

Central Asia

Caucasus

ANALYST

BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 5, NO. 8

Wednesday, April 21, 2004

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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/April 21, 2004

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A series of bombings and attacks on the security forces shook Bukhara and Tashkent between March 28 and April 1. The Uzbek government blamed the terrorist acts on the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an illegal opposition group under suppression since the 1990s. The accusation was surprising as the group, which operates throughout Central Asia and many Arab Middle Eastern countries, has until now avoided violent means of achieving its political objectives. This raises questions whether the Uzbek government could be blaming the group as a pretext to avoid international criticism for further suppression of the group. While this policy could help Tashkent mute the Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the short-run, it will likely radicalize the group and other unarmed opposition groups to push them towards adopting armed struggle as their only viable political strategy.

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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](http://www.cacianalyst.org)) and described below.

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### Analytical Articles:

Analytical articles require a three to four sentence introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful judgment supported with concrete examples.

Analytical article structure:

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

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

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

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

### Specifications for Field Reports:

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

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

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## POSTPONING AFGHANISTAN'S ELECTION: A MIXED BLESSING

**Asma Shakir Khwaja**

*By postponing Afghanistan's national elections until September, Karzai has sought an extension on the democratic project in Afghanistan. However, it is perhaps worth asking whether current conditions in the country will be conducive for a free, fair election only a few months after the initial June date. While this decision is generating doubts on the government's legitimacy, the perils of proceeding with an election in the absence of the necessary requirements for its orderly holding could be even worse*

**BACKGROUND:** On March 28, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai stated that national elections were to be postponed until September. This decision came after the United Nations said that elections could not be held in June, as outlined in the 2002 Bonn Agreement. The UN claimed that "Lack of security, slow progress in the disarmament of militias, slow voter registration and a weakly-developed legal and institutional framework for democratic politics are jeopardizing the success of any future elections. Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) are requisites for the holding of free and fair elections." The Bonn Agreement called for presidential elections to be held within two years after the meeting of the emergency Loya Jirga, which took place in June 2002.

Elections were postponed due to the lack of security, the lack of voter rolls, 30-year old census data, the lack of a basic infrastructure of holding elections, slow progress in the disarmament of militias, and weakly developed legal and institutional frameworks. Various issues, which are not directly related to elections, also played a significant role in their postponement such as poor communication, little access to remote areas and the difficulties of educating the people about elections and candidates.

The Voter Registration Project Agreement was signed on August 14, 2003 between UN representatives and the Afghan Electoral Commission. The estimated US \$75.6 million cost of the project will be covered by UNDP. There has never been a voter registry in Afghanistan, and the process is even more complicated in the absence of any census. Until now, only 1.5 million out of a potential 10.5 million voters have been registered. In the past women were excluded from any electoral process so their registration is still a big problem. Among women, voter registration is only two percent, which is around 100,000 women. The UN has said that for a successful ballot, at least 70 per cent of eligible voters should be registered. Registration has been slow because of the limited number of voting stations. The Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) will set up 4,200 registration and polling stations throughout Afghanistan in 32 provinces from 1-25 May but the security for many of these stations remains a concern.

After the assassination of Bettina Goislard, a French national working for UNHCR in Ghazni, the Office of UN Volunteers has stopped recruiting workers for voter

registration. Since last August, almost 600 people have been killed in violence. Police have found leaflets in the southeast specifically warning people away from voter registration. The overall context of sporadic violence has fostered an atmosphere ideal for voter, election monitor, and candidate intimidation.

Besides the lack of security, paved roads, and basic election infrastructure, Afghanistan at present has no electoral law to draw on. Electoral jurisdictions have yet to be drawn up and agreed upon. Voting rules need to be drafted, approved, and implemented by the government.

**IMPLICATIONS:** The opposition to President Karzai has perceived this delay as his failure. As a result, the legitimacy of the government has also been questioned. Mr. Karzai needs to preserve government legitimacy to avoid political chaos. One way to forestall political chaos in the event of further election postponements is to reconvene the Loya Jirga to reaffirm the legitimacy of extending his term in order to ensure that national elections will be properly conducted. U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad has said that postponing elections would trigger a crisis of legitimacy for the Afghan government. If the delay goes beyond September, elections will have to be conducted next year because of the winter. This will require yet another meeting of the Loya Jirga to approve the further delay.

Though economic rehabilitation is significant for political stability, a democratic environment cannot be created until the government exercises the rule of law and disarms civilian militias. To achieve this goal Afghanistan is forming a national army with 7,500 men to help in the disarmament program and to provide security for the elections. Provincial Reconstruction Teams are another effort to bring more security to Afghanistan.

The process of registration of voters reflects the ethnic and regional balance of Afghan population, which made the registration process complicated. Pakistan is also expecting that Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran would be registered and allowed to participate in the forthcoming Afghan elections, to confer legitimacy and credibility to the election process. It might aggravate rising ethnic tensions. The option to hold presidential election while postponing the parliamentary was rejected as it could also exacerbate tensions between the Pushtoons and non-Pushtoons.

The legal framework for elections, moreover, remains unclear. Mr. Karzai has yet to issue either a draft electoral law or a presidential decree on the controversial issue of provincial and district boundaries that would form electoral constituencies. It appears that the setting of final electoral boundaries, organizing political parties and even preparing ballots for dozens of candidates in different parts of the country is a hard task to accomplish, even by September.

Mr. Karzai cannot assert his power beyond Kabul as he admits that his government is facing logistical problems. If the situation remains as it is, elections in September will only confirm an undemocratic and unstable status quo, which will bring more harm than good. The government and political parties have to agree upon an electoral law, on constituencies, on the registration of political parties, and the registration of candidates, all formidable tasks on their own.

Although the Afghan constitution does not give any specific date for holding the elections, it does state that the government has six months to draft and pass an electoral law stipulating the details of how and when the elections should take place. The constitution also stipulates that a minimum of

two women per province should be seated at the national assembly. Given current progress, this goal appears overly ambitious.

**CONCLUSIONS:** If carried out correctly and successfully, the September 2004 elections could be a turning point for democracy in Afghanistan. However, given the obstacles and the timeframe, this is increasingly unrealistic. A delay in the elections would also allow the government and its international supporters to focus on disarming militias, tackling the growing drug trade, completing voter registration and deploying more troops to maintain security.

Undoubtedly, many will read a further election delay as a setback for Karzai. However, the consequences of a poorly-managed, unmonitored, or incomplete September election are much more serious, and threaten the entire democratic project in Afghanistan.

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## WILL SAAKASHVILI MANAGE TO GET RID OF ABASHIDZE?

In spite of many attempts by Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania and Security Council Secretary Vano Merabishvili to negotiate a peaceful solution to the ongoing tensions between regional and central authorities, Aslan Abashidze still remains Saakashvili's Achilles' heel. Hence, the leader of the autonomous region has strengthened his personal security.

Bags of sands have been lined up in front of the interior ministry of Ajaria and over fifty armed men have been deployed to guard the territory. One tank and a Grad-type rocket launcher has been stationed on a stadium near the Ajarian Supreme Council by the directive of the Ajarian authorities. The main issue for the central government remains the disarmament of illegal armed formations in the autonomous republic. "Everything should be done to disarm people in Ajaria" stated Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Baramidze stated, calling on the Ajarian authorities to stop terrorizing the local population and enlisting citizens into illegal armed groupings. President Mikheil Saakashvili stated that "if Abashidze is not able to disarm the residents of the autonomy, then the central authorities are ready to open special stations where residents will be able to hand over firearms, which was distributed by Abashidze in exchange for money". On the other hand, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Ajaria Rostom Japaridze believes that the people of Ajara need their arms for their own protection.

In a written address to the Ajarian population, President Mikheil Saakashvili says that there are forces among the Ajarian authorities who have declared disobedience to the central Georgian authorities. "They are armed to their teeth, and are

preparing for war with the Georgian armed forces; they disregard directives of the commander-in-chief". The address was voiced at a press conference by one leader of the opposition movement based in Batumi, "Our Ajaria".

President Saakashvili calls the information spread by local authorities to the effect that Tbilisi intends to abolish the Ajarian Autonomy, impose restrictions on religious groups, destroy mosques, and resettle people of other ethnicities in Ajaria a "dirty lie". "This lie is circulated by people who have stolen money from the local population of Ajara, people who live like kings, while many Ajarians can hardly make ends meet, these are people who were involved in criminal activities and now have openly embarked on the road of treason," Saakashvili goes on in the address.

The situation escalated after the local authorities did not allow the central government to hold repeat parliamentary elections in the mountainous part of the autonomous republic and refused to let the chairman of the Central Election Commission of Georgia pass through the Choloki checkpoint, the main link between Ajaria and the rest of Georgia.

