

# Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 9 NO. 20

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*



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# THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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

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**KEY ISSUE:** A short 100-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:** Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGdO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

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

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## GEORGIA'S OKRUASHVILI SCANDAL: LOUD BANG WITH UNCERTAIN FALLOUT

*Jaba Devdariani*

*The Return of Georgia's former hawkish Defense Minister, Irakli Okruashvili, to Georgian politics was scandalous, but short-lived. After leveling an array of heavy accusations against President Mikheil Saakashvili on September 25, Okruashvili was arrested on September 27 on charges of extortion, money laundering and negligence. Surprisingly, he pleaded guilty on October 9 and publicly recanted his allegations against the president. Okruashvili's case galvanized the opposition parties and showed the extent of the protest vote in Georgia, but the impact on internal politics might prove short-lived.*

**BACKGROUND:** Irakli Okruashvili, a lawyer by education, served as the new government's "bad cop" following the Rose Revolution in 2003. During his brief spells in office in 2003-2004 he presided over the arrest of Shevardnadze-era corrupt officials as Prosecutor-General, and then fired the country's entire corrupt traffic police force as Minister of Interior to launch the new Patrol Police force. He was appointed Minister of Defense in 2004 to launch an ambitious clean-up and boost the country's armed forces.

Despite President Saakashvili's continuous backing, during his two years in this latest post Okruashvili gradually became a political liability. He consistently advocated military action against Georgia's breakaway provinces, especially his native South Ossetia, and brought the country to the brink of large-scale hostilities during the outbreak of violence in 2004, which left several Georgian servicemen killed. Okruashvili was also reviled by Russia for his inflammatory rhetoric and high-handed treatment of the Russian military stationed in Georgia. Georgia's Western military advisors often, albeit quietly, questioned his cleansing of the Ministry of Defense's General Staff of many qualified, often Western-educated officers, in favor of his own protégés. The

transparency of the Ministry's budget was a key concern for opposition parties and NGOs. Two of Okruashvili's personal friends and close allies – Governor of Shida Kartli province Mikheil Kareli, and Okruashvili's deputy at the Ministry of Defense, Aleksander Sukhitashvili, were often accused by the media, NGOs and political opponents of large-scale corruption and abuse of office. Some of these accusations were backed by the Georgian Ombudsperson's report to the parliament in April 2007.

In what was seen as a conciliatory nod towards Russia, President Saakashvili relieved Okruashvili of the Ministry of Defense and appointed him the Minister of Economy on November 10, 2006. However, Okruashvili resigned the post on November 17 and left the country, reportedly for studies. Rumors on Okruashvili's return to politics have abounded since then, with some media sources quoting his talks with influential business and media tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, a partner of the fugitive Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

In September 2007, the prosecution started to apprehend some of Okruashvili's former allies on what seemed to be a well-documented case of soliciting systemic kick-backs from municipal auctions. These

detentions culminated in the arrest of governor Mikheil Kareli on September 26. On September 25 Dimitri Kitoshvili, the president's spokesman and parliamentary secretary, was arrested and charged with extorting mobile operator's shares in favour of Okruashvili in his previous capacity as the Chair of the National Telecommunications Commission.



On September 25, Okruashvili launched his party with damning allegations against President Saakashvili. He accused the President of: conspiring to murder Badri Patarkatsishvili; fabricating evidence on the death of former Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania; plotting a split of the Georgian Orthodox Church; preventing a successful military operation to take South Ossetia's capital, Tkshinvali and covering up the alleged corruption in his own family.

On September 27, Okruashvili was arrested on charges of extortion, money laundering, misuse of power and criminal negligence. The arrest galvanized opposition forces of all stripes, and a reported tens of thousands of people rallied in front of the Parliament on September 28 to protest what they termed the "politically motivated arrest" of Okruashvili. On October 9, the Prosecutor General's office reported that Okruashvili pleaded guilty on several charges, including extortion

and criminal negligence, and was released after posting around US\$6 million in bail payment. In a televised recording of Okruashvili's statement to the prosecutors he also failed to provide an official testimony against Mikheil Saakashvili and stated that all of his accusations were leveled for gaining political advantage. He subsequently announced his decision to quit politics.

**IMPLICATIONS:** In the post-Soviet space, the arrest of a President's political rival following a series of dramatic accusations, followed by a guilty plea, naturally raise suspicions regarding due process of law. However, the legal process is far from complete as Okruashvili will have to face charges in court. The government maintains that Okruashvili made accusations against the President knowing about his imminent arrest, and hoping to increase the political costs of prosecution by posing as a defiant opposition leader.

The short-term political fallout of Okruashvili's case was significant. Political groups of all stripes – from the populist left-wing Labor Party to the right-wing Conservative and Republican Parties – used the public perception of injustice to galvanize their extremely weak political base of support. A record-breaking turnout at September 28 rallies points at a general mobilization of the protest vote. However, these protestors are unlikely to form a unified base for any single political force, and a long-term alliance among the parties that invited the protests is highly unlikely. Okruashvili's departure and confession of guilt is likely to make them reluctant to continue with active participation.

The opposition tries to keep the protest momentum running through radicalization of their tone. The current lowest common denominator to keep the multi-striped coalition together is "Georgia without a President" – meaning abolishment of the institution or presidency, or its significant weakening. However, this objective is only achievable if the opposition either topples Saakashvili's government or wins the constitutional majority in the parliamentary elections. Neither of these scenarios is likely: Saakashvili still enjoys too significant a support to just cede power, while the opposition does not come across as a

responsible and credible enough force to count on a victory in polls.

President Saakashvili's reputation did, however, suffer damage to his credentials as a pro-democracy and anti-corruption fighter. He admitted that much in his initial comment, sweeping away the conspiracy to murder charges as "absurd" but singling out the corruption charges leveled by Okruashvili, as well as the fact as his formerly closest ally is prosecuted for corruption as the "most upsetting."

At the same time, Georgia lives with a TV-driven news cycle, and even the hardest political upsets become ancient history in several months. Unless there are any significant new revelations backing Okruashvili's claims, their effect will fizzle out. President Saakashvili is counteracting by launching a twin effort to further discredit the opposition, while showing improvement in the key painful areas laid bare by Okruashvili's statements. As a stop-gap measure, Saakashvili already ordered compensation packages for the most vulnerable, went to Georgia's wine-growing province of Kakheti, hard-hit by Russian sanctions, to drum up support. Saakashvili applauded the inputs of the older generation in the country's economic development. He thus reached the key elements of the protest vote with a positive message – the disadvantaged, the agricultural workers and the middle-aged professionals that are sidelined by country's younger, more adjusted generation of political and business leaders.

Internationally, it is unclear whether the damage will be lasting. Russian media and politicians, including President Vladimir Putin personally, are widely disseminating the message of a supposedly crumbling Georgian democracy. However, international observers appear to be taking both the Georgian and Russian versions of the events with a pinch of salt. Perhaps the worst outcome is for Georgia's western allies to become indifferent to Georgia, but that depends on the performance of the Georgian courts in the Okruashvili case, as well as the general drive to keep the governance efficient and transparent, and allow for the fullest possible exercise of the freedom of speech and opinion by the opposition.

The ruling party whip in the parliament, Giga Bokeria, has challenged Patarkatsishvili to openly take part in politics. The tycoon's October 11 interview to his own TV channel suggests he seriously intends to do so. It might be better for the Georgian democracy for Patarkatsishvili to play openly, rather than remain a money-bag. But such a position is disadvantageous to his political chances – with poor command of Georgian and little finesse, with an image of being super-rich in an impoverished country, Patarkatsishvili is unlikely to garner much voter sympathy.

**CONCLUSIONS:** President Saakashvili suffered a temporary and damaging setback following Irakli Okruashvili's allegations. However, so far there are no grounds to expect a long-term dramatic fallout for the Georgian authorities. President Saakashvili and his National Movement are clearly in need, however, to restore popular and international confidence.

The Okruashvili crisis once again exposed the lack of avenues for channeling popular disappointment and frustration into the political process. There is a clear demand for an articulate political opposition force to take shape and compete with the authorities. Unfortunately, Okruashvili's brash allegations and their prompt retraction have discredited some of the more nuanced political messages that might have served as a ground for forming a genuine opposition force. The nascent alliance of the Republican, "Georgia's Way", and "Freedom" parties who unite around a pro-European center-right agenda seems to be emerging, but it remains to be seen whether the leaders will manage to crystallize their political message before the impending elections in fall 2008.

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Jaba Devdariani is the founder of Civil Georgia ([civil.ge](http://civil.ge)). He currently serves as a political officer at the OSCE Mission in Serbia but authored this in a private capacity. His commentary is independent of and does not necessarily reflect the views of the OSCE.'

# RUSSIA ATTEMPTS TO LIMIT CHINESE INFLUENCE BY PROMOTING CSTO-SCO COOPERATION

Marcin Kaczmarwski

*In the shadow of the triple summit in Dushanbe (CIS, CSTO, EURASEC), the representatives of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Shanghai Cooperation Organization signed a Memorandum of Understanding, laying the foundations for cooperation between the two organizations. The agreement, for which Russia has pressed Beijing for a long time, can be interpreted as Moscow's attempt to engage China into a fully-fledged military alliance. Nonetheless, more evidence shows that Moscow aims at limiting Chinese freedom of maneuver in Central Asia and demonstrating Russia's preeminence in the region, especially in the field of security.*

**BACKGROUND:** Russia faces a serious dilemma regarding Central Asia security structures. Two organizations, in both of which Moscow actively participates, operate in the field of regional security – the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). There are obvious differences between the CSTO (which is a typical alliance, including obligations of direct military assistance) and the SCO (which is not an alliance, and focuses mainly on issues of soft security). In addition, there are differences in membership (Belarus and Armenia in CSTO, China in SCO). Nonetheless, they face similar tasks of stabilizing the region. One can observe the evolution of the SCO – in the case of Andijan-type events being repeated in one of the Central Asian states, an SCO reaction cannot be excluded.

