

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 6 NO. 7

6 APRIL 2005

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ANALYTICAL ARTICLES:

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF THE "KYRGYZ REVOLUTION"

Maks Kokonbaev

ASSESSING CHINA'S REACTION TO KYRGYZSTAN'S "TULIP REVOLUTION"

Matthew Oresman

NAZARBAYEV'S GRAND DESIGN FOR KAZAKHSTAN'S DOMESTIC PURPOSES

Stephen Blank

GEORGIA AND UKRAINE: BUYING IRANIAN GAS?

Hooman Peimani

FIELD REPORTS:

LARGE DEMONSTRATION IN JAVAKHETI MARKS INCREASED TENSIONS

Grigor Hakobyan

KAZAKHSTAN BALANCES ON THE TIGHTROPE BETWEEN VELVET REVOLUTION AND "GOVERNABLE DEMOCRACY"

Marat Yermukanov

PESHAWAR CONFERENCE ON PAKISTAN'S TRIBAL AREAS

Zahid Anwar

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Daan van der Schriek

NEWS DIGEST



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Contents

Analytical Articles

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF THE "KYRGYZ REVOLUTION" 3
Maks Kokonbaev

ASSESSING CHINA'S REACTION TO KYRGYZSTAN'S "TULIP REVOLUTION" 5
Matthew Oresman

NAZARBAYEV'S GRAND DESIGN FOR KAZAKHSTAN'S DOMESTIC PURPOSES 8
Stephen Blank

GEORGIA AND UKRAINE: BUYING IRANIAN GAS? 10
Hooman Peimani

Field Reports

LARGE DEMONSTRATION IN JAVAKHETI MARKS INCREASED TENSIONS 13
Grigor Hakobyan

**KAZAKHSTAN BALANCES ON THE TIGHTROPE BETWEEN VELVET
REVOLUTION AND "GOVERNABLE DEMOCRACY"** 14
Marat Yermukanov

PESHAWAR CONFERENCE ON PAKISTAN'S TRIBAL AREAS 16
Zahid Anwar

AFGHANISTAN'S MEDIA UNDER PRESSURE 18
Daan van der Schriek

News Digest 20

EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

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

The Analyst aims to provide our industrious and engaged audience with a singular and reliable assessment of events and trends in the region written in an analytical tone rather than a polemical one. *Analyst* articles reflect the fact that we have a diverse international audience. While this should not affect what author's write about or their conclusions, this does affect the tone of articles. Analyst articles focus on a newsworthy topic, engage central issues of the latest breaking news from the region and are backed by solid evidence. Articles should normally be based on local language news sources. Each 1000-1200 word analytical article must offer a concise and authoritative statement of the event or issue in question. An article must provide relevant, precise and authoritative background information. It also must offer a sober and analytical judgment of the issue as well as a clinical evaluation of the importance of the event. Authors must cite facts of controversial nature to the Editor who may contact other experts to confirm claims. Since *Analyst* articles are based on solid evidence, rather than rumors or conjecture, they prove to be reliable sources of information on the region. By offering balanced and objective analysis while keeping clear of inflammatory rhetoric, The Analyst does more to inform our international readership on all sides of the issues.

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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: Ideal length between 1000 and 1200 words.

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

BACKGROUND: 300-400 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-400 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

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

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. 700-800 words.

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

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COSTS AND BENEFITS OF THE “KYRGYZ REVOLUTION”

Maks Kobonbaev

Beginning on March 24, the uprising in Kyrgyzstan brought excitement to democratic forces of the world and alarmed the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. The new government has found itself in a unique position to change the status quo, combat corruption and build institutions of democratic governance based on the rule of law. At the same time, the consequences of “Kyrgyz Revolution” are fraught with potential costs such as the fragility of property rights and business investment climate that could stagger economic performance for years to come.

BACKGROUND: At 3 p.m. on March 24, around 20 thousand people gathered on the Ala-Too Square to demand the resignation of Askar Akaev. After several clashes, demonstrators stormed the police and entered the White House, throwing portraits of Akaev out of the windows and waving the flag of Kyrgyzstan. Akaev had left 30 minutes before protestors entered his office. Other government officials left through a side door. Those who were still inside were beaten mercilessly. A short while later, Kurmanbek Bakiev, one of the opposition leaders, addressed the crowd, saying that the government is in the hands of the people. Demonstrators also freed Felix Kulov, a leader of the “Ar-Namys” opposition party, who had been in jail since 2000. Kulov urged Akaev to peacefully transfer his power. The sentiment of excitement was felt both inside and outside of Kyrgyzstan.

While the presence of overwhelming excitement was felt during the revolution, the following events brought trepidation and fear. Protesters started to loot nearby supermarkets and businesses. The new government scrambled to restore stability but this proved a hard task in the absence of police and given a broken chain of command. Volunteers tied yellow ribbons around their arms to serve as street patrols. They prevented many of potential lootings, but most businesses in Bishkek’s downtown had been wrecked. At least three people were killed and a hundred were hurt in different incidents. In the aftermath of looting, some people were desperate, while others were still optimistic of the

revolutionary events. In any case, the initial joy at best gave way to skepticism and an overall mixed picture.

The Soviet Union collapsed fifteen years ago, leading analysts to trumpet the global triumph of liberal democracy. Echoing such sentiments, Kyrgyzstan’s relatively new President Askar Akaev became the champion of democratic reforms unparalleled in his authoritarian neighbors in Central Asia. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan was briefly called the “Island of Democracy” and received more foreign aid per capita than any of its neighbors. However, since 1996, Akaev began turning increasingly autocratic, influencing the judicial and legislative branches to control his political opponents. To get reelected for his third term in 2000, Akaev violated the constitution and initiated criminal prosecutions against key challengers. Feliks Kulov and Topchubek Turgunaliyev ended up in jail and criminal charges were slammed on Daniar Usenov, barring him from standing for election.

Akaev and his family became more powerful and opulent. His son and son-in-law owned profitable businesses using government channels. Akaev and his wife Mairam’s clans (*Sari-Bagish*, *Saru* and *Kutchu*) and regions (*Kemin* and *Talas*) were overrepresented in the government while the most populous Southern region was underrepresented.

IMPLICATIONS: In the recent parliamentary elections, Akaev went too far, filling up the Jogorku Kenesh with pro-presidential candidates as well as his

own son and daughter. The blatant exclusion of political heavyweights such as Kurmanbek Bakiev and Roza Otunbaeva and the general apprehension that Akaev was preparing yet another trick to remain in power added fuel to the fire. Meanwhile, corruption, rural poverty, unemployment and Akaev's alienation from ordinary people severely diminished his popularity. All these factors put together, coupled by the struggle for power and outside support, culminated in the revolution.

In view of fifteen years of Akaev's reign, the dramatic changes witnessed in Kyrgyzstan does represent a hope for a better future and the triumph of popular democracy. Now Acting Foreign Minister, Otunbaeva in a meeting with the foreign ministers of Georgia and Ukraine expressed that "Our choice is for democracy." The revolution is also a lesson for the new government to create a system of governance based on checks and balances. For instance, Kulov has already stressed the importance of the independence of the judiciary to avoid future revolutions. Marat Tazabekov, director of the Economic Policy Institute, contends that a presidential form of government leads to the regime of one person and that Kyrgyzstan should have a parliamentary form of government.

While conditions for the further development of democracy are present, the real concern is the country's ubiquitous corruption. If the government does not fight with the cancer of corruption, most efforts could turn out to be futile. Cholpon Baekova, Chair of the Constitutional Court, announced that the new chapter in Kyrgyzstan's history should start with the establishment of transparent government without corruption and tribalism. Bakiev, Otunbaeva and others accused Akaev's clan of widespread corruption but have kept their silence on what they intend to do to address the problem.

Whereas the political benefits of the upheaval are yet to be realized, economic costs are already present. The full cost of the destruction of state property remains to be estimated. According to member of parliament Timir Sariev, the budget lost one million dollars, while the Ministry of Finance estimates losses of half again as much. Still, the main costs are in the private sector. Major stores such as "Beta," "Dordoi Plaza," "Silk

Way," "Narodnyi" and many others were looted completely. As a result, three major owners committed suicide and many others are under heavy stress. Middle class salespeople rented most of the counters and shops inside these supermarkets, and they were the most hurt by the looting. David Grant, director of the International Business Council (IBC) in Bishkek, announced that the damage amounts to roughly US\$100 million. The IBC represents investors in Kyrgyzstan, totalling investment of over US\$ one billion. One of its members, the BITEK cellular phone company, lost US\$500,000 when its head office was marauded.

To cap it all, BITEK has started to experience what some experts call the beginning of the redistribution of property rights. On March 30, the Sverdlovsky district court arrested its property upon a law suit initiated by Fellowes (a company affiliated with Russia's Alpha group), claiming ownership of BITEK. BITEK has 300,000 clients and is valued at \$150 million to 200 million. At the moment, the issue seems to be in the process of resolution along legal and contractual channels, it is very likely that amidst the chaos, some individuals and entities will want to grab stakes in such lucrative businesses. For instance, Ruslan Sarymsakov, president of JSC "Ak-Keme", claimed the ownership of "Pinara Hotel" previously owned by a Turkish company, "Sistem Muhendislik." Disputes over the ownership of Sanatoriums and other properties in the Issuk-Kul tourist zone have begun as well. The consequences of insecure contracts, dubious claims and incentives to redistribute property rights can stagger Kyrgyzstan's investment climate and slow down economic growth.