Having negotiated with U.S. Ambassador Richard Miles, Abashidze stated that the recommendations of the international community should be considered by everyone, however he emphasized that the tensions did not emanate from Ajaria. Negotiations between Abashidze and a group of influential businessmen from Tbilisi in order to avoid further conflict resulted in promises that the parties will do everything to find a settlement to the problem. After meeting with businessmen, Abashidze left to sign an agreement on hosting the

women's World Chess Championship in Batumi in May 2004. It seems that for Abashidze, the Chess tournament is of more salience than the dispute with the central government.

It appears that Saakashvili seeks a peaceful solution to the conflict by using international pressure on Abashidze. The central government clearly tries to convince Abashidze to leave his office in a peaceful way, otherwise a confrontation seems unavoidable. Saakashvili stated that "there are some peaceful resources that remain to discharge the ongoing tense situation in the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria", and instructed the cabinet to draft a special program aiming at social support of the Ajarian population. In addition, the president criticized the term "standoff between the center and the region" declaring that the situation in Ajaria is neither a standoff nor a conflict, as the main point of the problem is one criminal clan, which must be given the place it deserves.

Very few believe that Aslan Abashidze will leave his office in a peaceful way. Backed by hundreds of paramilitaries and influential politicians from the north, he presents a powerful warlord in the western part of Georgia and plays the role of a spoiler for the further development of the country. Despite the fact that neither the central government nor Saakashvili's western friends approve of his activities, they have to make some concession in order to avoid the escalation of a conflict from which none of the parties would benefit.

**Giorgi Vashakidze**

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE AJARIAN CRISIS

Mamuka Tsereteli

*The escalating conflict between the central government in Georgia and leadership of Autonomous Republic of Ajara is creating a major challenge for the economy of the entire Caspian region. Georgia suffers substantial losses in tariffs, and subsequently budget revenues. Armenia loses additional supply routes, and producers of oil and oil products in the Caspian have to look elsewhere for substitute export routes. This development seriously affects U.S. interests in the region, since the beneficiaries of the situation are Iran and Russia.*

**BACKGROUND:** The uncertainty created by the deteriorating relationships between the Georgian central government in Tbilisi and the Ajarian leadership in Batumi has caused producers and shippers from the Caspian to seek alternative transportation routes. This process has accelerated since the “economic blockade” of Ajaria in March. Although it was in theory a blockade of Ajaria only, its impact was felt from Caspian producers to European refineries. After a slight reduction of transshipping in March (from an expected 850,000 MT to 750,000 MT), volumes have plummeted in April as producers and shippers have been attracted to other routes. The Batumi oil terminal will transship close to 300,000 MT in April and May respectively, assuming there will be no further escalation of tensions. This is the worst figure in the last four years.

This development is seriously affecting energy development in the region. For more than a century, since the late nineteenth century, Batumi has been a major export outlet for oil produced in the Caspian. Following the construction of Baku-Supsa early oil pipeline in the late 1990s, and particularly after completion of ChevronTexaco-led CPC pipeline, which ships oil from Kazakhstan to the Russian port of Novorossiisk, volumes shipped to Batumi seemed to be declining. However, privatization of the Batumi oil terminal in 2001 and substantial investments in the reconstruction and renovation of those facilities helped Batumi to reemerge as a major port for the export of Caspian oil and oil products. In 2003, the terminal shipped almost nine million tons of oil and oil products, delivered to the port by the Georgian Railway system. Those shipments brought substantial revenues to the Georgian economy through railway tariffs and other revenues.

**IMPLICATIONS:** The direct impact of the decline in volume will be a combined loss of tens of millions of dollars of tariff revenues to the Georgian Railway and the Batumi terminal. Investors in Batumi terminal will scale back their investment plans to double the current capacity of the terminal up to 18 million tons a year. It will be extremely hard for Georgian Railways to maintain last year’s scale of operations, make required investments, or make a substantial contribution to the state budget.

The direct beneficiary of Ajarian instability has been Iran. The Iranian government has invested heavily to expand its

Neka port in the South Caspian. Volumes through Neka have doubled in comparison to last year’s shipments and with the doubling of Iran’s pipeline capacity from the Caspian to Northern refineries, due to be completed in the next few months, volumes will continue to increase at the expense of the Azerbaijani-Georgian route.

Another beneficiary of the developments in Georgia is Russia. Tensions in Ajaria serves multiple objectives of Russia: First, Russia is not interested in Georgia’s integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, and clearly, additional serious internal conflict distances Georgia from this declared goal. Secondly, Russia is not interested in the resolution of conflicts in Georgia. The conflict in Ajaria gives Russia an additional chance to play the role of arbiter and peacekeeper, and to move the attention of Georgia and International community from Abkhazia to Ajaria. Third, the serious conflict in Ajaria will put in doubt Georgia’s ability to serve as a reliable transit country for Caspian hydrocarbons, and while it will not affect the development of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project, it may substantially reduce shipments of Caspian oil and oil products via the Azerbaijani and Georgian rail system. This is clearly in the long-term interests of Russia, whose policy toward Georgia is unlikely in the long term to be smoothed by the departure of Eduard Shevardnadze from power. Russia’s policy towards Georgia is determined by Georgia’s pro-Western orientation and its growing transit potential, which helps to transport Caspian oil and gas outside Russian control, and which contributes to alternative energy supplies to Central and Eastern European markets, currently dominated by Russia.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Georgia and its Western allies already made a strategic mistake in Summer 2003 by allowing Russia’s UES to take over Tbilisi’s electricity distribution company Telasi, power-generation facilities near Tbilisi, and part of the strategic high voltage transmission lines. In addition to direct threats to energy security of Georgia, that decision created major obstacle for East-West gas transit project from Azerbaijan to Turkey, since a critical element of Georgia’s natural gas market, the Gardabani Power Station, ended up in Russian hands and most probably will continue using Russian natural gas in the future. It also helped Russia consolidate its energy position in Armenia and in the South

Caucasus in general, which mitigates the energy independence of those countries.

To balance the Russian influence in Georgia, it will be necessary to allocate considerable time and resources to defuse the situation in Ajaria, and to bring control over the power sector back to the Georgian government, with the aim to privatize it later, once the power system will be more stable and less dependent on a single source of import of electricity and natural gas. The stability and energy independence of Georgia will contribute to full-scale

utilization of East-West energy corridor, where Batumi will always play the critical role of a maritime gateway.

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Mamuka Tsereteli is the Executive Director of the America-Georgia Business Council and Adjunct Professor of international relations and Political Risk Analysis at American University in Washington, D.C. His areas of interests include economic security, political and economic risk analysis and mitigation strategies, and Business development.

## DISRUPTED MARCH IN SUPPORT OF FELIX KULOV

A number of Kyrgyz human rights activists, leaders of non-governmental organizations and representatives of political parties organized a march in support of the jailed opposition political figure, leader of the Ar-Namys party Felix Kulov to take place on April 15 and the protesters were planning to walk from the cross-section of Chuy Avenue and Fuchik Street in Bishkek to the Sokuluk district jail, where Kulov is imprisoned. The march had scarcely started when a group of policemen demanded the road be cleared and the protesters to head home, saying that the march was not authorized and was therefore illegal.

Lately the issue of releasing Felix Kulov, imprisoned on reportedly fabricated and politically motivated charges of abuse of authority, has been actively raised in Kyrgyzstan. Members of the Ar-Namys party announced that in the beginning of June Kulov may request a conditional discharge and that he could be released from jail in June this year. There have also been sayings that Kulov is politically active and intends to participate in the presidential elections in 2005. In an interview to *Deutsche Welle*, the Deputy Chair of the Ar-Namys party Emil Aliev said that Kulov was to be released last year, but the authorities made sure that he would not be eligible for amnesty.

The April 15 march was announced to remind the authorities that it is time to release the jailed opposition leader. Two days before the march, the Republican Headquarters for the Release of Felix Kulov issued a statement inviting people to take part in the event. According to the authors of the statement, despite numerous protest actions, public hearings, hunger strikes and meetings that the representatives of Kyrgyz human rights

organizations, political parties and civil society had organized in support of Kulov, the authorities did not do anything to fulfill their requirements. "Independent monitoring of the court sessions by human rights activists demonstrated that the judicial power in Kyrgyzstan, in defiance of the principle of impartiality and lawfulness, has fulfilled the wishes of the presidential administration and had an interest in isolating one of the prominent opponents of the current leadership", says the statement.

The group of marchers in support of Kulov consisted of Emil Aliev of Ar-Namys party, Viktor Chernomorets of the Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan, Tolekan Ismailova of the Civil Society Against Corruption, human rights activists Topchubek Turgunaliyev, Tursunbek Akun and others. The action also involved several dozen people from Kulov's native village Baitik.

Marchers were detained as soon as they gathered for the march, altogether 18 people, including Emil Aliev, Viktor Chernomorets, Kulov's 70 years old sister Jumagul Kulova, his brother Dias Kulov, Tolekan Ismailova and Aziza Abdrasulova of the Guild of Prisoners of consciousness. The case of the detainees was considered in the Pervomai rayon court of Bishkek the same day. The first three detainees were freed, 12 people were warned. By the court's decision Tursunbek Akun, Tolekan Ismailova and Aziza Abdrasulova (although she was monitoring the event for a project on the public meetings law and was not participating) were fined with one thousand som (ca. 24\$). Abdrasulova and Ismailova stated on 16 April, the detention and trial contradicted to the constitution and they would appeal to international organizations.