The CSTO is under Moscow's control, and remains far more operational than the SCO, but Russian analysts point out that the CSTO could find itself in the shadow of the SCO and become an Eurasian-type WEU, which lost its significance to the

advantage of expanding NATO. As early as 2003, Russia began to promote closer ties between the CSTO and the SCO. Moscow has insisted on signing a memorandum on cooperation between the two organizations. The Review of Russian Foreign Policy released in February 2007 pointed out the need to coordinate activities of the SCO, CSTO and EURASEC. The need for such cooperation was also included in a joint communiqué signed by Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao during this latter's visit to Moscow in March 2007.

CSTO observers were present at the SCO Issyk-Kul anti-terror exercises in May 2007. Russia also wanted to make the SCO exercises Peace Mission 2007 a joint task between the CSTO and SCO, but China refused. Only observers were allowed. The Russian Chief of General Staff, General Yury Baluyevsky, proposed for the SCO Bishkek summit to agree on coordination of efforts between SCO members in the security sphere. Lastly, during the summit in August 2007, the president of Tajikistan appealed for the conclusion of an agreement on cooperation between the SCO and CSTO.



Finally, on October 5, a day before the joint summits of three post-Soviet organizations (CIS, CSTO, and EURASEC), the secretariats of the CSTO and SCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding, laying the foundations for cooperation between them. The document is very laconic, consists of four short articles. Both



*Presidents Bakiev, Putin and Rahmon*

organizations agree to cooperate in the fields of regional and international security, the struggle against terrorism, drugs and arms trafficking, as well as other areas. They agree to conduct consultations and share information. They are encouraged to work out joint programs and activities. In every case, the language of the document underlines that the cooperation should take place “within the limits of their [respective] competence”.

**IMPLICATIONS:** The language of the signed agreement remains very cautious and very general, which indicates Chinese unwillingness to commit itself to what could be perceived as a military alliance or involve Beijing into military commitments. China wants to avoid being put into a Russian-led anti-Western front in Eurasia. Furthermore, China is concerned with Russia’s presently stronger position in the region. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that China is interested only in economic and energy

issues within the SCO framework, neglecting the sphere of military security. Beijing wants to maintain the possibility of establishing military contacts with other Central Asian states.

Russian insistence on signing the agreement on CSTO-SCO cooperation can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, Russia seems to want to pull China into an anti-Western front, presenting ties between the two organizations as a kind of military alliance in Eurasia. But more convincing are the regional motives for the CSTO-SCO agreement. Russia attempts to hold its dominant position in Central Asia. It presents itself as a representative of both a military bloc (CSTO) as well as an economic one (EURASEC). By putting them on par with the SCO (where Moscow’s influence has to be shared with China’s), Russia defines itself as the main coordinator of all multilateral activities in Central Asia. The agreement is also a way of promoting the CSTO; especially considering that Russia would like to establish similar ties between CSTO and NATO, including cooperation in Afghanistan.

Russia would like to merge the SCO and CSTO in such a way that it would strengthen its position, presenting itself as a representative of all Central Asian states vis-à-vis Beijing. Too fast a development of the SCO could negatively influence Russia’s position in the field of security. Russia wants to prevent the SCO’s domination of Central Asia, and at the same time, slow the speed of integration and cooperation within the SCO. It also hopes to be able to monitor contacts between China and Central Asian states in the security dimension. In case of focusing only on the CSTO, Russia would risk being left behind in regional security affairs, given the developing military interactions between China and Central Asian states.

The agreement between the CSTO and SCO will not result in merging both organizations or

transforming the SCO into military alliance. The cautiousness showed by China limits the possibilities of conducting common operations by both organizations. Nonetheless, Russia has managed to prevent the erosion of CSTO, which was endangered by the growing role of the SCO. Moscow embarked on strengthening the CSTO (e.g. creating joint peacekeeping forces) and, on the other hand, successfully pressed China for a formal agreement between the CSTO and SCO.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Russian-Chinese relations in Central Asia remain a mix of competition and cooperation, also in the security field. Russia's goal appears to be to retain its leadership during the gradual expansion of the SCO, which is why Moscow pretends to represent post-Soviet Central Asian states vis-à-vis China. Russia aims at putting on an equal standing all organizations acting in this region, which would upgrade those controlled by

Moscow. Possible cooperation between CSTO, EURASEC and SCO would strengthen Russia's role in Central Asia, as well as maintain its predominance as the main 'hub' of multilateral ties in the region. The CSTO-SCO agreement, for which Russia regularly pressed China, remains a rather small step in this direction. Nonetheless, growing ties between the SCO and CSTO would limit Chinese possibilities to talk to its smaller neighbors without taking into account Russian interests.


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## THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY

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New issue of the

### *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*

The August 2007 issue of the China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, edited by Dr. Niklas Swanström, is online.

The issue contains articles by Johannes Linn, Alyson Bailes, Robert O. Freedman, Magnus Norell, and Marlene Laruelle, among other.

The issue is freely available online through [www.silkroadstudies.org](http://www.silkroadstudies.org).

## WILL WASHINGTON'S NEW COUNTERNARCOTICS POLICY IN AFGHANISTAN WORK?

*Haroun Mir and Jens Laurson*

*Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the war on narcotics has become a central policy issue for NATO. The British government has made it one of its priorities and so far spent more than \$100 million to eradicate poppy fields in Afghanistan. Alas, all combined efforts from NATO countries, Afghan government, and the United Nations have failed to produce results. The new US counter-narcotics strategy is not likely to change this, since it does not appear to handle the narcotics issue in the framework of a long-term development strategy.*

**BACKGROUND:** Narcotics trafficking has always been an issue in Afghanistan; it thrived not the least because of three decades of military conflict and absence of law enforcement. But the opium trade is more than a law enforcement issue, it has become a thriving economy for poor Afghans. So far, the Afghan government and its NATO allies are treating the problem as one of law enforcement alone. However, fighting a US\$ three billion industry with a budget of a few hundred million at most is somewhat unreasonable.

Since the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979, the Afghan people's main ambition has been survival. Consecutive years of severe droughts, which eliminated much of their livestock, a non-existent infrastructure, and permanent violence have left the country with little from which to build a working and resilient economy. Now, the Afghan central Government and its NATO allies find it difficult to eradicate opium poppy in the country, which is only natural since millions of people depend on it for their livelihood.

The new counternarcotics policy in Afghanistan, formulated by the U.S. authorities, is not much different from the previous British policy. The U.S.' new "Five Pillar Plan" is based on improving public information, alternative development, eradication,

law enforcement, and justice reform, which seems to be an approach mainly based on the Colombian model. It doesn't take into consideration Afghanistan's deteriorating security and volatile political situation. The U.S. plan focuses on increasing development assistance, coordinating counternarcotics and counterinsurgency planning and operations, and enhancing political will in the counternarcotics effort both within the Afghan government and its NATO allies.

**IMPLICATIONS:** While the new US plan seems plausible on the paper, it faces harsh realities on the ground. This new plan relies on the capacities of the Afghan government, international aid agencies, and NATO forces, which have faced growing new challenges in the southern and southwestern parts of the country. In addition, since the last two years, the security and political situations have been deteriorating and the insurgents have moved their operations closer to Kabul to border provinces such as Logar and Wardak.

The Afghan government is mired with serious problems. In the whole of southern Afghanistan, government institutions are virtually non-existent a few kilometers away from the center of provinces and districts. Provincial governors rely on powerful warlords and drug lords for their own protection,

and in exchange close their eyes on their illicit activities. At highway checkpoints, the police do not stop luxury SUVs belonging to powerful lords, and courts of law most of the time rule in favor of wealthy defendants. Corruption has become an accepted norm and seeking personal wealth the ultimate goal for elite politicians.

The pace of reconstruction and development projects is not as slow as it is because of lack of funding. Rather, it is the lack of capacity and skilled workers that keeps the majority of Afghan ministries from utilizing all of their development budgets for 2007. Similarly, international aid agencies are unable to implement their well-funded projects for a lack of security, and the ever growing threats of kidnappings of foreign technicians and aid workers. Increasing development assistance without a better development strategy will only fatten the bank accounts of a few corrupt Afghan officials and private companies involved in reconstruction and development. But it is unlikely to provide substantial changes in the lives of ordinary farmers, which would be necessary to incite them to abandon the cultivation of opium poppy in favor of alternative crops.

The goal of Washington's new counternarcotics strategy, which is to fight the insurgents and the narcotics trade simultaneously, is overly ambitious. NATO is short of soldiers to fight the Taliban. All recent appeals by Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO's Secretary General, to increase NATO's participation in Afghanistan have not been met by the member countries. Were German troops to participate in opium poppy eradication in the northeastern provinces, for example, their numbers would have to be increased by additional thousands. And while German helicopters regularly fly over large opium poppy fields in the northeast, they are powerless and too short of resources in the rugged and difficult Afghan terrain to do anything about it.

