhriddin Husniddinov, an adviser to President Karimov, told ITAR-TASS on 2 February that about 700 people convicted of religious extremism have been freed under the December amnesty commemorating the 11th anniversary of the Uzbek Constitution. He added that the state-supported Muslim Spiritual Board of Uzbekistan and the State Committee for Religious Affairs have been tasked with helping the former extremists to find jobs and with ensuring that they do not return to extremist groups. (ITAR-TASS)

OPPOSITION WEEKLY BANNED IN KAZAKH PARLIAMENT

3 February

Kazakh Mazhilis (lower house) member Serikbai Alibaev has called on Mazhilis Chairman Zharmakan Tuyakbai to look into a ban on the circulation of the opposition weekly "Respublika Assandi Times" in parliament and has demanded that measures be taken against whoever imposed the ban, the paper reported on 30 January. Alibaev told the Mazhilis that "Respublika Assandi Times" has frequently been harassed by the authorities because of its critical reporting, and its distributors have been persecuted by the police. Mazhilis officials have told parliamentarians that they may not bring copies of the paper into the parliament building. Alibaev said this violates his constitutional right to receive information. The day that Alibaev's demand appeared in the newspaper, a member of its editorial staff was detained and beaten up by three men in police uniform, Deputy Editor in Chief Galina Dyrkina told a news conference in Almaty on 3 February. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

NEW U.S. AMBASSADOR TO UZBEKISTAN SAYS FUNDING WON'T BE CUT

3 February

John Robert Purnell, the new U.S. ambassador to Uzbekistan, told a news conference on 2 February that despite U.S. State Department recommendations that financial assistance to Uzbekistan be reduced because of that country's lack of progress in human rights, the

amount of assistance will not be reduced. Purnell said that during his first meeting with Uzbek President Islam Karimov the main topics of discussion were combating terrorism and drug trafficking, as well as political and economic development. (Uzreport.com)

U.S. CALLS ON KAZAKHSTAN TO MEET ALL ITS OSCE COMMITMENTS

4 February

Responding to the semi-annual report by Anton Rupnik, head of the OSCE Center in Almaty, Deputy Chief of the U.S. delegation to the OSCE Douglas Davidson said the United States approves of Kazakhstan's desire to serve as the OSCE's annual chairman in 2009, but the country must meet all its OSCE commitments. Among the areas needing attention, Davidson said, are reported violations of election legislation, government persecution of political opponents during election campaigns, and government harassment of the independent media. A decision on Kazakhstan's candidacy for the OSCE chairmanship will be made at the organization's annual foreign ministers' meeting in 2006. No other Central Asian state has sought the chairmanship. (gazeta.kz)

MEDIA CENTER ATTACKED IN SOUTH KYRGYZSTAN

4 February

The internationally funded Osh Media Resource Center in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh was attacked by two unidentified masked men in the early morning hours of 4 February. After assaulting a security guard and making verbal threats against journalists, the attackers stole computers, disk drives and hard disks, a digital camera, and a multimedia projector, but failed to get into a secure room where the center's documentation is stored. Center Director Ernis Mamyrganov told Interfax that the men were apparently looking for specific data. The UNESCO- and U.S.-funded center provides technical support, including Internet access, to journalists and students in southern Kyrgyzstan. More than 120 local journalists are members of the center. (Interfax)

KYRGYZ INTERIOR MINISTRY OFFICIAL LAMENTS GROWTH OF DRUG TRAFFICKING

4 February

Maken Turdugulov, head of the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry's investigations department, told journalists in Bishkek on 4 February that there has been enormous growth in the amount of drugs trafficked through Kyrgyzstan in the last five years. More than 3.5 tons of narcotics were seized by law enforcement agencies in 2003 -- a seven-fold increase over 1999. Turdugulov said this is only 1 percent-2 percent of the actual drug flow via Kyrgyzstan. Turdugulov's remarks were part of his assessment of a 1999 law on

fighting corruption and organized crime. He said the law is a failure not only because the drug trade is flourishing, but also because only one case has ever been filed under the law -- and that case was soon dropped. (akipress.org)

RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR ACCUSES TAJIK PUBLICATIONS OF DISTORTIONS

4 February

Russian Ambassador to Tajikistan Maksim Peshkov told a press conference in Dushanbe on 4 February that some recent articles in the independent Tajik publications "Asia Plus" and "Ruz-i nav" about Russian-Tajik relations have distorted facts and demonstrated ignorance of the real situation. Peshkov said he is bothered by reports on Tajik labor migrants in Russia and on the strategic relationship between the two countries, but he was particularly annoyed by an assertion that Tajikistan's debt to Russia is \$300 million, rather than the \$400 million that Peshkov says is the correct figure. The Tajik media has sometimes been critical of the treatment of Tajik job seekers in the Russian Federation. Such articles tend to appear whenever a group of Tajiks is deported for allegedly violating Russian residence rules. "Ruz-i nav" has reported extensively on the number of Tajiks who have died in Russia and has even implied that they were victims of genocide. (RIA-Novosti)

AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT DECREES NEW HOUSING FOR DISPLACED PERSONS

4 February

President Ilham Aliyev signed a decree on 4 February on the construction of new settlements to house some 4,000 families of displaced persons from Armenian-occupied districts of Azerbaijan adjacent to Nagorno-Karabakh who have been living in tent camps and railroad cars for the past decade. The settlements will be provided with water mains, electricity, schools, and medical facilities and will be financed from the State Oil Fund. (Turan)

BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY CALLS FOR INVESTMENT IN KAZAKH SMALL BUSINESSES

5 February

Jack Straw, who arrived in Kazakhstan on 5 February, told a news conference after his meeting with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev in Astana that Britain will help Kazakhstan develop its small- and medium-sized-business sector so the country's economy will not be centered exclusively on the raw-materials sector. Straw noted that British firms have already invested heavily in the Kazakh oil-and-gas sector. As part of his 5 February program in Astana, Straw opened a representative office of the British Embassy and the British Council, and announced that the embassy itself will move from Almaty to Astana in the near future. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

EUROPEAN UNION UNHAPPY WITH KYRGYZ ELECTION CODE REVISIONS

5 February

The representative of the European Union to the OSCE told the weekly meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Permanent Council on 29 January that the EU remains unhappy with the Kyrgyz Election Code, even after the recent adoption of changes by the parliament. In the view of the EU, the revised version does not meet international standards for free and fair elections, nor does it fulfill the country's OSCE commitments. The EU criticism noted that there are still some points in the legislation that could be used to limit the rights of citizens, candidates, and political parties to participate fully in the political process. (Kyrgyzinfo)

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST MEETS WITH IMPRISONED KYRGYZ OPPOSITION LEADER

5 February

International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights Vice President Ulrich Fischer was allowed by Kyrgyz authorities to meet with the country's most prominent political prisoner, Feliks Kulov, on 4 February. Kulov -- who formerly served as former National Security chief, vice president of Kyrgyzstan, and mayor of Bishkek -- is serving a 10-year sentence for abuse of office. The Kyrgyz opposition says the charges against him were politically motivated to remove President Askar Akaev's most-credible rival from the political arena. Kulov has indicated that he intends to run for president in the 2005 election. International human rights groups, the European Parliament, the OSCE, and U.S. State Department have appealed repeatedly to the Kyrgyz authorities to release Kulov. (Interfax)

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT DEPUTIES BACK INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATION IN CHECHNYA

5 February

On 4 February, 145 of the 624 deputies to the European parliament signed a statement of support for the proposal by Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov to establish an interim UN administration in Chechnya. Maskhadov's plan calls for the establishment of a provisional government in Chechnya under UN auspices and for the disarming of the Chechen armed resistance. "Nezavisimaya gazeta" on 5 February quoted an unnamed organizer of the European Parliament campaign to collect signatures in support of the proposal as saying, "I believe that this is the only way of resolving the Russian-Chechen problem." (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA'S PUTIN LINKS BOMB TO PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

7 February

Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed he would not talk to rebel Chechens he has accused of setting off a deadly bomb on the Moscow metro to disrupt elections next month that he is virtually certain to win. The Friday morning rush-hour bomb killed at least 39 passengers, and police said 105 people were still in hospital, 21 of whom remained in a critical condition. Soldiers and police with dogs were deployed on Saturday to beef up security at underpasses and metro stations, particularly at three close to the Kremlin. Putin, addressing reporters alongside the president of ex-Soviet Azerbaijan, said there was no doubt fugitive Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov had masterminded the attack. "We do not need any indirect confirmation. We know for certain that Maskhadov and his bandits are linked to this terrorism," he said. "I do not rule out that this could be used both in debates taking place in the Russian presidential election and as a lever to put pressure on the current head of state." A spokesman for the fugitive Chechen leader said neither Maskhadov nor his separatist government were "connected to this bloody provocation and (they) unequivocally condemn it." Putin, his poll ratings over 70 percent, has never been hurt by attacks like Friday's train blast and used the fight against separatists to his advantage in first winning election in 2000. He is unlikely to have any trouble defeating up to six rivals in the March 14 vote. The list of candidates who have met stiff requirements to take part is to be announced by Sunday. (Reuters)