The head of the Bishkek city militia department Keneshbek Duishebaev claims that representatives of the law enforcement bodies acted according to the law. Duishebaev said that the day before the marchers had been warned of the illegality of their action. The judge, Esenjan Abylkasymov, also claimed that the detained people indeed broke the law. "They had attempted to hold a protest action without any permission and we are considering the case according to the law", said Abylkasymov in an interview to RFE/RL correspondent.

Some deputies of the Kyrgyz parliament criticized the actions of the law enforcement bodies. In the opinion of the deputies of the Legislative Assembly of Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz Parliament) Azimbek Beknazarov and Omurbek Tekebaev, the law enforcement bodies by detaining the marchers violated the citizens' right to gather peacefully and hold meetings and protest actions. According to the parliamentarians, Kyrgyz citizens have the right to hold peaceful meetings and protest actions without any prior permission from the authorities.

The recent march in support of Kulov did not take place as it had been planned, but it did again remind people of Kulov's case. The issue of releasing Kulov has been raised by the local activists as well as the international community constantly and this task has for years been the top priority of the Ar-Namys party. But the time when the jailed Kyrgyz opposition leader is going to be freed is still under a big question. The big question becomes even bigger as the time for next presidential and parliamentary elections draws near, say local observers.

**Aisha Aslanbekova**

## KAZAKHSTAN'S ELECTION LAW

Olivia Allison

*The controversial new Kazakh law on elections, including about 600 amendments, was signed into law by President Nursultan Nazarbaev April 15, after an April 9 constitutional court ruling that found the law in compliance with the constitution. The ruling came among international statements against the law, which they say does little to restrict governmental interference in elections. Nonetheless, most experts say the law contains positive measures including decentralization and fewer restrictions on candidates.*

**BACKGROUND:** Both houses of parliament overwhelmingly approved the draft in its second reading Feb. 20, and the law passed a third reading shortly after that. President Nursultan Nazarbaev had presented the first governmental version Sept. 2, 2002, and established a working group, and two political parties originally submitted drafts but eventually withdrew their drafts in support of the governmental draft.

By most accounts, the law contains concessions to the opposition and is thus an improvement over the other. But some experts temper this opinion by saying that, despite these concessions, at best the law will change nothing in reality. At worst, they say, the law will further solidify governmental control over elections.

Most assess the Constitutional court acts according to Nazarbaev's will, so its ruling is hardly independent. Of seven members, Nazarbaev personally appointed three. The chairman of the lower house appointed two, and the chairman of the Senate—also appointed by the president—appointed the final two members. This composition makes an independent evaluation of the law's constitutionality doubtful. There are in fact areas in the law contradicting the Constitution, particularly those regulating who can run for office.

Opposition parties claim that because they have been forced to the sidelines, the law still contains many loopholes for election fraud. Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) candidate Pyotr Svoik stated at a February 18 news conference that "the system of falsification of elections remains fully in place". Furthermore, there is no mechanism checking governmental oppression of opposition in the law. Nonetheless, the Kazakh authorized representative for human rights Bolat Baikadamov stated that the law represents a significant increase in electoral rights for citizens over the previous law.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Although the law has been finalized and signed into law, many open-ended questions remain, including the selection of regional election commissions and the potential for electronic voting. Other much-discussed elements of the law are candidate disqualifications for administrative offenses and the role of observers.

The biggest unsolved problem is that of representation on regional election commissions. While the law appears even-

handed by giving all political parties a spot on the commissions, it problematically limits the commissions to seven people. Kazakhstan has nine registered parties, and more are expected to register before the fall's elections. Not all of the parties will have candidates in all regions, so in some regions the question is irrelevant. But, for instance, in Almaty, there are likely to be more than seven parties. A system for determining which seven parties can participate in the commission has not been decided. The discrepancy between the number of slots and the number of parties could enable Nazarbayev to exclude political foes from regional election commissions.

On the other hand, the appointment of local election commission officials by the regional representative bodies, the mashlikhats, is an improvement on the old system, when regional representatives were hand-picked by the governors. Still, under the law, Nazarbaev will appoint the Central Election Commission's seven members, and there is no stipulation on equal representation for all parties. This does not foster CEC independence, experts say, and even presidential figures like the president's daughter and head of the "Asar" political party Dariga Nazarbaeva has agreed.

Another contentious issue was the perspective of electronic voting, which prompted a third reading of the law. Many consider the idea too technologically advanced for Kazakhstan, and insufficiently outlined in the law. The issue is touched on in Article 43, which now states that the CEC can make decisions on automatic informational (voting) systems. Those in favor of the voting systems claim they are less likely to be penetrated by corrupt-minded governors in the region than traditional voting methods. Nonetheless, lawmakers have given assurances that the computer program is not ready for use and will not be used in upcoming elections. Opponents of the system say that discussing the system and working any mechanism for it into the law is premature, considering there is no finalized system. Others say that governmental units are underestimating the cost of implementing the system to make it seem more plausible. Official cost estimates have hovered around 4.5 billion Tenge.

One area of concession is the relaxed restrictions on candidacy. The law loosens a ban on candidates with "administrative offenses," which could benefit opposition

activists who have been found guilty of civil-law infractions. Still, candidates who have been convicted under criminal law cannot run for office, a rule that many say contradicts the constitution, which only denies candidacy to prisoners or mentally ill.

One positive area of the law is the granting of greater rights to election observers. Experts say the new law, which allows journalists to be present at voting precincts and have access to election-related documents, meets international standards. Candidates can also nominate unlimited monitors to observe voting.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The law garnered many negative statements from various international organizations and from governing bodies like the U.S. government and the European parliament. Because the law was considered and passed by Parliament at the same time as the more controversial draft media law (also recently sent to the Constitutional Council), international organizations have claimed the reigning political elite is shoring up political power before this fall's parliamentary elections and working to decrease competition.

Aside from this, the case is a new example on a short list of Constitutional Council decisions on controversial laws.

Experts say that ascertaining a precedent from past constitutional council decisions is also almost impossible. Since 1996, the council has made more than 120 resolutions, and rarely have they found a law to be unconstitutional. In high-profile cases, the experience is mixed. In April 2002, the council found the draft law on religious freedom to be contradictory to the constitution. Three months later, the council approved a contentious law on political parties. Experts say these laws drew equal international opposition, but the government acted to preserve its political interests in approving the law on political parties.

Regardless of the improvements that the law seems to bring, conditions for political opposition in Kazakhstan remain extremely difficult. In 1999's parliamentary elections, three of four seats won by the opposition went to the Communists, and the Communist Party is the only opposition group official recognized as a party. In 2002, a controversial law on political parties introduced a restriction barring registration for parties with fewer than 50,000 members.

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Olivia Allison is an independent writer currently traveling Central Asia.

## NEW FOREIGN MINISTER TO REVITALIZE AZERBAIJAN'S DIPLOMACY?

Most observers in Azerbaijan agree that by appointing Elmar Mamedyarov as the country's new foreign minister on April 2, President Ilham Aliyev made both an unexpected and a good choice. The hope is that he will bring dynamism to the government, where older bureaucrats are still in the majority.

In fact, this could be a welcome sign of President Aliyev's efforts to bring more professionals and technocrats to positions of leadership. The 44-year old Mamedyarov is a career diplomat, who rose through the ranks of the ministry he now heads. A graduate of the Kyiv Institute of International Relations in Ukraine and once a visiting researcher at Brown University in Providence, he is one of the few professionally-trained Azerbaijani diplomats. Mr. Mamedyarov served at the Azerbaijani Mission to the United Nations in New York, was the Deputy Chief of Mission in Washington, DC and most recently inaugurated Azerbaijan's Embassy in Rome. Of the above, his posting in Washington, DC is, perhaps, most significant because it provided an opportunity for deeper involvement with security affairs, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, energy diplomacy as well as for understanding the U.S. domestic political process. Importantly, he was in Washington on September 11, 2001, a major turning point for the United States and U.S.-Azerbaijani relations.

In his first interview with ANS-TV, Mamedyarov predictably said that resolving the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is his highest priority. To deal with the challenge of the stalled negotiations against the background of the increasingly frustrated

Azerbaijani public, his energetic style could be useful. In fact, the new minister will have to use diplomatic skills not only with his Armenian counterpart and the OSCE's often distracted mediators, but also to convince the Azerbaijanis that the Minsk Group-mediated peace talks still make sense even though they have produced no results over the last 12 years. The importance of resolving the conflict underscored by the new minister seem to reflect President Ilham Aliyev's overall greater focus on this issue.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict is not, however, Mamedyarov's only challenge. Azerbaijan's traditional policy of carefully balancing its pro-Western orientation with relations with neighboring Russia and Iran, advancing Euro-Atlantic integration, regional affairs, such as the ongoing Caspian delimitation talks and strengthening ties with partners, primarily Georgia and Turkey, as well as increasing pace of the deepening U.S.-Azerbaijan security cooperation all remain major priorities in the foreign policy agenda. His new job took a positive start for as the very first meeting as foreign minister on April 8 was with the Council of Europe's Secretary-General Walter Schwimmer, who stated that the problem of political prisoners in Azerbaijan had been resolved. Given that the Council of Europe is Azerbaijan's major multilateral partner this comes as good news.

