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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

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

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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SAVING AFGHANISTAN: FROM POPPY TO PIPELINE

Teymur Huseyinov and Hasanali Karasar

With the war over and the threat from the Taliban highly minimized, the long dormant Trans-Afghan Pipeline (TAP) project is reviving. The October presidential election was carried out in good order and all forecasts of doom were proven wrong. For the first time ever, Afghanistan has an elected ruler. Although despite the fact that the \$4.4 billion pledged by international donors in Tokyo in 2002 is coming in too slowly, the Karzai government seems resolute on speeding up the process of realizing TAP - as Karzai's latest trip to India and intensive discussions with Turkmen authorities indicate.

BACKGROUND: The story of TAP is one of melancholy. Started in 1991 with the efforts of Bidas Corp., by the mid-1990s it was already a battleground between rival consortiums led by Unocal and Bidas with heavy Saudi involvement on both sides, including elements with ties to Osama bin Laden. The shutting of eyes at the time to the Taliban's crimes was due to the desire of international energy lobbies for a stable regime in Afghanistan. The plan advocated by Carlos Bulgheroni, CEO of Bidas, was simple: to connect Central Asia's energy riches with the Indian subcontinent and international markets, through a pipeline to be built from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, ending in Pakistan. For all of Bulgheroni's strenuous efforts, it was Unocal, owing to the sophistication and skill of its top management and its connection to Saudi partners and Afghan employees - the most prominent among company advisors being Zalmay Khalilzad and Hamid Karzai - that managed to marginalize Bidas from the project as early as 1995. Thus until the U.S. retaliated against the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998, the Taliban, appearing to stand for "stability", enjoyed enormous tacit support from business as well as political circles in the West. Unocal had to withdraw from the project following the events in Kenya and Tanzania.

Following the U.S.-led attack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the wake of September 11, 2001, there has been increasing support for the revival of TAP.

The political will to revive the project was manifested in a January 2003 agreement between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan. More encouraging is the provision by the Asian Development Bank of funds for feasibility studies - the primary stage to be finalized very soon - and pre-project costs. The expected meeting of the steering committee of the ADB this month will be of a strategic importance as regards the project's go-ahead.

IMPLICATIONS: The initial phase of the TAP foresees the construction of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan's Dauletabad-Donmez gas fields to the Pakistani deep-sea port at Gwadar, or via Lahore to Amritsar in India, with provisions for the addition of an oil pipeline in the future, so that construction costs can be contained. Depending on the route, the pipeline will be either 900 or 1100 miles in length, with estimated costs reaching \$3.5 billion. There are two different options for the pipeline route through Afghanistan - either via Herat-Sokhab and Kandahar to Multan and Fazilka, or through Northern Shibirgan-Mazar-i Sherif and Kabul to Peshawar, Lahore and eventually Amritsar. The second alternative has appealed more to the Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen and Hazara peoples of Afghanistan because it passes through their lands. In fact, a pipeline could provide a common interest to the many long-alienated and disparate ethnic groups of Afghanistan. It would bind these Northern groups with Southern Pashtuns in the pursuit of common benefits, contributing to the

integrity and cohesion of Afghan society and thus serving as an indispensable tool for nation-building efforts underway in the country.

The second option would potentially, quite rapidly, facilitate the inclusion of Uzbekistani gas fields that are close to the Afghan border. Moreover, this route, which would enter Pakistan from Kabul, would be advantageous in that it might be extended into the industrialized, northwestern part of India. In such a case, there would be a great impetus for the exploration of the important gas fields already in use in Shibirgan province – facilitated by Soviet engineers years ago – as well as of the oil reserves of Sar-e Pul.

In financial terms, the TAP would contribute annual transit revenues of around \$300 million to the Afghan economy, with even more benefits coming indirectly through job creation and improved infrastructure, with more gas, electricity and heating available to support local industries. The Indian determination to build the trans-Afghan highway and railroads is a positive sign in this regard. More to the point, India is eager for extension of the pipeline into its territories, provided that Pakistani goodwill regarding supply security is guaranteed at the international level. India's decision to join the project would contribute to economic integration and interdependence, creating a golden opportunity to lay the foundations of long-term peace and prosperity in the region.

For Turkmenistan and potentially for the rest of the Central Asian states, having an alternative route to export their energy resources would make them less dependent on the Russian pipeline system. This landlocked mass of the world is still at the mercy of the economic and industrial infrastructures of the former Soviet Union, which leaves them scant room for diplomatic maneuver.

In view of the prominence given to energy security and the diversification of global energy resources in the agenda of the Bush administration in recent years, the TAP could become an important element in the global picture. As an alternative source of fuel, it would provide cheaper products for Western consumers as well as for Far Eastern countries, given that these are

widely thought to be the main drivers of global energy demand in the coming decades.

However, some potentially negative effects of the project need to be mentioned. These chiefly concern Russia and Iran. Russia would be poised to lose most of its cheap gas from Turkmenistan and from other Central Asian states in the medium run. That would force it to explore more of her own gas fields in Siberia and consume the extracted product in the domestic market, instead of selling it abroad at higher prices. Thus it would be advisable for the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom to be strongly encouraged to join the new consortium and to share the benefits of the project. Otherwise, Russia would be likely to exert massive political influence on the Central Asian governments, with inevitable negative consequences for the stability and order of the entire region. It is noteworthy that Ukraine, as a major buyer of Turkmen gas, has already expressed its desire to take part in the construction of the TAP.

Iran, likewise, would be harmed if it were excluded from the post-war Afghan economic recovery. Its own ambitions concerning the transportation of Central Asian oil and gas to the Persian Gulf or the Indian Ocean would be hurt. Speculation as to a pipeline connecting Iran and India either on the seabed or in Pakistani territorial waters has already been made. However, all three proposed projects for the exportation of Iranian gas to India are fraught with similar, if not greater, difficulties as the extension of TAP into industrialized India.

CONCLUSIONS: There is a strong case to be made that the TAP would constitute an important element of a solution to Afghanistan's drug problem, constituting an alternative source of income. Income from opium poppy cultivation, now reaching the equivalent of one third of the country's GDP, is a major concern for the Karzai administration. A major threat to the stability of Afghanistan is the possibility that the central government will fail to share revenues with the regions on an equal basis. This would fuel anti-unitary sentiments in the North and boost demands for federalism. Therefore, successful completion of the project would mark a growing recognition that it is in

the Western world's interest to help Karzai defeat the drug barons and create a prosperous Afghanistan.

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THE REVOLT IN KYRGYZSTAN AND TAJIKISTAN'S POLITICAL SITUATION

Pulat Shozimov

The Presidents of the Central Asian states are all nearing the point of passing on their responsibilities to newly elected successors. Yet the absence of legitimate mechanisms of transferring power are likely to make these processes difficult. Until recently, the issue has been in an impasse. Yet the March revolt in Kyrgyzstan after a flawed parliamentary election showed one possible scenario of radical transformation. As the Kyrgyzstan events reverberate around the region, one salient question is to what extent a similar, radical scenario is possible in Tajikistan, especially on the eve of the 2006 presidential elections?

BACKGROUND: One important implication of the Kyrgyz revolution was that it showed the political strength of the hitherto neglected southern regions of the country. The revolution may bring southern forces to power, and has in any case strengthened the political power of the South. In this sense, the recent Kyrgyz events are reminiscent of the regionalism that characterized Tajikistan civil war in 1992-97. The war led to the exclusion of the previously dominant North from the political leadership and the arrival to power of Southern forces. Aside from this, the perhaps central factor in Kyrgyzstan was the ease with which the opposition forced President Akayev to abstain from taking a fight and in the end to renouncing his position. The question is whether this is indicative of the weakness of legitimacy and real power of all political regimes in Central Asia? Are radical political tools the only instrument that could lead the societies of Central Asia into democratic

development, or could they instead lead them to the destruction of the social order and the appearance of new, dangerous consequences for all countries of the region?

Pundits now consider whether the other republics of Central Asia will be the next to meet new challenges by opposition forces seeking to replicate the Kyrgyz version of a 'rose revolution'. In particular, the revolt in Kyrgyzstan worried the Kazakhstani and Tajikistani elites, considering the fact that presidential elections are scheduled in both countries in 2006.

