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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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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 NGO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

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

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KAZAKHSTAN'S MILITARY ARMAMENT PRIORITIES

Roger N. McDermott & Igor Mukhamedov

Kazakhstan is slowly but systematically reassessing its military armament priorities, taking into account the demands placed on the armed forces to meet modern threats and successfully reform. Moreover, it will also boost its military exports during 2006, by strengthening its existing access to international arms markets, which will place the interests of its defense industry at the heart of its international security policies.

Kazakhstan's role as an arms exporter will thus be enhanced through concentrating on exporting 'specialist products' capitalizing on elements of its current expertise and fulfilling niche market requirements. This is likely to result in Kazakhstan emerging as the leading exporter of arms in Central Asia.

BACKGROUND: Astana's new sense of confidence in its own defense industries was much in evidence on February 10 when Galym Orazbakov, President of Kazakhstan Engineering National Company, explained in Astana, "We expect the export of the company's special products to double in 2006," comparing with its record in 2005. This will be most notable in Kazakhstan's future exports to the Indo-Pacific region. "Recently, we held talks with our partners in India and Egypt who are planning to hold tenders for the purchase of arms. The company is planning to take part in these," Orazbakov explained. Specialist products exported would include depth charges and torpedoes.

Orazbakov's confidence in the Kazakhstan Engineering National Company, formed in spring 2003 and consolidating 21 mostly machine-building companies, is based on the level of demand from the Indo-Pacific region and the contracts currently secured with these countries. Kazakhstan's intense diplomacy with key trading partners also develops more opportunities to secure lucrative defense contracts. The export of specialist products including torpedoes and depth charges increased slightly in 2004, by 4 per cent. Orazbakov said that "historically, we have been carrying out a number of joint projects with India aimed at modernizing and repairing the torpedoes belonging to the Indian Navy. We are also designing a new torpedo called Kazy." During the latest talks held between February 13-15, 2006, the Indian delegation proposed widening the current scale of cooperation in

the area of defense industries. It was also suggested that joint projects in producing and upgrading some types of conventional weapons, such as combat vehicles and tanks, should be considered.

In Kazakhstan, domestic sales of military armaments have risen by 5.6 per cent compared with 2004, based on the increased demands of the Nazarbayev military reform program. Yet this domestic rise is partly related to the Zenit joint stock company producing Sunkar-M military cutters, and the aircraft repair plant No. 405, which repairs military helicopters. Ships are urgently needed for the Navy, as well as transport aircraft and modernized air defense systems. Kazakhstan intends to open a center for Landover maintenance on the basis of the armored mobile vehicles HMMWV. Such initiatives are also underpinned by security assistance from other countries to Kazakhstan. China provides vehicles and equipment, and South Korea has provided three ships. Kazakhstan is also signaling its readiness to consider buying western types of equipment and weapons. A marketing sub-department within the armament department of the MoD, tasked with dealing with this side of procurement, is currently under consideration. The budget allows this in theory, but the Kazakhstani government will require strong arguments in favor of any new type of western weaponry, if such plans are to succeed.

IMPLICATIONS: The demands of Kazakhstan's existing military reform priorities, which highlight in particular the airmobile forces, peace support and antiterrorist capabilities, place additional demands

within the system to increase troop mobility and react at speed to any potential crisis situation. Traditionally, the armed forces have been heavily reliant on its declining stock of Soviet and Russian hardware and weapons systems. Achieving NATO interoperability within its key formations will entail looking beyond Russia to procure the equipment its armed forces will need. That is why within the framework of the five-year plan of military cooperation with the U.S., Kazakhstan has been successfully working on equipping the airmobile forces with HMMWVs. Kazakhstan has already received more than 30 vehicles. During the visit of U.S. military representatives to Almaty in early February 2006, the issue of obtaining 17 or 18 additional vehicles was discussed. Unlike most other states that use HMMWVs, Kazakhstan has created its own "HMMWV-Asia Center" to maintain those vehicles, which has been operational since September 2005. At the end of 2006, Kazakhstan is expected to receive the first Huey helicopters for its airmobile forces and it is also discussing with the U.S. the possibility of receiving C-130 transport aircraft. Such airframes and the accompanying supporting packages will result in the Kazakhstani MoD planning repair and maintenance arrangements; reflecting the arrangements with the HMMWVs. With the next rotation in Iraq of the Kazakhstani peacekeeping component of KAZBAT, Astana is planning to deploy a small number of armored HMMWVs. The idea is in its early stages, but it reveals the commitment of the Kazakhstani government to the promotion of its peace support capabilities, from which it has gained a great deal of positive publicity owing to the presence of KAZBAT in Iraq.

