

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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KEY ISSUE: A short 75-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

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

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

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

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

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

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THE NEW GREAT GAME IN MOTION: KYRGYZSTAN AS AN OBJECT OF MAJOR POWER RIVALRY

Stephen Blank

As the U.S. and NATO prepare to leave Afghanistan Washington, Brussels, Moscow, Beijing, New Delhi, Iran, Ankara, Tehran, and Islamabad are all competing to enhance their influence in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan, a weak state whose government just collapsed, exemplifies the process by which the struggle for influence occurs. While Washington is currently negotiating the status of its base at Manas after 2014 and Turkey is the second largest investor in Kyrgyzstan, it is very clear that the real rivalry in Kyrgyzstan is occurring between Russia and China.

BACKGROUND: Kyrgyzstan remains a weak state as the recent fall of its government indicates. This makes it more dependent upon outside support, a fact that both Russia and China have been quick to exploit. Moscow has again offered to fund Kyrgyzstan's Kambarata-1 hydroelectric project and forgive about 40 percent of the country's roughly US\$ 500 million debt. The Dastan torpedo factory will reportedly be opened up to private auction, i.e. Russian investment. Moscow is pushing for two of its state firms, the state electric firm Inter RAO and Rushydro, to own a 75 percent stake in the Kambarata hydroelectric project. Uzbekistan strongly opposes Kambarata lest it give those two states control over the Syr Daria watershed that is crucial for its agriculture sector.

Moscow has reportedly sought a 49-year lease for its four military facilities in Kyrgyzstan but both parties have so far agreed to a fifteen year lease beginning in 2017. Nonetheless a governmental representative told local media that the agreement may not actually be signed until 2017 –an eternity in Kyrgyz politics – and a statement reflecting its wariness about Russia. Indeed, even as Kyrgyzstan was negotiating its agreements with Moscow, President Almazbek Atambayev made all kinds of derogatory remarks about Russia, despite his pledge that Kyrgyzstan would join the Eurasian Economic Union (EURASEC). EURASEC is the centerpiece of Putin's plans for Central Asia and a clear effort to curtail the expansion of China's commercial and overall economic presence in Central Asia.

Membership in EURASEC essentially means sacrificing Kyrgyzstan's economy to Moscow in an equally desperate effort to keep the state together. Even though Kyrgyzstan has been a member of the World Trade Organization for years and has much lower import and export tariff rates than does the new Customs Union, it decided to assume the burden of heavier import tariffs. Consequently it will pay higher prices for goods imported from Russia, Kazakhstan, and the Middle East. It is thus forced to subsidize noncompetitive Russian



President Vladimir Putin and Almazbek Atambayev

goods to stay alive. Yet, there is little doubt that both Kyrgyz leaders like Atambayev and the Chinese government have understood the Russian policy and its thrust to deprive Kyrgyzstan of its real sovereignty.

IMPLICATIONS: On his recent visit to China, Atambayev typically sought large-scale Chinese support. Kyrgyzstan and China agreed to enhance security cooperation, though it is not clear what they meant by that. The two governments also discussed measures to support and further promote Chinese investments in transportation and infrastructure, e.g. the Osh-Batken-Isfana road, and further moves in energy cooperation. These projects also appear to comprise China's proposed railway system that would tie together China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan; the Dalka-Kemin transmission line – a project to construct a transmission line from Kyrgyzstan directly to China; and exploration for oil and natural gas. China wants to build an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan and a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through northern Kyrgyzstan.

Atambayev states that these programs would promote energy security, transport liberalization, and regional economic integration, all of which cut directly against Moscow's interests as expressed through EURASEC. Thus the rivalry between Beijing and Moscow, along with Bishkek's desire to exploit that rivalry to maximize its freedom of action, visibly expresses the shape of present foreseeable rivalries in Central Asia through competing economic projects and models. China's loans contrast with Russia's demands for subordination and the transfer of real assets as the price of support, yet do not excessively burden Kyrgyz leaders with too many requirements for transparency.

As the NATO and U.S. forces depart from Afghanistan and their primarily militarily-oriented presence throughout Central Asia, an economic-political rivalry among all the foreign actors interested in the region has sprung up. Whereas Washington's footprint is largely

though not exclusively visible in Uzbekistan and in the construction of military installations throughout the region, Russia is attempting to combine both defense presence and economic suzerainty through bilateral deals and EURASEC. China's presence is more exclusively economic though there are signs that it too may be thinking of enhanced defense cooperation and presence. However, in the meantime, China has become the place where local governments go to raise capital on global markets and is outstripping Russia in regard to trade, investment, and energy assets. Indeed, already this year China may receive more gas from Central Asia than does Russia.

This supplanting of Russia by China alarms Moscow as seen in the vigorous push behind the EURASEC idea. Yet, Russia cannot come out and openly address China as a rival here because it needs China for its global "Weltpolitik" against the United States. Nevertheless, it is gradually losing the regional domination it had because economic competition is China's strength, not Russia's. Indeed, the rivalry fully validates Andrei Tsygankov's observation that Russia is really a regional power in Eurasia but masquerades as a global power. Yet because it does so, it is losing ground to China, which is steadily becoming ever more competitive in all the major dimensions of state power. As Tsygankov notes, China is a global power with global impact but prefers to pose as a regional power in East, South and Central Asia.

Naturally other states are also trying to enter into this rivalry; India, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and of course, the United States. It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that real competitiveness in this latest manifestation of what might be called the new great game lies in the power to trade and invest on attractive terms with Central Asian governments, not to project military power alone. Indeed, the latter looks like a losing proposition until and unless a crisis occurs, which of course cannot be ruled out. Yet, until then any power seeking to invest

in Central Asia must be ready, willing, and able to commit quite large investments. All the major projects involved, though they may turn out to be profitable, require big expenditures up front to make an impact, whether such impact is economic or political.

CONCLUSIONS: If that assessment is correct, then most of the other actors seeking to play a major role in Central Asia are likely to falter unless they are prepared to use the power at their disposal to commit substantial resources, either individually or collectively to the region. China is already outpacing Russia, which is encountering ever more difficulties in trying to arrange a continental bloc of satellite states. While it may not be possible for China to organize its own version of such a bloc given the deep-rooted regional fears and apprehensions about Chinese objectives, in the coming years it will probably be the primary foreign economic presence in Central Asia, able to cash in on the political advantages that accrue to any such power.

That Chinese effort, buttressed by economic power, if not the capability to project military power as well, is likely to assume a clear shape in the future. Moreover, there is every reason to imagine that one or more Central Asian states will undergo a major crisis that could trigger demands from the region or on the part of a great power which claims its interests are affected thereby for a foreign intervention. We will then see the real test of whether Moscow can live up to the commitments it seeks to make and obtain from Central Asia or whether China will supplant Russia in the defense and security sphere too. Until then, it is also clear that if anyone wants to join the next phase of great power competition in Central Asia, that government better come with a large and open checkbook.

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GEORGIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: ANOTHER LITMUS TEST OF DEMOCRATIC PROGRESS

Niklas Nilsson

As Georgia approaches Election Day on October 1, much attention is paid by international Georgia-watchers to whether these elections will signify a step forward in the consolidation of Georgia's political system. Indeed, practically all elections held since the Rose Revolution in 2003 have been considered litmus tests of Georgia's democracy in one way or another. Yet these parliamentary elections, given their function as a scene-setter for the presidential elections scheduled for October 2013, arguably have an unprecedented significance in that they are potentially the first step toward Georgia's first constitutional and orderly transfer of political power since independence.

BACKGROUND: A brief recap of previous such transitions – the violent ouster of Zviad Gamsakhurdia in January 1992 and the less violent Rose Revolution forcing Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation in November 2003 – highlights the importance that the next transition takes place within the confines of the constitution and through a recognized election. Georgia has certainly come a long way as a state over the last decade. Many state functions have been drastically improved, with the virtual elimination of everyday corruption and overhaul of the police force as the most frequently quoted examples. Overall, the Georgian state is clearly much stronger than it was ten years ago. Yet, while a functioning state is one precondition for the evolution of a democratic system, it does not guarantee such an evolution in itself. In Georgia, the extreme powers vested in the executive after the Rose Revolution, the tendency of non-transparent decision-making by a closed and unaccountable group of advisors and not least the government's dominance over nationwide broadcast media all present problems of Georgia's political system and obstacles to the consolidation of Georgian democracy.

Indeed, the dominance of the ruling United National Movement (UNM) party in all

spheres of political life is one reason for the weakness of Georgia's political opposition, which has frequently taken to street protests rather than engaging in political protest. To its detriment, Georgia's opposition parties are also internally divided and are often based around the personalities of their leaders rather than around political agendas.

However, these elections differ in that the government faces a more organized and better funded opposition than in any previous election. The Georgian Dream (GD) coalition headed by former oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili – ranked the 153rd richest man in the world by Forbes and by far the richest Georgian – includes a disparate group of opposition parties who have nevertheless managed to campaign across the country. While the table is tilted in favor of the UNM, these elections are arguably the most contested ones in Georgia so far and holding free and fair elections in such an environment will unavoidably be considered a measure of Georgia's political maturity among domestic as well as international observers.