Tajikistan already underwent a political experiment in 1989-1991, when secular and democratic movements could not control the political situation in the country, allowing religious groups to take the initiative. These factors transformed the peaceful stage of democratic transformation in Tajikistan to

the violence that in turn generated a civil war that killed 50,000 people and turned 100,000 into refugees.

Following the peaceful agreement between the Tajik Government and the United Tajik Opposition in 1997, the Opposition was given control over 30% of the government structures. The main part of the Opposition until today remains connected with the Party of Islamic Renaissance of Tajikistan (IPRT), which transformed its strategic line from confrontation with the Government to peaceful coexistence with it. The unwieldy political dialogue between the opposing sides provided each with great experience of conducting a political dialogue, which included both sides altering their original positions. This happened to a great extent because all participants in the conflict realized that the continuation of civil war could lead to the shattering of the unity of Tajikistan into a series of regional sovereignties.

Tajikistan is the one State in Central Asia where a religious party was legalized. The main dilemma with this political configuration resided in the Constitution of Tajikistan, whose article 8 defines the country as a democracy and a secular state. Simultaneously, the political program of the IPRT proclaims the strategic goal of building an Islamic State. During the process of negotiations, the IPRT agreed to compromise with the Tajik Government by recognizing the secular State. Conversely, the Tajik Government also compromised by changing article 28 of the Constitution, hence allowing the IPRT to participate in the 2000 parliamentary elections.

IMPLICATIONS: Since the civil war, Tajikistan has held parliamentary elections, in February of 2000 and in February of 2005, as well as one presidential election, in 1999.

During the first parliamentary election in 2000, only the IPRT crossed the 5% threshold and with gained two seats in the parliament with 7,31% of the votes. None of the secular democratic parties came over the threshold. Most seat were captured by two pro-government parties, the People's Democracy Party of Tajikistan, which gained 64,9% and 38 seats, and

the Communist Party of Tajikistan, with 20,9% and 5 seats).

In the 2005 parliamentary elections, secular opposition parties such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD) (based on the 'Justice and Development' party, banned in 2000) and the Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) failed to reach the 5% threshold. As in 2000, only the IPRT among the opposition reached the threshold and increased its share to 8,9%, capturing only two seats. The Communist Party of Tajikistan lost heavily, receiving only 13,4% (three seats plus one in the majoritarian system). Most votes were gained by the pro-government PDPT, with 80%.

Three opposition parties, the IPRT, DPT, SDP as well as two pro-government parties refused to recognize the results of the election in Dushanbe because of numerous alleged violations. However, this protest did not endure. After some time, the Communist Party reneged on its decision and agreed to participate in the new Parliament. The IPRT later followed suit.

The IPRT has considerable political experience earned during the civil war and the post-conflict period. Its leaders do not want to take on the responsibility of political activism, and realize that they are not ready to organize peaceful protests. They also understand that secular parties do not have substantial support among the population. Most of their supporters are out Tajikistan (about 15-20% of the working population is estimated to be in Russia). Moreover, Tajikistan is isolated geographically, from the North by Uzbekistan and from the South by Afghanistan. One of the lessons that the IPRT has learnt is that without changes in Uzbekistan, the Tajik Opposition will not see any success. That is why the IPRT, as the main Opposition force, closely monitors and adapts to the situation in Uzbekistan.

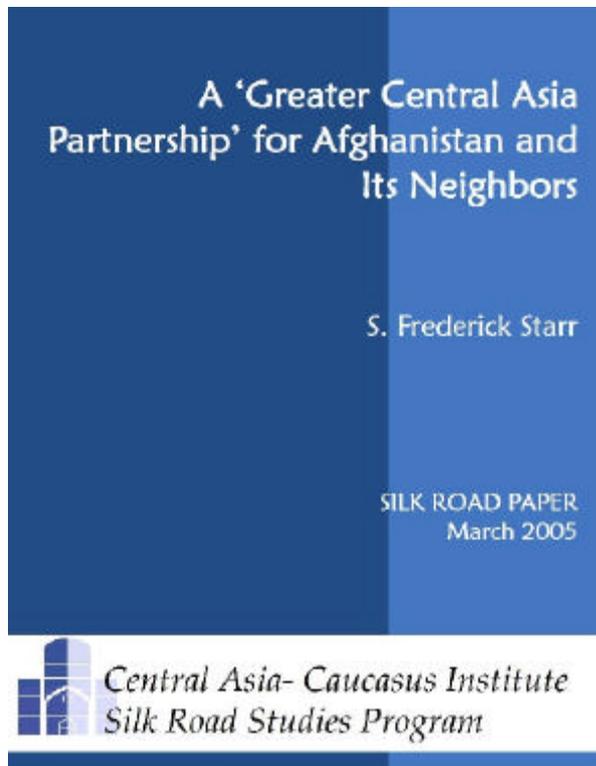
In 2006, Tajikistan will go to the polls to elect a President. After the political events in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmonov will face increasing difficulties in extending his presidency. The Parliament approved changes to the

Constitution which allow Rahmonov to stand for re-election in 2006.

CONCLUSIONS: The time between October and December 2005 will be a very crucial time for Tajikistan. The political situation will be dangerous in the case that President Rahmonov fails to achieve a compromise with the IPRT before the presidential elections. The notion that the Government is in control of the country simply does not stand up to scrutiny, but the President has a significant support among the population which does not want to see renewed civil war. Rahmonov also maintains considerable support among most of traditional and official Islamic circles. Nevertheless, if he would enter into a conflict with the IPRT, he could lose his popularity very quickly. Indeed, one of the reasons for his popularity is the compromise he conducted with the IPRT and the signing of a power-sharing agreement, from which Rahmonov acquired a great deal of symbolic capital as the person who put an

end to the civil war. Another reason is that the IPRT restrains the attacks of pan-Islamic movement operating in the northern Region of Tajikistan, and keep loyalty to the Government's nation-building project based on identification with the Samanid dynasty. In short, the situation in Tajikistan will depend to a great extent on the continuation of dialogue between the Government and the IPRT. This in turn illustrates that no significant political and social changes in Tajikistan will occur in disregard of the religious factor. Moreover, significant political changes in Tajikistan would be possible only following crucial political changes in Uzbekistan.

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HARD TIMES FOR PRESIDENT ALIYEV

Anar Valiyev

The months of February to March 2005 turned out to be both the most difficult and the most decisive time of the one-and-a-half year presidency of Ilham Aliyev. There was the attack on the opposition press by pro-governmental circles, the murdering of the prominent journalist Elmar Huseynov, and the scandal about the involvement of high-ranking police officers in organized crime. All those incidents have affected the position of the president. The opposition used the recent events to accuse the government of being unwilling to make reforms. Meanwhile, struggle within the ruling Azerbaijani elite is perceptible more clearly than ever.

BACKGROUND: During the commemoration of the Khojali massacre in late February, the Azerbaijani public was shocked by a pornographic scandal connected with Ganimat Zahidov, the editor-in-chief of the opposition Azadlig newspaper. On February 25, Zahidov and the Azadlig technical director Azer Ahmedov were both kidnapped and physically abused by a group of unknown people. During the press conference on the next day, Zahidov maintained that the kidnappers were beating him for publishing critical articles about President Aliyev. Afterwards, the kidnappers brought them to a Baku restaurant where they took pictures of the journalists with prostitutes in a secluded room. The pro-governmental mass media immediately took its chance to trumpet the “amorality” of the opposition and its press.

However, the attention abruptly shifted from the scandal to the murder of the editor of the popular journal Monitor, Elmar Huseynov (see the 9 March edition of the Analyst). In fact, Huseynov’s death put the authorities in an inconvenient spot. A continuation of the defamation of the opposition press could be interpreted as an indirect involvement in the murder. The ruling elite tried instead to present Huseynov not only as a critic of the authorities, but also as an opponent of the opposition. The authorities endeavored to prove that the journalist’s death was not in the interest of

the ruling elite and began to investigate the case with excessive alacrity.

Finally, during a special operation on March 10, a criminal group headed by the head of the Criminal Investigation Department, colonel Haci Mammadov, was neutralized. Twelve other members of the group, all high-ranking police officers, were arrested. The investigation showed that the group had been involved in kidnapping nine people, and of killing at least three other police officers who were investigating the kidnapping cases. The scandal was a devastating blow to the reputation and image of both the police and Ramil Usubov, the Minister of Internal Affairs. Despite predictions of Usubov’s resignation, the President did not dismiss him, arguing that the event was “a black spot in the history of the Department of Interior Affairs, but we cannot tarnish the reputation of the entire ministry.”