Also on February 10, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev held a series of meetings with U.S. ambassador John Ordway, Russian ambassador Vladimir Babichev and Indian ambassador Ashok Mukherjee in Astana. Predictably, the Kazakhstani Foreign ministry said Tokayev "discussed expanding bilateral contacts in various areas of cooperation, and looked at a wide range of international and regional issues of mutual interest." Yet, Mukherjee presented Tokayev with an invitation to visit India on an official visit later this year, showing New Delhi's interest in forging stronger ties with Kazakhstan and increasing Indian interests in Central Asia.

An Indian dimension is therefore central to the hopes of increased sales output from Kazakhstan's defense industries. In fact a Kazakhstani delegation recently participated in an international exhibition of land and naval weapons, Defexpo India 2006, in New Delhi. Consequently the Indian government expressed interest in holding talks on procuring torpedoes and mines for the Indian Navy. "The major result for Kazakhstan, which took part in such an exhibition for the first time, is that the Indian Ministry of Defense has expressed an interest in cooperation with our defense companies. In the future, talks can be conducted on selling Kazakh torpedoes and naval mines to India," a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense confirmed.

CONCLUSIONS: Domestically, the defense industries, although lacking in transparency, often provide a glimpse of how and where the Kazakhstani government is procuring weapons for its armed forces. Nazarbayev's commitment to developing a Naval security component to the armed forces, as his country's contribution towards Caspian security, and his drive to reform the armed forces may be measured in how domestic defense industries supply the needs of the military. Military reform and the foreign security initiatives that facilitate the development of the program in a constructive manner, compel complimentary domestic supporting plans, such as the creation of Kazakhstani centers capable of carrying out repair and maintenance on key military assets. In this area, the leadership of the Kazakhstani MoD will be crucial, raising the importance of having suitably qualified personnel carrying out detailed and systemic work in the armaments department, avoiding the pitfalls overbearing political interference.

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BETWEEN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND HARASSEMENT: CHRISTIAN CONVERTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Anara Tabyshalieva

Unlike Christian convert Abdul Rahman who had to seek asylum in Europe after his trial for converting from Islam in Afghanistan, thousands of Christian converts from Muslim families enjoy some religious freedom in post-communist Central Asia. However, a number of them often face discrimination and harassment on a daily basis. Religious freedom is at risk in all post-Soviet states in a varying degree. An important proposal is to support Muslims and Christians to initiate and to be involved into discussions about modern Islam and Christianity and religious tolerance traditions in Central Asia. Issues of religious freedoms, interfaith dialogue and cooperation deserve higher attention in order to prevent religious strife.

BACKGROUND: The first historical movement of Christians in Central Asia was the Nestorian Church in the fourth century. Nestorian Christian successfully converted a number of Turks to the new faith in the medieval ages. The second migration was related mostly Orthodox Christian during Russia's colonization of the region in the nineteenth century. Anti-Russian uprisings, especially the 1898 Andijan rebellion that called for a Jihad (Ghazawat) seriously affected Russian religious policy in Central Asia. The Russian Orthodox clergy did not dare to convert local Muslim peoples into Christianity, something they widely practiced in Siberia and the Far East. Together with Orthodox Churches, some Protestant minorities penetrated or were deported to Central Asia in the colonial and Soviet period. The third increase of the number of Christians in the region is taking place presently as a result of mass conversion of local populations from traditionally Muslim or Orthodox families to Protestantism.