IMPLICATIONS: The most controversial aspects of the year preceding these elections have been, on the one hand, Ivanishvili's background and intentions. The Georgian government and the UNM have persistently

sought to make the case that the fortune he made in Russia in the 1990s, and his ability to sell off his Russian assets at a competitive price ahead upon his decision to move into politics, imply that he maintains connections with the Kremlin. Hence, his political endeavor is frequently depicted as an extension of Russian attempts to meddle in Georgian politics. Ivanishvili's allegedly soft stance on Russia is quoted as an indication of this, but this stance comprises of a vaguely stated objective to improve relations with Georgia's northern neighbor. While such allegations refer to the very real security threat that Russia poses to Georgia, currently manifested in the Kavkaz 2012 military exercises in the North Caucasus, they cannot in themselves serve as an argument against Ivanishvili's right to run for public office.

A second and arguably more serious challenge that Ivanishvili poses to the UNM is his personal wealth. Ivanishvili possesses the resources to fund social reforms out of his own pocket, let alone his political campaign. This has also raised the issue of regulating campaign funding in Georgia. While such regulations are uncontroversial in most established democracies, the Georgian State Audit Office's seemingly selective application of such regulations and the excessive fines issued upon violations in the case of the GD coalition is arguably not contributing to the creation of a level playing field. Combined with the earlier controversy surrounding the revocation of Ivanishvili's citizenship and the subsequent constitutional amendment, valid for three years, allowing him to stand for election, can easily be interpreted as concerted attempts by the government to delimit Ivanishvili's prospects in the elections.



The campaign climate has in large part followed the pattern established in Georgia over the last five years, where the competing parties in an extremely polarized political spectrum accuse each other of posing existential threats to Georgia as a state. The UNM's depiction of Ivanishvili as a Russian stooge is matched by the GD coalition's assessment of the government and President Saakashvili as turning Georgia into an authoritarian regime on par with its most repressive counterparts in the post-Soviet space. GD has at times seemed more focused on taking protests to the street after Election Day than on the elections themselves. Such accusations frequently overshadow issue-based debate on Georgia's real challenges, defined by the population at large as its dire economic situation,

unemployment, poverty, medical care and agriculture.

Elections are an imperfect measure of democratic standards and democratic consolidation arguably takes place through the building of institutions and evolution of democratic culture

between elections. Yet, elections still provide a snapshot of the state of democracy in any given society and the attention paid to such events domestically as well as internationally implies that the holding of elections at an acceptable standard, now in October as well as next year, hold real significance to Georgia's political future. The perception that whichever political figures will form Georgia's next government have gained power through free and fair elections is crucial to their domestic legitimacy and at least as importantly, to Georgia's foreign policy options.

Indeed, one reason why Georgia's elections receive significant international attention is the foreign policy narrative the Georgian

government has sought to establish about its role in the world after the Rose Revolution, which provides for a very intimate connection between the country's domestic mode of governance and its international security objectives. This narrative holds, first, that Georgia is essentially a European country and deserves a place in the European and Transatlantic security community. Hence, Georgia should modernize and democratization is one aspect of this modernization.

In its international extension, the international example Georgia sets through its reforms – that of an alternative model of development in the post-Soviet world and beyond – constitutes an asset for the West that extends much further than to Georgia alone. This progress must be bolstered as it provides for a more or less automatic conflict with Russia, fearing similar developments in its neighboring states and ultimately in Russia itself. The government's narrative also makes the case that the current ruling elite is the only feasible political force in Georgia capable of consolidating these achievements.

While this narrative obviously serves to legitimize the rule of the current government and to discredit the opposition, it also presents democratic practices as a key precondition for Georgia's international security objectives. Unless Georgia is capable of demonstrating that it can hold elections in accordance with international standards, its prospects for future integration with the EU and NATO,

admittedly distant objectives following the 2008 war, will be drastically reduced.

CONCLUSIONS: While the electoral implications of the recent prison abuse scandal is unclear, most recent polls suggest that the UNM will win the upcoming elections but that GD will present a real challenge and be able to form a substantial faction in parliament. It remains to be seen whether the opposition will take these seats or revert to previously tried practices of parliamentary boycott and street rallies. A far more positive scenario would provide for a stronger opposition faction that actively engages in the parliamentary process, which would increase the role of parliament as an institution and a venue for managing political cleavages, as implied by the constitutional changes entering into force after the 2013 presidential elections. Such a development could also provide for the evolution of Georgia's currently highly immature party system as it could force existing parties to focus more on ideology and issue-based debate than on trading accusations of authoritarianism or treason.

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CHECHEN AND INGUSH PRESIDENTS CLASH OVER COUNTERINSURGENT OPERATIONS

Tomáš Šmíd

On August 1, 2012, Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov announced that troops of the Chechen MVD and the Chechen administrative FSB had carried out a special operation in the neighboring republic of Ingushetia on July 29. Chechen troops killed two and wounded one member of the North Caucasian insurgency, suspected of conducting an attack on Tsentoroy, the center of the Kadyrov clan. Ingush president Yunus-Bek Yevkurov dismissed Kadyrov's version and proclaimed that the casualties were caused by an accidental explosion in the village of Galashki near Chechnya's border, in effect accusing Kadyrov of lying and exacerbating the already severe animosity between the two leaders.

BACKGROUND: Chechens and Ingush are two cognate nations belonging to the supraethnic family of Vaynakhs. Occasional disputes have usually been short in duration and only rarely politicized. Chechens and Ingush have similar traditions, culture, habits and language. They shared one administrative unit during the Soviet era and both became victims of Stalin's repression and deportations. However, political differences exist, caused particularly by long-term demographic and socioeconomic factors but also by developments after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Ingushetia's strategy towards Moscow was far more careful in the early 1990s, which saved the republic from a destructive war. Ingushetia consequently accepted a large number of Chechen refugees and the then administration of President Ruslan Aushev succeeded in dealing with the situation in spite of an extremely tense political and humanitarian context. The Chechen (Ichkerian) separatists under Aslan Maskhadov's leadership pragmatically avoided any disputes with Nazran, ignoring pressure from the Salafi wing of Ichkerians as well as the existing territorial questions between the two republics. Akhmat Kadyrov, the father of Chechnya's current president, also had good relations with Aushev as well as with his successor, Murat Zyazikov.

However, conflict between the two leaderships appeared after Kadyrov became Chechnya's president and Yevkurov replaced the conformist Zyazikov as his Ingushetian counterpart in 2008. The relationship soon turned into open hatred, forcing the Kremlin to mediate between the two leaders. The first major problem appeared after an attempt on Yevkurov's life in June 2009. Yevkurov survived the bomb attack – most probably organized by Said Buryatsky, a leader of the North Caucasian Salafis – but was hospitalized for a long time. In the meantime, Kadyrov strengthened his influence and declared himself the one and only real fighter against terrorism, taking on the task of retaliating on Yevkurov's behalf.

At this time, their different strategies for fighting radical Salafism and terror became increasingly apparent. While Yevkurov pressed for preventive operations and negotiations, Kadyrov promoted nonselective harsh power. A real clash appeared in January 2011, when Yevkurov accused Chechen refugees of bringing crime, prostitution and alcoholism into Ingushetia. Yevkurov's ill-considered and offensive statement engendered great exasperation among the Chechen population. The Kremlin also publicly admonished Yevkurov for the statement. The situation calmed after an intervention by Ingushetian

businessmen whose dealings were threatened by the problem becoming politicized along ethnic lines. Yevkurov then undertook several reconciliatory acts, including the opening of an alley named after Akhmat Kadyrov in Ingushetia's capital Magas and visits to several Friday prayers in Grozny. Yet, Kadyrov has never fully accepted these gestures and has not forgotten Yevkurov's statements.

The dispute fundamentally stems from a complicated personal relationship between the two politicians. Yevkurov holds the title of Hero of the Russian Federation, a paratrooper and general who was in command of the famous capture of Kosovo airport in Pristina, and considers Kadyrov to be an FSB puppet and a grandiloquent tyrant, but not a real warrior. In return, Kadyrov considers Yevkurov's Hero title for activities "during the establishment of constitutional order in the North Caucasus" to be synonymous with "murdering Chechen civilians." At that time Kadyrov and his father fully sided with the separatists and fought against the federal forces.

IMPLICATIONS: The animosity includes a broader institutional underpinning. Due to his military career, Yevkurov is considered the GRU's man in the region whereas Kadyrov is supported by the FSB, with closer ties to President Putin. Disputes are further fueled by Kadyrov's ambitions to become the leader of the whole North Caucasus and to assert his power in the neighboring republics.

Both leaders have suggested to the Kremlin that their counterpart should be replaced. Yevkurov has proposed the reinstatement of Alu Alkhanov as head of the Chechen Republic while Kadyrov has pushed for replacing parts of the Ingush leadership.