IMPLICATIONS: No one was surprised that a scandal involving opposition newspapers would emerge preceding the upcoming parliamentary elections. Three months before the 2000 parliamentary elections, the authorities inflated the story about “hijacking” a plane by a member of the Musavat party, thereby detaining the editor of the Yeni Musavat newspaper Rauf Arifoglu, accusing him of helping terrorists. Five years later, the opposition is trying to achieve an agreement with

the government on common rules of behavior during the parliamentary elections. Through the Media, they announced expected concessions from the government, emboldened by the position of the Council of Europe and the U.S.. Instead, the scandal signaled a beginning of attacks on the opposition with the aim of achieving several goals. Aside from discrediting the opposition and intimidating journalists, it served to divert public attention from the upcoming elections. In a society with traditional values, this scandal may very well have achieved some of its goals, as seen in pro-governmental media reports interviewing ordinary citizens infuriated by the amoral behavior of journalists. But the process was abruptly interrupted by the murder of Elmar Huseynov, which seems to have caught the government by surprise.

The struggle within the ruling elite is becoming increasingly visible. As a matter of fact, President Aliyev is trying to conduct reforms, and in the process aims to get rid of a number of cabinet and administration figures. All those whom the President would sacrifice in order to secure reforms will be forced to leave the political arena, and thereby lose both influence and large incomes. As a result, those recalcitrant members of the administration strive to prevent reforms by discrediting the President and his reforms. Indeed, whichever group was behind Huseynov's murder caught the right time. In the midst of the anti-opposition campaign, the murder of journalist who is known for his anti-governmental articles tatters the reputation of Aliyev's government. Even though the ruling elite were the least interested side in murder, the killing electrified the society and gave an impetus for the further unification of opposition forces.

The police scandal flowed logically from this situation. After the murder of the journalist, the President needed to show the public and his opponents in the administration forcefulness and the presence of a program for fighting organized crime. Furthermore, uncovering of the criminal

group had the added value of diverting the attention of the public. A final possible aim was to strike against Ramil Usubov, the staunch henchman of the late President Heydar Aliyev. In so doing, Ilham Aliyev may have sought to show that he will not hesitate to decapitate the most loyal people of his administration. Rumors of Usubov's upcoming dismissal seem quite possible in this regard.

Finally, the President's attempt to regain the initiative was illustrated by an amnesty announced to practically all political prisoners. On March 20, 2005 the President pardoned all opposition members who were imprisoned for the coup attempt following the October 2003 election, thus eliminating pressure from the Council of Europe.

CONCLUSIONS: The recent scandals and violence may unfortunately not be the last. The closer Azerbaijan will move toward the parliamentary elections, the higher the chances that more sordid details will be revealed. In this struggle, an unholy alliance of odious members of the presidential administration with opposition figures should not be ruled out. Under pressure from the international community and with the looming specter of rose, orange, and tulip revolutions, the Azerbaijani government is faced with the imperative to enforce fair and transparent elections. But given an invigorated opposition and the recalcitrance of the "old guard", the position of President Aliyev is anything else than strong. Walking a fine line, any mistake on the President's part will be used by both the opposition and opposing groups within his administration to weaken him and his leadership. The only option for the President is to forcefully take the initiative to implement changes in society. Any further postponing of the issues of reforms is now a danger to the President's position.

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ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT ROUTES BEGIN TO EMERGE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Inomjon Bobokulov

The core issues of regional political and economic processes determine the perspectives of Central Asian integration. These include the effective management of regional water resources, the creation of a regional security system, the legal regulation of boundary issues, among other. And the establishment and development of alternative regional transport routes, in the line of these issues, is a path to stimulating economic growth, achieving political stability, and reinforcing sovereignty. A number of transportation project to connect Central Asia to its southern and eastern neighbors are gathering increasing momentum.

BACKGROUND: Central Asia is considered to be the heart of Eurasia, serving as the linking point between East and West as well as between North and South. It is a gateway to Europe for China, South and South East Asia, and it is pivotal in the relationships between Russia and the Southern Asian countries. The region is served by an extensive national rail and road system, but it has no direct access to the sea or to the world's transport networks.

Central Asia is a landlocked region and Uzbekistan, the region's most populated (and densely populated) country, is one of only two double land-locked countries in the world (the other is Liechtenstein). The region is located at a great distance from any major markets, and seaports. The U.S. is approximately 12,000 km away; Europe is 6,000 km distant; and to the South, the nearest naval communication system is 2,000 km away. The geographical remoteness from the main seaports is a serious disadvantage and impediment to the region's fully-fledged participation in globalization, diminishing capabilities and limiting the de-facto sovereignty of regional countries. According to Uzbekistani officials, often the expenses for the transportation of the imported goods exceed the original prices by up to 60 percent. These factors make the export of some goods economically unprofitable and the import of vital goods burdensome. In this light, the development of

alternative regional transportation networks is considered a cornerstone of the national and regional strategies in Central Asia.

IMPLICATIONS. The Newly Independent States of Central Asia share a common post-Soviet system of transport communications, including roads (rail and highway), as well as oil and gas pipelines. They inherited a well-developed road and pipeline network, but it was one-sided and ill-suited to the needs of free and internationalized markets. It makes all regional countries completely dependent upon the "northern corridor".

Central Asia is at the crossroads. In order to benefit from its strategic position, and to reinforce sovereignty economically and politically, regional countries are developing the existing system of transport communications towards eastern and southern directions and unify it with the transport systems of neighboring countries, first of all, of China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

An example of the Central Asian countries' joint efforts is the construction of the 302-km Tedjen-Serahs-Meshed rail link between Turkmenistan and Iran, opened in May 1996. According to experts, this route cuts travel time to Europe from Central Asia by four hours (from the Transsiberian's 14,000 km to 9,500 km).

Within the framework of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China project, highways and railroads will be built through Andijan (Uzbekistan) and Osh (Kyrgyzstan) to Kashgar (China). The existing Kazakhstan-China rail link through "Druzhba" started to operate in 1992. It brought a significant growth of regional countries' trade relations with China, and today this link is becoming a gateway for oil and gas pipelines. At present, a 962 km Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline is under construction. Its completion is planned to the end of 2005, providing this Central Asian country with the capacity to reach a production of up to 100 million tons of oil a year, and to extend its potential oil customers to Southeast Asia.

Positive changes in Afghanistan provide new opportunities for regional cooperation in this field. In the last summit of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in October 2004, Afghanistan obtained an observer status within the organization. Needless to say, improving and connecting Afghanistan's roads with the Central Asian transport system would be a significant contribution by regional countries to the international community as well to the process of economic recovery and political stability in this country.

The realization of this goal is vested in the agreement "On the creation of the International Trans-Afghan corridor" signed by Uzbekistan, Iran and Afghanistan in June 2003. The agreement implies the construction of a 2,400 km road (possibly with a rail network in the future) through Termez-Mazar-e Sharif-Herat to the Iranian seaports of Bandar-Abbas and Chabahar. This route allows Central Asian countries to reach the Persian Gulf, and increase the level of interaction of Central Asian roads, and China as well (through the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-China project) with the Middle East, Europe, and Southwest Asia. It is important to note that at present, about 50% of Uzbekistan's cotton is exported via the Persian Gulf.

Work is well under way to improve transport corridors that will connect Central Asia with South Asia through Afghanistan. This will provide crucial access to the Arabian Sea. The transport corridor

Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan is rather important not only for Uzbekistan, but also for other Central Asian countries. This would allow Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to trade through the Arabian Sea on the doors of South and Southwest Asia and the Middle East with distances reduced by approximately 1200-1400 km.

Another prospective transport project is the Murghab-Kulma road, which will connect Tajikistan with the Karakorum highway in China, and will allow the country, and region to have an alternative transport corridor, connecting them with China, Pakistan, and India. The strategic importance of this road is that alongside with the Afghan direction, it will allow the Central Asian states direct access to the Pakistani ports of Karachi and Gwadar, which are significantly closer in distance than the Baltic and Persian Gulf ports. But the most important fact is that the opening of these corridors would decline the one-sided northern monopoly on trade, and lead to positive changes in the geostrategic and geoeconomic situation in Central Asia.