Law enforcement and justice reform will take numerous years to mature. Traditionally, the Afghan central authorities has been only minimally felt outside Kabul. Even today, in rural parts of Kabul province, people rely more on traditional

institutions and the verdicts of elders and tribal chieftains to resolve their issues than on government institutions. On rare occasions, they take their cases to government courts. Indeed, there are two justice systems and laws in the country. One originates from the central government institutions, and the other from traditions and tribal institutions. Most of the time, people prefer and trust their traditional justice system over the central government's system – not least because it is more cost-efficient. Even government officials often promote the traditional justice system because it helps reduce their workload. Before a modern judiciary system becomes effective in Afghanistan, the government will be faced with two options: either to create special courts to indict powerful drug-lords or extradite them to international courts outside the country.

Eliminating, eradicating, and interdicting drug trafficking and processing centers in Afghanistan is a challenging task that requires at least tripling the military and police resources in the country. The private militia belonging to narcotraffickers are better paid and equipped than the Afghan National Police. Narco-traffickers can easily bribe senior Afghan officials and buy their loyalty as they have done over the years.

Alternative development has become the most common expression in Afghanistan. Huge amounts of money has been spent on "alternative livelihood" by international development agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations. Yet the majority of farmers are as poor as they were five years ago. An Afghan farmer with an average of 7 to 10 family members seeks to survive on less than \$1,000 a year. They have a variable income based on the harvest of their crops, which could be affected by the caprices of nature. Sickness or death in the family can deplete a family's annual budget. They have to struggle with all their financial shortages without government assistance or any private lending institutions. They have heard about, but never seen, the much-talked about alternative development policies.

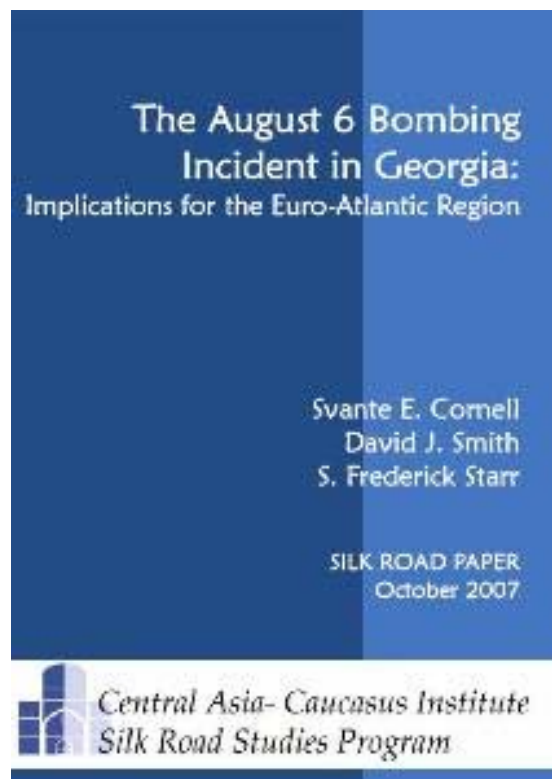
**CONCLUSIONS:** Instead of linking counternarcotics to counterinsurgency strategy, U.S. policy would be well-advised to link it to a comprehensive long-term development strategy. Narcotics in Afghanistan are not uniquely a law enforcement issue. It is a well established economy that feeds and sustains millions of poor Afghan households. Afghanistan's centralized administration is years away from establishing its authority in far and remote districts. It remains a traditional country, where traditional institutions could be used as tools in counternarcotics policy.

Islam and tribal values are of unique importance in all of Afghanistan, but particularly in the Pashtun tribes of the southwestern provinces. These two elements can be exploited for counternarcotics purposes. The Afghan government is making use of traditional jirga (council) system, such as the Joint Peace Jirga, to resolve problems with neighboring Pakistan, but it does not make efficient use of it to

empower local tribal chieftains and spiritual leaders in the struggle against drugs.

The issue of narcotics in Afghanistan should be dealt locally rather than nationally. If a fraction of available financial resources were dedicated to empower traditional councils in villages and district levels, there would be greater opportunities to communicate with villagers and enhance public information. These institutions could become good interlocutors between the government and local farmers in the context of an efficient and effective counternarcotics policy.

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** Haroun Mir served for over five years as an aide to the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, Afghanistan's former defense minister. He works as a consultant and policy analyst in Kabul. Jens F. Laurson is editor at large for the International Affairs Forum.



#### New Silk Road Paper:

#### *The August 6 Bombing Incident in Georgia: Implications for the Euro-Atlantic Region*

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The Paper can be downloaded free at [www.silkroadstudies.org](http://www.silkroadstudies.org). Hardcopy requests should be addressed to Alec Forss at [afors@jhu.edu](mailto:afors@jhu.edu).

## BAKIEV GEARS UP PRO-PRESIDENTIAL PARTY FOR COMING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Nurshat Ababakirov

*Less than a week before the national referendum, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev appears vigilant to secure the successful passage of his draft constitution, to establish a favorable ground for his Ak-Zhol Party in the likely ensuing parliamentary elections, and, more importantly, to persuade the public that what he is up to is for the country's sake. The president has good chances to create a monopoly over three branches of power starting already from 2009. This prospect leaves the opposition parties little time for deliberation but to straighten up their party lines and prepare for the elections.*

**BACKGROUND:** In a speech on October 10 in Batken oblast, President Bakiev encouraged local governors to ensure a maximum turnout in the referendum set for October 21. He suggested building a centralized power structure, which would help the country free itself from the political instability that has prevailed over the last two years and prove effective against drastic economic hardships that have mounted in recent months. "Therefore, the executive branch should work from the bottom to the top as a single entity," he asserted.

On October 15, the forum For Constitution, Reform, and Development voted for the creation of the Ak-Zhol party and chose Bakiev as its chief. Pro-presidential parties, government workers, and other civil activists created the forum a month ago after the Constitutional Court annulled the November and December constitutions. Then Bakiev, implying the parliament's eventual dissolution, shared his plans about the creation of a "party of creativity, responsibility, and action," which should unequivocally serve as a platform for his ideas and policies.

Observers promptly commented that he wants to follow the scenarios developed in Russia and Kazakhstan, with strong pro-presidential parties, but showed concern regarding the haste of his plans. Unlike prior experience, President Bakiev's draft Electoral Code, which will be presented along the draft constitution in the referendum, allows recently created parties to run in elections.

As an unprecedented step in Kyrgyzstan, a country that harbors an abundance of dwarflike and leader-centered parties, the parliamentary elections will be based entirely on party lists. General speculations had it that the REBP party (Republican Party of Labor and Unity), created by the president's brothers, Janysh Bakiev and Jusup Bakiev in 2005, could become the core of the future pro-presidential party. It has a stronger appeal in the south. It was thought that Moya Strana (My Country), led by Medet Sadyrkulov, the head of the presidential administration; Novyi Kyrgyzstan (New Kyrgyzstan), chaired by the newly appointed mayor of Bishkek Usen Sydykov; and other pro-presidential parties would round it up.

In general, the current constitutional draft embodies a strong presidential state and leaves a restricted and ambiguous role for the government led by a Prime Minister. On that account, Muratbek Imanaliev, the head of the Institute of Public Policy (IPP) and a former Foreign Minister, sarcastically asked why President Bakiev did not propose to break up the already weakened institution of the prime minister and assume its position with all the attributed responsibilities. Currently Bakiev has his third Prime Minister, Almaz Atambaev, who is likely not immune to the fate of his forerunners.

According to the constitutional draft, the president will be responsible for nominating and dismissing akims (local governors) and local judges. He will also be empowered to establish and fully control independent institutions, which may quite

successfully carry out tasks usually assigned to the executive branch. He will select officials responsible for defense and security, and can dismiss any cabinet member without parliament's consent.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Despite the continuous consolidation of power in Bakiev's hands, some still perceive it as a way to transcend the lingered constitutional impasse by viewing it as 'consensual constitution.' But many experts and authors themselves acknowledge existing flaws in the draft constitution, quite able to generate further disputes, precipitating new changes of the constitution itself.

The tight schedule set for the referendum, notwithstanding the clear violation of norms regarding referenda, shows Bakiev's efforts to take the advantage in a period when the opposition is still disunited as a result of the unsuccessful political rallies held last April. Moreover, ordinary people appear increasingly apathetic towards political matters, owing to seemingly excessive and equally futile political wrangling, partly reinforced by a crippling 30% inflation. Moreover, this short time is certainly insufficient for ordinary people to acquaint themselves with the provisions of the draft and come up with a conscious choice. Also owing to seasonal labor waves, up to 30-40 percent of eligible voters may currently be outside the country, which requires the establishment of voting precincts and effective registration abroad, which in the case of failure may well entice the government to resort to administrative leverages in some regions with a low turnout.

According to Omurbek Tekebaev, the leader of the Atameken Party, such haste is explained by the potential deterioration of socio-economic conditions in the wintertime, which could undermine president's chances of securing widespread support for the allegedly authoritarian changes he is pushing through.

Following a proposal of pro-presidential parliamentarians, Bakiev's last amendment to the draft sets a restrictive 0.5 per cent threshold to be passed in every province of the country and a five per cent nationwide threshold for parties. Supporters believe that it will make all parties

operate on a national scale, thereby stifling clan-based elections and village-to-village skirmishes.