The current clash between Chechnya's and Ingushetia's presidents can be considered the most severe to date for several reasons. Firstly, it is an openly public conflict with mutual harsh accusations exchanged through media. Secondly, Kadyrov overreacted to Yevkurov's initial statement. He accused Yevkurov of

being unable to establish order on his own territory and poignantly offered his services in doing so. Kadyrov recalled that the Chechen side has repeatedly warned of the existing Salafi bases in the area and suggested joint counter-terrorist operations that would prevent insurgents from conducting raids into Chechnya.

Another aspect of the dispute concerns the different views on counterterrorism on part of the two leaders. Kadyrov's approach can be labeled as hard and Yevkurov's as soft. Yevkurov prefers dialogue with representatives of the Islamist underground and often terms the radicals young lost souls. Even according to several Chechen observers, such an approach has seemed more successful than the use of brute force.

Kadyrov refuses to employ a soft strategy and instead subjects the families of Islamist radicals to repression according to the principle of collective guilt. While Yevkurov strikes hard against real terrorists, Kadyrov frequently prosecutes only alleged terrorists, e.g. peaceful followers of less frequent forms of Islam. Moreover, Kadyrov has accused Yevkurov of inadequate support for the Ingushetian clergy that speaks against the Salafis. Ironically, during the "August dispute" between the Chechen and Ingushetian leaders, terrorist attacks occurred in both regions. Two suicide bombers killed 4 soldiers in Grozny on August 6 and Kadyrov blamed Muslim and Khuseyn Gakaev for organizing the terrorist attack – the same perpetrators allegedly responsible for the attack at Tsentoroy. In Ingushetia, a suicide bomber killed 8 police at a funeral on August 19. Evidently, both republics experience problems in suppressing terrorism, but Yevkurov's strategy is arguably more likely to bring results in the long run.

Another point of disagreement concerns the fight against corruption where Kadyrov perceives his solution to be more effective: officers are forced to return bribes taken; otherwise all their possessions are confiscated.

Kadyrov is indisputably more successful in the reconstruction of his republic. Local observers think this is mostly due to the better financial advisors of the Kadyrov's administration who master the federal budget legislation, allowing the administration to use the federal budget to their benefit. In addition, the effectiveness of Kadyrov's regime in these areas frequently contradicts Russian law and paradoxically also Chechen norms and traditions.

The most dangerous aspect of the verbal conflict between the two leaders is that it raises the question of revising mutual borders in the context of joint actions against local militants. Such statements can easily spill over from the personal and political level into the interethnic and consequently ethnopolitical level with possible escalation into a broader conflict. Kadyrov has raised claims on Sunzha and parts of the Malgobek rayons which together form almost half of Ingushetia.

CONCLUSIONS: The recent conflict between Yevkurov and Kadyrov can be considered the

most severe so far and has the potential of assuming an interethnic dimension, especially considering Kadyrov's requests for the revision of mutual borders at Ingushetia's expense. Thus, the territorial sovereignty of the federal subjects – which can only be violated by federal forces – is also at stake. Kadyrov's statements about establishing order come close to a threat of armed operations on Ingushetian territory. Kadyrov's ambitions to rule the entire North Caucasus have already brought about several attempts to become a more crucial player in Ingushetia and Dagestan. The threats risk angering Ingushetians beyond the republic's leadership and could significantly worsen the historically good relations between Chechens and Ingush. The key to the solution lies, as usual, in Moscow.

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GEORGIA'S PRISON ABUSE SCANDAL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Svante E. Cornell

The release of graphic videos of grave prisoner abuse in Georgia's penitentiary system could not come at a worse time for the ruling party, less than two weeks before the October 1 parliamentary elections. The episode, inadvertently, is highly indicative of both the strengths and weaknesses of Georgia's political system. On the one hand, it is aggravating that this type of abuse could go on without high-level intervention in spite of repeated criticism from domestic and foreign watchdogs alike. On the other hand, the government's reaction is, encouragingly, that which could be expected from a democratic than an authoritarian state.

BACKGROUND: On September 18, Georgian oppositional television stations Maestro and Channel 9 released highly graphic video recordings of prisoners being brutally beaten and sexually assaulted in Georgia's Gldani prison no. 8 on the outskirts of Tbilisi. The videos led to a rare spontaneous public outcry, with demonstrations emerging both in the capital and in other Georgian cities.

Controversy over the state of Georgia's prisons and penitentiary system is not new. Indeed, the situation in the penitentiary system has arguably been the leading subject for years in the yearly country reports of the U.S.

State Department on human rights in Georgia, as well as in the reports of the Georgian public defender's office. As early as 2006, Human Rights Watch published a detailed 100-page report entitled "Undue Punishment: Abuses against Prisoners in Georgia". The government, however, long downplayed such allegations, pointing instead to its successful purge of organized crime from Georgia's penitentiary system. Indeed, that



system had long been under the effective control of the "thieves-in-law", the notorious Soviet organized crime structures in which ethnic Georgians wielded an outsize influence, and which in turn had developed strong linkages to the security structures during President Eduard Shevardnadze's tenure from 1992 to 2003.

Following the release of the videos, the government initially tried to spin their release as a political plot by allies of opposition leader and tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili. The timing of the release of these videos indeed seemed intended to coincide with the most vulnerable moment for the government, roughly a week before parliamentary elections in which most polls showed the ruling party with a comfortable but shrinking lead. There is no doubt that this timing was intentional, yet the authorities soon realized that the problem could not be dismissed out of hand.

Therefore, that approach was quickly exchanged for a full-scale effort at damage control. At 3 AM on September 19, Saakashvili posted a lengthy response by video, in which he

sharply condemned the abuses, and promised both harsh punishments for the perpetrators and thorough reform. Officials still hinted at the political motives behind the release of the videos, but seemed no longer to seek to deflect responsibility for the abuses or to term them isolated incidents. By mid-day, the Minister responsible for the penitentiary system, Khatuna Kalmakhelidze, had resigned; and a number of prison officials including the deputy head of the penitentiary department and the two highest ranking officials of prison number 8 had been arrested. By the evening of September 19, the president admitted to a “systemic failure” in the penitentiary system and instructed Prime Minister Vano Merabishvili to oversee a thorough reform of the prison system. In a temporary measure, the personnel of “problem prisons” was suspended and the patrol police moved in to supervise prisons.

The televised meeting in which these remarks were made also featured Justice Minister Zurab Adeishvili and Chief Prosecutor Murtaz Zodelava. Notably absent from the meeting was Interior Minister Bacho Akhalaia, who had been in charge of the crackdown on organized crime in the penitentiary system as head of the Justice Ministry’s Penitentiary Department in 2005-2008. Akhalaia had been widely criticized for human rights abuses during the period, and is widely believed to have continued to informally oversee the penitentiary system.

The official soul-searching continued with National Security Council Secretary Giga Bokeria termed the government’s failure to heed the public defender’s findings and recommendations a “grave mistake”. The next day, public defender George Tugushi, a persistent critic of the conditions in Georgia’s prisons, was named as Kalmakhelidze’s successor, stating that he had obtained from the president a promise of full independence to reform the system. Late on September 20, Akhalaia also tendered his resignation, citing his “moral responsibility” for the scandal.

IMPLICATIONS: The prison abuse scandal highlights two shortcomings of post-revolutionary Georgia, but also important strengths.

First, the scandal points to the authorities’ unwillingness, in certain areas of governance, to respond to even long-standing and widespread criticism – very much in contrast to the same government’s highly cooperative and responsive attitude in other areas. It is noteworthy that the judicial sector tends to fall into the former category: aside from the penitentiary system, Georgia has been subjected to criticism for the slow pace of reform of the court system – Georgian courts still have conviction rates in criminal cases nearing 99 percent. The widespread process of plea bargaining, in turn, has been criticized for involving the selective and arbitrary application of justice. By contrast, in many areas of EU approximation, European officials have termed Georgia very cooperative and adaptive to recommendations and criticism. Even Akhalaia’s tenure at the defense ministry has been lauded in leaked U.S. government cables for being “the most active defense minister in terms of seeking advice” from the United States “and following through” on that advice.

A second shortcoming lies in the area of means and ends. Indeed, the scandal suggests that in certain areas of governance, the Georgian government has had a tendency to emphasize results over process, or ends over means. The balancing of means and ends dates back to the very first days of the Rose Revolution, when the Saakashvili administration needed to rebuild a dilapidated state from scratch, knowing it only had limited time to deliver public goods to its citizens before losing the window of opportunity for reform. It is at this point that the practice of plea bargaining was introduced, as officials widely known to have been spectacularly corrupt were arrested and allowed to buy their freedom in return for ‘voluntary’ payments to the state coffers. While widely criticized in the West, this practice

enabled the government to make an example of these officials, in turn providing the legitimacy for the subsequent eradication of low-level corruption in the country. Similarly, the eradication of the thieves-in-law and their influence on Georgian society would have seemed highly unlikely prior to the revolution, given their pervasive influence on all levels. Their swift reduction to size would certainly not have occurred in the absence of the harsh measures employed by Akhalaia. Yet the question is whether the cost of these undeniable successes was a tacit acceptance of the need to break some eggs to make an omelet.