CONCLUSIONS: While the new government is in a unique position to fundamentally alter the way Kyrgyzstan will move forward, the potential risks in the form of insecurity and redistribution of property rights are very real and can harm the business investment climate in the country for years to come. The new leaders have promised to protect property rights; for example, Bakiev does not expect major reprivatization and redistribution. The prosecutor general, Azimbek Beknazarov, promised to investigate all illegal actions aimed at business people. Daniyar Usenov, a principal investigator of Akaev's wealth and

recently appointed interim deputy prime minister for economic issues, argues for fair rules of the game for all businesses. While promises are high, incentives to renege on promises are even higher. Therefore, it is essential for the new leaders to understand that the people granted them power with genuine hope to build democratic and prosperous Kyrgyzstan. This is possible only if the government manages the state accountably,

combats corruption, protects property rights and improves the quality of life of the majority. This is not an easy task, but the necessary one for the new government to make a difference.

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ASSESSING CHINA'S REACTION TO KYRGYZSTAN'S "TULIP REVOLUTION"

Matthew Oresman

The surprisingly rapid opposition takeover of the Kyrgyz government last week has significant implications for nations across the region, including China, which has watched these developments with a keen eye. While Russia and the United States maintain military bases in Kyrgyzstan, China is the only outside power that actually borders Kyrgyzstan. China has developed strong ties with Kyrgyzstan since the Central Asian republic gained its independence, and Beijing has used these ties to fulfill multiple foreign policy goals, particularly in the area of counterterrorism, domestic security, economic cooperation, and diplomatic and strategic positioning.

BACKGROUND: To date, China has reacted to the Kyrgyz revolution with muted rhetoric. Beijing has let Russia take the lead in responding to developments and has refrained from asserting its desires publicly. Officially, the Foreign Ministry has merely stated that "China hopes the situation in Kyrgyzstan turns stable at an early date... As a friendly neighbor of Kyrgyzstan, China is paying close attention to the development of the situation and wishes social order there restored to a normal state as soon as possible." Additionally, the border crossing to Kyrgyzstan that was closed at the start of the revolt has already been reopened.

While China has yet to exert significant influence on the evolving situation, other than telephone diplomacy and demarches to the new government to protect Chinese citizens in Kyrgyzstan, China may still assert itself if its interests become threatened. This was the subtext to SCO Secretary General Zhang Deguang's statement that he has "deep concern over the current complex situation" and that it is "important now that the course of further events in Kyrgyzstan develop in line with the Constitution, that law and order return to the society, and that national concord and peace be properly provided." As the new government begins to take shape, China will weigh several factors in

deciding its next course of action. These will include the shape of the new government, its position toward the Uyghur Diaspora, security threats created by the new power vacuum, and the effect of a potentially democratic Kyrgyzstan on Beijing's regional strategic interests.

IMPLICATIONS: The first factor shaping China's reaction is the shape and make-up of the new Kyrgyz government. As of now, the majority of new leaders are former government officials, not grass-root activists. All of these leaders, including acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev, former acting internal security coordinator and opposition leader Felix Kulov, acting Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva, and former Foreign Minister and current leader of the opposition Party for Justice Muratbek Imanaliev, have had a long history of engaging with China over the course of their careers. For now it seems that they have no interest in changing Kyrgyzstan's relationship with China. Acting Foreign Minister Otunbayeva has already stated publicly that Kyrgyzstan will continue to develop its foreign policy in line with the status quo and that China is an important friend and economic partner. This being said, to some analyst, anti-China rhetoric is a large part of the opposition's base. It was the Askylar riots in 2002, ostensibly a protest against the Kyrgyz government ceding too much territory to China in land negotiations (but at its heart an anti-Akayev protest) that helped galvanize the opposition. In fact, it was the five deaths caused by government forces that forced then Prime Minister and now acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev to resign. And while there has been little anti-China rhetoric used by the opposition since the Askylar riots, the current political situation may still restrain how quickly the new government embraces China, lest a rival opposition leader resurrect the old anti-government/anti-China chants.

Secondly, Beijing will keep a close eye on how the new government handles the Uyghur Diaspora in Kyrgyzstan. With approximately 50,000 Uyghurs living in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to the thousands of shuttle traders going back and forth between

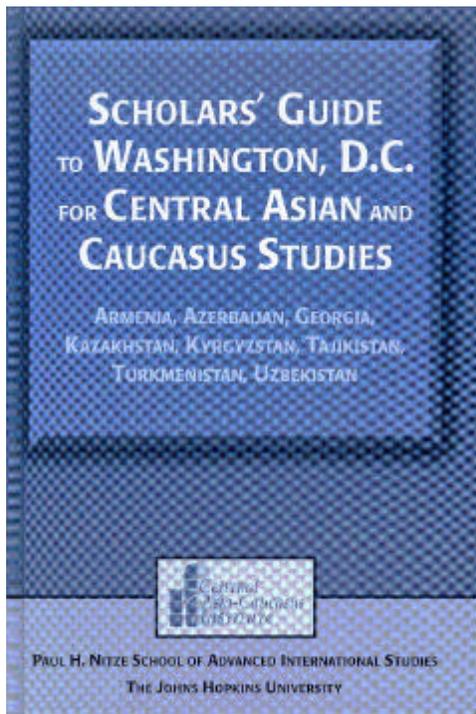
Xinjiang and Kyrgyzstan, the country represents one of the largest Uyghur populations outside of China. Prior to the revolution, China had done an efficient job of convincing the Kyrgyz government and all other Central Asian regimes to do Beijing's "dirty work" when it came to the Uyghur populations. The former government helped monitor Uyghur activities in the country, prevented many Uyghur associations from organizing fully as political groups, and arrested and extradited Uyghurs as needed. Under a new, more democratic government, Uyghur groups could be able to develop more politically. If allowed, they may more aggressively seek to influence the situation in Xinjiang or organize the Diaspora community more effectively. Both possibilities worry Beijing. If the Uyghurs of Kyrgyzstan are in fact allowed to challenge Beijing more openly, or, alternatively, if democratic activists start penetrating into China from Kyrgyzstan, Beijing may forcefully assert their interest to the Kyrgyz government and use all their levers of influence, including ties to the as-of-yet unreformed security branches, to make sure the situation does not become troublesome.

Thirdly, Beijing is as always concerned about potential instability created by a power vacuum in Kyrgyzstan. While an interim government has taken power and new elections will be held in June, the unstable situation may allow for radical Islamic groups to infiltrate more deeply into Kyrgyzstan and drug smuggling networks to more effectively establish their presence. Both situations create problems for Beijing, and not just because of the threat these groups could pose to stability in Xinjiang. China has come to recognize over the last decade that internal instability in Central Asian countries affects China's own national security, and a failed state on its borders would require a great deal of resources and attention, assets that China currently would like to focus on its economic development and the Taiwan situation. If Beijing perceives a new threat, Chinese leaders would be likely to exercise whatever levers of influence and power they find necessary before they have to consider new military and security options.

Lastly, China is watching developments in Kyrgyzstan with an eye toward what it means for China's influence in the region. China has made impressive inroads into the region since the end of the Soviet Union both through bilateral engagement and the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Analysts and government officials in Beijing have already stated their fear that the Kyrgyz revolution will provide an opportunity for the United States to more forcefully assert its presence there, as the new government reaches out to new partners. China suspects that the United State was the hidden hand behind the revolution, and a new partnership between the United States and Kyrgyzstan could unravel many of the recent gains for China, especially in keeping the SCO an organization of Chinese dominance. While this may be a knee-jerk reaction by Beijing, two recent Xinhua headlines highlight this concern, reading: "U.S. Meddling in Central Asia Through Military, Economic Infiltration" and "U.S. Influence in Central Asia To Rise After Change of Kyrgyzstan Government."

CONCLUSIONS: In conclusion, China is currently in a "wait and see" mode when it comes to Kyrgyzstan. Beijing will likely continue to follow Russia's lead and not attempt to assert any strong influence on the new government until the Chinese leadership feels absolutely compelled. China will continue to watch developments in Kyrgyzstan with an eye for the factors discussed above. Only if the situation turns against China would Beijing decide to act, using a growing assortment of tools for influencing events in Central Asia. Until then, China may yet introduce a modicum of stability into the region and could be an important partner of the United States and Russia in helping to manage this rapidly changing situation.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Matthew Oresman is the Director of the China-Eurasia Forum (www.chinaeurasia.org) and can be reached at moresman@chinaeurasia.org.



The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute is proud to announce the publication of the Scholars' Guide To Washington DC for Central Asia-Caucasus Studies. The Guide was compiled by Tigran Martirosyan and Silvia Maretti and published by M.E. Sharpe, publishers.

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NAZARBAYEV'S GRAND DESIGN FOR KAZAKHSTAN'S DOMESTIC PURPOSES

Stephen Blank

On February 18 Kazakhstan's President, Nursultan Nazarbayev, presented the equivalent of his state of the union address. However this speech goes further than merely a statement of policy priorities for the short, medium, and/or long-term. Rather Nazarbayev here outlined a template, not just of policy initiatives, but also of the development of the future Kazakh state. Kazakh spokesmen, traveling in America, also pointed to this template-like quality of his speech, citing that it proposes Kazakhstan's full independence as a state (based on its previous economic successes largely connected to oil and gas revenues), Kazakhstan's movement toward a market economy from a command economy, and the movement from unitary authoritarian leadership to what they call democratic institutions and values.

BACKGROUND: Nazarbayev's speech certainly extols Kazakhstan's independence and aims to safeguard it against potential threats by a program of economic reform and social initiatives that carry with them a strong whiff of paternalism. These socio-economic initiatives aim not only to provide the basis for the security of Kazakhstan's people but also for their full movement into a modern state and economy. Thus he calls for a blueprint for moving the main industries of Kazakhstan from oil and gas to tourism, food processing, textiles, oil and gas machine building, transport logistics, metallurgy and construction.