Neither is Mr. Mamedyarov a stranger to the state bureaucracy. In an odd combination, possible perhaps only in emerging nations, he is both a dynamic representative of the younger generation and a veteran of Azerbaijan's foreign service. This

comes handy as he assumes charge of a massive institution and becomes a participant in the complicated inter-agency dynamic.

In spite of its visibility, the foreign ministry in Azerbaijan has not, in recent years, been one of the influential ministries serving as power bases for various political groups. This became especially apparent since the resignation in early 1998 of foreign minister Hasan Hasanov, once a powerful politician. Elmar Mamedyarov replaced Vilayat Guliyev, who is a former MP and a literature professor, not an entrenched political power personality with an extensive clientele. While the appointment shouldn't have been particularly difficult in terms of domestic politics, its symbolism is significant. Raising the ministry's profile and prestige domestically thus contributing to transformation of Azerbaijan's political landscape is one of Mamedyarov's major challenges.

President Ilham Aliyev has evidently chosen the path of cautious reforms avoiding sweeping moves, which could potentially lead to instability. Bringing a younger career diplomat with extensive international experience and at the same time familiar with the domestic bureaucratic system on board as his foreign minister, Aliyev is acting to solidify the base for such reforms. Therefore, much rides on Elmar Mamedyarov's shoulders; his performance will not be only a test of diplomatic skills, but also one more test case for the generation of young professionals he represents.

**Elin Suleymanov**

## UZBEKISTAN'S REACTION TO TASHKENT BOMBINGS GENERATE DOUBTS ON EFFICACY

Hooman Peimani

*A series of bombings and attacks on the security forces shook Bukhara and Tashkent between March 28 and April 1. The Uzbek government blamed the terrorist acts on the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, an illegal opposition group under suppression since the 1990s. The accusation was surprising as the group, which operates throughout Central Asia and many Arab Middle Eastern countries, has until now avoided violent means of achieving its political objectives. This raises questions whether the Uzbek government could be blaming the group as a pretext to avoid international criticism for further suppression of the group. While this policy could help Tashkent mute the Hizb-ut-Tahrir in the short-run, it will likely radicalize the group and other unarmed opposition groups to push them towards adopting armed struggle as their only viable political strategy.*

**BACKGROUND:** Armed opposition groups advocating violence to achieve their political goals emerged in Uzbekistan around the mid-1990s. Among them, the most organized one was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a group mainly based in the Ferghana Valley seeking the overthrow of the Uzbek government and the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic state. It has since been implicated in a variety of violent activities against the Uzbek security forces, including a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999. While pursuing the same objective as part of its plan to create an Islamic caliphate consisting of all the Central Asian states and the Arab Middle Eastern countries, the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Liberation Party) has rejected violence for toppling the Uzbek government. This position, which makes it distinct from the IMU and other armed Central Asian opposition groups, encouraged the Tajik government in 2002 to consider legalizing its branch in Tajikistan. Its aim was to create an unarmed alternative to the underground armed groups as a means to curb their growth. Despite this reality, the Uzbek government has indiscriminately suppressed both the IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir since the 1990s. In particular, the harsh treatment of the latter's members and sympathizers have drawn strong protest on the part of international human rights groups.

**IMPLICATIONS:** The Uzbek government has yet to produce any concrete evidence to back its blaming the Hizb-ut-Tahrir for the terrorist acts. Unless the group has secretly changed its policy of non-violence, there are no grounds to charge Hizb-ut-Tahrir with masterminding the recent wave of violence.

Neither does the IMU's *modus operandi* entirely fit the recent violence. The bombing of Tashkent's bazaar resulting in the deaths of scores of Uzbek civilians is not consistent with the group's past violent activities, which mainly targeted Uzbek security forces and government officials. The use of suicide bombers is also uncharacteristic of the IMU, and represents the first time this tactic has been used in Central Asia. Furthermore, the suppression of the IMU in Uzbekistan and its heavy losses in Afghanistan where it allegedly fights on the side of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda has severely weakened the

group and restricted its operation inside Uzbekistan. If it indeed carried out the mentioned terrorist acts, it could have been an act of revenge for the reported recent killing of one of its leaders in Pakistan's South Waziristan region where the Taliban and al-Qaeda have been operating since 2001. In late March the Pakistani forces killed and arrested scores of those groups' members in their effort to uproot them from their country.

Despite the Uzbek government's accusation, it is not yet clear which group was behind the terrorist acts. Such reality raises the possibility of the involvement of non-regional terrorist groups in the mentioned incidents on behalf of or in cooperation with an Uzbek group or as an independent move to expand the war in Afghanistan and Iraq to a pro-American country (Uzbekistan), for instance.

The tragic events in Tashkent and Bukhara provided an opportunity for the Uzbek government to arrest many political opponents regardless of their type of activities and political views particularly those suspected of backing the Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Such mass arrests of opponents most of whom have not advocated violence will unlikely help the government curb political violence and terrorist activities perpetrated by those who subscribe to violent political ideologies. However, they could alienate many Uzbeks dissatisfied with the state of affairs, i.e., unemployment, poverty, lowering of the living standards, rampant government corruption and the growing authoritarianism. Against a background of political repression, their growing dissatisfaction will certainly provide a suitable ground for the expansion of violent political ideologies and the growth of those groups promoting them as the only option to achieve the desired political, economic and social changes.

**CONCLUSIONS:** No matter who planned and implemented the attacks, the failures of the Uzbek security forces have been exposed. Terrorism tends to flourish in spaces where popular dissatisfaction with the government has no possible political outlet. In Uzbekistan, this dissatisfaction is growing in tandem with the Karimov regime's iron-fisted approach to any form of opposition. Added to the frustrations of poverty, there is a very real risk

of radicalizing non-violent groups who feel that they have no other options. By lumping Hizb-ut-Tahrir in with the IMU and Al Qaeda without any evidence, and by treating them with the same brutal methods, Tashkent may be making more enemies than it is eliminating.

A more flexible policy towards dissent and allowing more avenues for open expression could help the Uzbek government prevent the expansion of political violence and terrorism. The current strategy, cloaked in the rhetoric of

"fighting terrorism" amounts to little more than the suppression of all forms of political opposition. Recent violence in Bukhara and Tashkent suggest that this strategy is failing, and raise the question whether an even more draconian approach would only exacerbate the problem.

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

## KYRGYZSTAN OPENLY REFORMS PENITENTIARY SYSTEM IN SUPPORT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The penitentiary system of the Kyrgyz Republic mainly remained from the Soviet regime and faced many difficulties after the collapse of the Communist regime. After 10 years of sovereignty and gradually escalating crisis of the closed penitentiary system, it had started to improve when the Kyrgyz government went to a dialogue and cooperation with civil society.

In 2002, the Prison Service was transferred from the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the Ministry of Justice, through this demilitarizing the system. It is two years since the Kyrgyz government made the penitentiary system open, and dramatic reforms were started. Civil society presented by NGO's, international organizations and civilians are actively involved in process of reforming penitentiary system.

During Soviet times, the prison system had a retaliatory character and was based on ideas of profit-making and accomplishing the Communist party production plan from convicts' work as a compensation for crimes committed. Therefore, huge "training schools" were built in remote areas with severe climate that were planned to transform into manufacturing centers. Convicts were not perceived as humans with equal rights, thus their human rights were violated by the penitentiary system supervision.

"The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the ceasing of the centralized management of the uniform prison system. Penal systems in Central Asia faced similar problems: lack of financing, absence of a precise control system, and legislation not concordant to realities of time," Penal Reform International Central Asian Representative reported an Almaty office.

The Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan was one of the first organizations that welcomed the Kyrgyz Government's willingness to reform the prison system and its readiness to cooperate with civil society. "From 2002 we are working on the penitentiary system reform in the framework of the legislative program", said the coordinator of Legal programs and "mass media support" program Ruslan Khakimov. The Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan provides grant support for nongovernmental organizations enabling prison reforming and development of the penitentiary system legislation. "We propose specific offers to the legislation on reduction of prison terms and prison population. The point is that Criminal Code

of Kyrgyz Republic is one of the most severe in the post Soviet area. Thus, our actions are directed to decriminalize legislation in the Kyrgyz Republic", Khakimov explained.