Yet, in practice and in the short run, a 0.5 per cent threshold in every province will drastically reduce the chances of some opposition parties to get into the parliament. For example, this measure, along with sidelining small parties, is thought to be targeted at the Ar-Namys Party led by Felix Kulov, the president's number one rival, who is better known in the north and likely infamous in the south for his attempts to mount rallies in April 2007 against the southerner Bakiev. Also, it will ensure no advancement for parties created by non-titular nations like the Uzbeks, who comprise 30 percent of the south's population and 17 percent of the total, but who lack representation in many areas.

In general, about 5-7 parties are likely to run full-heartedly in the parliamentary elections. Several opposition parties such as Atameken, led by Tekebaev; Akshumkar, co-chaired by Baybolov, Sariev, and Beshimov; Arnamys, led by Kulov; the Social Democratic Party, led by current prime minister Atambaev, and Asaba, co-chaired by Beknazarov and Otunbaeva, have already started their pre-election campaigns at different stages. But some of the leaders have begun to call for unification into a single party, recognizing their present vulnerability in the face of the new-born strong pro-presidential party.

**CONCLUSIONS:** In a nutshell, the results of the referendum will likely be in Bakiev's favor. But nobody seems able to provide a guarantee for the thoroughness of the draft constitution, and its immunity from future changes and amendments. Since the apparent monopolization of power is at stake, Bakiev can be expected not to eschew administrative involvement. Warnings are abound that Bakiev will meet the fate of Akaev. These could be in vain, if he proves be able to demonstrate some signs of economic development and political fairness. With the shuddered Kyrgyz economy and a strong power struggle, this could nevertheless prove difficult.

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## FIELD REPORTS

### WOMEN: THE PILLARS OF AFGHANISTAN

*M. Ashraf Haidari*

The largest defeat of the British-Indian forces in the Second Anglo-Afghan War came through the leadership of one heroic, Afghan woman — Malalai of Maiwand. Malalai called out to dejected Afghan troops and carried the Afghan banner before being killed on the battlefield.

A woman who rose to patriotic duty during troubled times, Malalai reminds us all of the critical role women must play in securing peace and prosperity for Afghanistan. While Afghan women have gained formal political suffrage under Afghanistan's 2004 Constitution, they are yet to secure equality. At present, Afghan women are not afforded the respect that the great Malalai still enjoys more than a hundred years after her death.

In the two decades before the fall of the Taliban in 2001, continuous civil strife in Afghanistan deprived Afghan women of the opportunity to participate in the political life of the country. The lack of social and economic freedoms left them marginalized and vulnerable, a financial burden on an impoverished society. Together with children and the elderly, they became

victims of unspeakable atrocities. And during the Taliban period, any glimmer of hope for emancipation and empowerment of Afghan women was snuffed out, as they were denied basic human rights, including access to education and freedom of movement.

The post-Taliban government has sought to remediate these abuses through the creation of a Ministry of Women's Affairs and an Independent Human Rights Commission, yet attention to women's issues is often overshadowed by other pressing issues like security concerns and the narcotics trade. Simply having institutions dedicated to gender sensitivity and tolerance will not ensure gender mainstreaming. As the Afghan government recognizes, harmonized attention to gender across all government bodies, as well as aid delivery organizations, must be instituted. The Afghan government has prepared a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, which will provide a comprehensive, cross-ministerial approach to improving the condition of women.



Without popular support, however, this laudable effort cannot be effectively implemented. Sadly, the very brave individuals who speak out for vulnerable populations in Afghanistan are targeted by the insurgent and extremist groups. As Shukria Barakzai, Member of Parliament from Kabul province, recently lamented: "When I leave home these days for work, I am not quite sure whether I will be back [alive]."

The persecution of these individuals fighting for Afghanistan's progress is partly driven by Afghanistan's male-dominant conservative culture. Successful gender mainstreaming will therefore require a fundamental alteration of Afghan societal norms over many generations.

Intensified education efforts at the village level can promulgate this long-term adjustment in Afghan culture and underscore the equality of all Afghans under the law. With half of the population under the age of 15, this youthfulness can serve as an advantageous agent of change to promote this transformation. The youth have not fully been appreciated as a resource for progress, however.

Though six million Afghan children are now enrolled in school, millions of others are not, due either to security concerns or employment demands. About a quarter of all children seven to 14 years old are forced to work to support their families. Criminal networks within the country also traffic children abroad as far away as the Middle East and Africa, where they are subjected to forced labor or even sexual abuse. Desperate to pay off outstanding debts, Afghan poppy farmers give away daughters in marriage at ages as young as seven years old.

Because Afghans are a very family-oriented people, empowering women will help improve the condition of Afghan children, and shifting

responsibility within the family will bring positive effects which extend far beyond social equality.

Since Afghan women have an average of almost 7 children in their lifetime, their time is heavily devoted to domestic housework and child-rearing and they have little opportunity to contribute to family income. If Afghanistan is to achieve the double-digit growth needed to build a robust economy, women must contribute on a much larger scale. The Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan and other sustainable micro-credit programs are reaching out across the country, as about 75 percent of these services are enjoyed by Afghan women.

Employment opportunities for women would enable the approximately three million war widows to provide for themselves and their families. As the 2003 Golden Globe-winning film *Osama* illustrated, when women are left without a male to head the household, they lose the ability to earn any income.

Along with improved educational and employment opportunities, women are in dire need of medical services. Women and children feel the brunt of insufficient health spending levels – just \$1 per capita – due to a lack of resources. One Afghan woman dies in childbirth about every half-hour and 20 percent of children never make it to their fifth birthday.

The good news is that funding in this sector, when appropriated, can have a dramatic impact. The Afghan Ministry of Public Health has been able to expand access to basic healthcare across Afghanistan. As a result, the infant mortality rate declined to about 135 per 1,000 live births in 2006, from an estimated 165 per 1,000 in 2001. The number of women receiving prenatal care increased to 30 percent in 2006 from 5 percent in

2003. Nineteen percent of pregnant women were attended by a skilled health worker last year, up from only 5 percent in 2003.

The development of a prioritized National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan is a monumental step in underscoring the importance of women's issues in Afghanistan's development. The question remains, however, if the Afghan people and international community will rally to make the vision of the Plan a reality. As Malalai's story reminds us, women are the pillars of Afghanistan. By enhancing attention to women's issues, more

than half of the Afghan population can be socially, economically, and politically empowered to make a significant contribution to Afghanistan's long-term development. The international community must help the Afghan government approach the task of empowering Afghan women as a continual process rather than as a single benchmark, for experience shows us that even legal equality does not translate into equal treatment.

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## BREAD CRISIS IN KAZAKHSTAN HEIGHTENS SOCIAL TENSION

*Farkhad Sharip*

To all appearances, the Kazakh government was totally unprepared for the unprecedented rise in bread prices aggravated by runaway inflation. At a government meeting on October 1, Prime Minister Karim Masimov, irritated by the helplessness of regional governors in coping with galloping prices, assigned them the task of creating grain reserves to stabilize the food situation in their respective regions. He warned that the government would establish a strict state monopoly on bread production if governors fail to cope with the task within a week.

The steep rise of bread prices in all regions of Kazakhstan, which came in the wake of parliamentary elections, flames up popular discontent with the ruling Nur Otan party and causes embarrassment for the government. Last September, a group of protesters picketed the Almaty office of Nur Otan, demanding urgent measures against the rising cost of living. This time, protesters dispersed peacefully, but the deteriorating situation on the domestic grain market and shortage of bread in major cities of Kazakhstan is

heightening social tension. In Almaty, bread manufacturers complain they have run out of stocks of flour which normally last for months. In Qaraghandy and Pavlodar, one of the three major wheat-growing regions of Kazakhstan, bread prices hiked by 30 percent within a month. In North Kazakhstan, all attempts of the regional government to keep prices down and ration out bread failed. Shop owners openly ignore the calls for equal distribution of the staple food. Berdibek Saparbayev, Minister of Labor and Social Protection, who was dispatched to Pavlodar to calm down passions, publicly blamed "entrepreneurs" for "plotting a conspiracy" on the grain market.

Obviously, there is more than one reason for the widespread bread crisis in Kazakhstan, one of them being the globally rising food consumption and growing, and often uncontrolled, export volumes of Kazakh grain. But government officials persistently hush up domestic problems of food supply such as inconsistent agricultural reform, ineffective land use, rising costs of grain production and inadequate state support for farmers. Official sources indicate

that this year over 300 small farms left 40,500 hectares of land unsown for lack of subsidized fertilizers, diesel oil and pesticides. This official figure could be doubled or tripled to get a more accurate picture of the real state of farming policy. Only a few government-favored wheat producing farms can afford expensive but efficient American John Deere harvesting machines. Every year, dozens of small farms end up in bankruptcy, unable even to cover production costs and pay back hard-obtained bank credits. This results in hundreds of hectares of abandoned agricultural land turning into barren wilderness from year to year. The dilemma for the government is that Kazakhstan, gearing up to join the World Trade Organization, faces demands for drastic reduction of state subsidies for agriculture, but the Ministry of Agriculture cannot abandon the old practice out of fear that the country will lose its position as a major grain exporter. At the same time, the government desperately struggles to create food reserves, making it mandatory for farmers to sell part of their harvest to Prodkorporatsia, the state-owned food and grain corporation. But many farmers, lured by higher prices for their produce offered by foreign grain purchasing companies, look for buyers outside Kazakhstan. Last August alone, when some bakeries were standing idle for lack of flour, 91,000 tons of grain were exported from Kazakhstan. Prime Minister Masimov reiterated at recent government meeting that grain exporters should contribute 20 percent of their produce to emergency grain reserves at a price not higher than \$200 per ton.