To this end he calls for a new ideology of creation of small businesses while preserving a core of state owned businesses. Those businesses or firms that are not part of this core would be privatized. Nazarbayev therefore also calls for substantial social welfare initiatives to ensure that every citizen has access to higher education and support for a substantial program of social insurance for mothers and children as well as adults. Nazarbayev also advocates wage raises for public sector workers and the unemployed.

There is little doubt that he considers it imperative that Kazakhstan provide for both more broad-based economic and social progress as well as security for its citizens so that they will not be tempted by doctrines like radical fundamentalism and terrorism due to lack of perspectives for socio-economic growth. However Nazarbayev's program also goes beyond creating a basis for long-term economic growth and social security. He also outlined proposals for substantive political reform from the top. He, like his spokesmen abroad, regularly extolled Kazakhstan's achievements as showing that it is a democratic state, i.e. they reproached those in the United States and elsewhere who will accuse the regime of being what it fact is, a moderately authoritarian state that grants freedoms but does so from above, not from below, and that lacks the real attributes of democracy.

As part of his speech Nazarbayev repeatedly claimed that Kazakhstan had already built the foundations and more of a democratic state. In truly eclectic fashion he claims that the model he pursues is akin to both that of Western countries and the "new Asian democracies". He claims to

have instituted regular democratic elections, a multiparty pluralist system, and over 5000 NGOs. This indicates the essential fallacy of this thinking since NGOs, to be genuine, must be created from below. He claims as well that there is no censorship, freedom of speech and defended basic human rights, e.g. the freedom to travel and return safely.

Nazarbayev also claims to have instituted legislative accountability and authority, but is not resting on his laurels. He advocates the further decentralization of power and regulation of state government to make it more effective and transparent. Thus he is calling for an improved system of localization or devolution of powers to local levels that will supposedly increase democratic participation and accountability at those levels.

IMPLICATIONS: While he may appeal to Western and Asian sources of inspiration, Nazarbayev more accurately stands in the tradition of Tsarist reformers who sought to make the state more effective a vehicle for the promotion of economic growth and social stability and sought to build structures for local government that would enhance popular participation, effectiveness and even more democratic elements at that level. But if we are looking at contemporary models perhaps the most appropriate exemplar of his approach or the state most congenial to what he appears to be doing is Singapore. There too a state which was firmly run from above, achieved prodigious levels of economic development and social stability, including substantial welfare benefits. The government presided above a state of law, a kind of *Rechtstaat* to use the 18th and 19th century term for a state based on law but that was not a democracy with kingly or presidential accountability to it. Thus Singapore remains a state with very firmly enforced police powers that clearly circumscribe as well as regulate the freedoms granted from above. Likewise, it provides a vehicle for a circumscribed polity where a legislature functions but where ultimately the president is supreme and not truly accountable to it.

Whereas Singapore's wealth is founded on trade and mercantile pursuits given its location and the defense of property rights there; Kazakhstan's economic potential depends, first of all on energy and raw materials which are plentiful. Although the government has taken precautions to set aside large amounts of energy revenues and plow them back into the local economy, Kazakhstan's future still remains tied to the price of energy. In this respect it significantly differs from Singapore and resembles other petro-states. These states too often showed a major commitment to social welfare, paternalistic rule from above, including experimentation with initiatives from above that created limited openings within the political system. But they also run risks that we can see in Kazakhstan, particularly corruption and a tendency toward nepotism. The latter, in fact, is common throughout Central Asia as Nazarbayev, Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan have all encouraged their daughters to found political movements and become players in their country's politics, clearly a desire "to keep the dacha in the family".

Nazarbayev's domestic program also represents an attempt to avert extremist threats by a comprehensive program of socio-economic development and by the creation of sufficient transparency that would encourage popular participation while the actual framework wherein it could be expressed remains one that is limited from above. But there is also another purpose behind the creation of this template for the future development of the state. There is little doubt that he, like his colleagues, has been alarmed by Ukraine's revolution and has taken counsel with Moscow on measures to prevent this "infection" from spreading. By ceaselessly proclaiming that Kazakhstan is already a democracy he hopes to neutralize calls from America and Europe for reform or the threat posed by a pending corruption trial in America where his own corruption and that of his family will figure prominently. Although Kazakhstan is undoubtedly the most "liberal" state in Central Asia, it is by no means a democracy for

the present, and even under the best interpretation, his reforms will not lead to that conclusion even if we cannot foresee the future beyond his rule.

CONCLUSIONS: The template outlined here is clearly one that is developmental and bears resemblance to Singapore and to the Gulf monarchies, particularly the Emirates. But it is also clear that as Kazakhstan lives in a violent neighborhood and is very much hostage to the price of energy. Thus its developmental perspective remains to a considerable degree an open-ended question. Nazarbayev is surely correct in wishing to use the opportunities provided by the current high energy prices to move the economy towards a stronger and more diversified basis. But will his desire to retain unchallenged power and to pass at least some of it down to his family permit that to occur when forces beyond his control such as terrorism, the demand for democracy that has led to

violence in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the price of oil and gas, and Uzbekistan's deepening crisis that can spill over into Kazakhstan, suffice to hold these forces at bay? Nor is it clear how future developments in the Central Asian policy of such states as Russia, China, and America will affect his domestic grand design. Thus this grand design remains a tribute to his political acumen which we have seen for the last fifteen years, but the likelihood of its success in being realized cannot be described as being anywhere near certain. In other words, despite his best efforts, for some time, as regards Kazakhstan's evolution and progress, the jury will remain out.

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GEORGIA AND UKRAINE: BUYING IRANIAN GAS?

Hooman Peimani

During his two-day visit (March 12-13) to Yerevan, Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli discussed with his Armenian counterpart Andranik Margarian Tbilisi's interest in the extension of the Iranian-Armenian gas pipeline to Georgia. According to the Armenian prime minister, the Georgian official also discussed the possibility of the pipeline's further extension to Ukraine, which seeks to decrease its heavy fuel reliance on Russia with an expressed interest in Iranian gas. Provided the Georgians go beyond expression of interest, reach an agreement with Iran and ignore Washington's opposition to such an agreement, the discussed project will have a long-term impact on the Caucasus' balance of power.

BACKGROUND: The idea of exporting Iranian natural gas via a pipeline Armenia and through it to Georgia and Ukraine emerged shortly after the

Soviet Union's disintegration. In search of consolidating their newly-achieved independence, reducing their heavy dependency on Russia and thus

decreasing Moscow's political influence in their countries, the three ex-Soviet states found importing oil and natural gas from Iran a feasible and inexpensive alternative to Russian energy. Tehran was very interested in such prospects as it was eager to increase its fuel exports and particularly its natural gas, whose exports at the time was next to nil despite having the world's second largest gas reservoirs. The possibility of exporting Iranian gas to the more affluent markets of central and western Europe through Ukraine made both Iran and the three newly-independent states even more interested in the pipeline project as it would significantly increase Iran's export revenues, while generating a substantial amount of income in transit fees for the rest. Moreover, the growing economic cooperation among Iran, Armenia and Turkmenistan made feasible exporting Turkmen gas to Armenia via Iran. Such project could eventually lead to Turkmen gas export to Europe via Armenia.

All these ideas went beyond expressions of interest in the 1990s as Iran concluded agreements with Armenia for gas exports to that country and negotiated such exports with Georgia and Ukraine. Likewise, Iran, Armenia and Turkmenistan reached an agreement in principle for exporting Turkmen gas to Armenia via Iran. Despite the enthusiasm in all the mentioned countries, none of the envisaged projects materialized for various reasons, including Washington's opposition to any project improving Iran's economy and increasing its political and economic influence in the CIS countries. The latter denied adequate financing for the projects.

IMPLICATIONS: After years of delay, Iran and Armenia began implementing their gas project in September 2004. Being under construction, the required 142-kilometre Iranian-Armenian gas pipeline of which 42 kilometers will be laid in Armenia is scheduled to be fully operational at the end of 2006, if everything goes well. Through the pipeline, Iran will export 36 billion cubic meters of gas to Armenia over a 20-year period. The actual beginning of its construction has created a realistic ground for Georgia's optimism that its extension to

that country could well become feasible as evident in Georgian Prime Minister Noghaideli's reported discussion with his Armenian counterpart. Apart from Tbilisi's initial interests, the growing tension in Georgian-Russian relations has prompted its recent expression of interest in the pipeline project. The worsening of these relations is very likely owing to Russia's role in Georgia's breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Tbilisi's demand for the closure of the three Russian military bases in Georgia, and Russia's concern over the growing American military presence in Georgia. Given this likelihood, Georgia's heavy energy dependency on Russia is imprudent. Connecting the Iranian-Armenian pipeline to Georgia's gas pipeline network with a short and relatively inexpensive pipeline feasible in a short period of time would not only address its current vulnerability in its relations with Russia, but that possibility with its limiting impact on Russia's influence in Georgia could well be used as a leverage by the Georgians in their dealing with Moscow. Perhaps, such considerations are among the factors prompting the Georgian government with a clear pro-American orientation to reach out to Iran even as the U.S. is seeking to deny Tehran economic gains and political influence, especially in the Caucasus.