The Public Fund "Center for legal assistance of convicts" is one of the first NGOs in grant assistance of Soros Foundation rendering legal aid to prisoners and their affected community. The Its Deputy Director Nizamova Dilarom, who directly works with target groups (prison institution management, convicts and their relatives) and knows the system inside out, both welcomes governmental actions on providing long-term access to public and constructively criticizes the system to take further actions on reforming the system. "At the moment, the situation in the prison system itself remains pitiful. Citizens are imprisoned for practically 98% of criminal offences; only 2% get non-custodial sentences. Therefore, colonies are overpopulated with prisoners. Moreover, conditions of maintenance and food in prisons are terrible", she stated.

There is a vicious circle. At first, colonies cannot accept new prisoners due to overpopulation. But court verdicts need to be exercised. The system becomes heavy in management. To resolve the problem, Kyrgyzstan chose to amnesty imprisoned people. Dilarom Nizamova argues it is not the best way the penitentiary system should operate. "After release on amnesty, convicts, not knowing what to do, cross the law and again come back in prison. Thus, the penitentiary population still grows. Instead of healthy persons, we return qualified criminals to society. Therefore it is necessary to think over mechanisms of alternatives to custody".

A team of PRI Representative Office experts Anvar Uzakbaev, Gulnara Kalakbarova and Director of the Almaty based office Vera Tkachenko also provided their viewpoints on the penitentiary system. "Kyrgyzstan as many countries of the post-Soviet area are forced to conduct reforms of the Prison System under difficult conditions. Kyrgyzstan's prison system is in critical state. Penal facilities of most institutions have not been maintained for long, and are currently worn out", they argued. Vera Tkachenko added that the "situation worsened with insufficient financing (according to information from the Central Prison Service Department, it receives only 30% of the financing that is required). An extremely severe criminal policy leads to mass imprisonment. As a

result, institutions turned out to be overpopulated with convicts that do not receive necessary foodstuff, clothing, medicine, etc. In prisons, different infectious diseases, including TB and HIV, are spreading".

Nevertheless, all interviewed experts share the view that the Kyrgyz government, in comparison with other Central Asian countries, is actively and openly cooperating with civil society in reforming the penitentiary system. A "concept on reforming the penitentiary system of Kyrgyz Republic by 2010" was developed in participation with experts from state institutions, international organizations and NGOs. Presently, an educational center under the Central Prison Service Department (CPSD) has been organized to train specialists in international norms of human rights observation of convicts, and the application of information technologies.

"A transformation from a closed to an open system starts when people begin to change. The goal of the educational center is to teach each employee to observe human rights, be familiar with international conventions on treatment of the imprisoned. We have to show how to observe standards, how it works and why it is better than the former way", said the head of the educational center, Larisa Sdelnekova. She also told The Analyst that the educational center conducts workshops and trainings to the CPSD management about penitentiary reform. "We want to inform each employee on the essence of reform, and open their eyes. The success of the reform depends on each employee and their attitudes to reform. We want to break old Soviet stereotypes and train them to work anew so that it would be easier for them to work", she added.

Overall, the process of reforming the penitentiary system is not a one-day event, but a complex and long term program. The prison system that was gradually escalating to a crisis required changes. The Kyrgyz Government assessed its financial state, decided to open the penitentiary system to the public (including mass media) and involve civil society to change it. NGOs and international organizations contribute, starting from proposals to the change of legislation and finishing with changing the attitude of employees of the penitentiary system. Thus, the Kyrgyz government is resolving the problem and raising public confidence.

**Aziz Soltobaev**

## NEWS BITES

### **AZERBAIJANI JOURNALISTS PROTEST AGAINST REOPENING OF TURKISH-ARMENIAN BORDER**

**7 April**

A delegation of 20 Azerbaijani journalists arrived in Turkey on 6 April to protest any consideration by the Turkish government of reopening that country's border with Armenia. After holding protest demonstrations in the Igdir and Kars districts near the Armenian border, the journalists traveled to Ankara on 7 April to meet with Turkish officials. In response to rumors of a possible warming of relations between Turkey and Armenia, Turkish Ambassador to Azerbaijan Ahmed Unal Cevikez reaffirmed the Turkish government's position that its blockade of Armenia and denial of diplomatic relations will continue until Armenia withdraws from Azerbaijani territory and officially renounces any territorial claims on Turkey. Turkey has maintained a trade and transport blockade of Armenia since 1992, although the possible normalization of relations was discussed in two meetings between the Armenian and Turkish foreign ministers in September and December. (bakutoday.net)

### **FORMER AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT THREATENED WITH ARREST**

**7 April**

Azerbaijani Interior Minister Usubov told Turan on 7 April that Ayaz Mutalibov, who has lived in Moscow since fleeing Baku in May 1992 in the wake of an abortive comeback attempt, will be arrested if he returns to Azerbaijan. Usubov said Mutalibov is charged with planning a terrorist act, creating illegal armed formations, treason, and dereliction of duty in connection with the February 1992 killing of several hundred Azerbaijanis in the Karabakh village of Khodjali. (Turan)

### **GEORGIAN PRESIDENT DEMANDS RELEASE OF FORMER BATUMI MAYOR FROM ADJAR CUSTODY**

**8 April**

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili issued a strongly worded demand on 8 April to the Adjar leadership calling for the immediate release of former Batumi Mayor Tengiz Asanidze. The Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled on 8 April in favor of an appeal by Asanidze and called on the Adjar authorities to release him immediately. Despite receiving a presidential pardon in 1999 and being acquitted by the Georgian Supreme Court in 2001, Asanidze remained imprisoned in an Adjar prison for 10 years. A presidential candidate in 2000, Asanidze was the mayor of the Adjar capital Batumi when he was arrested in October 1993 on corruption charges. "If the authorities of the autonomous republic do not fulfill the court ruling and my demand I will use levers and means the central authorities have to free Asanidze," Saakashvili said. (ITAR-TASS)

### **RIGHTS GROUPS CONDEMN CHECHEN ABUSES**

**8 April**

Human rights organisations have issued a joint statement condemning what they say are widespread abuses in the Russian republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia. The groups - including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch - say that despite Moscow's claims to have normalised the situation in the north Caucasus, the cycle of violence there continues. The Kremlin says that life in Chechnya is gradually returning to normal, but human rights organisations tell a very different story. They have provided new evidence of rape, torture and summary execution of Chechen civilians by Russian troops and an increasingly powerful militia commanded by the son of Chechnya's pro-Moscow president, Ahmad Kadyrov. And the violence is now reported to be spreading from Chechnya to neighbouring Ingushetia. Anna Neistat, from Human Rights Watch said: "Over the last three months, we've documented a number of abductions and disappearances on the territory of Ingushetia as well as several attacks against civilians resulting in either deaths or serious injuries. "Just like in Chechnya, the perpetrators of these abuses go unpunished and there is no accountability whatsoever." (BBC)

### **PUTIN CALLS NEW NATO 'UNHELPFUL'**

**8 April**

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the expansion of Nato will not help meet security challenges facing the world today. But he told Nato chief Jaap de Hoop Scheffer that his disapproval should not affect relations with Russia. The negotiations in Moscow come 10 days after seven eastern European countries, including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, joined Nato. The Nato chief wants to persuade Russia that the alliance is no threat. Moscow has previously aired its concerns about Nato's eastward expansion, but this is the first time Mr Putin has met Mr de Hoop Scheffer. In televised remarks, the president told the Nato secretary-general: "Life has shown that this mechanical expansion does not make it possible to counter effectively the threats we face today." "This expansion could not have prevented the terrorist acts in Madrid, for example, or help resolve the situation in Afghanistan," he said. But Mr Putin added: "We hope the expansion will foster the strengthening of trust in Europe and around the world and will be an instrument and component in strengthening international security. "For this, or course, it is necessary to increase the level of trust between Nato and in this case Russia." Moscow has particular concerns about the membership of the three Baltic states, once part of the former Soviet Union, where Nato has deployed warplanes. In a radio interview before the meeting, Mr de Hoop Scheffer played down the significance. "It is completely logical that Russian planes patrol Russian airspace and that Nato planes patrol Nato airspace. There's nothing special in that," he said. "The new Nato nations have no intention or plan to build military infrastructure that is not already on their territory." He later told the president he understood Russian concerns but urged Moscow to concentrate on fighting global threats in

common with the alliance. "The problems facing us are simply too big - terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq - to think that we can go it alone, that Russia or Nato can go it alone," Mr de Hoop Scheffer said. The Nato chief met the president in the Kremlin after signing an agreement with Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov to set up a Russian liaison office at Nato military headquarters at Mons, Belgium. (BBC)