CONCLUSION: The lack of an effective transport network with the outside world is one of the fundamental barriers for regional cooperation and for the integration of Central Asia into the world economy. A well-developed regional transportation system is the base of the region's future prosperity, and a unique opportunity to developing international transport networks and trade relations for countries stretching from Europe to Asia. It is a facilitator for foreign investment, increasing the interests of external powers, such as the EU, China, Japan, Iran, Pakistan, and India in the region. An effectively united transport system in the heart of Eurasia is an essential element of regional stability and security. It will also provide positive momentum for India and Pakistan to improve their bilateral relationship. Thus an interconnected regional transport network is an advantage not only for Central Asia, but also for international community in general.

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FIELD REPORTS

VERBAL ATTACKS ON U.S. AMBASSADOR HIGHLIGHT PRE-ELECTION TENSIONS IN AZERBAIJAN

Anar Kerimov

Last week, several pro-governmental deputies launched verbal attacks on U.S. ambassador in Azerbaijan Reno Harnish, accusing him of "plotting a velvet revolution." The Ambassador's visits to the provinces of the country and his meetings with opposition parties behind closed doors were the cause of these accusations.

"Ambassador Harnish is overstepping his responsibilities and interfering into Azerbaijan's domestic affairs," said Member of Parliament Zahid Oruj, member of the pro-governmental Ana Veten (Motherland) party. Others, such as Musa Musayev, have called on the ambassador to explain why he was meeting with the opposition and not the ruling party. The Parliament session coincided with the visit of the opposition Musavat Party's leader Isa Gambar to the United States.

The political offensive against the U.S. diplomat shows the growing tensions in the country prior the November parliamentary elections. The ruling party YAP is worryingly watching the events in the post-Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Georgia and seems increasingly concerned about a possible similar scenario in Azerbaijan. The speaker of parliament, Murtuz Aleskerov, warned that "Azerbaijani authorities would never allow a velvet revolution to take place in the country." The deputy speaker Ziyafet Askerov added, "Let no one think about other places," obviously referring to the recent events in Kyrgyzstan.

The opposition parties, meanwhile, have stepped up their preparation for the crucial elections. The

recent release of seven opposition leaders from prison by President Ilham Aliyev's amnesty added fuel to the fire. The major opposition parties – Democratic, Popular Front and Musavat – have started working on a list of unified candidates for all 124 constituencies in the country. Other opposition politicians, such as the leader of the Liberal Party Lala Shovkat Hajiyeva, leader of the National Independence Party Etibar Mamedov, and independent politicians Ali Masimov, Eldar Namazov have formed their own coalition to contest the race for Parliament.

While the opposition is dreaming of a velvet revolution and the authorities intensify their efforts to prevent it, many analysts believe that much will depend on the position of the international community. In the upcoming elections, the conditions are different than in the 2003 Presidential election, and one can already see the growing pressure on Baku from the international community to hold free and fair elections. This message was conveyed to the Azerbaijani authorities by the U.S. ambassador to the OSCE as well as the European Union and Reporters without Borders. The Council of Europe, meanwhile, has been working with Azerbaijani authorities to make changes to the election law as well as ensure the start of the Public TV.

The U.S. ambassador himself has refuted all accusations that he was plotting a velvet revolution in the country: "The US government does not believe in revolutions nor does it plan one in Azerbaijan." Yet, Harnish did not stop short from

lobbying for free and fair elections. Specifically, he focused on the issue of freedom of assembly. "I think it would be fair to say that the position of the U.S. government is that the freedom of assembly in Azerbaijan should be observed," he said. After the violence that took place during the presidential elections in October 2003, public rallies have been prohibited in the country. The opposition claims that it hurts democracy and prevents them from meeting their voters. It seems, however, that the Azerbaijani authorities have softened up on this issue. "Opposition demonstrations will be allowed

during the election campaign period," said Ali Hasanov, the head of President's Office's political department in a recent interview to ANS TV. "But the opposition must also give assurances that the demonstrations will be peaceful."

Whether the tensions between the ruling and opposition parties will end up in another crackdown by the authorities or a velvet revolution is a matter of time. But one active opposition member, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that, "The strength of the opposition parties is not as high as it was in 2003."

AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IN KAZAKHSTAN GAINS "DEMOCRATIC" LAURELS AS OPPOSITION LOSES GROUND

Marat Yermukanov

After last year's September 19 parliamentary elections, the opposition in Kazakhstan suffered serious setbacks, and the political image of leading pro-democratic forces such as the Ak Zhol party has dramatically plummeted. Regime change in Kyrgyzstan, which assumed the most appalling forms and culminated in mass looting and chaos, deprived the opposition movement in Kazakhstan of much of its public appeal. Democratic forces in Kazakhstan are taking desperate steps to form a united opposition block. But what has been achieved so far is a far cry from unity.

About a month ago, a group of opposition activists made public their intention to establish a new "Alga, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan!" ("Forward, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan!") party. As the name suggests, the new political organization was conceived as the successor of the once-popular Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) party banned on January 6 this year by an Almaty specialized economic court on charges of calling people to overthrow the present regime during a rally. The founders of the party who signed

a statement declaring in broad terms the protection of civic rights of all citizens of Kazakhstan as the main objective pursued by the new political organization did not specify whether the renewed party has something different from the old Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan's political line in its program, or if it is just a name-change.

The handful of activists who signed the statement included the former chairman of Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan Asylbek Kozhakmetov, severely criticized by renegade DCK members for his proclivity to rule the party with an iron hand, theater director Bolat Atabayev, and the editor of the DCK party paper "Azat" Batyrkhan Darimbet. But most other party members who signed the statement are little known or totally unknown to the wider public. This raises strong doubts about the capability of the newly-baked party to muster popular support to materialize the stated aims of "fighting corruption, lawlessness and social injustice. The statement points out that "Alga, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan!" strives to build a new state which would bear social responsibility

to place natural resources at the disposal of the entire people, and not a handful of wealthy.

The attempt to resurrect the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party under a new name may seem a proof of the vitality of the opposition movement which suffered crushing blows in the past several months following the split within the major opposition forces, the Ak Zhol Democratic party and the Communist Party of Kazakhstan. Analysts, however, note that opposition forces are losing ground after the last year's September 19 parliamentary elections which marked the heyday of the democratic movement in Kazakhstan. In the pre-election campaign, Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and Ak Zhol Democratic party showed a willingness to join forces signing a declaration about concerted pre-election tactics.

But in fact, the opposition did not represent a unified force. Opposition candidates Batyrkhan Darimbet (DCK) and Oraz Zhandosov (Ak Zhol party) failed to get seats in parliament. The opposition blamed this on election authorities, but outside observers ascribed this failure to deepening internal strife in the opposition block. Akezhan Kazhegeldin, the exiled former prime minister of Kazakhstan, said that the weakness of the opposition lies in its inability to unite and to overcome internal disputes.

The split in the Ak Zhol party, long hushed up by party leaders and disclosed at the last party Congress convened on March 13 by co-chairmen of the party Alikhan Baymenov and Ludmila Zhulanova, who lashed out at other leaders such as Altynbek Sarsenbayev, Oraz Zhandosov and Bolat Abilov accusing them of deviating from the party charter, buried the last hopes for a united action. Nevertheless, after a long horse-trading at the Coordinating Committee of Democratic Forces, the opposition nominated a single candidate for presidency, Zharmakan Tuyakbay, former deputy

chairman of the pro-presidential Otan party. Another notable move from the opposition was the drafting of a new proposed Constitution which, in essence, envisages the establishment of parliamentary rule in Kazakhstan, while the National Commission on Problems of Democratization, created to support the existing regime, claims that only a strong presidential power can bring about democratic changes.

Not long ago presidential advisor Yermukhamet Yertysbayev confidently declared that in Kazakhstan the opposition is not likely to succeed in winning people for a Kyrgyz-style "revolution". His main arguments are that the well-off middle class, affluent property owners who dislike any idea of upheavals, form the pillar of the Kazakh society. Yertysbayev seems to be convinced that regime change, "which is inevitable", and power struggle between the ruling elite and the opposition will pass off peacefully, within the legal framework. Well-known political scientist Yerlan Karin holds the same view.