By contrast, the response to the scandal has highlighted how far Georgia has come in the past decade. Indeed, the government's response to the scandal is much more reminiscent of what one would expect from a western democracy than from a post-Soviet authoritarian government. Far from seeking to shut down the video releases or cover up the scandal, the government responded by the admission of a systemic rather than isolated problem, as well as the resignation of two ministers and the arrest of high-ranking officials. Critics might retort that the government had little choice given the approaching elections and the impossibility of stopping the spread of the videos. But that it beside the point. While it is impossible to know how the government would have reacted outside an electoral cycle, it is precisely its concern to retain public legitimacy and to maintain the lead that all credible polls give it that suggest that Georgia has evolved considerably over the past decade. While the scandal suggests how much reform is still needed in Georgia, it also suggests that there may be no turning back. Indeed, the public outcry over the abuses suggest to what extent

the principles of human rights have been internalized in Georgian society.

CONCLUSIONS: The prison abuse scandal put on public display the remaining dysfunctions of post-revolutionary Georgia. Yet paradoxically, the facts were not new. Opposition politicians and human rights watchdogs had long been complaining of exactly the kind of practices involved in the released videos. But just as in the Abu Ghraib scandal, it was the graphic nature of the videos that created an uproar in Georgian society, and which forced government officials to act as decisively as they belatedly did.

As tragic as the scandal is, it may have brought a silver lining. Not only is it likely to lead to a thorough reform of the penitentiary sector in Georgia; it may lead to a fundamental rethink of the relationship of means and ends. As Georgia approaches its parliamentary elections, the balance sheet of the Rose Revolution must be overwhelmingly positive: in spite of its shortcomings, in ten years Georgia's government has built a functioning state and at the very least the foundations of a liberal democracy. Following the October 1 election, whoever comes out as the winner, Georgia will need to move toward the next stage, the consolidation of democracy. This will require the institutionalization of reforms, their spread to areas that have hitherto been neglected, and a greater attention to due process and the deepening of the rule of law. If the scandal helps accelerate that process, then something good may have come of it.

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FIELD REPORTS

KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN STRENGTHEN BILATERAL COOPERATION

Georgiy Voloshin

On September 6 and 7, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov paid an official visit to Kazakhstan. Upon his arrival at the Astana airport, he was warmly greeted by his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev. Despite the geographic proximity of the two countries and the prominent role that each plays in Central Asia – Kazakhstan remains the most economically advanced Central Asian country, while Uzbekistan is the most populous and in many respects the strongest in military terms – Kazakh-Uzbek relations have traditionally been complicated. As both Astana and Tashkent consider themselves to be regional leaders in post-Soviet Central Asia, their bilateral relationship has been marked throughout the 1990s and 2000s by a scarcity of official contacts and a lack of long-term cooperation projects. The last time Karimov went to Kazakhstan on a bilateral visit was in April 2008, although he also attended the Astana Summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2011.

Unlike in previous instances, this year's visit of the Uzbek president to the Kazakh capital was celebrated on both sides as another step towards the strengthening of political, economic and cultural ties between the two nations. In his opening remarks, President Nazarbayev praised Uzbekistan as a "brotherly country, a friendly neighbor and a strategic partner in Central Asia." Following an enlarged session of bilateral talks, the presidents signed a joint communiqué calling for the continuation of the strategic

dialogue on various issues of mutual interest. Another agreement was signed between the Foreign Ministers of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan outlining their cooperation agenda up to 2014. In order to boost tourism on both sides of the border, sectoral ministries signed additional agreements on the transit of persons and reciprocal visits by Kazakh and Uzbek citizens.

Karimov's visit to Kazakhstan also permitted to reach an agreement on the facilitation of border crossing procedures for Kazakh cargoes bound for Uzbekistan and vice versa. Earlier in August, the Kazakh media highlighted a major border incident involving over 140 transport vehicles moving goods from Kazakhstan over to Uzbekistan and beyond. The new Uzbek law amending the transport legislation entered into force on August 1 and imposed on all cross-border carriers a legal obligation to obtain a special permit in Tashkent in order to carry out the transit of goods across Uzbek territory. Because of such restrictions whose adoption had never been duly notified to Kazakh authorities, dozens of companies suffered serious economic losses and considerable delays in the supply of their goods.

Such incidents have been frequently blamed for the poor state of economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As of 2011, the overall trade turnover equaled almost US\$ 2 billion, which is 24 percent higher than in the previous year. Still, since both countries' economies are mostly complementary, with

Kazakhstan interested in importing Uzbek gas, cement or fertilizers and Uzbekistan buying heavy machinery and agricultural products from its northern neighbor, this figure is far from reflecting the real potential of economic cooperation between Astana and Tashkent. According to President Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will invest their joint efforts in this field with the aim to double trade turnover by 2016. The Kazakh leader also praised Uzbekistan's decision to sign the Agreement on free trade in the CIS which was adopted in October 2011 upon Russia's proposal (the two other countries that have not signed the Agreement are Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan).

In his lengthy speech, President Karimov emphatically stressed the importance of consolidating bilateral cooperation on security issues. According to the Uzbek leader, the situation in Central Asia is rapidly becoming fragile, as great powers continue to nurture clashing interests and NATO's forthcoming withdrawal from Afghanistan is creating regional controversies and spurring fears. Karimov believes that major challenges to both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan remain to be terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. At a

time when Uzbekistan is preparing to leave the CSTO (following the suspension of its membership, the issue of Uzbekistan's participation in the Organization will be discussed later this year in Moscow), Tashkent is visibly seeking to strengthen its partnership with Kazakhstan in security matters.

Still, the biggest surprise of the Nazarbayev-Karimov meeting came with regard to Tajikistan's Rogun Dam project aimed at solving the problem of energy deficits in Central Asia's poorest country. Nazarbayev joined his Uzbek colleague in condemning the actions of upstream states supposedly neglecting their neighbors' concerns over water-sharing issues. Karimov recalled that both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan should strictly stick to international norms, including those contained in the four UN conventions ratified so far. After accusing Dushanbe of "gigantomania" (the Rogun Dam is slated to become the highest in the world), he suggested conducting an international investigation on the feasibility of hydropower projects in Central Asia. At the same time, Tajikistan is preparing to increase funding for the Rogun site, allocating around US\$ 208 million in 2013.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS EVALUATE PRE-ELECTION ENVIRONMENT IN GEORGIA

Eka Janashia

In September 2012, three reputable international organizations – National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) – reported on a "competitive" though "polarized" pre-election environment in Georgia ahead of the October 1 parliamentary elections.

NDI expressed concerns in its interim report covering the period from August 3 to 27, over the fact that the country's key political forces – United National Movement (UNM) and the opposition coalition Georgian Dream (GD) led by Bidzina Ivanishvili are both considering their opponent as constituting a threat to Georgia as a state. The report said that instances of violence between UNM and GD supporters during political campaigning in the

regions showed that “the two largest electoral subjects are acting like enemies, not political adversaries or electoral opponents.”

Likewise the PACE delegation, after meeting with Georgian officials and political parties on September 11-12, assessed the pre-election atmosphere in the country as prone to “antagonism” where political adversaries publicly exchange accusations about each other instead of “informing voters about their views and party platforms.” The delegation termed this sort of campaign “negative” and called on the parties to abstain from any action undermining public trust in the election process. “Perceived injustices in the law are not, and cannot be, a justification for breaking the law,” the delegation said in reference to various statements reportedly made by leaders of GD on the necessity to protect their supporters’ votes in case of electoral fraud.

On the other hand, PACE urged the Georgian government to refrain from using administrative resources and restated its concerns about “the excessive and disproportionate” fines charged by the State Audit Office (SAO) to the GD candidate Kakhi Kaladze, who is a close political and business partner of Ivanishvili. On August 10, Tbilisi City Court fined Kaladze GEL 16,944,960 (about US\$ 10.3 million) due to his spending of GEL 3.33 million for Georgian Dream’s political activities in violation of party funding regulations. Georgian authorities postponed the enforcement of the fine following the PACE report, which was welcomed by the organization.

On a positive note, PACE welcomed the endorsement of “must carry rules” that improved pluralism in the country’s media environment. The must carry rules implies a legislative amendment to election code, passed by parliament on June 29, which obliges TV cable providers to transmit all television channels for sixty days before the elections. Thanks to the amendment, the three key pro-opposition channels Maestro, Kavkasia and

Channel 9 became available in packages offered by the largest cable networks such as Silk, Super and Caucasus TVs. The PACE delegation also applauded the work of the Voter’s List Verification Commission work to enhance the quality of the voters list.

The OSCE/ODIHR interim report, covering the period between August 22 and September 5, stated that whereas the Georgian government pledges to conduct fully transparent, free and fair elections, GD expresses distrust in the electoral process that triggers “concerns about the abuse of administrative resources and intimidation of supporters.” OSCE/ODIHR report noted that some of the provisions of party funding legislative amendments were deliberately tailored to restrict the GD leader’s financial capacities. It also criticized the SAO for its biased stance reflected in a selective approach toward electoral subjects and the imposition of excessive fines. In addition, the OSCE/ODIHR report found Georgian media outlets divided according to political outlook and lacking independent editorial policies.