## **US REVIEWS UZBEK MILITARY TIES**

**13 April**

The commander of US forces in Afghanistan, General David Barno, is in the Uzbek capital Tashkent to meet Uzbek government officials. The US has a military base in Uzbekistan to back up its troops in Afghanistan and sees the Uzbeks as essential allies in the war on terror. The visit comes just as Washington is due to decide whether to renew its substantial aid budget to Uzbekistan. Much of the budget goes to the police, who rights groups accuse of torture. This is General Barno's first trip to Tashkent since he was appointed six months ago. It is, the Americans say, a working visit to discuss Uzbek support for the war on terror. Uzbekistan plays an important role on the US military map, extending the Pentagon's reach to the north of Afghanistan through a base in the desert close to the Uzbek-Afghan border. It was from this base that Washington sent troops into Afghanistan in 2001. Shortly afterwards, US aid to Uzbekistan increased 10-fold to almost \$90m a year. Relations between Uzbekistan and the United States are still very warm. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was full of praise for President Karimov and his government on a recent visit. But there is also some embarrassment on the US side because of the Uzbek record on human rights. Almost half of US assistance goes to the Uzbek security forces, including the police. Human rights activists have documented many incidents of torture in Uzbek detention centres - even a case in which a man apparently died after submerging in boiling water. The State Department is shortly expected to decide whether to continue aid to Uzbekistan or whether Uzbekistan should be de-certified - meaning judged unsuitable for assistance. Were that to happen, it is not clear what would happen to the military base. (BBC)

## **QATAR TRIAL OF SUSPECTS IN CHECHEN LEADER'S ASSASSINATION OPENS**

**13 April**

A municipal court in Doha launched the trial on 12 April of two Russian security-service employees accused of organizing the February car bombing in Qatar that killed former acting Chechen President Zelimkhan Yandarbiev. The trial was adjourned until May on a request by the defense after both suspects -- identified in Arabic media as Anatolii Belashkov and Vasili Bokchov -- pleaded not guilty at their hearing. Western media have reported that the two Russians admitted their guilt to Qatari investigators. Moscow has repeatedly denied any involvement by its intelligence services in the slaying, but conceded that the two suspects work for a Russian security agency and insisted on their release without trial. The Qatari daily "Al-Raya" published an article on the eve of the trial that accused Defense Minister Ivanov of personally ordering Yandarbiev's assassination. (RFE/RL)

## **INJURIES REPORTED IN YEREVAN CLASHES**

**13 April**

Several people sustained injuries during clashes between police and participants in a demonstration staged by two opposition parties outside the presidential residence in Yerevan. The clashes occurred at 2:00 a.m. local time (1:00 a.m. Moscow time) on Tuesday. Police blamed opposition members for starting the clashes. The police press service told Interfax that law enforcement officers "had to use force, sort out the situation and break up the demonstration. Several people sustained various injuries." A number of demonstrators were arrested as well. Interfax reported on Monday that the opposition's round-the-clock demonstration had moved to the parliamentary headquarters, which is located 100 meters from the presidential residence. The demonstration participants were not able to reach the presidential residence because it was encircled by interior troops. An opposition leader told Interfax that the demonstration would continue until the opposition's key demand - the resignation of President Robert Kocharian - was met. Opposition leaders said that Parliamentary Speaker Artur Bagdasarian had promised to meet with them on Tuesday. (Interfax)

## **AFGHAN FOOTBALLERS GO 'MISSING'**

**13 April**

Nine members of Afghanistan's national football team have gone missing while on tour in Italy. The team's spokesman said the players failed to return from a night out in the northern town of Verona on Monday. "We don't know if they were looking for economic asylum or if they just stayed out all night at a disco." The series of games in Italy is the Afghan team's first appearance in Europe for 20 years. Football was banned in Afghanistan after the Taleban regime came to power in 1996. The team coach, Mir Ali Asger Akbarzola, has said the players would not be able to take part in the match against Verona on Tuesday - even if they came back in time. "It's 20 years since our national side last played in Europe and our people need football to give them hope," Italy's Ansa news agency quoted him as saying. The proceeds from the tour will go towards construction of medical centres in the Afghan capital, Kabul. Verona police spokesman Luigi Altamura said it was unclear if the players were seeking to defect from Afghanistan. They do not have their passports with them because a team official had all the team's documents. But according to Italian radio, "the fugitives have already reached Germany, where a numerous Afghan community lives, to ask for political asylum". The game against Verona will still be played because a few Afghan players living in Germany have been called in to replace the missing team members, Ansa reported. (BBC)

## **FOUR TAJIKS RETURN HOME FROM GUANTANAMO**

**14 April**

U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan Richard Hoagland announced on 13 April that the United States has released four Tajik citizens from detention at Guantanamo Bay. "They have already returned to their country," Hoagland said after a meeting with Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov. RFE/RL's Tajik Service quoted Hoagland as saying that the individuals were released because "they no longer present a danger to

society." The BBC quoted a statement from the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan as saying: "We are not able to comment on the number or background of the released detainees. It is the decision of the Tajik government whether to release this information." RFE/RL's Tajik Service reported that 11 Tajiks were held at Guantanamo originally, leaving seven following the release. However, the BBC has reported that eight Tajiks remain at Guantanamo. The Tajik citizens were detained in Afghanistan in late 2001. (RFE/RL)

### **SUSPECTED TALEBAN AMBUSH POLICE**

**15 April**

Suspected Taliban fighters have killed a police chief and nine of his guards in an ambush in southern Afghanistan, a government official says. One of the attackers also died in the exchange of fire. News has only just emerged of the attack, which happened on Wednesday in a remote area of Kandahar province, about 400km south of the capital Kabul. It is the latest of a series of attacks by people believed to be linked to Afghanistan's former Taliban rulers. Almost 20 people have been killed in violence over the past three days, including seven who were shot dead earlier this week in south-eastern Afghanistan. The latest attack happened in an isolated part of Kandahar province. The police officer who died has been named as Yar Mohammed, who was responsible for the Mizan district of the neighbouring province of Zabul. Speaking to the BBC, Zabul's intelligence chief, Ahmed Zia Massood, said the police officer was travelling back through Kandahar through the district of Chinarto, when he and his body guards came under sustained fire. Zia Massood said it appeared to have been a well-planned ambush although one of the attackers was killed and another injured. They have also been blamed for another attack on Wednesday in Kandahar City, in which a bomb explosion near a US base injured a senior police officer and killed a civilian. People claiming to speak for the Taliban have called for a holy war against President Hamid Karzai and his American allies. Another group, Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin, led by former Mujahideen Commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar has made similar statements. He has called on his supporters to follow the example of Iraqis resisting American troops. (BBC)

### **AFGHAN PRESIDENT VISITS KAZAKHSTAN**

**15 April**

Afghan President Hamid Karzai visited Kazakhstan on 15 April. Karzai and President Nursultan Nazarbaev discussed economic ties, regional security, and the problem of drug trafficking. Karzai said Kazakh businessmen are welcome in Afghanistan. The Afghan leader also assured his Kazakh counterpart that "we will continue the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking and will work with Kazakhstan to develop transit potential and trade between the two countries," Interfax-Kazakhstan reported. For his part, President Nazarbaev said Kazakhstan wishes to see stability in Afghanistan and open transport routes to the south. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

### **TAJIK BORDER TRANSFER MOVES ALONG**

**15 April**

Aleksandr Baranov, the commander of Russian border troops

on the Tajik-Afghan border, said on 15 April that Tajik guards will take over control of the border by May 2005. Baranov said the start dates and end dates for the transfer have been set at May 2004 and May 2005, but will still require a bilateral agreement between the two governments to iron out the details. Under current working-group protocols, the Pamir section of the border will shift to Tajik control in May-August 2004, with remaining Russian detachments to be moved out by May 2005. (ITAR-TASS)

### **UN CONDEMNS TURKMENISTAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

**15 April**

The UN Commission on Human Rights voted on 15 April to approve a harshly worded resolution calling on Turkmenistan to improve its treatment of ethnic minorities and overall human rights record. The resolution, which was proposed by the United States and the European Union, expresses profound concern at limitations on freedom of speech in Turkmenistan; the "discriminatory practices of Turkmenistan's government toward ethnic Russians, Uzbeks, and other minorities"; and "state policy based on suppressing any political activity." Twenty-five countries voted in favor, 11 against, and 17 abstained, including Russia. (ITAR-TASS)

### **WEBSITE SHEDS LIGHT ON RATIONALE FOR CHOICE OF INGUSH PRESIDENT**

**15 April**

The website [www.ingushetiya.ru](http://www.ingushetiya.ru) reproduced on 14 April what appears to be a confidential memorandum to President Putin from Viktor Kazantsev, who was removed last month from his post as presidential envoy to the Southern Federal District. The memorandum, dated 7 November 2001, claimed that separatist sentiments are widespread among the Ingush, and that the republic harbors some 20,000 members of illegal armed formations, including some from Chechnya. In order to quash the danger of separatism and improve the economic situation (Ingushetia relies on funds from Moscow for 85 percent of its budget), Kazantsev proposed that Moscow back Federal Security Service officer Murat Ziyazikov in the April 2002 Ingushetian presidential election; create a commission to draft legislation on the restoration of the former Chechen-Ingush republic (which was divided into two separate entities in the summer of 1992); and order the General Staff of the Russian armed forces to prepare to expand military operations from Chechnya into Ingushetia. Kazantsev predicted that those measures would not only stabilize the situation in Ingushetia but would result in the successful conclusion of the "counterterrorist operation" in Chechnya in 2002-03. Ziyazikov was duly elected president in a runoff ballot with 53 percent of the vote. (RFE/RL)