Paradoxically, the problem with the bread crisis is not the shortage of wheat, but rather overproduction of it. Kazakhstan is desperately short of transport facilities to ship the grain. This year Kazakhstan plans to export 9 million tons of grain, while 3.5 million tons would suffice for domestic consumption.

The Ministry of Agriculture announced that this year Kazakhstan will reap the richest harvest ever recorded since the independence of the country – 22 million tons, which tops last year's achievement by four million tons. Prodkorporatsia announced that it

would purchase the grain from farmers for \$200 per a ton of wheat, fabulously higher than last year's purchasing price of \$80. A bumper harvest offers farmers a rare opportunity to buy new agricultural machines, to pay back bank credits and improve their financial position. But it does not solve the impending food crisis triggered not only by rising bread prices, poor land management, but also, to a larger extent, by the government's inability to handle the situation. Akhmetzhan Yesimov, minister of agriculture, admitted that there was nothing the government could do about bread prices. He nevertheless urged regional governors to create local stocks of grain within the next four months and appealed to the patriotic sentiments of farmers. It seems that government members are going out of their way to avoid political consequences of the crisis which caught the government unprepared.

Kazakhstan is not an isolated case in the dramatic chain of food shortage which affected all Central Asian nations. But in Kazakhstan, generally depicted as a oasis of plenty in economically poor Central Asia, the bread shortage will have far more serious political reverberations. Even some public organizations, traditionally loyal to the government, are running out of patience with the inactivity of the elite. Siyazbek Mukashev, the chairman of the Trade Union of Kazakhstan, declared that the Council of Veterans and other public organizations would stage street manifestations and demand the resignation of the government if Nur Otan fails to fulfill its pre-election promises.

The bread price rises undermine public trust in the government and damage the political image of the ruling Nur Otan party, which heaped promises of a wealthy life before the elections. Growing public discontent may lead to further government reshuffles and unpredictable moves. But there is good reason to hope that the solid economic foundation will carry the country over the crisis without an excessive price to pay.

## TAJIK-UZBEK-TURKMEN ENERGY DEAL

*Sergey Medrea*

On October 12, the electric power council of the CIS member states held its thirty-second session in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Participants included the heads of electric energy authorities, national electric companies from CIS countries, observers, invited guests and organizations. The highlight of the session was the signing of an agreement on transmission and supply of Turkmen electricity to Tajikistan via Uzbekistan.

The Commonwealth of Independent States electric power council was formed in 1992; its main objective is to develop coordinated energy-related actions among CIS member states and to ensure sustainable and effective power supply into the economies of the respective countries, based on the common electric-energy systems. During the session held, thirteen important energy-related issues were discussed. The simultaneous rehabilitation and unification of single energy systems between the CIS and Baltic states with the energy systems of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was the most significant. The success of the meeting was such that a final agreement between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on transmission and supply of electricity was settled and signed.

Already on October 5, during the official visit of the Turkmen president to Tajikistan, an agreement was made on Turkmenistan annually supplying electricity to Tajikistan during the autumn/winter months. However, Uzbekistan posed an obstacle for this agreement to become feasible. Turkmenistan

agreed to be responsible for delivering electricity at the border with Uzbekistan, whereas transit arrangements were entirely the responsibility of the Tajik side. It was during the October 6 EurAsEC meeting that Tajik president Emomali Rahmon announced the three countries had agreed on the supply and transmission of electricity. The final agreement and necessary arrangements were signed and discussed among energy officials during the CIS electric power council meeting.

The significance of the Tajik-Turkmen-Uzbek agreement is that comparing to last winter, the present energy deal has more prospects of being realized. Last year, similar talks took place among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan regarding the supply of electricity to Tajikistan via Uzbekistan. But the Uzbek side failed to comply with the agreement, claiming it did not have the capacity to transmit power due to busy and fragile power grids. Uzbek representatives on the CIS energy power council declared that the work on repairing energy transmission networks and energy grids had already started and soon Uzbekistan would be able to make the transfer.

Due to acute power shortages, the construction of hydroelectric stations is the number one priority for Tajikistan to achieve energy independence. Emomali Rahmon uses every possibility to announce that Tajikistan will soon become energy self-sufficient. To this effect, two big hydroelectric plants are being built on the Amu Darya and Zeravshan rivers. However, these are trans-boundary rivers and

Uzbek-Tajik tensions and disputes did not fail to ensue, the contested issue being that Tajikistan's energy ambitions should not affect the rivers' flow. But there are other problems regarding the power plants as well: disagreements between Tajik and Russian investors on ownership of the future dam have arisen. Russia claims as much as 75% of the ownership, which Tajikistan is not ready to give away.

Aslam Cahudhry, UN technical adviser on water and environment, agreed that Uzbekistan will be affected by the Rogun dam and also expressed his pessimism about construction of the Rogun, saying that it has not made much progress. Nevertheless, it seems that for

Uzbekistan it is more beneficial and safer to ensure that energy-hungry Tajikistan will fulfill its energy deficit with Turkmen energy coming via Uzbekistan rather than by constructing hydroelectric dams and thus having control over the water flows leading downstream to Uzbekistan.

The international tension amounts to fear on both sides of becoming too dependent on one another – Tajikistan on energy, Uzbekistan on water. Experts say the two countries are gradually working on resolving the disputes and the Uzbek consent to transmit Turkmen electricity to Tajikistan is a small but significant step toward cooperation.

## CELEBRATING RAMADAN EID IN UZBEKISTAN

*Erkin Ahmadov*

Last week was marked by extensive celebrations of Ed-al-Fitr (Ramazan Hait) in all Muslim states of the world. Central Asian states were no exception to these festivities, as Islam is the predominant religion in all states of the region. In Uzbekistan, the religious holiday that was declared to be a public day off by a presidential decree, underwent a number of tight regulations.

Ramazan Hait or Uraza Bayram is the holiday of breaking the fast after one month of various physical constraints. During this month, it is believed, Muslims are free of their earthly needs and may dedicate themselves to the God and their spiritual development.

This year the date of the beginning and end of the holy month of Ramadan was a subject of much speculation in all Muslim countries. The clergy and astrologists could not establish when the new moon appeared, which marks the beginning of the month

and thus the beginning of fasting for practicing Muslims.

In Uzbekistan, the holy month officially started on September 12. Just a couple of days before breaking the fast, president Islam Karimov introduced a resolution "On Celebration of Ramazan Hait" adopted in accordance with a presidential decree from 27 March, 1992. For many the resolution manifested respect to provisions of freedom of conscience and confession. Moreover, in light of present discussion, it is interesting to note that Tashkent was announced the capital of Muslim culture in 2007 by the Organization of the Islamic Conference on Issues of Education, Science and Culture.

However, in the beginning of September, heads of regional religious organizations were introduced to the new order of Muslims' Spiritual Administration of Uzbekistan that regulated conduct during the

holy month of Ramadan in the regions of the republic.

First, ten-day readings of Koran (“Hatm-ul-Kuran”) were to be held in the central mosques of Uzbekistan. All the heads of the mosques were forbidden to preach during the night prayers (“tarovih”), and were obliged to close all the ceremonies before 10 p.m. After this, every leader was supposed to report to his regional administrator on the conduct of the procedure and inform on whether there were any incidents. Only after this could the cleric go home.

In such regions of Uzbekistan as Namangan, where the threat of religious radicalism is considered to be the highest in the republic, clerics heads were to ensure that students did not attend the night prayers. In this region, the local authorities already tightly control students’ attendance at mosques, including various forms of reporting on the numbers of pupils and times of visits.

Moreover, in Namangan every Imam of a mosque is to make sure that he invites specifically the graduates of the “Mullah Kyrgyz” madrasah of Namangan to read prayers. For this, they should first transfer 20,000 sums (\$ 20) to the madrasah and “make an agreement” with the supreme spiritual judge or kadi of the region, Abdulhay Tursunov. Addresses and phone numbers of those invited to read Koran should be reported to Tursunov as well.

Second, imams are in charge of informing their parishioners that they must arrive to the mosque by

foot, not by car. Earlier, they were required to observe that the number of cars in front of a mosque would not exceed one hundred.

Obviously, there is a rising governmental control over the activities of religious organizations and the spiritual life of the citizens of Uzbekistan. Moreover, in certain critical parts of the country, this issue has a serious character and a vivid political context.

From the early years of independence, Uzbekistan’s mosques have become a place of unofficial interaction and political self-organization. Later on, thousands of Muslims were accused of belonging to extremist religious groups with many mosques being closed. Nevertheless, the right to practice any religion or none is provided by the articles 18, 31 and 61 of the Constitution and the Law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations”.

It is a well-known fact that situation with religious extremism in Uzbekistan is of a big concern, and for this reason, the government exercises tight control over the activities of religious organizations. Now it seems that even celebrations of the major, widely recognized Muslim holidays undergo tough regulations.