Apart from the international organizations, the country’s pre-election environment was evaluated by the U.S. interagency delegation visiting Georgia on September 10-12. The head of the delegation, deputy assistant secretary of state in the bureau of democracy and human rights Thomas O. Melia, said that despite a variety of faults, the political environment in the country is conducive to ensure the full participation of all political players on equal terms. Political parties are able to travel throughout the country, hold rallies and freely deliver their messages via media sources. “We have every expectation, based on the political parties’ commitment to contain any violence and the government’s commitment that security forces will be scrupulously professional,” Melia said.

The major tendencies outlined by international observers in the run up to the October 1 parliamentary elections include both the GD’s persuasion that the government intends to

falsify the election results and the belief on part of the UNM that GD “is preparing for post-election disorder” rather than for elections. These tendencies raise pre-election tensions and

imply a risk of renewed instability after the elections.

NEW GOVERNMENT FORMED IN KYRGYZSTAN

Joldosh Osmonov

The breakup of Kyrgyzstan’s parliamentary majority coalition and dismissal of the government as a result of corruption allegations against Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov has led to the formation of a new government. While many consider the new Prime Minister, Jantoro Satybaldiev, an “anti-crisis manager” in light of the serious economic problems the country is facing, others are skeptical of his capability to bring about significant changes.

On September 12, the newly-formed cabinet of ministers took an oath at the national parliament in the presence of the country’s president, Almazbek Atambaev. The new government, which was formed in an unexpectedly short period of time, received the votes of 111 parliamentarians out of the present 113. A majority of the parliament members also supported the candidacy of Satybaldiev, previously chief of the presidential administration, to the Prime Minister’s post offered by the new parliamentary ruling coalition. The government structure remains the same with most of the members of government staying on their posts.

Despite the expectations of a difficult and lengthy process to form a new parliamentary majority coalition, which has been the case in the past, the three parliamentary factions Ata Meken, Ar Namys and Social-Democratic Party managed to reach a quick agreement on the formation of a new ruling coalition, leaving the other two factions, Respublika and Ata Jurt, in opposition. It is notable that two of the coalition members, Ata Meken and Ar Namys,

instigated the government’s dismissal by leaving the previous ruling coalition. These two factions accused the previous head of the government Omurbek Babanov of corruption and of putting his personal business interests above those of the state.

The new Prime Minister Satybaldiev has held various senior positions under all Kyrgyz presidents in the past. During different periods he has served as Transport Minister, Osh City Mayor, Osh oblast governor, and Director of the government agency on reconstruction and development in Osh and Jalalabad cities after the ethnic violence in 2010. After Atambaev became president, Satybaldiev was appointed the chief of his administration.

Satybaldiev is considered to be a compromise figure among different influential political groups. Despite the fact that he is not officially affiliated with the pro-presidential Social Democratic party, he is seen as one of the most loyal supporters of the president. The new head of government is known as an experienced and diplomatic politician whose non-confrontational approach seems to satisfy more or less all political groups in the country. The leader of the Ata Meken parliamentary faction, Omurbek Tekebaev, described him as the “right person at the right moment.” Being born in the south of the country, his candidacy is also expected to alleviate the north-south political rivalry.

Many experts acknowledge that the selection of Satybaldiev as head of the cabinet of ministers will ease the heated political situation in the

country. At the same time, experts claim that Satybaldiev's appointment is part of a well-designed plan on the part of President Atambaev to take control over government. They note that Atambaev will now have a technocratic Prime Minister, who does not have big political ambitions and lacks wide public support, as opposed to the independent-minded and popular Babanov.

In the meantime, Satybaldiev has already outlined the main priorities of his cabinet. He quickly began work without changing the government's structure and allowed most of its members to remain in office, arguing that there is no time for reorganization and emphasizing his general adherence to the previous Prime Minister's course. He named the restoration of a vertical power structure and the fight against political corruption as his main priorities. Talking about the country's most prominent problem, a state budget deficit estimated at 21

billion soms, Satybaldiev emphasized the need for budget sequestration.

Most local political experts already discuss how long this government will survive. Some claim that in light of the economic problems widely believed to be almost impossible to solve, the new Prime Minister will also resign in the near future, in turn forecasting a serious political and economic crisis in the country. Others think that the open confrontation and disagreements among the political groups in parliament will result in yet another dismissal of the government. However, most experts say that the political elite understands that another government dismissal will bring the country to a point of no return and will search for compromises to allow the government more room for maneuver, thus allowing it to function for a longer period of time.

ARMENIA AVOIDS CUSTOMS UNION MEMBERSHIP

Haroutiun Khachatryan

Despite some existing problems, Russia and Armenia retain a close alliance. This was once more underlined in a non-official summit held in Moscow last August.

On August 8, a Russian-Armenian summit took place in Moscow. Armenia has long been among Russia's closest allies and, given the difference in size between the two countries, could be expected to have limited leverage in negotiations with the much larger power. Armenia's President Serzh Sargsyan was formally on vacation, which he interrupted to attend the Moscow meeting.

However, the summit demonstrated that Armenia was able to defend its interests against its powerful partner. Although some experts were quick to point out that joining Armenia to the Russia-led Customs Union was not a

priority during the meeting, the proceedings showed that this issue was indeed high on the agenda. Armenia's membership in the Customs Union was previously discussed during a visit of Sergey Naryshkin, Chairman of Russia's State Duma, to Armenia on July 23-24, as well as during President Sargsyan's meeting with Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev in London on July 28.

The Customs Union resembles the Maastricht Treaty of the EU and is intended to underpin a geopolitical pole in Eurasia centered on Russia, usually termed the Eurasian Union. These ideas were presented in a series of articles by President Vladimir Putin appearing earlier this year before he was again elected President of Russia. A Customs Union is already established between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, based

on a treaty signed on October 6, 2007. Russia is eager to also include Armenia in the Customs Union and is able to apply significant leverage on the small country not least by conditioning the supply of natural gas which Armenia lacks. Russia currently supplies gas to Armenia priced at US\$ 186 per 1,000 cubic meters, which is much cheaper than the Russian supplies to any of its neighbors.

Yet, Armenia remains skeptical to membership in the Customs Union. Armenia always signs agreements on free trade in the CIS, the free-trade zone agreement signed on October 18, 2011, in St. Petersburg being the latest example. On September 12, 2012, Armenia became the fourth country to ratify this Agreement. However, Armenia also seeks a free-trade and other Association agreements with the EU. It is currently in advanced negotiations with the EU on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) as Armenia is a member of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative. Membership in the Customs Union may hinder these processes, and Armenia hopes to benefit from both free trade zones.

To counter Russia's pressure to join the Customs Union, the Armenian side brought a set of arguments to the summit. First, Armenia has no common borders with either member country of the Eurasian Customs Union. In particular, it is separated from Russia by Georgia, which has no relations with Russia, and by Azerbaijan, which has no relations with Armenia. Second, no clear concept either of the Eurasian Customs Union or the EurAsEC economic union as a whole has been elaborated. Hence, it is unclear to Armenia which organization it should join. Third, Armenia remains a valuable ally to the CIS and to Russia in particular, since it is now the only South Caucasian country which favors military cooperation with Russia. This is all the more

evident given the lack of success in Russia's recent negotiations with Azerbaijan regarding the Gabala radar station.

In a recent quote, President Sargsyan stated that "The military and technical cooperation is also taking up speed. In 2010, we extended the time terms for deployment of the Russian military base in Armenia. We trust that the presence of the Russian military base in Armenia emanates from our security interests. This fall, we will conduct CSTO military exercises in Armenia. Overall, I believe that through the deepening of our relations, we are promoting peace and security in the Caucasus." Sargsyan implies that not only does Armenia need Russia, but Russia also needs Armenia. Relations between the two countries are not devoid of problems. A permanent issue has been the fact that the Russian labor market attracts a large number of skilled Armenians every year. Another problem emerged in early September, when the Russian Foreign Ministry offered only a slow and weak reaction to Azerbaijan's release on August 31 and pardon of military officer Ramil Safarov, sentenced and imprisoned in Hungary for the murder of an Armenian officer. Russia's reaction came three days after the event in contrast to the immediate denouncement by the U.S. However, Russia and Armenia remain important partners. As for the Customs Union, Armenia was given the special status of an observer who can participate in the formation of the Union, which at least buys it time. The problem of the natural gas price was also discussed at that meeting, but no final decision was taken. Armenia will most likely retain the beneficial price this winter. This is a limited burden for Russia as the quantities used by Armenia only represents a fraction of Russian exports.