### **ARMENIAN OPPOSITION LEADER EMERGES FROM HIDING**

**15 April**

National Accord Party (AMK) Chairman Artashes Geghamian, who went into hiding after police resorted to violence early on 13 April to disperse opposition demonstrators in Yerevan, convened a news conference at the parliament building on 14 April, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. He told RFE/RL that police who searched AMK headquarters and his

apartment the previous day confiscated documents and even family photographs. Geghamian, together with two leading members of the opposition Artarutun alliance, Albert Bazeyan and Viktor Dallakian, said the opposition will continue to campaign by constitutional means for the resignation of the present Armenian leadership. Another Artarutun activist, parliament deputy Shavarsh Kocharian (no relation to President Robert Kocharian), said the opposition will convene a further mass demonstration in Yerevan on 16 April. (RFE/RL)

### **COUNCIL OF EUROPE EXPRESSES CONCERN OVER VIOLENCE IN ARMENIA**

**15 April**

Two top Council of Europe officials expressed concern on 14 April over the previous day's violence in Yerevan. Council of Europe Secretary-General Walter Schwimmer noted the "incomplete and contradictory" reports of excessive police violence, arrests of opposition activists and parliament deputies, and a media blackout. He warned against a crackdown, stressing, "In a democracy, people are free to gather and express their views, even if they are critical of the president or of the government." Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Chairman Peter Schieder has written to Armenian parliament speaker Artur Baghdasarian expressing "serious concern" over the violent dispersal of the Yerevan demonstration and requesting more detailed information about what happened and the events that preceded it. (ITAR-TASS)

### **TAJIK EXTREMIST LEADER ARRESTED**

**16 April**

Tajik security forces have arrested a man alleged to have led an extremist religious movement in northern Tajikistan. Tajik officials said that Hodi Fattoyev, former senior imam at a mosque, headed the Bay'at movement, an extremist group that allegedly engaged in arson and murder. An Interior Ministry source said that Bay'at was headquartered in the town of Chorkuh in the Isfara District of Tajikistan's northern Sughd Oblast. The source claimed the group was responsible for "arson attacks on mosques, the beating of people of other religions, and the murder of the local Baptist leader, Sergei Besarab." Twelve members of the group are currently under arrest. (RIA-Novosti)

### **PUTIN DISCUSSES TERRORISM WITH UZBEK PRESIDENT**

**16 April**

President Vladimir Putin hosted talks in Moscow on 15 April with Uzbek President Islam Karimov, during which they discussed efforts to combat terrorism in the context of the violence in Uzbekistan late last month, RTR and ORT reported. Karimov told Putin that terrorist groups are regrouping faster than the international antiterrorism coalition can react, finding weak points in the coalition's defenses and striking there. Putin told Karimov that "in your struggle against these acts, you can count on Russia's full and unconditional support." The two presidents also discussed bilateral economic relations. Aleksei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Center told "Izvestiya" of 15 April that Karimov's visit to Moscow came following a recent cooling in relations between the United States and Uzbekistan as a result of Washington's criticism of human-rights abuses in the

republic. Malashenko noted that Moscow, meanwhile, has always stressed that such issues are "President Karimov's personal business." Therefore, the Uzbek president has begun to exhibit his readiness to cooperate more actively with Russia, "Izvestiya" commented, citing Karimov's statement that his country is prepared to take "decisive steps to take advantage of unexploited political and economic opportunities." (RFE/RL)

### **ARMENIAN CIVIC GROUPS PROTEST ARRESTS, POLICE BRUTALITY**

**16 April**

Some 1,000 people attended a demonstration in Yerevan on 15 April to protest the police brutality against and arrests of protesters on 13 April, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. At the same time, participants stressed that their protest should not be construed as an endorsement of the opposition campaign to force the president's resignation. At least 115 people were arrested on 13 April, including three parliament deputies who were subsequently released. Police say 12 people were sentenced to up to 15 days' detention, and that three others, including former Defense Minister Vagharshak Harutiunian, have been remanded in custody in connection with a separate criminal investigation. Also on 15 April, police vacated the headquarters of Sargsian's Hanrapetutun party and he emerged from hiding, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. (RFE/RL)

### **PAKISTAN FIGHTERS HUNT MILITANTS**

**18 April**

Around 2,000 Pakistani tribesmen began a search on Sunday for foreign Islamic militants and tribal allies just inside the Pakistani border with Afghanistan. The operation in South Waziristan comes several weeks after the Pakistan army's biggest strike against militants linked to al-Qaeda and the Taliban. More than 100 militants and troops were killed then. However no senior al-Qaeda figure or the tribal leaders who may have been sheltering them was caught. The tribesmen are under heavy pressure to do better. Hundreds of tribal warriors left for the bleak mountains on the Afghan border on foot, carrying little more than AK47 assault rifles and light weapons. The force of 2,000 - known as a tribal lashkar - is trying to accomplish what the Pakistani army failed to do last month; to capture the Arab, Chechen and Uzbek militants believed to be sheltering in the area, along with the tribal leaders who support them. So far, the tribesmen have torched one suspected hideout, but have not run into any resistance. The Pakistani government has set a deadline of next Tuesday for tribal elders to hand over the foreigners and their allies. Meeting in a grand council in the regional capital, Wana, tribal leaders promised action, saying their patience with the militants who have brought misery and trouble to Pakistan's tribal belt has now run out. Many al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters fled into Pakistan when the American-led military campaign began in Afghanistan at the end of 2001. Osama Bin Laden and his number two, Ayman al-Zawahri, may be among them, hiding in caves along the mountainous border. Pakistan is under heavy pressure to kill or capture them as the Americans and their Nato and Afghan allies step up operations on the other side. (BBC)

### **U.S. WANTS KARABAKH RESOLVED IN OSCE MINSK GROUP FORMAT**

**19 April**

The United States believes the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must be resolved within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group, U.S. diplomat Stephen Mann, who was appointed in early April as co-chair of the group, told a news conference in Yerevan on Monday. He said that in acting as the U.S. co-chairman of the group, he will be guided by the national interests of the United States. Mann explained that the U.S. wants the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolved through peace talks. Mann met in Yerevan with Armenian President Robert Kocharian, heads of defense and security agencies, and the leader of the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. He said his talks with Kocharian were warm and useful. The U.S. official will travel from Yerevan to Tbilisi and Baku for meetings with the leaders of Georgia and Azerbaijan. (Interfax)

**TBILISI MAYOR DISMISSED****19 April**

Vano Zodelava was dismissed without prior warning on 19 April from the post of mayor of Tbilisi that he has held for several years. Zodelava said he will not retire, but continue his engagement in politics and may run for the post of Tbilisi mayor if that office becomes elective. Also on 19 April, President Mikheil Saakashvili named former Central Election Commission Chairman Zurab Chiaberashvili to succeed Zodelava, giving him six months to demonstrate his competence in that post by, among other things, halting illegal construction, installing new traffic lights, and introducing a cheaper municipal bus system. (Caucasus Press)

**GEORGIAN PARLIAMENT DEPUTY SUSPECTED OF TAX EVASION****19 April**

Georgian Sugar General Director Tengiz Gogichashvili, who was elected to the Georgian parliament on 28 March on the list of the opposition Industrialists-New Rightists bloc, was stripped of his parliamentary immunity on 17 April at the request of the Prosecutor-General's Office, which suspected him of failing to pay 89,000 laris (\$43,790) in value-added taxes. Leaders of the bloc denounced that ruling at a press conference the same day, accusing the authorities of staging "a cheap show" to distract public attention from their own failures. On 19 April, Gogichashvili agreed to pay some 233,500 laris to the state budget in order to avoid being remanded in custody; he continues to deny the charges against him. (Caucasus Press)