The greatest pitfall for the democratic movement in Kazakhstan is the ethnic division which loomed large at the Congress of the "For Fair Kazakhstan" block of democratic forces held on March 20. Activists of the Kazakh national-patriotic movement protested that Congress delegates ignored economic and political interests of Kazakhs and issued a statement announcing the creation of a National Front of Kazakhstan. The pro-presidential AIST parliamentary faction and pseudo-communists headed by Vyacheslav Kosarev loyal to the regime retaliated promptly by setting up a National-Democratic Front as a counterweight. The slogan of democracy is the magic sword both for opposition and the regime. But so far it is effectively being used only by the latter.

AFGHANISTAN'S FLEDGING PRIVATE SECTOR ASKS FOR SUPPORT

Daan van der Schriek

Private business in Afghanistan is pressing for financial support, saying it could do a better job than the many non-governmental organizations in the country that up till now handled most of the money flowing into Afghanistan. It can count on government support for its attempt. However, at the moment there is very little going on in the private sector outside construction. But an olive oil enterprise near Jalalabad offers a cheerful exception.

The private sector in Afghanistan feels unhappy and unfairly treated, considering the huge amount of money that flowed into the country since the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001. It believes far too little of this money ended up with them.

"It is the consensus among the private sector that with something in the order of \$10 billion of non-military expenditures over the last three years, the impact on the Afghan economy has been less than it should be," the Afghanistan International Chamber of Commerce (AICC) said in an April 3 press release. In private, AICC officials say NGOs squandered or even "stole" the money.

In its press release, the Chamber acknowledged that, at first, "the private sector lacked the capacity and the transparency to absorb these large amounts [of money]" but "the reality is that the donor nations... did not have a proactive policy of support for the private sector."

The AICC wants this to change and seeks more attention for the private sector – so that Afghanistan can develop further on its own when aid money will stop coming, says AICC chairman Hafizi Azarakhs.

It was no surprise the Chamber came with its plea on April 3, because the next day a major donor conference, the Afghanistan Development Forum, started in Kabul. Here, it got the support of the Afghan government. President Hamid Karzai also accused NGOs of squandering the aid money given

to Afghanistan – which the NGOs understandably denied.

The country's budget is financed for over 90 percent by foreign donors, who therefore have the last say over how the money is spent. And fearing government corruption and incompetence, much has been handled through the NGO community. This not only didn't encourage the private sector to grow; NGOs also don't pay taxes and other duties and are therefore of little help to boost the government's income. And their favorable status has led many enterprising Afghans to set themselves up as NGO to profit from its tax-exempt status – while doing business as a private company. This is another of the grudges of bona fide enterprises against NGOs.

The UK and the World Bank in the end supported Karzai's plea that the private sector deserves more support. However, apart from growing poppies, there is little going on in the Afghan private sector outside construction. Hardly a factory has survived 25 years of war unscathed.

But still, there is one exception at least. With Italian support, one promising enterprise – an olive farm with a factory producing olive oil – is being re-developed near Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. In the 1960s, the Soviets built the farm with 20,000 hectares of irrigated land. All produce up till 1989 went to the Soviet Union, says Giuliano Masini who oversees the refurbishing project. Then, the farm was abandoned. But in 2003 the factory – still owned by the Afghan ministry of agriculture – was restored with Italian help. Since then, attention has shifted to recover the plantation, of which 300 hectares are used for production again.

A total 135 people are currently employed at the plant; 300 people are permanently working on the plantation (there are also seasonal laborers). This year, a first five tons of olive oil "made in

Afghanistan” were produced by the restored factory. They had the oil tested in Italy where it was pronounced “top quality,” says Masini. And the olive oil was a success: it was quickly sold out in the shops of Kabul.

When the whole plantation is fit again for production, hundreds of tons of olive oil can be produced. The plan, says Masini, is “to go East” with the production. Instead of trying to break into

the over-saturated European market, he wants to concentrate on Pakistan and India.

And since the Jalalabad enterprise has the only olive oil factory and the biggest plantation in this whole region, Masini believes it has a bright future. Here, then, is a sustainable enterprise that could help Afghanistan stand on its own feet when the aid money dries up.

CONFERENCE HELD ON THE “REVOLUTION” IN KYRGYZSTAN

Dariya Alieva

Entitled “Kyrgyzstan’s Spring of Discontent: Causes, Parallels, Implications,” a round-table discussion of a panel of academicians, journalists, political analysts and NGO representatives took place at the American University – Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek on March 31. The conference with an audience of roughly 150 people took place in a comparative and analytical atmosphere defining the issue, looking at the causes of upheavals, and possible future scenarios for Kyrgyzstan.

The massive demonstrations first in the southern cities of Osh, Jalalabad and then the March 24 overthrow of Mr. Akaev’s 14-year rule took place quickly and was largely unexpected. The looting of almost all the major foreign and local supermarkets and stores in the night of the same day in Bishkek, with an estimated damage of US\$100 mln, left the city in a difficult condition and the Bishkek residents bewildered. Reflecting upon this, the forum started with looking at major factors determining the overthrow of the former Kyrgyz government.

While analyzing the causes that contributed to such an unexpectedly swift change, panelist Elnura Osmonalieva from Allavida, an international development organization in Bishkek pointed at

three major factors: longstanding poverty, oppression and corruption in the country. Based on her first hand experience as a journalist and election observer in southern Kyrgyzstan where the demonstrations initially started, Ms. Osmonalieva assured the audience that the last parliamentary elections of February 27 were fraught with numerous violations. It is already proven that the former Akaev administration used armed force against peaceful demonstrators in Jalalabad. This, she said, along with the three aforementioned factors raised major discontent among the population and added up to the restive situation in the country. AUCA professor of psychology Aaron Brudny explained the violent overthrow of the government as an “outburst of energy” among people that had been long depressed by the authorities. In addition to this, revolution as such or whether to call it a revolution or not was a topic of further discussion in the auditorium.

Kumar Bekbolotov, a representative from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Bishkek, completely rejected the idea of calling the events as a revolution. “Simple replacement of government officials does not mean a revolution, there are no revolutionary changes yet” said

Bekbolotov. He further emphasized that it is neither a revolution nor a coup d'etat but rather a simple takeover. Since the demonstrations and march to Bishkek were sparked in the south of Kyrgyzstan, some people among the attendees of the forum even raised the issue of whether it is a seizure of power by the south – the longstanding South-North gap in Kyrgyzstan.

Comparing the so called “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan with velvet revolution in Georgia and orange revolution in Ukraine and discussing the possible domino effects in other Central Asian countries constituted another major topic of debate during the forum. Comparing the revolutions in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, Edil Baisalov, chief of Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, noted that the scenario of the revolution was different in these two countries and that the revolution in Kyrgyzstan was not going to be over yet. In Mr. Baisalov’s opinion, the revolution could have been easily prevented if Mr. Akaev’s so-called “vaccine” against any type of revolution had worked. Mr. Baisalov vehemently argued that this vaccine consisted of organized looting by pro-Akaev groups that night, blaming the peaceful demonstrators the next morning for all the damages incurred. But Mr. Akaev’s plan of preventing the revolution failed. Tim Epkenhans, Director of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, noted that corruption and rigged elections identical to those in Kyrgyzstan could cause a change of power in other Central Asian countries too. Mr. Epkenhans argued that conflict potential is particularly high in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan,

and that events would not necessarily consist of a spillover effect of the takeover in Kyrgyzstan but rather erupt as a result of dire living conditions.

Talking about the possible future scenarios for Kyrgyzstan, John Heathershaw, a Ph.D. candidate at London School of Economics and Political Science specializing on peace building in Tajikistan argued that three factors could exacerbate the situation: continuance of uprising against the interim government (no formal recognition of interim government yet), worsening of the socio-economic situation (e.g. high inflation) and competing mass demonstrations, which in turn could be used by regional groups struggling for power to mobilize the public in their favors. As a result, this might end up leading to an identity conflict as well.

Overall, this conference provided a common space for academics, journalists and students to come together and analyze critically the events that have shaken Kyrgyzstan lately. All in all, the panelists presented different views on the defining issue of the revolution, determining the causes and predicting the consequences, but one factor united them all – optimism about a future liberal and democratic Kyrgyzstan. But this optimism remains to be matched by fact, given almost daily minor-scale demonstration in front of the White House and the Kyrgyz parliament Jogorku Kenesh, as well as land squatters on the outskirts of Bishkek.