AZERBAIJAN REASSURES RUSSIA ON PIPELINE

7 February

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev on Saturday sought to reassure Russia that the oil pipeline being built from his country to Turkey won't undermine Russia's economy. The \$3.6 billion pipeline from Baku to the Turkish port of Ceyhan bypasses Russia. "We think bringing the pipeline on line won't have any negative consequences for our neighbors. On the contrary, it could even carry Russian oil," Aliyev said at a news conference during an official visit. He also suggested that the pipeline running between the Azerbaijani capital Baku and the southern Russian port of Novorossiisk could carry Russian oil south rather than bringing Azerbaijani petroleum north. Russia has been urging Azerbaijan to increase its Caspian oil shipments through the Novorossiisk pipeline. On Friday, Russian Energy Minister Igor Yusufov said that the two nations were negotiating a new 15-year agreement on oil transit and that Russia had offered to reduce oil transit fees for Azerbaijani petroleum. Russia's pipeline network carried about 3 million tons of Azerbaijani oil last year, and the

amount could be increased to 16.5 million tons, Yusufov said. Aliyev said the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline could be operated "more efficiently," meaning the volume of Azerbaijani oil pumped through could be increased. At the same time, he said, the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline had originally been planned in Soviet times to carry Russian crude to two high-capacity Azerbaijani refineries. "This pipeline could be reversed," he said, quickly adding that "of course, this isn't a question for today. Maybe it could be the subject of future negotiations." (AP)

DEPUTY FSB CHIEF SAYS METRO BLAST WAS PROBABLY A SUICIDE BOMBING

9 February

Deputy Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Vyacheslav Ushakov said on 9 February that his agency, which is leading the investigation into the 6 February Moscow metro blast, is now working on the theory that the explosion was the work of a suicide bomber. The Moscow explosion, he said, was similar to one on a commuter train in the Stavropol Krai town of Yessentuki in December that killed more than 40 people. The Russian authorities believe the Yessentuki bombing and a bombing at an open-air rock concert in the Moscow neighborhood of Tushino in July were carried out by Chechen suicide bombers. As a result, investigators are looking for a "Chechen trail" in the Moscow metro blast, Ushakov said. (RIA-Novosti)

NATIONALITIES MINISTER WARNS AGAINST POST-BLAST XENOPHOBIA

9 February

Minister without portfolio Vladimir Zorin, who is responsible for nationalities policy, spoke out on 9 February against inciting nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments in the wake of the 6 February Moscow subway blast. "International terrorism is unquestionably the No. 1 danger today," Zorin said. "But it is no less dangerous to foment anti-Caucasus, xenophobic sentiment in such a great multiethnic country as Russia." "Terrorists, like all criminals, have neither nationality nor religion," he added. Zorin called for the state and "civil society" to unite in fighting terrorism. Following the incident, Motherland co-leader Dmitrii Rogozin called for a state of emergency and Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) leader and Deputy Duma Speaker Vladimir Zhirinovskii called for all "suspicious" people to be sent away from Moscow. (Interfax)

GEORGIAN MINISTER IMPLICATES ABKHAZIA IN MOSCOW METRO BOMBING

9 February

State Security Minister Valeri Khaburzania told journalists in Tbilisi on 9 February that his agency has detained a man

from the North Caucasus, Nazir Aidobolov, who was allegedly recruited by Abkhaz intelligence and sent to Georgia to establish contact with Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge. Khaburzania claimed that Aidobolov had instructions to go to the Russian Embassy in Tbilisi on 5 February and inform the resident Russian Federal Security Service officer that a major terrorist attack was planned for the following day in Moscow, and a second several days later in Stavropol Krai, and to name Chechens from Pankisi as the organizers. (Interfax)

DETAINED AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITIONISTS LAUNCH HUNGER STRIKE

9 February

Some 60 people currently being held in the Bailov pretrial-detention center for their alleged roles in the 15-16 October clashes in the wake of the Azerbaijani presidential election have begun a protest hunger strike. They include Musavat Party Deputy Chairman Arif Gadjev, Umid Party Chairman Iqbal Agazade, and People's Party Chairman Panakh Huseinov. Eight opposition activists currently on trial for their alleged roles in the protests have also begun a hunger strike to protest police brutality. One of them, a member of a local election commission from Gazakh Raion, said local police "treated me in such a way that I was ready to confess I had murdered John F. Kennedy." (Turan)

KAZAKHSTAN SIGNS FOR ADB LOAN TO PROVIDE RURAL DRINKING WATER

9 February

The Kazakh government signed an agreement with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Astana on 9 February, under which the ADB will loan Kazakhstan \$34.6 million over 25 years for a rural drinking-water project. The project, which is being financed by Kazakhstan (about \$21 million) and the Islamic Development Bank (\$9.5 million) as well as by the ADB, is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2009. More than 400 villages in Aqmola, North Kazakhstan, Karaganda, and South Kazakhstan oblasts will obtain new water and sewage systems. The government of Japan is providing an additional \$350,000 to the project to train Kazakh specialists in maintaining and managing the new systems. (khabar.kz)