NEWS DIGEST

NATO CHIEF VISTING ARMENIA AMID TENSIONS

5 September

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen is expected to meet with Armenia's leadership during a two-day visit to Yerevan that begins on September 5. The visit comes amid escalating tensions between Armenia and neighboring Azerbaijan over Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's decision to pardon an Azerbaijani military officer who had been jailed for life in Hungary for the murder of an Armenian officer in 2004. Hungary says it returned the officer to Azerbaijan after receiving assurances for Azeri officials that his life sentence would be enforced. It is not clear if the NATO chief will visit Azerbaijan, with NATO saying only that Rasmussen is opening a regional tour of the South Caucasus. Armenia and Azerbaijan have been in conflict for around three decades over Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian-controlled territory inside Azerbaijan. (RFE/RL)

DISQUALIFIED SOUTH OSSETIA CANDIDATE REGISTERS NEW PARTY

5 September

The disqualified winner of last year's presidential election in Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia has officially registered her new political party. The new party of Alla Dzhioyeva, a surprise winner over a Kremlin-backed candidate in the November 2011 election, is called Ossetia -- Liberty Square. Dzhioyeva made headlines last year after supporters rallied against a Supreme Court decision to invalidate the presidential election in which preliminary polls showed Dzhioyeva was winning. Dzhioyeva was barred from taking part in the repeat presidential poll in April and Kremlin-backed Leonid Tibilov was announced the winner. South Ossetia broke away from Georgia in the early 1990s. Russia recognized it as an independent state following a brief war with Georgia in 2008, something only five other countries have also since done. (RFE/RL)

TURKMENISTAN HOLDS FIRST-EVER MILITARY MANEUVERS IN CASPIAN

6 September

Turkmenistan has held its first naval drills on the Caspian Sea amid a dispute with Azerbaijan over ownership of a section of the sea believed to hold lucrative energy reserves. In June, the two sides accused each other of provocations and vowed to defend their rights over a section of an undersea oil field called Kapaz by Baku and Serdar by Ashgabat. Experts have estimated that the region could be holding upward of 50 million tons of oil. Tensions over how the inland Caspian Sea should be divided among the five surrounding states, which also include Russia, Iran, and Kazakhstan, began after the 1991 Soviet collapse. The naval drills held on September 5 near Turkmenistan's western seaport of Turkmenbashi involved an exercise in repelling a naval attack on ships and oil refineries. (RFE/RL)

NATO: TALIBAN CELL LEADER KILLED

7 September

NATO forces in Afghanistan carried out two successful operations, killing a Taliban cell leader and seizing large quantities of opium, officials said Friday. In a statement, the International Security Assistance Force said the cell leader, identified as Ahmed Shah or Ajmal, is believed to have been in charge of Taliban military operations in western Helmand province. Days before he was killed Thursday, he is believed to have led an attack that killed several Afghan soldiers, ISAF said. Ajmal was killed by an airstrike after ISAF soldiers made sure there were no civilians in the area, officials said. Also in Helmand, Afghan security forces working with coalition troops made a vehicle stop that led to a big haul in drugs with more than 1,000 pounds of dry opium and 200 pounds of wet opium seized. The search also turned up weapons, ammunition and night vision goggles, the ISAF

release said. Three suspected insurgents were arrested. Military officials say the Taliban uses drugs to finance its operations. (UPI)

U.S., RUSSIA FURTHER ANTARCTIC COOPERATION

8 September

The United States and Russia have signed two agreements on furthering their cooperation in the Antarctic and the Bering Strait region that connects the two countries. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signed the documents on September 8 in Vladivostok on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Summit. Lavrov praised the agreements as further proof of the two countries' resolve to work together. "As a whole the memorandum demonstrates the will of our countries to work jointly for mutual benefit on a wide array of Antarctic issues. And the statement about inter-regional cooperation reinforces our positive experience we've already had in this sphere and gives our regions understanding that the governments of Russia and the United States encourage them to develop further mutually beneficial ties," Lavrov said at a press conference along with Clinton. "It is an important aspect of our relationship as it touches the issues that directly affect our citizens," he added. Clinton pointed to the documents as a further positive sign in the growth of bilateral relations since the countries' "reset" in relations in 2009. "We are formally deepening our scientific cooperation in Antarctica, a continent with vast opportunities for research. Scientists from both of our countries will work together to explore Antarctica's terrain, study the effects of climate change, and cooperate on a range of issues to better understand and protect our environment," Clinton said. "And for the first time, U.S. and Russian officials and scientists are working together to enforce the Antarctic Treaty." As a further sign of better bilateral relations, Clinton pointed out cooperation on a new visa regime that will help Russian and U.S. companies. "Tomorrow our historic visa agreement will come into force. It will facilitate travel between our nations, which will strengthen both people-to-people ties and business contacts," Clinton said. "It is fitting that this agreement will come into force during APEC. Business communities in our countries repeatedly ask us for visa liberalization to make it easier for

them to work together, and we are happy to be able to deliver." Speaking later, Clinton said the U.S. Congress may move this month to upgrade trade relations by lifting the 1974 Jackson-Vanik amendment, Cold War-era legislation that has blocked normal trade privileges for Russia.

Congress is under pressure to act after Russia joined the World Trade Organization last month. (RFE/RL)

PUTIN SLAMS EU OVER GAZPROM PROBE

9 September
Russian President Vladimir Putin has condemned a European Commission probe into Russian state-controlled energy giant Gazprom, saying it was "unconstructive." Speaking on the sidelines of the annual summit of Pacific rim nations, Putin said the EU's action was prompted by the "difficult economic situation in the eurozone." "What is going on against Gazprom is not news. You know, some foreign Gazprom offices were raided last year. This is a second step in this direction. We regret this is happening," Putin said. Putin added that the EU wants Russia to bear the costs of "subsidizing" the economies of Central and Eastern Europe countries. "To a large extent, the European Union subsidizes Eastern European economies. Now someone in the European Commission probably decided that we should share some burden of this subsidizing. In other words, united Europe wants to retain political influence and it wants us to pay for it. But it is not a productive approach," Putin said. The European Commission launched its probe on September 4, saying that Gazprom is blocking competition in the Baltic states and former Soviet-bloc countries. The EU is looking into whether Gazprom "prevented the diversification of gas supplies" and "imposed unfair prices" on these customers. Gazprom denies the allegations and says its business practices are in line with those of other gas producers. Putin said, although the Soviet Union provided hugely subsidized energy to its communist-bloc satellites, Russia will not make nonmarket decisions and will not "take on additional obligations linked to antimarket solutions for the economies of those countries." Putin added that he does not consider the EU probe the beginning of a "trade war" with Russia.

HRW CITES 'ABUSIVE' RESPONSE TO STRIKE BY KAZAKH GOV'T, OIL FIRMS **10 September**

Leading rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) has accused Kazakhstan's government and several oil firms of systematic violations of the rights of thousands of oil workers. The group said in a report released on September 10 that last year's extended protests, which resulted in the eventual killing of at least 16 workers by police and thousands of layoffs, highlighted the larger issue of "disregard for workers' rights and other human rights." The report, "Striking Oil, Striking Workers: Violations of Labor Rights in Kazakhstan's Oil Sector," documents how the government and three oil companies in western Kazakhstan violated the rights of oil workers to freedom of association, to organize and bargain collectively, and to freedom of speech. "That is, interference in workers' efforts to bargain collectively, mass dismissals of workers following peaceful strikes and other violations," Mihra Rittmann of HRW, speaking to RFE/RL from Almaty, said of the violations described in the report. "We thought it was really important to look into these violations and come up with some recommendations for how the government could address workers' rights going forward." Of the three companies named in the report, two are joint ventures: KarazhanbasMunai JSC, a Chinese-Kazakh company; and Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC, which is partially-owned by Italy's Eni. The third is Kazakh firm OzenMunaiGas. The report, based on field research and interviews with oil workers and union leaders at the three companies, says the firms' managements and government authorities initially reacted with indifference to employees' efforts to negotiate collective agreements in May 2011 and subsequently resorted to harassment of union leaders and mass dismissals – some 2,000 people were fired from the three companies. Thousands of workers went on strike after negotiations failed, and some declared hunger strikes. Authorities brutally broke some strikes, and several union leaders and representatives were sentenced to jail terms. On December 16, police opened fire on a crowd in the western town of Zhanaozen, amid violence triggered by unidentified men in oil-company jackets. A total of 16 people died as a result of the incident. After the violence, authorities cracked down on vocal oil workers and activists. HRW calls on Kazakhstan to bring its labor legislation in line with international standards on collective bargaining, freedom of association, and

the right to strike. It also urges the government to protect union members and stop using prosecution against them. The report also urges Kazakhstan's foreign partners -- those from the European Union in particular -- not to turn a blind eye to abuses against Kazakh workers and set norms for human rights improvement in the country. It says that international companies "should ensure that their workers, or workers employed in their subsidiary companies or other business partners, enjoy basic rights to organize, bargain collectively, and strike." The document calls on the European Union, which is currently negotiating an enhanced partnership cooperation agreement with Kazakhstan, to establish "specific and measurable benchmarks for human rights improvement" for Kazakhstan to comply with in exchange for closer ties with the bloc. Rittmann said the agreement offers the EU and its member states substantial leverage in dealing with Astana. "[The European Union] has an opportunity to do much more to promote the protection of workers' rights as these negotiations are under way," Rittmann said. "Acting now will ensure that European companies that are working in Kazakhstan and European governments that are member states of the EU and investing in Kazakhstan are not benefitting from a poor rights climate for workers and poor labor legislation in Kazakhstan." (RFE/RL)

RUSSIAN AZERI DIASPORA LEADER SURVIVES ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

11 September

The leader of the local ethnic Azeri community in the central Russian region of Ulyanovsk has been wounded in an apparent assassination attack. Local authorities say unknown assailants opened fire on Islam Guseinov, 43, the local leader of the All-Russia Azerbaijani Congress and his bodyguard in Ulyanovsk, the regional capital. The bodyguard died on the spot, while Guseinov was hospitalized with minor injuries. There has been no official comment on a possible motive. Local authorities have launched an investigation. Similar attacks against leaders and prominent members of the Azeri community in Russia have been reported this year. In May, the leader of the ethnic Azeri community in the eastern Ukrainian city of Donetsk, Igbal Makhmudov, was shot dead by an unknown assailant in the town of Makiivka.