## NEWS DIGEST

### **ARMENIAN FOREIGN MINISTER: WE HAVE NO INTENTIONS TO USE KOSOVO AS PRECEDENT FOR NAGORNO KARABAKH CONFLICT SETTLEMENT**

**4 October**

The Armenian foreign minister while speaking at the UN General Assembly session presented Yerevan's position on an initiative to propose for discussion at the UN General Assembly the subject of frozen conflicts. "The Nagorno Karabakh conflict is on the agenda of the UN General Assembly on frozen conflicts. However, any resolution that covers all conflicts is not comprehensive from the start, as all of them are different," Armenian Foreign Minister Vardan Oskanyan announced yesterday. As REGNUM was told at the Armenian foreign ministry press office, Vardan Oskanyan that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict must not be discussed at the UN, as the negotiation process on its settlement is held within frameworks of the OSCE. "It is not the place for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict," the minister concluded. According to the foreign minister, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is not a frozen one. "We continue the negotiations and centimeter for centimeter are getting closer to its settlement. Secondly, there is a serious document on the negotiation table that is based not on dreams but on key problems and consequences," the diplomat said adding that together they would result in a balanced solution. "Thirdly, the process is grounded upon the right of the Nagorno Karabakh people for self-determination, for choosing their future. The Nagorno Karabakh people want nothing that does not belong to them. They want to have a right for peaceful living and determining their future. They want to use the right that every nation used represented at the UN." "We are closely watching the developments around Kosovo. We hear statements of the international community that Kosovo can become a precedent for other conflicts. We have no intentions to use Kosovo as precedent, as it will contradict our position that all conflicts differ," Vardan Oskanyan said that the Armenian side does not understand and cannot accept the

reverse logic that Kosovo was given independence and that a nation cannot obtain self-determination. "Nobody should tell us that there are proportions of freedom or security," Vardan Oskanyan concluded. The initiative to discuss frozen conflicts at the 62nd UN General Assembly was proposed by GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova). (Regnum)

### **BURJANADZE CALLS ON WEST NOT TO PANDER TO RUSSIA**

**4 October**

Georgia wants no confrontation with Russia and does not call on the West to enter in a confrontation with Russia either, but it demands that the West "not pander to" Russia, Georgian parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze said. "We want normal relations with Russia and we want no confrontation. We call on the West to do the same," Burjanadze told journalists on Thursday in comments on French Defense Minister Herve Morin's statement. Morin said a day earlier that France will back Georgia's entry to NATO, if Russia does not oppose it. (Interfax)

### **KAZAKHSTAN TO RATIFY KYOTO PROTOCOL - EURO PARLIAMENT REPRESENTATIVE**

**4 October**

Kazakhstan should ratify Kyoto Protocol. The member of the European Parliament Cem Ozdemir stated on Tuesday during the press conference in Almaty, the agency reports. C. Ozdemir noted that he supports aspiration of Kazakhstan to preside in OSCE in 2009. "My group supports this aspiration. However, I wish to emphasize that it is connected with responsibility in the issue of further growth of democracy and development of civil society," he said. During the press conference the Euro Parliament member informed that "Kazakhstan can become a part of the European Neighborhood Policy, though, we do not have direct borders." "Our relations should not be limited only to exchange of embassies.

As it was informed earlier, in 2006 Kazakhstan

stated a wish to be included in to the European Neighborhood Policy. (Kazakhstan Today)

### **INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS TO MONITOR REFERENDUM IN KYRGYZSTAN**

#### **4 October**

International observers, including Russian officials, will monitor a Kyrgyz referendum on amending the Constitution, a spokesman for the country's Central Election Commission said on Thursday. "The presence of international observers at the referendum will enhance its prestige and make it more transparent," the source said, adding that Russian and Georgian election commission officials had already filed applications for accreditation. International observers from the CIS Executive Committee, Russian parliamentarians and officials from public organizations also plan to monitor the Kyrgyz referendum. Earlier reports said local observers from political parties and public organizations would also participate. Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Court annulled the country's Constitution in mid-September after ruling that its adoption by parliament in 2006 was unlawful. Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev signed a decree on September 19 to call a referendum on amending the Constitution on October 21. The draft to be voted on in October stipulates that the country's parliament will be elected by party ballot, and that district and regional governments will serve as "the president's representatives at local level." Kyrgyzstan's main law was adopted by a national referendum in 2003 and amended twice in 2006. The Kyrgyz Central Election Commission has already designated 2,200 polling centers for the referendum. (RIA Novosti)

### **ABKHAZ, S.OSSETIAN LEADERS TO MEET IN MOSCOW FOR CONSULTATIONS**

#### **5 October**

The presidents of the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Sergei Bagapsh and Eduard Kokoity, will meet in Moscow on Friday to discuss the situation in Georgia and in the conflict zones. "Kokoity and I will meet for consultations today. We must coordinate our moves, given the growing tensions in Georgia and the latest attempts to further stoke the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian- Ossetian conflicts," Bagapsh told Interfax. (Interfax)

### **NATO'S SECRETARY GENERAL VISITS GEORGIA**

#### **5 October**

NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer has paid an official visit to Georgia. The guest met with the President of Georgia Mikhail Saakashvili. On October 4, Secretary General met with the students of Tbilisi State University (TSU), Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli and speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze. Today, Mr. Scheffer together with Saakashvili will arrive in Signahi region to hold briefing. From here, Secretary General will head to Brussels. (Azertag)

### **TAJIKISTAN TO BE NEXT EURASEC PRESIDENT**

#### **6 October**

The Eurasian Economic Community announced Saturday Tajikistan will hold the rotating presidency next year. Leaders attending an Intergovernmental Council meeting in the capital of Tajikistan also set formation of a customs union and single energy market as the Eurasec focus for 2008, the Novosti news agency reported. Eurasec's members include Russia and several former Soviet republics, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine are observers. The presidency currently resides with Russia. "At the meeting of heads of state in a narrow framework we decided to choose Tajikistan and President Emomali Rakhmon to chair Eurasec," Russian President Vladimir Putin said. Tair Mansurov, a governor of North Kazakhstan Region and a former Kazakh ambassador to Russia, was named the new secretary general of Eurasec. He replaces Grigory Rapota of Belarus, who has been secretary general since 2001. (UPI)

### **GM TO SET UP CAR VENTURE IN UZBEKISTAN**

#### **8 October**

General Motors Corp (GM.N) has set up a joint venture in Uzbekistan to produce and sell cars in the central Asian state, the Uzbek state auto company said on Monday. The state company, Uzavtoprom, said in a statement the two had signed an agreement to set up the venture, based on an existing car plant in Uzbekistan with annual production capacity of 250,000 Chevrolet cars. The statement said GM would hold a 25 percent in the venture with a possibility to raise it to 40 percent. The statement did not say how much the deal is worth and GM could not immediately be reached for comment.



The plant in eastern Uzbekistan was set up in 1996 together with South Korean company Daewoo Motor. Uzavtoprom has been looking for a strategic partner in the project since the Korean firm went bankrupt during a financial crisis in the late 1990s. (Reuters)

## **TWO SOLDIERS WOUNDED IN BATTLE NEAR DAGESTANI VILLAGE**

**8 October**

Two servicemen have been wounded in clashes with a group of militants near the village of Gubden, an on-duty officer from the Karabudakhkent District Interior Department told Interfax. The ministry defense officers were combing the area near the Gubden village, he said. "At around 11 am they came across a group of militants. Two servicemen were wounded in the shooting. The hunt for militants is continuing," the officer said. (Interfax)

## **CONTRACT WITH COMPANY ENI ON DEVELOPMENT OF KASHAGAN DEPOSIT NOT TO BE RECONSIDERED - NAZARBAYEV**

**9 October**

The Contract with ENI Company on development of Kashagan deposit will not be reconsidered, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev stated on Monday at the press conference after negotiations with the Prime Minister of Italy Romano Prodi. Nazarbayev reminded that 10 years ago Kazakhstan with a group of seven world companies signed the agreement on production on the largest deposit Kashagan. "There were no problems for 10 years," he emphasized. "This year the operator of ENI group, who became the operator by the support of the government of Kazakhstan, presented the government a new budget, which [increases expenses by dozens of millions of dollars] and postpones the first oil production from 2005 to 2010," the President reminded. "Our government considered this as a loss in the budget of a large amount of money, which had been planned in our strategic plans for development of economy and improvement of social status of our population," he added. "In this connection, both parties started negotiation process. These are commercial negotiations, which concern neither the President of Kazakhstan, nor the Prime Minister of Italy. Thus, the leader of the state emphasized that "if investors break the signed contract, the Kazakhstan party reserves the right to itself to take appropriate measures according to the legislation of the

country," Nazarbayev emphasized. (Kazakhstan Today)

## **GUNMEN ATTACK AFGHANISTAN MOSQUE**

**10 October**

Two people have been killed and at least 10 injured in Afghanistan after gunmen opened fire in a mosque during prayers in a province bordering Kabul. In a separate incident, also near the capital, a mullah was shot dead. The mosque shooting took place in Wardak province which borders Kabul. A police chief said around 10 gunmen entered the building in Abad district. They opened fire, killing two people and injuring others including a boy. Police are trying to find a motive. But it does not appear to be any kind of tribal or local dispute, and the Taleban are suspected to be responsible. In neighbouring Logar province on Tuesday night the Afghan interior ministry said a mullah on his way home from prayers was abducted and then shot a number of times. He died of his injuries. Attacks on religious figures, especially against those perceived to be pro-government, have increased over the past year. But they are still unusual.