NEWS DIGEST

KYRGYZ MPs HEAR AKAYEV FAREWELL

7 April

Mr Akayev's address was shown on national TV. Kyrgyzstan's parliament has heard a taped resignation speech by ousted President Askar Akayev. Mr Akayev said he had intended to step down after October elections anyway, and that his last order as Kyrgyzstan's leader for 15 years was "not to shoot". But MPs have yet to accept his resignation, amid a row over the rights and privileges he would retain. "Dear Deputies! I officially declare today that I resigned ahead of time from the post of president of Kyrgyzstan," he said in the address. Mr Akayev went on to call for fair polls, stressed that relations with Russia should remain a priority, and warned against using "outside forces" to settle Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs. He said that he had prevented a civil war by ordering the country's armed forces not to open fire, as protesters stormed Mr Akayev's offices two weeks ago. "I am convinced that in the future the Akayev period will be recognised as a bright period in Kyrgyz history. I did all that I could, but let whoever comes next do more." At the end of the 18-minute address, Mr Akayev was shown standing next to the Kyrgyz flag, holding up the resignation agreement he signed for Kyrgyz lawmakers visiting Moscow on Monday. Kyrgyzstan's new interim leaders had wanted Mr Akayev to formally resign so that fresh presidential elections could be held to decide his successor. But parliament has yet to decide on whether to accept his resignation. Some lawmakers say Mr Akayev should be impeached, or even put on trial for having fled the country at such a critical moment. If he were allowed to resign, he would retain the parliamentary immunity and certain privileges granted to heads of state. (BBC)

KAZAKHSTAN TIGHTENS ELECTORAL LEGISLATION

8 April

The Kazakh parliament passed constitutional amendments in the second reading on Friday to toughen the country's electoral legislation. The bill will now be submitted to the president for signing. The amendments ban candidates or political parties running in the elections from organizing any rallies, marches or demonstration during the period between the end of the canvassing campaign and the official

publication of the election results. In addition, the document introduces the same date for the start of all candidates' canvassing campaigns. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

KYRGYZ PARLIAMENT STRIPS AKAYEV OF CERTAIN GUARANTEES

8 April

The Kyrgyz parliament on Friday deprived President Askar Akayev of some guarantees that were promised to him after his negotiations with Kyrgyz parliamentarians in Moscow on Monday. In particular, guarantees of personal immunity will now apply only to Akayev himself, but not to his family members. In addition, parliament has deprived the president of the chance to be actively involved in the nation's public and political affairs. The amendments will take effect only after they are signed into law by acting President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. (Interfax)

OUSTED KYRGYZ PRESIDENT SEES NO QUICK RETURN HOME

11 April

Askar Akaev told RIA-Novosti in an interview on 11 April that his return to Kyrgyzstan is "impossible" as long as the current leadership is in power. The ousted president, who is currently in Russia, said, "They have done everything to create an atmosphere that militates against my return to the homeland." Akaev said that it would be possible for him to return only after a new presidential election, scheduled for 10 July. He said, "I will probably be able to return only after presidential elections, depending on the situation and the authorities -- whether they respect the laws, human rights, or whether they base everything on violent actions." (RIA-Novosti)

LAND SEIZURES PLAGUE KYRGYZ CAPITAL

11 April

A rash of illegal land seizures has hit the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, with 3,000-5,000 people marking off plots of land in the city's outskirts to build homes, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported on 10 April. The squatters have ignored local authorities' demands to give back the land, which city planners had intended for other uses. With many who are seizing plots hailing from Kyrgyzstan's south, and Bishkek

residents' ire rising, the standoff has raised fears of regional strife. On 9 April, the Bishkek City Council asked acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev to intervene in the situation, since local authorities have been unable to resolve the conflict. On 10 April, protestors held a demonstration in the center of Bishkek, accusing the central authorities of encouraging the land seizures through their inaction, RFE/RL reported. Acting President Bakiev addressed the demonstrators, promising to resolve the issue within days, although his promises failed to appease protestors. (RFE/RL)

ORGANIZER OF KYRGYZ SELF-DEFENSE GROUPS MURDERED

11 April

Usen Kudaibergenov, a well-known Kyrgyz stuntman, was murdered in Bishkek on the night of 10 April. Kudaibergenov, who helped to organize citizens' defense groups to prevent looting on 24-25 March, was shot to death by gunmen in his apartment. Kudaibergenov had also made efforts in recent days to put an end to a spate of land seizures in Bishkek. At a news conference in Bishkek on 11 April, the leadership of a recently formed civil-defense group called on acting President Bakiev and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to take control of the investigation of what they termed a political killing. (akipress.org)

TURKMEN, IRANIAN LEADERS OPEN DAM

12 April

Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami attended the official opening of the Friendship Dam on the border between the two countries on 12 April. Constructed at a cost of \$168 million with investments by both countries, the complex consists of a dam and reservoir. President Niyazov called the complex a symbol of Iranian-Turkmen cooperation and raised the prospect of future joint energy projects on the Caspian shelf and of Turkmen electricity exports to Iran. In a meeting with the Turkmen president the same day, President Khatami also praised the dam as a sign of close relations. (IRNA)

TURKMENS, AFGHANS, PAKISTANIS IN GAS PIPELINE TALKS

12 April

Pakistani, Turkmen and Afghan ministers met on Tuesday to discuss a multi-billion gas pipeline, in particular, the size of Turkmen gas reserves and security in volatile Afghanistan. The long-delayed project envisages a \$3.3 billion pipeline running 1,000 miles through Afghanistan to Pakistan, providing

Kabul with transit revenue and Pakistan with much needed energy. Among reasons for the delay have been worry about security in Afghanistan and questions over the size of the reserves in Turkmenistan's Dauletabad gas field. Pakistani Petroleum Minister Amanullah Khan Jadoon said progress was being made. "The Afghan minister has given quite some surety and it appears to us too, that there is a lot of improvement in the situation over there," Jadoon told reporters after the ministers met in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. "They are clearing the land mines and, as the minister said, it would improve considerably," he said. According to Turkmen estimates Dauletabad has reserves of 1.7 trillion cubic meters, making it the world's fourth largest gas field, but Pakistan wants to be sure about that. Energy-rich Turkmenistan, bordering Afghanistan and Iran, had long sought to free itself of its dependence on Russia's Soviet-era gas pipeline network. Proposals to build a pipeline through Afghanistan were discussed in the 1990s when the Taliban ruled the country. (Reuters)

EUROPEAN COURT FINDS GEORGIA GUILTY OF VIOLATING HUMAN RIGHTS OF EXTRADITED CHECHENS

12 April

The European Court of Human Rights issued a ruling on 12 April finding Georgia guilty of violating the human rights of a group of 13 armed Chechens arrested near the Georgian-Russian border in August 2002. The ruling held that the Georgian authorities denied five of the Chechens the right to appeal the Georgian decision to extradite them to Russia and imposed a fine of 80,500 euros (\$103,630) against the Georgian government. The Strasbourg-based court also found the Russian authorities guilty of human rights violations and imposed a lesser fine for their treatment of the Chechens. Georgia extradited five of the Chechens to Russia despite a protest by the European Court of Human Rights at the time. The Georgian authorities subsequently freed the other Chechens, although two were later arrested by Russian security forces. (Caucasus Press)

RUSSIAN, TAJIK FORCES SEIZE 1,500 KILOGRAMS OF DRUGS ON TAJIK-AFGHAN BORDER

13 April

Avaz Yuldoshev, a spokesman for Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency, announced at a news conference in Dushanbe on 13 April that Russian and Tajik forces have confiscated 1,500 kilograms of narcotics in 2005. He said that heroin accounted for two thirds of the

drug seizures. Yuldoshev stressed that drug production in Afghanistan continues to increase, adding that 50 laboratories for processing opium into heroin are constantly functioning in Afghanistan near the Tajik border. Yuldoshev also pointed to cooperation with law-enforcement authorities in Afghanistan, noting that one joint operation with Afghan police led to the seizure of 80 kilograms of heroin. (ITAR-TASS)

KYRGYZ POLL SHOWS KULOV LEADER FOR PRESIDENCY

13 April

A poll conducted among Bishkek resident's shows that Feliks Kulov, leader of the Ar-Namys Party, is the leading contender in upcoming presidential elections, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Conducted among 630 Bishkek residents on 5-7 April by Sotsinformbyuro with the help of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the poll asked respondents whom they would vote for if elections were held on the nearest Sunday. Kulov garnered the support of 52.2 percent of those polled, with acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev running a distant second with 18.3 percent. Other candidates polled less than 5 percent. (RFE/RL)