NEW KYRGYZ GOVERNMENT SWORN IN 12 September

Kyrgyzstan's new prime minister, Jantoro Satybaldiev, and his government have been formally sworn into office. Satybaldiev, who previously had been chief of the presidential office, was appointed to the prime minister's post last week by President Almazbek Atambaev. Parliament has confirmed the nomination. The previous government collapsed last month after two parties in the governing coalition -- Ar-Namys (Dignity) and Ata-Meken (Fatherland) -- quit the alliance over differences with then Prime Minister Omurbek Babanov. Lawmakers representing the Social Democratic, Ar-Namys, and Ata-Meken parties established a new ruling coalition on September 3. Babanov's Respublika party and the Ata-Jurt (Homeland) party have founded an opposition alliance called Rule of Law and Justice. (RFE/RL)

EU FMS TO MONITOR PREPARATIONS FOR GEORGIA VOTE

14 September

Foreign ministers from five of the European Union's newest member states have been tasked with monitoring preparations for Georgia's parliamentary elections on October 1. The Bulgarian Foreign Ministry said in a statement that Foreign Minister Nickolay Mladenov will join fellow ministers from Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Romania in traveling to Georgia on September 17 to observe preparations for the vote and show support for reforms "leading to Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration." The ruling party of President Mikheil Saakashvili is expected to face its stiffest competition since coming to power after the 2003 Rose Revolution, with support growing for the Georgian Dream opposition movement led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen warned last week the vote would be a "litmus test" for Georgian democracy. (RFE/RL)

TAJIK, UZBEK BORDER GUARDS TRADE BLAME FOR SHOOTING INCIDENT

14 September

The Uzbek and Tajik border-protection agencies have blamed each other for a shooting incident in which an Uzbek border guard was severely injured. Tajik officials say the Uzbek border guard entered

Tajik territory on horseback on September 11 and started filming the Tajik side of the border. After he ignored a command to leave, the Tajik side opened fire. Uzbek authorities insist the border guard was on the Uzbek side of the border and that Uzbek soldiers did not shoot. Relations between the two countries are often tense. Dushanbe and Tashkent stopped direct air flights in 1992 and introduced a visa regime in 2001. Some parts of the 1,330-kilometer Tajik-Uzbek border are mined, and 16 percent of it remains disputed. (RFE/RL)

OVERNIGHT BLAST TARGETS INTERIOR MINISTRY IN WEST KAZAKHSTAN

15 September

An overnight explosion and gun battle near a police station in tense western Kazakhstan has left at least two policemen injured, according to reports cited by RFE/RL's Kazakh Service. The incident comes days after a deadly operation in the same province to round up alleged terrorists thought to be responsible for a bombing near a mosque about a week ago. The latest blast occurred shortly after midnight on September 15 in the courtyard of local Interior Ministry offices in the provincial capital, Atyrau.

Witnesses were quoted as saying an exchange of gunfire followed the explosion. Authorities immediately cordoned off the area and were searching passing cars in an effort to find those responsible. A state television station saying "several" police officers had been wounded in the initial explosion. One police source told RFE/RL's Kazakh Service that six people had been arrested in connection with the incident. It marks the third violent incident in the Atyrau region this month. One person was killed when an explosive device detonated in a private apartment near a mosque on September 5. A week later, on September 12, security forces reported killing five alleged terrorists and seriously wounding another in a raid on an apartment building with a suspected connection to that explosion. Western Kazakhstan has seen a number of bloody incidents as tensions have mounted over labor disputes and other social frictions in the past 18 months or so. The first suicide bombing in Kazakh memory was reported in May 2011 in the western city of Aqtobe, injuring three people. Less than six months later, bombers targeted a regional prosecutor's office in downtown Atyrau. International rights group Human Rights Watch (HRW) recently accused the government in

Astana and several oil firms of systematic violations of the rights of thousands of oil workers in the west of the country. HRW charged in a September 10 report that extended protests in 2011, which resulted in the killing of at least 16 workers by police and thousands of layoffs, highlighted a broader issue of "disregard for workers' rights and other human rights." (RFE/RL)

AFGHANISTAN OKS THREE FOR SECURITY POSTS

15 September

The Afghan parliament voted Saturday to approve three men to fill key security positions. At least two of the men have already held ministerial positions in the government, Khaama Press reported. Bismillah Mohammadi was approved as defense minister. He previously was the interior minister. Asadullah Khalid got the legislative nod as chief of the national intelligence service, the National Directorate of Security. He earlier directed the border, tribal and ethnic affairs ministry. Mojtaba Patang was named the new Afghan interior affairs minister. Haji Din Mohammad was nominated for the post of border, tribal and ethnic affairs minister. However, he failed to get enough votes to secure approval. (UPI)

CSTO STAGES MILITARY EXERCISES IN ARMENIA

16 September

The Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has launched large-scale military exercises in the South Caucasus nation of Armenia. Around 2,000 troops from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan are conducting five days of war games. Armenian Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian said the aim of the exercises was to create a "regional force that can neutralize potential threats." The war games could prove unsettling to two South Caucasus neighbors -- Azerbaijan, which remains in a hostile dispute with Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 and still views the Kremlin as a military threat. (RFE/RL)

TURKEY PM ERDOGAN SAYS KURDISH PKK TAKES 500 CASUALTIES

17 September

Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, says 500 Kurdish rebels have been "rendered ineffective" by Turkish forces in the space of a month. The government often uses the term "rendered ineffective" to mean killed. Mr Erdogan said 123 militants were killed over the past 10 days near the south-eastern border with Iraq. The surge in deaths follows a recent escalation in attacks by the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on Turkish targets. Dozens of Turkish troops and civilians, including children, have been killed in recent bombings blamed on the group. On Sunday, eight police officers died as their bus was blown up by a roadside bomb in the southern Turkish province of Bingol. The PKK launched an armed campaign for an ethnic Kurdish homeland in south-east Turkey in 1984. Since then more than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict. The Turkish government, the US and the EU all regard the PKK as a terrorist organization. Mr Erdogan said: "In operations held during the past month, some 500 terrorists were rendered ineffective in the [south-east] region." The Turkish army said last week that 461 people had been killed in clashes between February and August this year. It said the military had staged close to 1,000 operations against the rebels over the last six months. (BBC)

KABUL FILM PROTESTERS FIRE WEAPONS AND SET CARS ALIGHT

17 September

More than 1,000 people in the Afghan capital Kabul are taking part in an angry demonstration against a film mocking Islam which has given rise to protests around the world. The demonstration is close to US and Nato installations in Kabul. The Kabul police chief said he had been injured by a rock thrown by a protester. Other protesters fired guns, and police vehicles were set alight. Lebanese militant group Hezbollah has called for a week of protests. The leader of the influential Shia Muslim group, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, said the world needed to know Muslims "would not be silent in the face of this insult". The first protest has been called for Monday afternoon in a southern suburb of Beirut which is a Hezbollah stronghold. Sheikh Nasrallah - who said

he had waited for the Pope to finish a visit before speaking out - branded the video the most dangerous insult to Islam ever. It was worse, he said, than Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, which were published in a Danish newspaper in 2005. 'Death to America!' In Kabul, black smoke from burning tyres streamed into the air, and shopkeepers hurriedly locked up and went home, as the protest gathered pace, reports said. Protesters shouted "Death to America!" and "Death to those people who have made a film and insulted our Prophet!", reported news agency Associated Press. There was a heavy presence of riot police and Afghan national police guarding the US embassy, said the BBC's Bilal Sarwary at the scene. Kabul's police chief, Gen Ayub Salangi, told the BBC: "Some of the armed demonstrators continue to fire. There are agitators among demonstrators. I have ordered police not to open fire. "They have thrown rocks and stones at us. I was hit and injured myself." Protests over the film at the centre of the row, many of which target US diplomatic missions, have shown no sign of abating so far. At least one person was killed in clashes between protesters and police in Pakistan on Sunday. There were also protests in some European capitals. On Monday authorities set up street barriers in Pakistan's biggest city, Karachi, to try to keep anticipated demonstrations under control. (BBC)