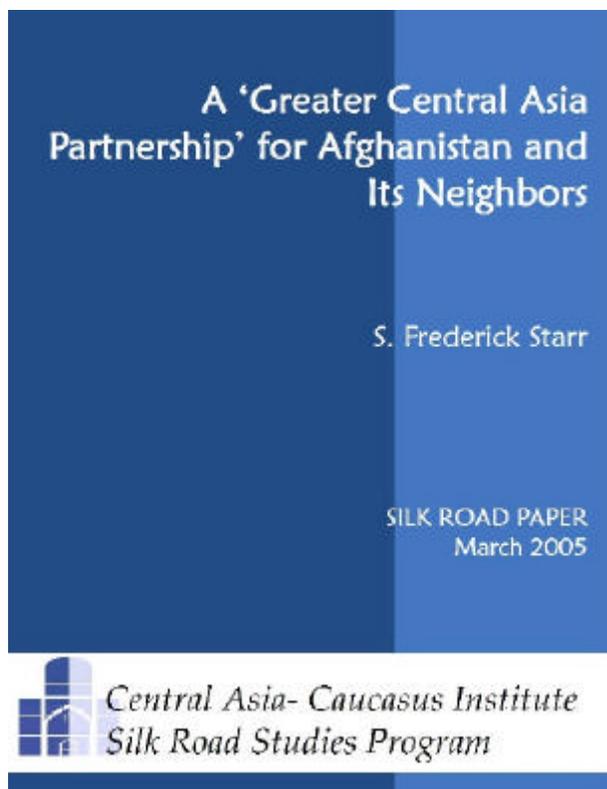
Against a background of Ukraine's friendly relations and significant economic cooperation with Iran, the new Ukrainian government has also sought to deal with its heavy energy dependency on Russia by importing Iranian gas. Thus, on 6 March 2005 Iranian and Ukrainian government representatives met in Kiev to discuss the implementation of a pipeline project to transport Iranian gas to Ukraine. The Ukrainian deputy minister of oil and energy in a meeting with Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for International Affairs Nejad Hosseini called for annual purchase of 15 billion cubic meters of gas from Iran. The envisaged gas pipeline will pass either through Iran, Armenia, Georgia and Russia or through Iran, Armenia, Georgia and the Black Sea. To make a final decision, the two countries' representatives are scheduled to meet in Tehran in May 2005 to discuss

the pipeline project's implementation, including its construction and financing, and the amount of gas to be exported. Given the American concern about Iran, the move of the newly-elected Ukrainian government with its clear pro-American tendency reflected Kiev's deep concern about its ties with Moscow and the necessity to address its heavy fuel dependency on a potentially unreliable energy supplier.

CONCLUSIONS: The ongoing construction of the Iranian-Armenian gas pipeline is a major event for the two sides. Despite this positive development, thanks to the growing hostility between Tehran and Washington, the latter's effort to deny Iran any major economic gain in its foreign relations and Tbilisi's and Kiev's recent political shift towards the United States, the feasibility in the near future of the linking of the Georgian and Ukrainian gas grids to Iran is uncertain. However, apart from their

economic importance, the two projects are significant for at least two reasons. They reflect an attempt by Georgia and Ukraine to decrease their energy dependency on Russia even at the price of annoying the United States, while they signify Tehran's success in maintaining good economic relations with Tbilisi and Kiev despite the recent ascension to power of their pro-American presidents. If implemented, Iran's gas exports to Armenia, Georgia and Ukraine will strengthen ties among the four countries, while limiting to a varying extent the influence of Russia and the United States, two powers with different reasons to oppose the gas projects.

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FIELD REPORTS

LARGE DEMONSTRATION IN JAVAKHETI MARKS INCREASED TENSIONS

Grigor Hakobyan

An increase in the level of tensions has recently been reported in the Armenian-populated province of Javakheti (known as Javakhk in Armenian) in southwestern Georgia. The leaders of United Javakhk (an Armenian public organization in the region) have rallied thousands of people to protest the socioeconomic hardships experienced by the Armenian community of the region. The estimates for the number of participants vary. An article in April 1, 2005 issue of the Armenian Aravot newspaper cited 3, 000 participants, while an article in the April 2, 2005 issue of the daily Azg cited 6, 0000-9,000 participants.

Despite unsuccessful attempts by the Georgian police to prevent the gathering, the rally went ahead as planned. Among the many demands presented by the protesters was to stop the withdrawal of Russian military base no. 62 stationed in Akhalkalaki; the recognition by the Georgian Parliament of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923; and the ratification of a law protecting the rights of national minorities in Georgia. Protestors also underscored the damage to the local economy that would follow from closing the Russian Military Base, home to Russia's 147th Motorized Rifle Division, and first established in 1828. The Akhalkalaki base provides the main source of employment in the region and provides the livelihood for thousands of local Armenians.

Given their proximity to Turkey, for the Armenians of Javakhk, the presence of a Russian military base is perceived as a guarantee of their

security, based on their fears of a potential new Turkish invasion, similar to the one that occurred following the First World War.

During the meeting, the rally organizers recounted some accomplishments from a prior rally held in the same location on March 13, 2005. Specifically, they mentioned the return of passport and tax services to the town of Akhalkalaki and the agreement by Georgian authorities to include Armenian history classes in the curriculum of Armenian language schools in Georgia. Furthermore, the rally organizers demanded that the Georgian authorities recognize the Armenian language as an official language, next to Georgian, in the region surrounding Javakheti and Ninotsminda, which is heavily populated by Armenians.

One of the demands raised at the rally was specifically directed to the father of the religious establishment of Apostolic Church in Armenia, Catholicos Garegin II. According to Azg's report, "United Javakhk called upon the All Armenian Catholicos Garegin-II to give Javakhk the status of a separate Diocese. The participants furthermore called upon Armenians worldwide not to forget about their kin in Javakhk and to pay attention to the problems in Javakhk."

Armenia's President Robert Kocharyan's unexpected April 1 visit to Georgia has been characterized as a consequence of these rallies. Although the details of the meeting that took place at the Gudauri ski resort, not far from Javakheti,

have not been reported yet, the Secretary of the Georgian National Security Council, Gela Bezhushvili has said that the presidents of both countries discussed the prospects of importing energy from Armenia to Georgia. He further stated that Robert Kocharyan has expressed a position of non-interference in the domestic affairs of Georgia.

According to Aravot, those who were behind the Armenian rallies in Javakheti can be found among President Vladimir Putin's entourage in Moscow. These forces are trying to create every possible hurdle to the implementation of the 1999 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) agreement, signed during the organization's Istanbul Summit, in which the Russian government pledged to withdraw its military bases from Georgia.

Some circles in Moscow could be interested in jeopardizing the political stability in Javakheti to the point of igniting a confrontation similar to the ones that occurred between the central authorities of Georgia and its respective minority regions (e.g. South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and though in a different manner, in Ajaria). This would potentially create an argument for maintaining Russia's military presence in the province, perhaps in a redefined form such as a CIS peacekeeping battalion of the type found in Abkhazia. However, it is yet to be seen whether the two neighboring nations, who stand the most to lose from any armed confrontation, will be able to mitigate this developing crisis.

KAZAKHSTAN BALANCES ON THE TIGHTROPE BETWEEN VELVET REVOLUTION AND "GOVERNABLE DEMOCRACY"

Marat Yermukanov

One of the most cited theories in Kazakhstan is that economic reform should take precedence over political renewal of society. The successful economic performance of the country and far-reaching reforms in the pension and banking systems lead some experts to believe that the time has come for Kazakhstan to implement radical political reforms. But the current regime, with an authoritarian streak, seems to be vacillating between genuine and "governable" democracy imposed from the top.

Events in Kyrgyzstan, portrayed as "banditry and marauding" perpetrated by an unmanageable mob in the public speeches of top echelons officials of Kazakhstan, present a striking contrast to the thesis of step-by-step political reform favored by official Kazakh ideology. By all standards, the repetition of the Kyrgyz scenario in Kazakhstan is almost

unthinkable. Even fierce critics of the regime admit that a number of factors strongly minimize, if not exclude altogether, the threat of a Kyrgyz-style uprising in Kazakhstan. These include the steady economic achievements of the last five years, relatively high wages and pensions, accelerated development of the business sector which fosters a middle class, and the political inertness of the rural population. The Kazakh establishment is well aware of its economic trump-card which will help stave off revolutionary moods in the masses.

Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz upheavals sent a shockwave among the ruling elite of Kazakhstan from the first hours of the wildfire-like developments. Authorities imposed a veritable information barrier, and important websites like centrasia.ru were effectively blocked. State-controlled media merely carried sketchy reports

carefully filtered for the consumption of the audience. For example, the short statement made by Kazakh Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev in connection with Kyrgyz events reached the only two days later. Likewise, the report that the ousted president Askar Akayev fled his country came only forty eight hours after Italian television RAINews24 showed an image of a military helicopter taking off with presumably Kyrgyz president Akayev on board. Kazakh officials neither denied nor confirmed allegations that Akayev was hiding in Kazakhstan until a Russian news media disclosed that Kyrgyz president arrived to Moscow from Kazakhstan.

Apparently, Kazakh leaders believed that last-ditch efforts by Askar Akayev to retain his power could by some miracle reverse the course of dramatic events. The Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan pinned its hope on “constructive dialogue” between the Kyrgyz opposition and the authorities. However incongruous it may seem in this circumstance, Kazakh Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev in his interview to *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* said that “Kazakhstan reaffirms its interest in rendering any assistance to Kyrgyzstan in case it is needed”.

Recovering from the blow delivered by the Kyrgyz uprising, Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev told the Congress of entrepreneurs on March 25 that “riots” in Kyrgyzstan were triggered off by the extreme poverty of the population and the weakness of the authorities, and the serious blunder of Kyrgyz government to put political changes before the economic reforms. By stating thus, Nazarbayev gained propaganda scores on two points. First, he demonstrated to the outside world and his home audience that under his rule, Kazakhstan attained incontestable economic leadership in the region. Second, he suggested that his theory about the priority of economy over politics stood the test successfully in Kyrgyzstan.