They are also a reminder that the insurgency is not just limited to bombings and fighting in the south and east of the country. Assassinations and tactics designed to intimidate local people are being used across Afghanistan and are getting increasingly close to the capital. (BBC)

## **THERE WILL NOT BE ANOTHER WAR IN THE CAUCASUS - SENIOR RUSSIAN COMMANDER**

**10 October**

There will be no new war in the North Caucasus, said Gen. Nikolai Rogozhkin, the Commander-in-chief of Russian Internal Troops. "We will not let a new Caucasus war happen no matter what takes place in Ingushetia or elsewhere in the North Caucasus. The situation, particularly in Ingushetia, is under control, as has been repeatedly stated by Ingush President Murat Zyazikov. Our troops are fulfilling their mission here given the present circumstances," Rogozhkin told journalists in Moscow. The situation, particularly in Ingushetia, is being made worse by certain forces. "Our units have conducted a number of operations in order to neutralize and eliminate several armed groups, and we will continue to fight gunmen in Ingushetia and elsewhere in the North Caucasus," the general said. (Interfax)

#### **4-MAGNITUDE EARTHQUAKE STRUCK ALMATY**

**10 October**

4-magnitude earthquake by the Richter scale struck Almaty on October 9 at 22.00, the agency reports referring to the Ministry of Emergency of the Republic. According to the Seismology Institute of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, the epicenter of the earthquake was on border of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The magnitude in the epicenter of the earthquake made 12.6. "The epicenter of the earthquake was in 81st kilometer in the southeast direction from Almaty," the press service noted. (Kazakhstan Today)

#### **LAWYER: IRAKLI OKRUASHVILI DID NOT LEAVE GEORGIA**

**10 October**

Georgia's ex-defense minister Irakli Okruashvili did not leave Georgia and is now at his home in Tbilisi, his lawyer Eka Beselia told reporters yesterday after a meeting with Okruashvili, a REGNUM correspondent informs. "He did not depart anywhere. I had a meeting with him at his home. We discussed and made clear several issues," Eka Beselia said. Georgia's former defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, whom the Tbilisi City Court ruled to release from custody on October 8 and his preventive punishment was replaced with the bail of 10mn lari, was freed on the night of October 9 after the bail was paid. Part of the bail was reportedly paid in money and the other part was guaranteed by his realty. Some media released information today citing Irakli Okruashvili's guards, who were on duty near his house, that he left Georgia with his family immediately after his release. (Regnum)

#### **CHECHEN HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS SEEK MEETING WITH PUTIN**

**11 October**

Chechen Human Rights Ombudsman Nurdi Nukhazhiyev has asked for a meeting with President Vladimir Putin to discuss the search for missing people. "More than 4,300 citizens have been abducted or have gone missing since 1994," Nukhazhiyev said. "Your meeting with Chechen human rights activists, who are doing their best to promote the constitutional process and restore civil society fundamentals, would give a major impetus to a constructive dialogue between the central government and the public," he said. "The meeting would enable Chechen representatives to discuss

problems related to human rights and ways to solve them." (Interfax)

#### **TAJIK COURT IMPRISONS 10 FOR TERRORISM, MEMBERSHIP IN BANNED MILITANT GROUP**

**11 October**

A Tajik judge said Thursday that 14 men and women were convicted of terrorism and membership in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a banned militant group responsible for several bombings and armed incursions across ex-Soviet Central Asia. The Sogdi regional court on Wednesday sentenced 10 men to between 13 and 29 years in prison for their role in an attack on border posts between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan last year, Judge Amirkhon Iskhokov said. Another man and three women were freed under an amnesty announced earlier this year, he said. President Emomali Rakhmon ordered the amnesty in connection with the 10th anniversary of the end of the country's devastating civil war. The IMU, which is believed to have connections to al-Qaida, had training camps in neighboring Afghanistan and has fought alongside Taliban militants. It recently has shown signs of activity after years of relative quiet. (AP)

#### **TURKMENISTAN MOVES AWAY FROM ISOLATION**

**12 October**

The president adopted legislation allowing foreign investors to create companies and own property in Turkmenistan -- moving the natural gas-rich country further from the isolation imposed by his autocratic predecessor. An amended law on foreign investment, adopted by President Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov and published Friday in the official newspaper Neutral Turkmenistan, allows foreign investors to create and fully own companies, and to acquire existing companies and property including real estate. Berdimukhamedov came to power after the death in December of Saparmurat Niyazov, who had ruled Turkmenistan with an iron hand since before it gained independence in the 1991 Soviet collapse. Under Niyazov, the access of foreign companies was strictly limited. Berdimukhamedov has expanded contacts with the outside world, likely seeking to capitalize on intense interest in its resources. After Russia, the Central Asian nation is the largest producer of natural gas in the former Soviet Union. The president also has moved to attract foreign investment in other

sectors. In July he announced plans for a special economic zone aimed to bring in investment to develop tourism infrastructure and port capabilities on the inland Caspian Sea. (AP)

### **KYRGYZSTAN, RUSSIA TO DISCUSS BILATERAL POWER, OIL&GAS COOPERATION**

**12 October**

The ninth meeting of the Russian-Kyrgyzstan intergovernmental commission for trade-economic and scientific-technical cooperation will be held in Bishkek on Friday. Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev will head the delegation of Kyrgyzstan at the talks and head of the Federal Atomic Energy Agency (Rosatom) Sergei Kiriyyenko will head the Russian delegation. Kiriyyenko arrived in Bishkek on Thursday with a delegation of 60. Representatives of the Russian business community are also among the delegation members. During the meeting the sides are planned to discuss a total of 15 issues related to mutually advantageous cooperation in different spheres, including electric power engineering, oil and gas industry, agro-industrial sector, communications, transport and information technologies. The problem of the stay in the territory of Kyrgyzstan of over 20 dumps of radioactive production waste since the USSR period is a separate item on the talks' agenda. The republic has not enough own funds for the reconstruction of the facilities and Bishkek hopes to get help from Russia in this issue. The poor technical condition of the tailing dumps is fraught with ecological disaster in the whole Central Asian region. The sides are expected to sign a number of documents on cooperation on the results of the talks. (Itar-Tass)

### **ARMENIAN OFFICIALS HAIL GENOCIDE VOTE BY U.S. CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE**

**12 October**

In an address at the opening of a session of the Armenian parliament, speaker Tigran Torosian hailed on October 11 the recent passage of a resolution commemorating the "Armenian Genocide" by a key committee of the U.S. Congress, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. The measure is now likely to be sent on to a vote in the House of Representatives, where a majority has already signed on to the resolution. A parallel measure is in the Senate pipeline. Torosian expressed gratitude to the American congressmen for showing "high moral qualities" and withstanding "various pressures," referring to an

intense lobbying effort by both Turkey and the Bush Administration opposing the measure. Former justice minister and current parliamentarian Davit Harutiunian also welcomed the vote but said that the resolution was unlikely to bring about any "essential change" to Armenian-Turkish relations, adding that it was his "conviction" that "Turkey would itself recognize the genocide in the next 10 or 15 years." After the vote was welcomed by President Kocharian on October 10 during an official visit to Brussels, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said that he thinks both Turkey and Armenia should now "make real steps toward reconciliation," Mediamax reported. Kocharian stressed that "the recognition of historical injustice can not harm bilateral relations" and referring to a possible reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey, explained that "the simplest formula would be the start of a dialogue without preconditions." The resolution, adopted on October 10 by the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, formally defined the World War I-era mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey as genocide. (RFE/RL)

### **BLAST KILLS 4 IN AFGHANISTAN**

**13 October**

A bomb explosion near a mosque in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province killed four Afghan National Police officers and wounded seven others, including one civilian, Friday, the U.S.-led coalition command announced Saturday.

The bombing took place in Gereshk City "as people were enjoying an evening out" on the first day of Eid al-Fitr -- a celebration marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, the coalition said. "Coalition forces operating in the area responded immediately and provided emergency medical treatment to six wounded ANP officers and one Afghan non-combatant at the scene," a coalition statement said. The civilian and five police officers were then transported to a nearby medical facility to receive further medical care, where they were listed in critical condition. (CNN)

### **ARMENIANS BREAK CEASEFIRE**

**13 October**

On October 12 from 21.00 to 23.55, and on October 13 from 05.25 to 05.30 subunits of the Armenian Armed Forces from their positions located near the Ashagiabdulkarimli, Garakhanbayli, Javahirli and Yusifjanli villages subjected to gunfire the opposite positions of the Armed Forces of Azerbaijan, press service of Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry said.

The enemy was silenced after retaliation. No casualties reported. (AzerTag)

## **IRAN-KAZAKHSTAN CASPIAN SUMMIT**

**15 October**

Following his arrival in Tehran on an official state visit to Iran, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev met on October 15 with Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. The two leaders signed a set of new bilateral agreements, including an accord on cooperation in tourism and regarding maritime trade, mainly between the Iranian ports of Anzali and Amirabad and the Kazakh port of Aqtau on the Caspian Sea, and new details regarding a proposal to construct a railway line connecting the two countries through Turkmenistan. Speaking to reporters at a joint news conference following the meeting, Ahmadinejad vowed to increase trade with Kazakhstan fivefold, from the current level of \$2 billion to a target of \$10 billion. In the energy sector, the Iranian president also said that he discussed the possible joint construction of an oil refinery and details concerning a "swap" in oil trade with Nazarbaev. For his part, Nazarbaev sought to increase the sale of Kazakh grain to Iran and expand Iranian investment in Kazakhstan's machine-building, infrastructure, transport, and telecommunications sectors. The Kazakh president is due to participate on October 16 in the second summit of the Caspian littoral states, hosted by Iran. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

## **CIVILIANS 'KILLED IN NATO RAID'**

**15 October**

Three civilians were killed and seven injured when Nato planes attacked insurgents outside Kabul on Sunday, a senior Afghan police officer says. The deputy chief of police of Wardak province said Nato called in air support after militants had ambushed a convoy of international peacekeepers. He said the air attack left five insurgents dead and three civilians, including a husband and wife. Nato said it had no information about the incident. The deputy police chief of Wardak province, which borders Kabul, said a roadside bomb struck a convoy belonging to the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) on Sunday morning. Asif Bandwal described how a battle then began in Jalrez district as the Taleban fired rocket-propelled grenades at the vehicles. He said Nato air power was brought in and three local people were killed and seven injured. Five insurgents were also killed when the bombs were dropped, he said.