SUICIDE BOMBING IN KABUL KILLS FOREIGNERS

18 September

A suicide car bomber in Afghanistan attacked a bus carrying foreigners in Kabul early Tuesday, killing up to 12 people, authorities said. The attack follows a weekend of deadly violence that included the deaths of eight coalition troops in so-called insider attacks and a daring insurgent assault on Camp Bastion. The attacks also come as protests against the United States over an anti-Islam film spread across the Muslim world. The BBC reported the attacker in the Tuesday bombing, identified as a young woman, set off the explosion as the bus traveled on a major highway leading to the international airport in the Afghan capital. It quoted officials as saying up to 12 people had died, most of them foreigners. The bus was believed to be carrying the airport's international staff. CNN, quoting an Afghan official, said the bus was attacked on the main road

leading to the Afghan capital's international airport. Those aboard the bus included foreigners and an Afghan interpreter, the report said. CNN said at least 10 others were wounded in the attack. The report said video footage showed military officials around the smoldering vehicle. China's Xinhua news agency quoted a police official as saying, "A suicide bomber targeted a minibus carrying foreign nationals along a main road from Kabul airport to Kabul intercontinental hotel, leaving at least nine foreigners dead." Xinhua said the explosion occurred at around 6:45 a.m. local time. Xinhua quoted a local television channel TV channel also saying nine foreigners died in the attack. A senior counter-terrorism official in Kabul told the BBC: "We can confirm that the suicide attack was carried out by a female suicide attacker. She is either a young girl or a woman." The nationalities of the foreigners are not yet known. Joint military operations between the United States and Afghanistan were indefinitely suspended Monday after the weekend insider attacks in which those killed included four Americans. "We're to the point now where we can't trust these people," a senior military official told NBC News. "It's had a major impact on our ability to conduct combat operations with them, and we're going to have to back off to a certain degree." Among the troops killed in the insider attacks, six, including four Americans, died Sunday at a remote checkpoint near a NATO installation in southern Zabul province. In a similar insider attack on Saturday, two British soldiers were killed in southern Helmand province by an Afghan believed to a member of the local police. Separately last Friday, the Taliban launched a daring attack on the heavily fortified Camp Bastion base in Helmand province, killing two Marines and damaging or destroying eight attack jets with damage estimated at more than \$200 million. One insurgent was captured and 14 others were during the subsequent fighting. The Taliban have stepped up their violence as U.S. forces plan to end combat operations in Afghanistan by 2014, allowing Afghan forces to take control of their country. Afghanistan has been relatively quiet so far even as the protests over the anti-Islam film. (UPI)

RUSSIA MULLS BAN ON YOUTUBE

18 September

Russia may soon join the growing list of countries blocking or restricting access to YouTube to prevent people from viewing a controversial film that

ridicules the Prophet Muhammad. Communications Minister Nikolai Nikiforov posted on Twitter that Russia might block YouTube entirely at the beginning of November after a new law aimed at protecting children from harmful information comes into force. Google, which owns YouTube, has barred access to the film in Egypt, India, Indonesia, Libya, and Malaysia. Bangladesh announced that it has blocked access to YouTube. Pakistan made a similar announcement on September 17. Google has refused to place a blanket ban on the video, citing concerns about freedom of speech. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that many Western countries restrict pro-Nazi propaganda and other forms of speech but allow speech insulting to Muslims.

KYRGYZ DEPUTY ARRESTED FOR ALLEGED CORRUPTION

18 September

The Kyrgyz Prosecutor General's office says a lawmaker has been arrested on charges of fraud and corruption. Sadyr Japarov of the opposition Ata-Jurt (Homeland) party was arrested on September 17. Ata-Jurt says Japarov's arrest is politically motivated. According to officials, Japarov's arrest is connected to an investigation into the son of another lawmaker employed by the Bishkek Prosecutor's Office, Eldar Madyzbekov, who was detained on September 15. Madyzbekov is suspected of illegally obtaining property that used to belong to ousted Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Madyzbekov's father, Turatbek Madyzbekov, is chairman of the Kyrgyz parliament's anticorruption committee. Ex-President Kurmanbek Bakiyev fled Kyrgyzstan after he was toppled by antigovernment protests in April 2010. He has been residing in Belarus since then. (RFE/RL)

NATO CURBS AFGHAN JOINT PATROLS OVER 'INSIDER' ATTACKS

18 September

NATO says it is restricting operations with Afghan troops following a string of deadly attacks on its personnel by rogue Afghan security forces. Only large operations will now be conducted jointly, with joint patrols evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Isaf said these were "prudent, but temporary, measures to reduce our profile and vulnerability". NATO commanders have been frustrated that the Afghans have not done more to stem the rise in attacks,

analysts say. Britain's Defence Secretary Phillip Hammond said the announcement did not amount to a change in strategy, but was to "ensure that any partnering with Afghan troops at lower than battalion level is properly approved with proper risk assessments in place". The move came as a suicide bomber targeted a bus carrying foreigners in the capital, killing 12 people on Tuesday morning. The attack happened on a major road leading to the international airport and reports suggest those on board worked at the airport. Afghan insurgent group Hezb-e-Islami has claimed it carried out the attack, which it says was in response to a recent anti-Islam video. Meanwhile NATO-led Isaf forces said they had arrested a Taliban leader and two insurgents they said were involved in last Friday's attack on the sprawling Camp Bastion in southern Helmand province. The Taliban leader, said Isaf, was suspected of "providing support" to the militants who staged the audacious assault, which killed two US marines and destroyed six Harrier fighter jets. Rogue 'surge' The joint command of the NATO-led Isaf forces said "events outside of and inside Afghanistan" related to the anti-Islam film, which was made in the US, were part of the reason for its restrictions on joint operations. Afghanistan - like many other countries in the Middle East, Africa and Asia - has seen days of protests over the video, some violent. On Monday, hundreds of protesters threw rocks and torched police vehicles in an angry protest against the film in Kabul. The AFP news agency said hundreds more staged a new protest in the northern city of Kunduz on Tuesday. Another prompt for the new restrictions is the recent surge in so-called "green-on-blue" attacks, Isaf said. The shift in NATO's operational procedures has not been well explained. Considerable confusion remains as to what exactly will or will not change on the ground. A NATO spokesman says that partnering operations below battalion level will have to be approved by a senior regional commander; the British defence secretary in contrast suggests most UK-Afghan operations will continue unchanged down to company level. Clearly the aim is to reduce the exposure of NATO personnel to potential attack by uniformed Afghans. The cumulative effect of these attacks strikes at the very core of NATO's mission. With most NATO combat troops due to leave in 2014, operations are in transition between counter-insurgency and a training and mentoring role. But training and mentoring require trust and a functioning relationship between NATO and Afghan personnel.

It is this the so-called "green-on-blue" attacks destroys, and thus their significance goes well beyond the numerical count of the casualties they cause. Fifty-one NATO troops have been killed by Afghan soldiers so far this year - 15 in August alone. In 2008, just two soldiers died in such attacks - though Isaf and Afghan force numbers have also increased substantially in that period. Four US soldiers and two UK soldiers died in rogue attacks at the weekend. A fifth of UK soldiers killed this year in Afghanistan were killed not by insurgents, but by Afghan soldiers or police. Joint operations will now only be conducted routinely at battalion level - large operations involving several hundred troops. "This does not mean there will be no partnering below that level; the need for that will be evaluated on a case by case basis" but it will have to be approved by a two-star general, Isaf said. It later clarified that the changes were temporary. "In some local instances, operational tempo has been reduced, or force protection has been increased. These actions balance the tension of the recent video with force protection, while maintaining the momentum of the campaign," said a second statement. NATO insisted it remained "absolutely committed to partnering with, training, advising and assisting our ANSF [Afghan National Security Forces] counterparts". In a news conference, US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta told reporters he was concerned about

the effect of insider attacks. But he insisted they did not mean the Taliban was getting stronger or regaining lost territory. He said the US would do all it could to minimise risks to its forces, but "we will not lose sight of the fundamental mission here, which is to continue to proceed to assure a peaceful transition to Afghan security and governance". Mr Hammond said the changes would have "minimal impact" on UK operations. The UK has 9,500 troops in Afghanistan. The BBC's Quentin Sommerville, in Kabul, says international and Afghan forces are meant to fight shoulder-to-shoulder against the Taliban and the new restrictions strike at the heart of NATO's strategy in Afghanistan. In practical terms, US soldiers are already staying on their bases, while Afghans carry out patrols alone. The Afghan ministry of defence said it had not been formally notified of the changes until a hurriedly convened meeting with NATO on Tuesday. There has been enormous frustration among NATO commanders that Afghan officials have not been doing enough to prevent the rise in attacks. Correspondents say the Isaf shift is clearly aimed at sending a signal to the Afghan government that it must improve its vetting of new entrants to the Afghan army and police force. But with 7,000 new recruits a month joining the Afghan army alone, it is a huge challenge to ensure Taliban militants do not slip through the net, they say. (BBC)