He assumed this mentoring tone in his talks with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who arrived in Astana on March 31 for a short visit. The young Georgian leader flattered the ears of his

Kazakh counterpart, lavishing praises of the economic achievements of Kazakhstan and posing as a humble disciple who came to Kazakhstan to learn the ways of economic and administrative management. In some way, Saakashvili disarmed the Kazakh opposition, stating that the Kyrgyz scenario or any other velvet revolution was ruled out in Kazakhstan because Kazakhs who enjoy higher income and solid social protection are preoccupied with economic reforms.

Nazarbayev showed his pragmatic approach, distancing itself from the hard-line and stubborn policy makers in the Kremlin and talking business with the leader of a new generation who came to power in the wake of a popular uprising. He promised Mikheil Saakashvili Kazakh investments to reconstruct Georgian seaports and delivery of natural gas. The agreement was reached on Kazakh oil shipments via Georgia’s Poti seaport to Romania’s Constanta. The new route should link Georgian Black sea terminals with the Aktau seaport on Kazakhstan’s Caspian coast.

Far more important than economic benefits are political gains for Kazakhstan. Georgia can pave the way for Kazakhstan in its efforts to join the World Trade Organization and foster closer ties with the European Union, NATO and other Western organizations. Nazarbayev realizes well that time has come to make the world believe in the sincerity of his commitment to radical political reforms. At the same time, the Georgian way of regime change would be the last thing Nazarbayev could wish for. He is still clinging to the idea of governing the democratic processes through a “pocket” parliament and his brain-child, the National Committee on Problems of Democracy, an inefficient structure not recognized by opposition. No one can tell in this state of balancing between the threat of popular revolutions and an authoritarian type of “democracy” what the political future holds in store for Kazakhstan.

PESHAWAR CONFERENCE ON PAKISTAN'S TRIBAL AREAS

Zahid Anwar

The University of Peshawar's Area Study Center recently held a high-level conference on the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a timely issue following the Wana operation and the unrest in this crucial region neighboring Afghanistan. Speakers discussed economic development issues, the impact of Afghanistan's crisis on the FATA, and the recent military operations.

With the exception of the Orakzai agency, the remaining six tribal agencies of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province are located along the Durand line and have a direct impact on developments in Afghanistan. Since this British devised system, with very insignificant changes, is still operational, there need arises to conduct an extensive analysis and assessment to judge its effectiveness, validity and relevance in a changing environment. The Afghan crisis has deeply affected these agencies, including through a massive influx of Afghan refugees to Pakistan, Islamabad's role as the frontline state for the Afghan Mujahideen Resistance against the Soviet occupation, and the prolonged stay of the refugees in the country. In the FATA more than anywhere else, these factors have created a deep impact that needs thorough academic investigation, said Dr. Azmat Hayat Khan, Director of the University of Peshawar's Area Study centre, said his inaugural address to a seminar on "The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan" which was organized by the Area Study Centre (Russia, China and Central Asia) of the University of Peshawar in collaboration with the Hanns Seidel Foundation on December 7-8, 2004.

Due to the developments in the region and the importance attached to the tribal belt, a large number of intellectuals, academics, analysts and diplomats from several countries attended the

seminar. These included the Director General of ISPR Maj. Gen. Shoukat Sultan, former Parliament member and central leader of the National Awami Party of Pakistan Latif Afridi, defense analyst Brig. (Retd) A.R. Siddiqi, Secretary to the Governor on FATA, Sahibzada Saeed and tribal representatives and elders Malik Qadir Khan and Malik Gulabat Khan, who all spoke on the occasion.

Vice-chancellor of Peshawar University, Lt. Gen. (Retd) Mumtaz Gul observed that the governance problem was the root cause of all ills in the tribal areas and suggested that a package of good governance coupled with tribal traditions could solve the problems in the Tribal Area. Dr Andreas Rieck, representative of the Hanns Seidel Foundation in Pakistan speaking on the occasion highlighted the importance of the Tribal Areas. He said the foundation was actively engaged in promotion and getting knowledge on issues related to Pakistan.

The Political Agent of the Khyber Agency, Arbab Arif spoke on the status and effectiveness of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and explained to the participants how effective the system was, which he said was being implemented only with the consent of tribal people. He said that the system of Jirgas holds the key to resolve the issues. The political agent in any of the agencies acts as presiding officer of the Jirga. The FCR is a procedural law based on the traditions or "Riwaj" of the tribesmen. He said all the disputes and matters were decided by the council of elders and the delivery of justice, he said, was comparatively quick and effective.

Brig. (Retd) A.R. Siddiqi, a well-known defense analyst and former Head of the Inter-Services

Public Relations, said in his speech on “A politico-military appraisal of the FATA” that the fact remains that Pakistan’s democracy is yet to be out of the woods and enter the wide space of untrammelled political choice and freedom. He observed that the recent Wana operation, the longest conducted after the Baluchistan insurgency, militarily lacked political clarity.

As Major General Shoukat Sultan admitted, Tribal Areas were neglected in the past. However, at present various developmental schemes are progressing there. They aim to improve living standards in the area. Commenting on the present situation of South Waziristan, he said that they were negotiating to resolve the problem there. Gen. Sultan argued that the policy in the 1980s to support Jihadi elements was part of the overall national policy, but maintained that the times had changed and that national interests defined Pakistan’s new outlook towards Afghanistan. “Now it is our national policy to discourage extremists and give voice to moderates,” he said, adding that Islamabad could not isolate itself from the world community. “This is the twenty-first century, and we cannot live in the situation faced by the country in the 1980s as the present day demands are entirely different”. He said the government adopted both direct and indirect strategies to flush out militants from South Waziristan. Gen. Sultan said that when tribal jirgas, lashkars (levies) and other tactics failed, only then did the government opt for military action.

Pakistan had supported and recognized the Taliban government mainly because it was a compulsion to secure a friendly government on the western border. He further elaborated that this did not mean that Pakistan supported their ideology. During the Taliban period, people from different parts of the world came to Afghanistan to promote their political agenda. He added that the tribesmen must accept that times had changed and with this, the reality on the ground had also changed. He said history shows that those nations perish which fail to adapt to changing circumstances. The purpose behind moving security forces into the tribal area

was to secure the western borders, to check the movement of people moving into Pakistan, to ensure that coalition operations in Afghanistan did not spill over into Pakistani territory, to nab the terrorists and to assist in development works in the FATA.

Gen. Sultan also noted that the army was conducting an operation where the tribesmen harbored foreign elements, who were involved in the coercion of the local population with the help of local sympathizers. This involved obstruction of development work and defying government authority. Gen. Shoukat said the government tried to solve the issue through negotiation, jirgas and local lashkars prior to military action, but without success.

The Secretary to the Governor on FATA, Mr. Sahibzada Saeed, said that reforms and development packages have already been announced for FATA to change the old structure, improve and extend the devolution of power plan in the belt. Apart from this abrupt changes in the old judicial system at the tehsil (local) level administration would be made. A significant amount of funds will be spent in this context to improve health, education, communication, irrigation and industry. These steps are being taken to improve the living standards of tribal people. He said work on most of these development projects was in progress.

The central leader of the National Awami Party Pakistan Latif Afridi, commented on the FCR. He termed it a small law, having seven chapters over 61 sections. It applied to the whole of the NWFP, but was abolished when the constitution of 1956 came into force. He said the FCR was abrogated in most of Balochistan, except in certain areas, with the 1973 constitution, where too it ceased to be operative when the Shariat bench of Quetta High Court declared it un-Islamic. The people of FATA are the only people today where this discriminatory law is applicable and used with full force. He maintained that the FCR was followed with political agents and their deputies using it with an iron hand.

Speaking on the occasion, tribal Maliks (elders) Malik Qadir Khan and Malik Gulabat Khan recalled the sacrifices rendered by their forefathers in the creation of Pakistan and said that the tribal people are true Pakistanis. They asked the government to resolve the FATA crisis through dialogue and not to use force and devastate the situation further. If the government, they said, was interested to win tribesmen's hearts, various developmental works should be launched to compete with the challenges ahead and remove the sense of deprivation and negligence that is prevalent in the tribal belt.

Gen. (Retd.) Nasirullah Baber, former Governor of NWFP and former Interior Minister, spoke on the tribal policy formulated by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1972-77 and noted that historically, the tribal areas have been – and continue to be – both an enigma and a dilemma. Commenting on the current situation in FATA, he said that instead of giving a free hand to military forces to run the affairs of the Tribal areas, government functionaries need to take the traditional Jirgas into consideration.

Khalid Aziz, former Chief Secretary of the NWFP, delivered a paper on “ The Afghan Presidential Elections and its Impact on the Tribal Areas”. He observed that by permitting the Afghan refugees to participate in the presidential elections on 9th of October 2004, Pakistan took a huge international step, unparalleled in history.

Dr. Minhajul Hassan, of the University of Peshawar spoke on the impact of the Afghan crisis on FATA”. He said that one of the most glaring impacts of the Afghan crisis on the Tribal Areas was the increase in religious institutions, mostly run by Afghan leaders, who translated inflammatory literature into the Pashto Language. On the one hand, this contributed to the development of the Pashto language, while on the other hand it increased sectarianism and radicalism in the area. He observed that it was the Afghan war that introduced modern weapons in the area, saying that according to estimates, there are 1.9 million licensed firearms in the NWFP, while the unlicensed number is almost six times higher.

Col. (Retd.) Yaqub Mahsud presented a paper on Unrest in the Mahsud area and the negotiation process. He said that even after deploying three divisions of the army and the bulk of the Frontier Corps, the forces occupied only one third of the Mahsud area, those areas that had a better road network. The remaining two thirds, a highly mountainous area with no mentionable roads, remained unoccupied and provided safe havens to militants, said the ex-army officer, who also played a key role in bringing the militants to negotiations with the government.