AFGHAN CHILD SOLDIERS' NEW START

10 February

The United Nations has launched a reintegration and rehabilitation programme for thousands of former child soldiers in Afghanistan. The UN Children's Fund, Unicef, will begin by targeting 2,000 children in the north-east province of Badakhshan. They will be offered education, vocational training and lessons in civic responsibilities. Similar programmes are planned in other areas. Unicef

estimates that there are around 8,000 child soldiers in Afghanistan. It says many of them have left armed groups and need urgent assistance to fully reintegrate into civilian life. "Most former underage soldiers in Afghanistan have missed out on many years of education, and all participants in the programme will receive basic literacy and numeracy tuition," Unicef said in a statement. Two years after the fall of the Taliban, much of Afghanistan remains unstable. Large militia factions compete in the north, remnants of the Taliban launch almost daily attacks in the south, and drug related violence racks much of the country. (BBC)

GEORGIA'S SAKASHVILI SEEKS NEW BEGINNING IN MOSCOW

10 February

Georgia's newly-elected President Mikhail Saakashvili urged Russia to open a new chapter in relations with Tbilisi and not fear rivalry from the United States as he began his first official visit to Moscow. "I have come to offer a hand to Russia and I hope my message will be heard. Georgia is ready for open and constructive cooperation with Russia," said Saakashvili in an address to students of the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations. Ahead of a key meeting on Wednesday with President Vladimir Putin, the Georgian leader repeated demands for Russia to shut down the two remaining military bases it has kept in the former Soviet republic. But he offered in return to allow the Russian military to help patrol border areas where Chechen rebels are suspected of hiding out. Many Georgians accuse Russia of engineering the break-up of their country by supporting separatist rebels in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The presence of two Russian military bases -- a hangover from Soviet rule -- in the Georgian towns of Batumi and Akhalkalaki remains a source of friction. For its part, the Kremlin has accused Georgia of allowing rebel fighters from the separatist Russian republic of Chechnya to launch attacks from inside Georgian territory. A US-educated lawyer, Saakashvili is a fluent English speaker, and many in Russia see the hand of Washington in last November's "rose revolution" which ousted his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze and brought Saakashvili to power. In his speech, the Georgian president sought to appease Russian concerns about the close ties between Washington and his government, which has set Tbilisi on a Western course with the aim of joining NATO and the European Union. "Our country is not a battleground between Russia and the United States," he said, adding that Georgia had no plans to offer the US military permanent bases. (AFP)

GIRL KILLED BY RUSSIA 'RACISTS'

10 February

A nine-year old Tajik girl has been stabbed to death in the

Russian city of St Petersburg by suspected skinheads. Police said a group of youths armed with knives and bats attacked the girl on Monday night, stabbing her 11 times. Her father and an 11-year old boy were also hospitalized with head wounds. The attack was being widely seen in Russia as racist in origin. St Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko, who described the attack as "bestial", said they must combat any manifestations of nationalism in the city. "This crime is comparable to the terrorist act in the Moscow underground railway," she said. "It is different in scale but these events are of the same order." St Petersburg police named the man injured in Monday's attack as Yusuf Sultanov, 34, from Tajikistan. He was with his daughter, Hurshida, and an 11-year old boy, Alabir, when they were attacked in a courtyard. A report by Russia TV said investigators were confident that St Petersburg-based skinheads were behind the incident. There have been several racist attacks in Moscow and other large Russian cities in the past, targeting foreign students, diplomats or immigrants from former Soviet Republics. An estimated 300 skinheads attacked market

places in Moscow two years ago, killing three people. (BBC)

SUICIDE BOMBER SHOOTS DEPUTY INTELLIGENCE DIRECTOR IN SOUTH AFGHANISTAN

11 February

The deputy intelligence director of troubled Khost province was shot dead by a suspected Taliban guerrilla who later blew himself up, an official said, in an incident which underlines continuing instability in southeastern Afghanistan. A spokesman for the ousted Islamic fundamentalist regime claimed responsibility for the attack, saying the intelligence director was targeted because he had given information to US forces and was formerly a member of an Afghan communist party. The south and southeast of Afghanistan is the former stronghold of the Taliban and remnants of the regime and their al-Qaeda allies are active in the region. United States-led coalition forces in these provinces come under regular attack and ambushes and kidnappings of foreigners have occurred in the region in recent months. (AFP)