The Taleban say they destroyed four vehicles. The BBC's Alastair Leithead in Kabul says an Isaf spokesman was unable to provide any information about the incident but said he did not think there had been any loss of life from Nato forces. The issue of civilian casualties has had serious repercussions over the past 18 months with President Karzai criticising international troops for not taking more care when fighting insurgents. This year has been the most violent since the fall of the Taleban in 2001. The United Nations says the number of insurgent attacks has increased by almost 30% on last year. (BBC)

## **SUPPORT GROWS FOR COMEBACK BY FORMER ARMENIAN PRESIDENT**

**15 October**

Meeting in Yerevan on October 10, some two dozen political and public organizations affirmed their support for former President Levon Ter-Petrosian's anticipated candidacy in the presidential ballot due early next year, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported on October 12. Opposition Hanrapetutiun party leader and former Prime Minister Aram Sargsian explained that the purpose of the meeting was to orchestrate a "serious support base" for Ter-Petrosian's nomination by a civic initiative, rather than a specific political party. (RFE/RL)

## **HELICOPTER MI-8T CRASHED IN AZERBAIJAN SECTOR OF CASPIAN SEA**

**15 October**

In Azerbaijan, helicopter MI-8T, belonging to the airline Azalhelicopter of the state concern Azerbaijan hava yollary, crashed on October 12, at 21.58 p.m. by local time at usual meteorological conditions. According to the Azerbaijan hava yollary, the crash occurred during evacuation of the patient from the sea derrick platform Hazar-4 of the State oil company of Azerbaijan. Technical condition of the helicopter prior to take-off was operable. Prior to the flight, according to the maintenance instruction, technical servicing was performed, the same crew performed control-verifying flight. According to the latest information from the State concern, rescue works have been organized at once on the territory of the crash and rescue ships and helicopters were sent to the sea. As a result of these works, the crash territory has been defined. According to the preliminary data, 4 members of the crew and 2 passengers were lost. Personalities of all six victims have already been established. "The wrecked helicopter Mi-8T is in

Caspian Sea at the depth of 20 meters. Special elevating crane has been sent to the scene to lift up the helicopter from the sea bottom. The search and rescue works are proceeding," the state concern informs. The commission has been created to investigate the reason of the crash by the state concern Azerbaijan hava yolary, investigation department for grave crimes of the State Office of Public Prosecutor of the Republic instituted proceedings, according to the clause 262.3. (Kazakhstan Today)

### **GEORGIAN INTERIOR MINISTRY, UN MONITORS RELEASE CONTRADICTORY REPORTS ON KODORI CLASH**

**15 October**

The Georgian Interior Ministry released on October 11 its report on the clash on September 20 between Abkhaz border guards and Georgian special-forces troops. According to that report, the Georgian forces were deployed on September 19 to intercept a group of armed men spotted two days earlier near a highway under construction in the Kodori Gorge, and early on September 20 located the group, some of whom opened fire with assault rifles and grenade launchers. The report stressed that "only those members of the group who put up armed resistance were killed." Seven Abkhaz taken prisoner after the shooting have been charged with illegal possession of weapons, belonging to an illegal armed group, and attempted premeditated murder. On October 12, the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) posted on its website (<http://www.unomig.org>) the preliminary findings of its own probe into the shootings, which noted discrepancies between the Abkhaz and Georgian versions of what happened (see "End Note," "RFE/RL Newslines," September 24, 2007). Those findings confirmed Abkhaz claims that the shooting took place on Abkhaz territory, rather than in the Kodori Gorge as Tbilisi claims, and that the two men killed -- both Russian citizens serving on contract as instructors with the Abkhaz security forces -- were shot dead at point-blank range. In Sukhum(i), Abkhaz Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba on October 12 said the findings of the UN investigation will help Abkhazia secure international support for its efforts to secure the release of the seven border guards. Meanwhile, in his most recent (October 3) report on the situation in Abkhazia to the UN Security Council, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recommended extending the so-called security zone along the de facto border between Abkhazia and the rest of

Georgia northwards as far as the Kodori Gorge. Shamba was quoted by ITAR-TASS on October 9 as saying that proposal meets Abkhaz interests. He added that the two sides should discuss the proposal and once agreement is reached, the formal mandates of both UNOMIG and the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the conflict zone should be amended. For the past year, the Abkhaz authorities have refused to resume talks with Tbilisi until the Georgian Interior Ministry troops deployed to the Kodori Gorge in July 2006 are withdrawn. (RFE/RL)

### **KYRGYZ PRESIDENT ASSUMES LEADERSHIP OF NEW POLITICAL PARTY SPARKING HARSH CRITICISM BY OPPOSITION PARTIES.**

**16 October**

Kurmanbek Bakiev was elected on October 15 to lead a new political party, according to RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service. He was elected by over 1,000 delegates at a founding party congress of the new Ak Jol Eldik Partiyasy (Bright Path Popular Party). The move comes just prior to the constitutional referendum set for October 21, which is set to lead to new parliamentary elections. Only last month, Bakiev said that "as the head of state," he "must treat equally all the political parties" and vowed that "I cannot and have no right to be the leader of any" political party. But prior to that statement, he also pledged to form "a new political force." Opposition deputies on October 15 strongly criticized the election of President Bakiev as the leader of a new political party, saying that he "has no right to lead a party." Parliamentarian Temir Sariev, one of the leaders of the Ak Shumkar party, explained that the creation of the new Ak Jol Party was another "sad example of creating ruling parties," with members that "are united neither by the idea nor by interests of Kyrgyzstan" but created solely because "they just want to serve one person." Another deputy, Isa Omurkulov of the opposition Social Democratic Party, also criticized the formation of the new pro-government party and dismissed rumors that his party will field candidates in an electoral alliance with Ak Jol in the widely expected new parliamentary elections, adding that the party, which is led by Prime Minister Almazbek Atambaev, "will run for parliament independently." Omurkulov added that Bakiev's decision is a "major mistake," because "no new political party can become genuinely recognized and respected among

the public and the voters during one [or] two months." (RFE/RL)

### **TURKMEN STATE WEBSITE REMOVES READERS' COMMENTS FEATURE**

**16 October**

In a dramatic about-face from its earlier decision, the Turkmen authorities removed on October 12 a new readers' comments feature that it previously touted as an example of freedom of information only two days earlier, RFE/RL reported. The decision removed the feedback option for the Turkmen government's official website, *Altyn Asyr* (The Golden Age), or *turkmenistan.gov.tm*, thereby blocking the posting of unsolicited comments by viewers. Although only about 15 comments were posted to the website during the two days posts were allowed, several offered mild criticism of former President Saparmurat Niyazov and one called on President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov to release all political prisoners held in Turkmen prisons. (RFE/RL)

### **PUTIN WARNS US AGAINST ATTACKING IRAN**

**16 October**

Russian leader Vladimir Putin met his Iranian counterpart Tuesday and implicitly warned the U.S. not to use a former Soviet republic to stage an attack on Iran. He also said countries bordering the Caspian Sea must jointly back any oil pipeline projects in the region. At a summit of the five nations that border the inland Caspian Sea, Putin said none of the nations' territory should be used by any outside countries for use of military force against any nation in the region. It was a clear reference to long-standing rumors that the U.S. was planning to use Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic, as a staging ground for any possible military action against Iran. "We are saying that no Caspian nation should offer its territory to third powers for use of force or military aggression against any Caspian state," Putin said. Iranian

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also underlined the need for solidarity. "The Caspian Sea is an inland sea and it only belongs to the Caspian states, therefore only they are entitled to have their ships and military forces here," he said. Putin, whose trip to Tehran is the first by a Kremlin leader since World War II, warned that energy pipeline projects crossing the Caspian could only be implemented if all five nations that border the sea support them. Putin did not name a specific country, but his statement underlined Moscow's strong opposition to U.S.-backed efforts to build pipelines to deliver hydrocarbons to the West, bypassing Russia. "Projects that may inflict serious environmental damage to the region cannot be implemented without prior discussion by all five Caspian nations," he said. Other nations bordering the Caspian Sea and in attendance at the summit are: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. The legal status of the Caspian — believed to contain the world's third-largest energy reserves — has been in limbo since the 1991 Soviet collapse, leading to tension and conflicting claims to seabed oil deposits. Iran, which shared the Caspian's resources equally with the Soviet Union, insists that each coastal nation receive an equal portion of the seabed. Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan want the division based on the length of each nation's shoreline, which would give Iran a smaller share. Putin's visit took place despite warnings of a possible assassination plot and amid hopes that personal diplomacy could help offer a solution to an international standoff on Iran's nuclear program. Putin has warned the U.S. and other nations against trying to coerce Iran into reining in its nuclear program and insists peaceful dialogue is the only way to deal with Tehran's defiance of a U.N. Security Council demand that it suspend uranium enrichment. "Threatening someone, in this case the Iranian leadership and Iranian people, will lead nowhere," Putin said Monday during his trip to Germany. "They are not afraid, believe me." (AP)