AFGHANISTAN'S MEDIA UNDER PRESSURE

Daan van der Schriek

Media in Afghanistan, especially television, continues to be criticized and threatened with a crackdown. The non-governmental organization Internews that monitors media developments in Afghanistan even says that pressure on both independent and state-controlled media has been increasing in recent months. The main enemies of a

free media in Afghanistan today appear not to be the Taliban, but conservative judges and warlords.

Newspapers, magazines and to a lesser extent also radio and television stations flourish in Afghanistan. More than 150 publications have appeared in Kabul alone. And many of them are independent. There is diversity, but the media is not

absolutely free. Certainly, there has been improvement over the years. In a November 2003 briefing paper on the Afghan elections, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, an independent research institute, wrote that "Freedom of expression has still not been achieved and political dissenters and journalists are not yet protected by free speech law."

And reviewing 2003, the International Press Institute commented, "While the Afghanistan government continues to talk of the importance of these rights [i.e. freedom of the press and of expression] the authorities are busy beating up journalists, arresting them and closing down media organizations."

But in March 2004, a new media law has been signed into force. Earlier restrictions, such as a ban on criticizing the national army or publicizing photos of only partially dressed women, were removed. Now, however, criticism of Islam and insults of officials are officially forbidden. And, say reporters without borders, "The blasphemy law continues to be the biggest menace for journalists." In the provinces, meanwhile, "local governors do not allow news diversity or criticism."

And the Ulema Council, led by Supreme Court president Fazl Hadi Shinwari, is against everything it deems un-Islamic. And its attempts to ban such (ill-defined) un-Islamic content seem to be growing, observers believe. On March 13, the Ulema Council asked the government to make the country's state and privately-owned TV stations stop broadcasting "immoral and anti-Islamic" programs. Earlier, the Supreme Court tried to ban cable television.

One representative of the Council told the Afghan Pajhwok news agency that "We have decided this in accordance with the constitution and we have also called for a ban on telecasts which have dances as this is absolutely contrary to the Sharia." But

whereas Article 3 of the Constitution says no law can be contrary to the Sharia, article 34 protects freedom of expression. "It is up to the public to decide about TV programs," reacted the press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders in a March 29 letter to President Karzai. "It is certainly not up to the government to say what is good and bad. Such a censorial attitude runs counter to Afghanistan's constitution and its press law."

The liberal minister for information and culture, Sayed Raheen, is also under pressure by extremists to curb liberal programming, he told the March 17 issue of Media Watch, the Internews publication surveying press conditions in Afghanistan. Raheen said he had therefore been advising TV channels "not to put him in a difficult position where it becomes impossible for him to defend them as he supports the work of independent TV stations."

But conservative clergy are not the only ones to blame. Regional strongmen are usually not fond of broadcast criticism, and journalists are likely to suffer harassment if they have publicized anything displeasing them. Self-censorship is common, therefore.

"The number of incidents must be enormous because for most journalists some form of intimidation, harassment or at least self-censorship has become part of their job description and they don't even think about it," said Internews media analyst Aunohita Mojumdar in September 2004 when the first Media Watch was published. "I think one out of three [Afghan] journalists at least will have some personal incident to narrate."

In the Reporters Without Borders' 2004 Worldwide Press Freedom Index, Afghanistan ranks a poor 97th, somewhere in the middle of the list between Mexico and Gambia. Some progress relative to other countries seems at least to have been made: in 2003, Afghanistan ranked 104th on the list.

NEWS DIGEST

OWNER OF HOUSE IN WHICH CHECHEN LEADER WAS KILLED FOUND DEAD

24 March

The owner of the house in Tolstoi-Yurt where Russian federal troops surrounded and killed Chechen President and resistance leader Aslan Maskhadov on 8 March has been found dead, Russian media reported on 24 March. His body reportedly bore signs of torture. Also on 24 March, a Grozny city council official told Interfax that it would be "unethical" to provide funds to rebuild the house, which was destroyed several days after Maskhadov's death. (RFE/RL)

DEATHS, INJURIES, LOOTING REPORTED IN KYRGYZ CAPITAL

25 March

Looting and violence in Bishkek on the night of 24-25 March claimed at least three lives and left hundreds injured as of 7 a.m. on 25 March. The Health Ministry reported two dead and 360 injured, with 173 hospitalized, but parliamentary deputy Temirbek Sariev announced on television on 25 March that three people were killed -- one woman who fell from the third floor of a shopping center, one person run over by a car, and another shot by guards during looting at a shopping center. Looters ransacked many of the capital's largest stores during the night of 24 March. They also targeted cafes and a number of ATMs and currency exchange points. (akipress.org)

MINISTER ACCUSES OSCE OF 'DESTABILIZING' KYRGYZSTAN

30 March

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on 30 March that Russia is concerned about the political situation in the CIS, where several countries have seen "violent changes of government" in recent months. "We consider it counterproductive to intervene in the internal processes of [neighboring] states," Lavrov said. He criticized the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for its role in the ongoing events in Kyrgyzstan, saying that OSCE assessments of the elections there were used "by those who destabilized the situation in the country" and that "Russia cannot ignore this fact." (newsru.com)

RUSSIA FACING ACUTE SHORTAGE OF ABLE-BODIED MEN

30 March

Regional Development Minister Vladimir Yakovlev said on 30 March that up to 60 percent of Russian males today are either underage, elderly, or handicapped. Of an able-bodied male population of about 20 million, nearly 1 million are in prison; about 4 million are serving in the military, Interior Ministry, Emergency Situations Ministry, or Federal Security Service (FSB); some 4 million are alcoholics, and about 1 million are drug addicts. Moreover, mortality among men is about four times the rate it is for women. "In the very near future, we will simply have no labor force at all, as the losses among the male population are comparable to those the USSR suffered during World War II," Yakovlev said. (ITAR-TASS)

SAAKASHVILI WANTS ALL REFUGEES TO RETURN TO ABKHAZIA

30 March

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said the return of all refugees regardless of their nationality, security for the Georgian population in the Gali district and joint economic projects are crucial to settling the conflict in the breakaway province of Abkhazia. "After trust is restored, we will have to start negotiations on a serious status for Abkhazia that will fully guarantee the rights of the Abkhazians," Saakashvili told a news conference on Tuesday. The president said he is aware of what sentiments dominate in Abkhazia's capital of Sukhumi. "People there have already realized that nobody will ever recognize this deserted territory as an independent state," he said. "We will certainly succeed in finding a consensus with the Abkhazians," Saakashvili said. (Interfax)

KARABAKH SETTLEMENT WILL REQUIRE COMPROMISES – MINISTER

30 March

Settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will require painful compromises from Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenian Defense Minister and Security Council Secretary Serzhik Sarkisian said on Wednesday. "I am absolutely sure that the settlement of the Karabakh crisis will be painful for the Armenian as well as for

the Azerbaijani people," Sarkisian said at parliament hearings devoted to the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. "A compromise presumes concessions, and nobody can make concessions without difficulties," he said. If Armenia receives security guarantees for Nagorno-Karabakh, the existing security area around Nagorno-Karabakh [seven Azerbaijani regions under control of the Karabakh side] "will lose its meaning," he said. The handing over of those territories to Azerbaijan is not yet on the agenda, Sarkisian said. "We just have to be ready to hold negotiations on the security area," he said. (Interfax)

AL JAZEERA REPORTS DISTORT CHECHEN SITUATION - RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY

31 March

Al Jazeera reports on Chechnya are obviously made to order and aimed at poisoning the atmosphere of Russian-Arab relations, the Russian Foreign Ministry's information and press department said in a statement received by Interfax on Thursday. "The channel has been regularly broadcasting reports of this kind in recent days. We have to say that these reports distort the actual state of affairs in the Chechen Republic and ignore consistent efforts of federal and local authorities to rebuild the economy and achieve public and political normalization," the statement says. (Interfax)

ARMENIANS IN SOUTHERN GEORGIA DEMONSTRATE AGAINST RUSSIAN WITHDRAWAL

31 March

Nearly 3,000 ethnic Armenian residents of the southern Georgian Djavakheti district held a demonstration on 31 March protesting the possible withdrawal of the Russian military from its Akhalkalaki base there. The demonstrators also reiterated a list of demands submitted to Georgian authorities at an earlier demonstration on 13 March. Those demands included an end to the ban on teaching Armenian history in local schools, the adoption of new legal guarantees for the rights of ethnic minorities, and the official recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Georgian government. The protesters also warned against any change to the region's demography that would "reduce the native ethnic Armenian population of Djavakheti." A smaller demonstration was held in Batumi on 31 March, with about 500 local residents protesting against the Russian withdrawal from their base in Adjara, Caucasus Press reported. (Arminfo)

ABKHAZ PRESIDENT WELCOMES RUSSIAN INVESTMENT

31 March

Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh announced on 31 March that the Abkhaz leadership is committed to promote greater Russian investment and commerce in Abkhazia. The Abkhaz leader added that "an investment economic group is being formed" to work directly with potential Russian investors. The Abkhaz leadership has already initiated negotiations with Russian companies over a \$40 million project to reconstruct telecommunications in Abkhazia, and is currently seeking Russian financing for the reconstruction of the Inguri power plant and the restoration of a railway route. (ITAR-TASS)

NEW KYRGYZ AUTHORITIES NEGOTIATING WITH AKAYEV

31 March

Representatives of the new Kyrgyz authorities are holding preliminary negotiations with President Askar Akayev about the possibility of him stepping down from his post as president, Kyrgyz parliamentary speaker Omurbek Tekebayev said at a meeting with OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel in Bishkek on Thursday. Tekebayev earlier said he was prepared to hold talks with Akayev. "I am prepared to negotiate with Akayev, but only if this is an official decision made by the Kyrgyz parliament," the speaker said. Tekebayev said that only the Kyrgyz parliament could initiate or support negotiations with Akayev. "I am prepared to negotiate as a speaker instructed by the parliament, but I am not going to initiate this process as a private individual," he said. (Interfax)