MILITARY OFFICIALS SAYS CHECHENS WILL BE DRAFTED THIS SPRING

14 April

The Defense Ministry plans to draft about 150 young men from the Republic of Chechnya in this spring's call-up. Colonel Yevgenii Maksimov, head of the North Caucasus Military District's mobilization directorate, told the news agency that Chechen conscripts will serve in the republic. "They will be sent to infantry units, mostly to guard facilities, military commandants' offices in particular." Maksimov said. Earlier this month, Chechen Military Commissar Major General Saidselim Tsuev said that no Chechen citizens would be drafted this year. There has been a two-year draft hiatus in the war-torn republic. (RIA-Novosti)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT WARNS OF 'FOREIGN CONSPIRACY'

14 April

Meeting on 14 April with the staff of the Georgian Prosecutor-General's Office, Mikheil Saakashvili claimed that unnamed circles abroad are planning to destabilize Georgia and thereby demonstrate to the international community that it is a failed state. Saakashvili said those unnamed persons plan to transfer to Georgia huge sums of money to be paid to Georgian politicians they hope to co-opt. Saakashvili

also commented that some of his former comrades in arms who "fought on the barricades" now erroneously consider themselves immune to prosecution, and he warned that they will nonetheless be brought to account for unspecified crimes. Saakashvili praised the performance of both the Prosecutor-General's Office and the Interior Ministry. (Caucasus Press)

GEORGIAN INTERIOR MINISTER ANNOUNCES BAN ON DEMONSTRATIONS DURING VISIT OF U.S. PRESIDENT

14 April

Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili announced on 14 April that all demonstrations and public rallies are to be banned during next month's visit by U.S. President George Bush. The interior minister made the announcement after learning of plans by opposition Labor Party leader Shalva Natelashvili to stage a demonstration in front of the Georgian parliament to coincide with the Bush visit to Tbilisi on 10 May. The Labor Party leader has been increasingly active in confronting President Mikheil Saakashvili in recent weeks and has openly challenged the Georgian president to a televised debate. (Caucasus Press)

DAUGHTER OF OUSTED PRESIDENT RETURNS TO KYRGYZSTAN

15 April

Bermet Akaeva, the daughter of ousted President Askar Akaev, made a surprise appearance at a session of Kyrgyzstan's parliament in Bishkek on 14 April, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. She said that she had arrived to occupy the seat she won in recent parliamentary elections but agreed to leave after Speaker Omurbek Tekebaev convinced her that it would be best to wait until the Central Election Commission rules on alleged voting irregularities in her election. Akaeva said that she returned to Kyrgyzstan from Moscow, where her family fled after 24 March, because she is concerned at the situation in the country, akipress.org reported. She added that her brother, who also won a seat in parliament in recent elections, plans to return as well, although she did not provide a date. The NGO Coalition For Democracy and Civil Society condemned Akaeva's return as a "provocation" and an attempt to destabilize the country. But acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev stressed that his government had not tried to block Akaeva's return, adding that he also saw no obstacles to the return of her husband, who holds significant business interests in Kyrgyzstan. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ PRESIDENT SUPPORTS KAZAKH LEADER'S UNION PROPOSAL

16 April

At a meeting with Kazakh Ambassador Umirzak Uzbekov in Bishkek on 16 April, acting Kyrgyz President Bakiev said that he supports Kazakh President Nazarbaev's plan to create a union of Central Asian states. "We fully support this idea. The idea has been around for quite a while now and I think that such a union would only promote economic rapprochement, first and foremost, and of course political union." Nazarbaev proposed the idea in an address to the nation on 18 February. (RFE/RL)

COUNCIL OF EUROPE HEAD DISCUSSES GEORGIAN CONFLICTS

16 April

Council of Europe Secretary-General Terry Davis met in Tbilisi on 15 April with Georgian Minister for Conflict Resolution Giorgi Khaindrava to discuss the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Speaking at a press conference on 16 April, Davis recommended that Georgia bear in mind the "positive role" played by Russia during the standoff last year between the central Georgian government and Adjara, and its peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He noted that both Russia and Georgia face separatist conflicts, and reaffirmed his support for the territorial integrity of both countries. Davis appealed to Georgians living and working illegally in Europe to return home as "their country needs them." He also downplayed criticisms of unnamed Georgian government ministers expressed by NGO representatives with whom he met during his visit. (Caucasus Press)

AZERBAIJANI JOURNALISTS OUTRAGED BY CHOICE OF PUBLIC BROADCASTER DIRECTOR

16 April

Independent Azerbaijani journalists and opposition politicians reacted with consternation to the announcement that parliament deputy Ismail Omarov has been appointed to head the new public television broadcaster. In his previous post as editor in chief of political programs for Azerbaijani State Television, Omarov repeatedly engaged in harsh criticism of the political opposition. Azer Hesret, who heads a confederation of organizations representing Azerbaijani journalists, said the choice of Omarov demonstrates the Azerbaijani authorities' contempt for the views of international organizations. He said Azerbaijani journalists plan to campaign for a public

vote of no confidence in Omarov. Omarov was quoted on 18 April by the opposition daily "Yeni Musavat" as saying that he will offer air time to opposition politicians. (Turan)

ACTING KYRGYZ PRESIDENT ADDRESSES PARLIAMENT

18 April

Acting President Kurmanbek Bakiev addressed Kyrgyzstan's parliament on 15 April, providing an overview of his government's recent actions and plans, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Bakiev noted that the government has approved a "100-day economic plan" prepared by Deputy Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov. Bakiev said that he will take action against arbitrary appointments, akipress.org reported. "I am opposed if a new minister changes all the personnel in a ministry," he said. "I will deal with those ministers soon." Bakiev cited the fight against corruption and the reform of the judiciary as priority tasks, Kyrgyz Television reported. In closing, he condemned recent statements by "some people and groups" against non-Kyrgyz citizens, promised measures to "remove this tension," and urged ethnic Russians not to leave Kyrgyzstan. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ DEMONSTRATORS PROTEST RETURN OF OUSTED PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER

18 April

About 300 demonstrators gathered in front of Kyrgyzstan's parliament on 15 April to protest the return of Bermet Akaeva, the daughter of former President Askar Akaev, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Demonstrators included members of the organizations Interbilim, KelKel, and Birge. Edil Baisalov, leader of the NGO coalition For Democracy and Civil Society, told protesters that "Bermet Akaeva's arrival means that she feels that the former regime remains strong." Bolotbek Maripov, who lost to Akaeva in a disputed race for parliament, said that Akaeva's return showed courage. "I'm glad that there's at least one man in the Akaev family," he said. (RFE/RL)

TURKMENISTAN BANS FOREIGN PRESS IMPORTS

18 April

Turkmen authorities have prohibited imports and circulation of foreign media printed matters. The ban is especially severe on the press in neighboring countries' languages, diplomats said to Novosti over the telephone from Ashkhabad, Turkmen capital. The

English-language Times of Central Asia, regional periodical published in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, was extremely popular with nonresidents in Turkmenistan. Now, its sellers were ordered to make a direct contract with the Turkmenpochta government postal agency-allegedly, to avoid problems with press deliveries from neighboring countries. When they contacted the agency, it flatly refused to conclude the required contract, and did not even care to explain why. Such editions based in neighboring countries as carry satellite television programs also come under the ban. Turkmenistan has no centralized deliveries of other CIS countries' press. Subscriptions to foreign-based newspapers were prohibited several years ago. The country has only one Russian-language paper - Neitralny Turkmenistan. The local television broadcasts a Russian-language news program four times a week. Broadcasts from the Moscow-based Mayak radio and all Russian television channels now come under prohibition. (Asia Pulse)

ARMENIAN, AZERBAIJANI FOREIGN MINISTERS MEET WITH MINSK GROUP CO-CHAIRMEN...