**SOROS PROTESTS AFTER UZBEKISTAN CLOSES DOWN HIS FOUNDATION****19 April**

Philanthropist George Soros accused the Uzbek government Sunday of forcing his pro-democracy foundation to shut down, blasting human rights abuses in the Central Asian nation and urging the United States to reconsider ties with its closest regional ally. The Uzbek branch of the Open Society Institute, which aims to build free and open societies around the world, closed this week after the government refused to renew its registration, claiming the organization was trying to discredit its policies. Soros said the foundation planned to appeal. He lashed out at the government, which has long been criticized for its poor human rights record, including allegations of torture, lack

of civil liberties and crackdowns on Muslims who worship outside state-run mosques. "Uzbekistan is stifling civil society and has a horrendous human rights record," Soros said in a statement, claiming that OSI staff in the country had suffered threats and intimidation. "Uzbekistan has jailed thousands of its own citizens on political grounds, tortured them and refused registration to most of its domestic human rights groups and all of its opposition political parties," he said. Soros said the only other country where OSI had been forced to close was Belarus, whose authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko has increasingly isolated the former Soviet republic. Earlier this month, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development issued a rare public rebuke of Uzbekistan and said it would limit investment due to the country's lack of progress on democratic and economic reforms. Soros praised the bank's decision, and called also on the United States "to re-examine its relationship with the Uzbek government." The requirement to register was imposed on civil groups by the government late last year following the ouster of President Eduard Shevardnadze in the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Shevardnadze accused Soros of funding the uprising that forced him to resign. In Uzbekistan, the OSI appeared to be the only foundation whose registration was not renewed. Soros said the Justice Ministry wrote in a letter dated Wednesday that OSI materials supplied to universities "distort the essence and the content of socio-economic, public and political reforms" in Uzbekistan and "discredit" government policies. (AP)

**MOSCOW WANTS FULL RIGHTS FOR TURKMEN RUSSIAN-SPEAKERS****19 April**

Turkmenistan has assured Russia it will take measures to improve the situation for its Russian-speaking citizens, Deputy Foreign Minister Yury Fedotov told Interfax. He said that, taking these assurances in account, Russia "considered it proper" to abstain from voting on a resolution on violation of human rights in Turkmenistan during the 60th session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva. "We based this decision on the fact that so-called country resolutions, especially in the UN's Human Rights Commission, will hardly improve the real situation," Fedotov said. "That is why the Russian diplomacy focuses on individually working with the countries that problems arise in, including the problem of Russian-speaking citizens." Concerning Turkmenistan, he said that, "On a number of concerns that were expressed by our side, we received assurances that the necessary steps will be taken to improve the situation surrounding our citizens in Turkmenistan," he said. Commenting on today's resolution on Turkmenistan, Fedotov noted that "it is possible that this question will arise in the fall, during the 59th session of the UN's General Assembly." "Then we will make our decision, taking into account all the factors, firstly the real situation of Russian-speaking citizens' rights," Fedotov said. On April 10, 2003, a Russian-Turkmen protocol was signed on the suspension of an agreement on settling several issues of double citizenship, which had been signed in 1993. Later, the Turkmen president unilaterally signed a decree stating that people with dual citizenship should choose one within two months. The Russian Foreign Ministry

stated several times that Russia still considers the 1993 agreement active, and considers that the expiration protocol is not retroactive, and is designed to regulate citizenship issues that may only arise after the protocol comes into effect. (Interfax)

### **EBRD TO INCREASE INVESTMENT IN SEVEN POOREST CIS COUNTRIES**

**19 April**

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) announces plans to increase investments in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to help them fight poverty. In order to help the seven poorest CIS nations, the EBRD is ready to take great risk and increase investments and donor financing. "The Bank is ready to take on the risk as we seek to invest more in countries at the earlier stages of transition," EBRD President Jean Lemierre said at the Board of Governors Annual Meeting in London on April 18-19. In his words, more than 50 percent of people in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan live in poverty. The economy of these countries is less consistent with market standards than the economy of other countries. A large state debt complicates foreign borrowing for economic development and social needs. Other obstacles to borrowing are underdeveloped markets, the closed borders, lack of banking and other services, insufficient infrastructures in these countries. The EBRD will invest in the private banking sector to enable it to small and medium-size business in these countries, as well as the housing and communal sector, energy sector and transport. "We will finance the kind of projects that we have found work best in these circumstances: small businesses, microfinance, investment to facilitate cross-border trade, small-scale infrastructure," Lemierre said. He said the EBRD might invest from 500,000 to two million euros in these projects. In addition, Lemierre asked the donor nations to increase their grants to the EBRD for use in other countries. He said additional grants would allow the bank to invest up to 150 million euros in each of these countries annually (currently it invests 90 million euros). "We cannot do this on our own," Lemierre continued. "In order to strengthen the initiative, the Bank has invited donor countries to contribute to provide technical cooperation, and to help prepare and co-finance projects. But the EBRD takes the full burden of added risk on its own books." (ITAR-TASS)

### **SOCAL ARMENIAN-AMERICANS DEMAND U.S. RECOGNITION OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE**

**20 December**

A delegation from Southern California joined scores of other Armenian-Americans in Washington, D.C. to demand official U.S. recognition of a genocide they say was perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire. The representatives joined a gathering of about 350 Armenian-Americans for the Armenian National Assembly's two-day conference, where they also urged increased foreign assistance for their homeland and better trade relations with the United States. Southern California is home to about 400,000 Armenian-Americans, the largest such community in the nation. Assembly members were buoyed Monday by a State Department announcement that the Bush administration supports permanent normal trade relations with Armenia. But

members acknowledged that with Turkey on the front lines of the war on terror, they won't see the phrase "Armenian genocide" in official U.S. statements anytime soon. "I'm sure President Bush will issue a statement on the anniversary about 'those dark days' or 'those massacres,'" said Osheen Keshishian of Los Angeles, who publishes the Armenian Observer, an English-language weekly based in Hollywood. Keshishian, who also teaches at Glendale Community College, said the issue remains a burning one for Armenians in the United States. "The point is, justice has to prevail. Truth has to prevail," he said. Armenian-Americans allege 1.5 million Armenians were killed in a genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1923. Turkish officials say far fewer people died amid a multiparty conflict. Tuluy Tanc, the minister-consular at the Turkish embassy in Washington, D.C., called the term genocide "unfair and untrue." "We do not think or believe a genocide occurred in Turkey," Tanc said. "Events in Turkey were, during the course of a world war, tremendously unhappy. Events took place affecting Armenians, Muslims, Turks and all components of the Ottoman Empire." (AP)

### **ARMENIAN PRESIDENT WARNS THAT POLICE WILL MAINTAIN ORDER**

**20 April**

In an interview for publication in "Izvestiya" circulated by his press service, President Robert Kocharian characterized the wave of opposition demonstrations that began earlier this month as "a temporary phenomenon" based on the mistaken perception that the so-called Rose Revolution that toppled Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze last November can be repeated in Armenia, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Kocharian warned that while the opposition has the right to stage sit-ins and rallies, police will intervene to restore order if future opposition protests block highways or interfere with the work of state institutions. At the same time, Kocharian vowed that the government will "work more energetically" to reduce poverty, eradicate corruption, and improve the economic situation. (RFE/RL)

### **TURKISH MERCENARY KILLED IN CHECHNYA**

**21 April**

A Turkish mercenary was killed in a federal special operation in Chechnya's Vedeno district, a military spokesman told Interfax. "The man who was killed had a passport under the name of Turkish citizen Semek Yusif [transliterated from Russian] with a Georgian visa, opened on July 7, 2002; a card of the Turkish Taekwondo Federation, issued in February 1991; a lawyer's card, issued in February 1996; and other documents with Turkish entries," said spokesman Col. Ilya Shabalkin. A Kalashnikov and cartridges were discovered at the scene. "The circumstances of the Turkish citizen's stay in Russia are under investigation," Shabalkin said. (Interfax)

### **ARMENIA, IRAN NEGOTIATING GAS PIPELINE CONSTRUCTION**

**21 April**

Yerevan is holding talks with Tehran on constructing a gas pipeline between Iran and Armenia to fully satisfy Armenia's internal demand for gas, President Robert Kocharian said at a

Tuesday press conference. No other options are being discussed, because they could be problematic for Armenia, Kocharian said. "We are discussing this project only with the purpose to improve Armenia's energy security," the president said. The construction of the second power transmission line is continuing. The line will make it possible to supply electricity to Iran in exchange for gas, while "other options are quite problematic," Kocharian said. The signing of a final agreement on constructing a gas pipeline between Iran and Armenia is expected when Iranian Petroleum and Gas Minister Bijan Namdar-Zanganeh visits Yerevan in late May. The construction of the gas pipeline should begin in late 2004 and be finished in 2006. In line with agreements signed earlier, the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline is expected to be 141-kilometer long, and 100 kilometers of it will be located in Iran and 41 in Armenia. The project has been estimated at \$120 million. (Interfax)

## **PUTIN REJECTS EU CALL FOR TALKS WITH CHECHEN SEPARATISTS**

**21 April**

President Vladimir Putin has likened the European Union's call for Moscow to establish a dialogue with the Chechen separatists to bin Laden's truce proposal to Europe. "As previously, we are now being urged to start talks and a dialogue with the people whom we and our partners in Muslim countries consider terrorists. Terrorist Number One, bin Laden, made a truce proposal to Europe which, as far as I know, was rejected," Putin said at a joint press conference with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in Lipetsk on Wednesday. "Why? And why are similar calls addressed to Moscow?" Putin said. "Therefore, Moscow does not think everything is constructive in the criticism of Russia concerning the situation in Chechnya." He noted, however, that Russia "takes this criticism seriously, responds to it and does so very constructively." (Interfax)