GEORGIA TOWNS PROTESTS AGAINST RUSSIAN BASE PULLOUT

31 March

The Georgian communities of Batumi and Akhalkalaki are witnessing large-scale protests against the Georgian government's decision to speed up the pullout of Russian military bases deployed there. Participants in the Batumi rally, mainly members of the Ajarian Patriotic Union, told journalists they were categorically against the Georgian leadership's policy which they said causes tensions with Russia. "The Russian base guarantees peace and stability in our region, and its withdrawal is not in Georgia's interests," they said. (Interfax)

BAKIYEV DENIES ROLE OF "ISLAMIC EXTREMISM" IN KYRGYZ CRISIS

1 April

Interim President Kurmanbek Bakiyev said he was "sure that Islamic extremism had nothing to do" with the recent revolution in Kyrgyzstan. "In Bishkek, in the north [of Kyrgyzstan] as a whole, Islamic extremism has a very low influence on the masses," Bakiyev said in an exclusive interview with Interfax. In the south, where Bakiyev comes from, Islamic extremism has a "weak" influence on the population as well, he said. There are "many mosques" in southern Kyrgyzstan, Bakiyev said. "At one time, it was regular practice to build mosques instead of schools or hospitals. But that's one thing, and Islamic extremism is a completely different story," he said. (Interfax)

AKAYEV MAY LOSE PRIVILEGED LEGAL STATUS – SPEAKER**1 April**

Parliamentary speaker Omurbek Tekebayev said on Friday that changes might be made to the law concerning Kyrgyzstan's first president that came out when Askar Akayev was in power and guaranteed him a prominent political role after leaving presidential office. "All that the Constitution makes provision for may be changed via legislative acts," Tekebayev told reporters. The Constitution guarantees the Kyrgyz president and his family lifetime immunity against prosecution. However, "negotiations with Askar Akayev are needed before considering changes to the law on the first president," Tekebayev said. "It needs to be understood what all sides are ready for in order to organize a lawful handover of authority," the speaker said. (Interfax)

AKAYEV WOULD BE IN DANGER IF HE RETURNED TO KYRGYZSTAN - FOREIGN MINISTER**1 April**

Interim Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Roza Otunbayeva told journalists on Friday that it would be dangerous for ousted President Askar Akayev to return to Kyrgyzstan. "We don't want him to be torn apart by the crowds," Otunbayeva said. "Akayev can live in Kyrgyzstan if his own people accept him," she said. Talking about the property belonging to Akayev and his family, Otunbayeva said that "an old car was the only property Akayev ever declared." "We are ready to send this car to Moscow at any time, let the rest go to the people of Kyrgyzstan," Otunbayeva said. (Interfax)

WORLD BANK TO GIVE KAZAKHSTAN \$35 MILLION FOR AGRICULTURE**1 April**

Representatives of the World Bank and the government of Kazakhstan signed an agreement on 1 April to undertake a \$96.1 million project to support agriculture in Kazakhstan. The World Bank will provide \$35 million for the project, which is intended to support agriculture development and raise standards of living in rural areas. The current project marks the second stage of a post-privatization agriculture-support project begun in 1998. Kazakh Finance Minister Arman Dunaev noted that the second stage differs from the first in that the Kazakh government is now providing the bulk of financial support. ("Kazakhstan Today")

MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES CANCEL PLANNED ARMENIAN CONCERT OF CONTROVERSIAL RUSSIAN SINGER**1 April**

Authorities in Yerevan cancelled on 31 March a series of concerts of popular Russian singer Filip Kirkorov after significant pressure from Armenian youth groups, according to RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau and Yerkir. The furor over the planned concerts stems from allegations that the Russian singer is "anti-Armenian" and routinely sings Turkish songs in his concerts. The protesters also argued that the timing of his concerts in Yerevan coincide with the April commemoration of the 90th anniversary of the Armenian genocide and are, therefore, "immoral and intolerable." The pressure to revoke the singer's invitation to Armenia was led by a student youth group affiliated with the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, a junior member of the ruling, pro-government coalition. Kirkorov, whose father is of Armenian descent, was set to perform at two concerts in the Armenian capital on 8 and 9 April. (RFE/RL)

MASKHADOV KILLED BY FELLOW MILITANTS AT OWN REQUEST – SHEPEL**1 April**

Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov was shot by guerrillas hiding in the same underground bunker, Deputy Prosecutor General Nikolai Shepel told journalists on Friday. "Maskhadov died of multiple bullet wounds inflicted on him by people hiding in the same bunker at his request," Shepel said. (Interfax)

MASKHADOV'S BODY WON'T BE RELEASED TO FAMILY – SHEPEL**1 April**

The Prosecutor General's Office will not release the body of the late Chechen separatist leader Aslan

Maskhadov to his family, Deputy Prosecutor General Nikolai Shepel told journalists on Friday. "The law on the fight against terrorism bans the bodies of terrorists from being released to their relatives. They are buried in unmarked graves," Shepel said. Maskhadov was charged with terrorism as part of the investigation into the school siege in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, the deputy prosecutor general said. "A court confirmed the charges brought against Maskhadov and issued a warrant for his arrest," he said. (Interfax)

KYRGYZSTAN'S PARLIAMENTARY SPEAKER HOPES AKAYEV WILL RESIGN

3 April

Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary speaker Omurbek Tekebayev said ousted President Askar Akayev will hopefully step down on Sunday. "In accordance with the constitution, resignation must proceed in parliament. But the current situation does not allow Akayev to return to Kyrgyzstan," Tekebayev told the press upon his arrival in Moscow on Sunday morning for talks with Akayev. "Our mission has been authorized by the parliament, we've arrived here with a notary who will document Akayev's resignation, and we plan to fly back to Bishkek in the evening," Tekebayev said. Asked how probable was Akayev's resignation, Tekebayev said, "We hope [he will resign]." "Neither we, nor Akayev are advancing any additional demands," he added. He said the talks will be held at Kyrgyzstan's embassy in Moscow, adding that the time has not been fixed yet. A member of the Kyrgyz delegation said talks with Akayev will most probably take place at the embassy in the afternoon. A source close to the Kyrgyz presidential administration told Interfax on Sunday that, "Akayev has no arguments to back his further stay in office." "The time when he could have signed a resignation document on certain terms has passed, primarily for him. This is clear from his latest interviews. In the current setting, Akayev must sign a letter of resignation and only then could talks with a parliamentary delegation on matters concerning the interests of the president himself, take place," the source said. "I'm sure the safety of his relatives residing in Kyrgyzstan, his property and the implementation of the law on guarantees for the first president will interests Akayev above all. Akayev is very well aware that he would not be able to return to Kyrgyzstan in the current situation. The new authorities would not be able to guarantee his safety," the source told Interfax. (Interfax)

'TALEBAN' STRIKE IN AFGHANISTAN

2 April

Six people have been killed in southern Afghanistan, in two attacks officials have blamed on Taleban fighters. Early on Saturday gunmen stormed government offices in Helmand province, killing at least three policemen and injuring four others. Earlier, three lorry drivers - two Afghans and a Pakistani - were shot dead when their military convoy was ambushed close to the Pakistani border. Officials say the Taleban have carried out a number of recent attacks. In Saturday's incident dozens of gunmen entered the district office in the town of Deshu, in Helmand province, and opened fire. A local official said the attackers may have suffered casualties, but took their dead or wounded away. The earlier attack, took place overnight on Friday near the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak. The lorry drivers had been transporting US military jeeps to Kandahar, the main American base in southern Afghanistan. The Taleban failed to disrupt last October's presidential election, which was won by President Hamid Karzai. This fuelled hopes among US and Afghan officials that the insurgency was fading. But there has been a series of attacks in recent days - including a car bomb that killed one person in the eastern city of Jalalabad on Wednesday. This has prompted speculation that the Taleban are preparing a spring offensive. (BBC)

FBI CONFIRMS GEORGIAN PREMIER DIED OF CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING

3 February

Experts from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) who have been assisting in the investigation of the 3 February death of Zurab Zhvania told journalists in Tbilisi on 1 April that they found no evidence that Zhvania was killed deliberately, rather than succumbing to fumes from a faulty gas heater. But veteran politician Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia repeated on 1 April her conviction that Zhvania was murdered, Interfax reported. She accused the FBI and the Georgian authorities of conspiring to conceal the true cause of Zhvania's death. (Caucasus Press)

BEREZOVSKY'S VISIT TO TBILISI APPROVED BY AUTHORITIES

4 April

The latest visit by controversial Russian businessman Boris Berezovsky to Tbilisi was agreed upon with the Georgian authorities, Georgian businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili told a news conference in Tbilisi on Monday. "Berezovsky's visit to Georgia was legal. He had all the necessary documents to cross the border,"

Patarkatsishvili said. The businessman said he had informed the Georgian authorities of Berezovsky's planned visit to Tbilisi in advance. "Georgia has been guided by the Geneva Convention, which it has signed. And there are no grounds to call into question the legitimacy of the documents which the authorities of Great Britain have issued to Berezovsky as a political refugee," he said. Berezovsky and his wife arrived in Tbilisi on April 2 at Patarkatsishvili's invitation. Their visit lasted for 14 hours. (Interfax)

INTERIM KYRGYZ PRESIDENT HAILS AKAYEV'S RESIGNATION

April 4

The resignation of Askar Akayev as president of Kyrgyzstan is a normal step that was taken in compliance with the constitution, the country's interim President Kurmanbek Bakiyev told Interfax on Monday evening. "It would have been even better for the Kyrgyz people if Akayev had taken this step earlier," Bakiyev said. "In my opinion, Akayev delayed his resignation, which provided grounds for various debates between Kyrgyz politicians and ordinary citizens," the interim president said. Asked whether Kyrgyzstan's current executive power is legitimate, Bakiyev said: "Who can be illegitimate in Kyrgyzstan today?" (Interfax)