18 April

Vartan Oskanian and Elmar Mammadyarov met separately at the U.S. Embassy in London on 15 April with the three co-chairmen of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. For reasons that remain unclarified, the two ministers did not meet face to face, although they have done so on several previous occasions over the past 12 months. Oskanian declined to comment on the talks, while the Armenian Foreign Ministry said in a brief statement they focused on preparations for a meeting next month between President Kocharian and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev. Mammadyarov for his part told RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service on 15 April that the London talks represented the continuation of his series of discussions with Oskanian under the Minsk Group aegis. Mammadyarov said Baku wants the return of all territories currently occupied by Armenian forces and the return to their former homes of all Azerbaijani displaced persons. He added that Baku "understands" Armenia's insistence on security guarantees for the Armenian population of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. (RFE/RL)

MINSK GROUP CO-CHAIRMEN EXPRESS CONCERN OVER CEASE-FIRE VIOLATIONS

18 April

In a statement released in Vienna on 15 April (<http://www.osce.org/item/13896.html>), the Minsk Group co-chairmen registered their shared concern over the marked increase in recent weeks in violations of the cease-fire signed by the defense ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in 1994. At least six servicemen have been reported killed in those exchanges of fire. The co-chairmen also deplored public statements implying that a resumption of full-scale hostilities is imminent, noting that such rhetoric complicates efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully and fuels feelings of hatred among the populations of both countries. The statement appealed to the conflict parties to reinforce the cease-fire; to refrain from any public statements that could lead to an escalation of the conflict; to recognize that a new war would be "disastrous" for both countries in terms of casualties, destruction, and an increase in refugees and displaced persons; and "to prepare their populations for a balanced negotiated agreement that will require compromises on both sides." (RFE/RL)

ARMENIA TAKES ISSUE WITH OSCE STATEMENT

18 April

Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamlet Gasparian said on 18 April that the "cautious criticism" expressed by the OSCE Minsk Group co-chairmen of the recent violations of the Armenian-Azerbaijani cease-fire is unlikely to deter Azerbaijan from further "sabre-rattling and bellicose statements." In their 15 April statement, the co-chairmen appealed to both sides to reinforce the cease-fire along the Line of Contact that separates Armenian and Azerbaijani forces and to refrain from further bellicose rhetoric. Gasparian said that since Armenian politicians do not make such aggressive statements, the Minsk Group statement was clearly addressed to Azerbaijan. He added that Armenia has written to the OSCE chairman in office and to the foreign ministers of the three countries that co-chair the Minsk Group (France, Russia, and the U.S.), arguing that the fundamental reason why Azerbaijan continues to violate the cease-fire is that the international community is reluctant to censure Azerbaijan for doing so. (Noyan Topan)

ABKHAZIA BEGINS SPRING MILITARY MANEUVERS

18 April

Over 3,000 men -- regular troops and reservists -- are participating in war games near Sukhum that began on 18 April and will last for four days. Abkhazia holds

such maneuvers every year in the spring, but this year's are reportedly the most extensive ever, and include ground, naval, and air forces. Representatives of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) and of the Russian peacekeeping forces deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone will observe the exercises, UN special envoy Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini told journalists on 18 April. The Abkhaz defense minister, Lieutenant General Sultan Sosnaliev, denied on 15 April that Russian instructors are training Abkhaz air force pilots. Sosnaliev's predecessor, Vyacheslav Eshba, is a trained fighter pilot. (Caucasus Press)

OSCE HEAD MEETS WITH KYRGYZ ACTING PRESIDENT

19 April

OSCE Chairman in Office and Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel met with Kyrgyz acting President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Bishkek on 18 April, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. The two discussed a joint OSCE-Kyrgyz plan to maintain stability in Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE reported in a press release on 18 April. The press release quoted Rupel as saying, "The workplan we have developed together with the Kyrgyz authorities focuses on such short-term priority areas as maintaining law and order, election assistance, media freedom, and business development. In the longer-term, we aim to concentrate on the rule of law, education, borders, and cross-border cooperation, as well as economic development." Addressing the issue of upcoming 10 July presidential elections, Rupel said, "I am confident that Kyrgyzstan will hold fair and transparent elections, and that the OSCE will further this process." But Omurbek Tekebaev, the speaker of Kyrgyzstan's parliament, sounded a different note during his meeting with Rupel, commenting, "We fear that the presidential elections will be extremely uneasy and the source of significant unpleasantness." (RFE/RL)

TALEBAN RELAUNCH RADIO BROADCASTS

19 April

The Taliban have returned to the airwaves in parts of Afghanistan with relaunch of their broadcasts on a pirate radio station. They plan to broadcast every day in the main languages of Afghanistan, Dari and Pashto. The station is called Voice of Shariat, or Islamic Law, and was named after the one the Taliban ran before they were driven from power in 2001. The station attacks the US-backed Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The diet of Koranic readings and

preaching sounds much the same as the old Voice of Shariat. In the past, Taliban broadcasts were virulently anti-western. The Taliban have sworn to continue their low-level insurgency against the government and its supporters, principally the United States, until foreign forces leave Afghanistan. A Taliban spokesman said one hour of programming would be broadcast twice a day using a mobile transmitter to avoid being shut down by American or Afghan forces. Asked what the movement would do if it was, he said they would simply set up another. The spokesman said the Taliban needed their own voice to counter what he called the pro-American stance of the world's media. The station could be heard in a number of regions in the south where the insurgents and the coalition forces fighting them are largely based. The Taliban took over Afghan radio when they swept to power in 1996. They threw out the female presenters and banned music, while their news reports eulogised the movement's leader, Mullah Omar, who is still at large. The station also defended his decision to offer sanctuary to Osama Bin Laden, who also remains uncaptured. (BBC)

COMMISSION TO EXAMINE AKAYEV FAMILY PROPERTY

19 April

Acting Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev signed a decree on the property of former Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev and his family. The decree lists the property and real estate that is to undergo inspection to determine whether it is legally owned by Akayev or his family, Bakiyev's press service told Interfax on Tuesday. The Kyrgyz National Bank and all commercial banks have been ordered to restrict all money transitions from Kyrgyzstan abroad and any operations on the accounts of companies listed in the decree. The bank accounts of Akayev's relatives have also been frozen, the press service said. The source noted that the commission was created "to make sure the property belonging to former president Akayev and his family is safe, taking into account their absence in the country, and to legally resolve several questions that the people have, related to the way the property was acquired." (Interfax)

ARMENIAN ARMS SMUGGLING SUSPECT EXTRADITED TO U.S.

19 April

Armen Barseghian, who is suspected of involvement in a conspiracy to smuggle arms to the U.S., was extradited from Armenia to the U.S. on 15 April and will appear before a New York court later this week,

RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported on 18 April, quoting the U.S. embassy in Yerevan. Law enforcement sources in Yerevan identified Barseghian as a U.S. citizen who was born in Armenia and returned there in the mid-1990s to avoid prosecution in the United States. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIAN PARLIAMENT EVACUATED FOLLOWING BOMB THREAT

19 April

The Georgian parliament building was evacuated on 19 April following an anonymous bomb threat made from a public telephone, but a four-hour search failed to reveal any explosive device. Speaker Nino Burdjanadze slammed the bomb threat as intended to tarnish Georgia's reputation on the eve of U.S. President George W. Bush's planned visit in early May. (Caucasus Press)

RUSSIAN ENVOY IN KYRGYZSTAN CAUTIONS AGAINST 'PANIC'

19 April

Yevgenii Shmagin, Russia's ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, issued an appeal on 18 April to ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan to remain calm in the face of reports of anti-Russian propaganda, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. The appeal noted, "Rumors of incitement to the division of property and ethnic strife have recently sparked concern among the population of Bishkek and the entire country.... I appeal to you, respected fellow countrymen, to remain calm and resist panic. We are confident that the amicable

Kyrgyz people, with their natural wisdom and farsightedness, will deal honorably with these temporary difficulties." The Russian Embassy confirmed that recent unrest in Kyrgyzstan has led many ethnic Russians to consider emigration. The embassy's migration department processed 50-70 people a day in early March, but now processes 250-270 people a day. (RFE/RL)

TURKMEN PRESIDENT SAYS NOT TO RUN AT PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN 2009

20 April

Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov will not run at the presidential election in 2009. Niyazov made a statement at a meeting with OSCE chairman-in-office and Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel on Wednesday. Rupel asked the president whether he would register as a candidate at the upcoming presidential election. Niyazov noted that he would resign. According to Rupel, issues of political, economic and public life in Turkmenistan, functioning of non-governmental organisations were discussed at the meeting. Rupel got pledges that democratic principles will be put in practice in Turkmenistan. He voiced the hope that Turkmenistan would participate in the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting that the OSCE will organize in September. A Turkmen representative did not take part in these meetings for the last four years. The OSCE chairman-in-office voiced the hope that the situation would change this year. (ITAR-TASS)