U.S. AMBASSADOR URGES DIALOGUE BETWEEN AZERBAIJANI LEADERSHIP, OPPOSITION

4 April

In an interview published on 4 April in the daily "Gun," U.S. Ambassador to Baku Reno Harnish listed five spheres that he termed crucial to U.S.-Azerbaijani cooperation. They are democratization, economic reform, the search for a peaceful solution to the Karabakh conflict, the functioning of the East-West energy corridor, and joint measures to combat international terrorism. He said an official invitation to President Ilham Aliyev to visit the United States is contingent on progress in all five spheres. Harnish urged dialogue between the authorities and the opposition, suggesting that the two sides sign a joint pledge to ensure that the parliamentary elections due in November are free, fair, and transparent. (Turan)

CSTO CHIEF SAYS ORGANIZATION COULD HAVE HELPED KYRGYZSTAN DURING RECENT UNREST

4 April

Nikolai Bordyuzha, secretary-general of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, which

comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia), stated on 4 April in Dushanbe that Article 2 of the Collective Security Treaty, which provides a mechanism for stabilizing the situation in member states in the event of unrest or external aggression, could have been applied during recent events in Kyrgyzstan. Bordyuzha met with Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov in Dushanbe on 4 April to discuss cooperation among member states, Tajik Television reported. In reference to recent "disturbances in Bishkek," he said, "I am deeply convinced that we should have applied this mechanism." "I am not talking under any circumstances about the use of military force," he added. "What happened in Kyrgyzstan is the internal affair of Kyrgyzstan's people." (Avesta)

BEATING OF RIGHTS ACTIVIST SPARKS OUTRAGE IN UZBEKISTAN

5 April

The case of human rights activist Egamnazar Shoymanov, who was abducted and beaten by unidentified individuals on 29 March, continues to spark outrage in Uzbekistan, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reported on 4 April. Shoymanov, who has led protests against unlawful land confiscations in Jizzakh Province, was attacked by a group that he believes had links to local authorities. On 30 March, 300 residents of Bunyodkor village expressed their anger at the attack with a violent protest, burning three cars and destroying a police post. The next day, the provincial and regional governors apologized to residents and treated them to a free meal. Shoymanov has sought refuge in Tashkent after the attack. Uzbek rights activists are demanding that the individuals who attacked Shoymanov be brought to trial. (RFE/RL)

TURKISH BUSINESSMAN ALLEGES PROPERTY SEIZURE IN KYRGYZSTAN

5 April

Gurkan Yenice, vice president of the Turkish company Sistem Muhendislik, alleged at a press conference in Bishkek on 4 April that on 25 March a Kyrgyz company illegally took over the Pınara-Bishkek hotel, which rightfully belongs to him, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. According to Yenice, on the night of 25 March, Ruslan Sarymsakov, head of the Ak-Keme company, came to the hotel with 50 supporters and evicted Yenice. Yenice said Sarymsakov asserted that "there is a new regime in the country and the present owners must leave the hotel," Kabar reported. Yenice asserted that his company acquired the hotel legally in a 1999 deal and

said he has all the necessary documents to prove it. For his part, Sarymsakov said decisions by Kyrgyzstan's parliament and Constitutional Court returned the Pinara-Bishkek hotel to him and he was merely reasserting his right to ownership, RFE/RL reported. (RFE/RL)

INGUSHETIAN PARLIAMENT APPEALS TO PRESIDENT PUTIN

5 April

Ingushetia's People's Assembly has written to President Putin and to presidential envoy to the Southern Federal District Dmitrii Kozak to stress the need to formalize Ingushetia's borders with neighboring republics. Parliament Chairman Makhmud Sakalov explained that Ingushetia should have started on 1 March determining the internal borders of local administrative districts, but it is not possible to do so until the republic's external borders have been determined. At issue is an Ingush demand for the return to Ingushetia of Prigorodnyi Raion, which was formerly part of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR until that territorial unit was abolished in the wake of the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia in 1944. Since then, it has formed part of neighboring North Ossetia. The April 1991 Soviet law on the rehabilitation of oppressed peoples called for the restoration of the pre-1944 borders, but Sakalov noted that that law has not been systematically implemented. (kavkazweb.net)

PETROKAZAKHSTAN DIRECTORS FACE MONOPOLY CHARGES

5 April

Rustam Ibraimov, deputy head of Kazakhstan's Agency for Fighting Economic Crimes and Corruption, told a press conference in Astana on 4 April that Thomas Dvorak, a U.S. citizen who is president of PetroKazakhstan, and Clayton Clift, a Canadian citizen who is the company's chief financial officer, face charges of violating Kazakhstan's antimonopoly legislation, "Kazakhstan Today" reported. Ibraimov alleged the company sold oil at inflated prices. For the period from 1 July 2003 to 30 October 2003, the company owes the Kazakh budget more than 13 billion tenge (\$98.4 million). According to Ibraimov, Clift is currently in Kazakhstan and has given written assurances that he will not leave the country; Dvorak is abroad, but will return to Kazakhstan to testify in late April. In a 4 April press release posted to the company's website (<http://www.petrokazakhstan.com/>), PetroKazakhstan stated that the price ceilings it is

alleged to have violated "represent a violation of the company's rights under the privatization agreements relating to the Shymkent refinery." The company said "the initiation of criminal investigations and charges in relation to these issues is an unfortunate and unnecessary escalation in what is essentially a civil dispute." (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ PRESIDENT RESIGNS EFFECTIVE 5 APRIL

5 April

Kyrgyz President Akaev signed an official statement in the Kyrgyz Embassy in Moscow on 4 April resigning the presidency effective 5 April, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Omurbek Tekebaev, speaker of Kyrgyzstan's parliament, accepted Akaev's resignation letter. Akaev also recorded an 18-minute address to the people, Kabar reported. In the address, which will be made public on 5 April, he enumerated his achievements and apologized to the Kyrgyz people, RFE/RL reported. (RFE/RL)

MOSCOW DIDN'T INTERFERE IN KYRGYZ CRISIS - SERGEI IVANOV

5 April

Russia did not interfere in the change of power in Kyrgyzstan, but was ready to evacuate its citizens, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov told reporters on Tuesday. "We did not interfere in the internal political events in Kyrgyzstan. Neither Askar Akayev nor the new Kyrgyz authorities requested our help," he said. "But we could not remain indifferent to the destiny of our citizens in Kyrgyzstan, particularly when riots and marauding erupted in Bishkek," Ivanov said. Four IL-76 military cargo planes were sent to Kant air base near Bishkek for the possible emergency evacuation of Russian citizens from Kyrgyzstan, Ivanov said. (Interfax)

RUSSIA READY TO HELP ORGANIZE GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA MEETING

5 April

Russia is ready to help the UN secretary general's special representative organize meetings between officials of Georgia and the breakaway province of Abkhazia to discuss security issues, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko told journalists on Tuesday. The group of friends of the UN secretary general for Georgia will hold a meeting in Geneva on April 7-8, Yakovenko said. Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valery Loshchinin and representatives of Great Britain, Germany, the United

States and France will attend the event, he said. (Interfax)

RUSSIAN, U.S. BASES IN KYRGYZSTAN DON'T HINDER EACH OTHER- IVANOV
6 April

Russian and U.S. bases in Kyrgyzstan are not hindering each other in the fulfillment of their duties, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said after a Rubezh-2005 training exercise on Wednesday. "Russian and U.S. military bases in Kyrgyzstan are not bothering each other. The American base in Manas was set up to support the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan and the Russian one in Kant to tighten security of the CIS Collective Security Treaty Organization," he said. In answering a question, he said that "Russia is not planning any military presence in Afghanistan." (Interfax)

KYRGYZ POLITICIAN KULOV AGAINST PUTTING AKAYEV ON TRIAL
6 April

Prominent Kyrgyz politician Felix Kulov said he is opposed to pressing charges against the country's ousted President Askar Akayev. "I will do everything in my power to help Askar Akayev avoid going on trial," Kulov said at a Supreme Court session on Wednesday. The Supreme Court is hearing Kulov's appeal against charges previously brought against him by the prosecutor's office. (Interfax)

'NO SURVIVORS' IN US AFGHAN CRASH
6 April

A US Chinook helicopter has crashed in south-eastern Afghanistan killing 16 people, at least four of them American crew, officials have said. The CH-47 helicopter went down in bad weather in the province of Ghazni, a US military statement confirmed. The statement said there appeared to be no survivors, and two remained missing. It was the eighth and worst air crash suffered by US forces in Afghanistan since they toppled the Taliban at the end of 2001. The helicopter was one of two Chinooks flying to the main US base at Bagram, north of Kabul, from a routine mission in southern Afghanistan. The second helicopter arrived safely at Bagram airfield. "Indications are it was bad weather and that there were no survivors," Lt Cindy Moore told the Associated Press. The seven previous accidents claimed 21 lives. The identity of the passengers killed on Wednesday is still unclear. "Eighteen people, including crew members and passengers, were listed on the flight manifest; two remain unaccounted for," a US military statement said. Four US crew were confirmed dead, and Afghan police sources told the Associated Press that the remaining 14 on board were also American. Ghazni governor Assadullah Khalid told Reuters news agency that local officials had recovered two bodies from the crash site. "We recovered two American soldiers' bodies and now American forces are in control of the situation. The chopper was burning when we were there," he said. Helicopters from the Bagram base have been used as part of a US offensive against suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban members in remote areas of the country. (BBC)