The collapse of state atheism encouraged numerous Protestant and other missions from the West and South Korea to settle in Central Asia. Since the days of perestroika and glasnost, they have penetrated to the most remote areas of the region. In some cases, Protestant missionaries, who traditionally come first to a terra incognita, build an

image of West which they use to their advantage. Activities of Christian missions across the region appear dynamic. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan, more than 77 percent or 850 of the 1100 registered missions were Christian, mostly Protestant. Reportedly, thousands of Kyrgyz and Kazakhs have converted from traditionally Muslim families, and now attend Protestant churches. According to the Christianity Today website, the number of ethnic Kazakh protestants increased from fewer than 10 in 1991 to more than 6,000 in 2000.

As a result of the vigorous growth of well-off and modernized Christian churches from the United States, South Korea and other countries, the thousands of native converts diversify religious and cultural life in Central Asia. At the same time, in some areas, a rapid process of re-Islamization of natives competes with the advances of Protestantism, which leads to increasing tensions between the newly converted and the Muslim community. Religious strife resulting from policies of increasing political freedoms are indicators of the deleterious effects of liberalization policies in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

IMPLICATIONS: Unlike the Afghan Christian convert Abdul Rahman, who had to seek asylum in Europe after his trial for converting from Islam, thousands of Protestant converts from Muslim

families enjoy religious freedom in the neighboring countries of post-communist Central Asia such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

However, a number of them often face discrimination and harassment on a daily basis. To varying degrees, religious freedom is at risk in all post-Soviet states. In general, state policy in religious affairs in each country is far from being coherent and clear. Certainly, some attempts of governments to recreate elements of Soviet control over religion and restrict religious freedom can be observed. In illiberal countries, state actors continue to be the first to violate religious freedom and freedom of opinion and expression: the most regrettable trends are reported from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. For instance in Uzbekistan, on occasions Christian converts (as well as Muslim groups) are detained for unauthorized religious meetings. Muslim and Russian Orthodox leaders in the region that started collaborating long ago first to cope with devastating Soviet repression and then to tackle the problem of proselytizing and wealthy foreign missions, now request authorities to support their own traditional denominations as a balance against this.

However, a shortage of skilled mullahs and clergy, financial problems, and slow adaptation to the new dynamic development in Central Asia remain important problems in the competition by the traditional religious structures of domestic confessions with foreign Christian churches. Nevertheless, especially in the Ferghana valley, attempts at proselytism by Christian churches runs into resistance by Muslim groups. Fierce battles over conversion, viewed as apostasy, occur in this stronghold of Islam known for a strong Islamic revival at a local and individual level, but could spread.

The restoration of a gender-discriminative interpretation of the Qur'an by local opinion leaders in some areas of Central Asia is one factor which encourages post-Soviet women to consider and draw closer to other denominations that appear more tailored to modern society, market relations and liberalization. Discrimination of female or young

converts at the family and community level remains underreported and a little discussed subject. Indeed, cases of conversions are covered up by families to avoid stigma. Another case is the government-supported restriction of women's freedom of belief for women: for instance in Tajikistan, a 2004 decree banning women from mosques clearly violates women's rights.

At the community level, the marginalization of new non-Muslim groups is especially visible in villages. In rural neighborhoods, anecdotal evidence shows that Protestant converts are boycotted, and conversely, new Christians avoid participation in life-cycle events that are traditionally combined with Muslim rituals. In addition, community clashes occur between the relatives of recently deceased Christian converts and village dwellers, since most rural communities only have Muslim graveyards. Journalists also report about cases when dying converts under pressure of relatives return to Islam.

CONCLUSIONS: The lessons learned include a need for region- and nation-wide discussion on concepts of state policy in religious affairs and the problems of freedom of belief as well as growing religious intolerance. Another proposal is to support Muslims and Christians to initiate and be involved into discussions about modern Islam and Christianity and traditions of religious tolerance in Central Asia, and for that matter other regions of the world. National and international actors in the region seem to pay scant attention to issues of religious freedoms, interfaith dialogue and cooperation in order to prevent religious strife. Within the Central Asian states, a legislative framework is needed to provide inter-religious coexistence that does not contradict freedom of belief and prevents discrimination based on age and gender.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anara Tabyshaliev is the author of a number of articles and several books on Central Asia.

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM MODIFIES TURKISH STRATEGY AND POLICY

Stephen Blank

Every analysis of the consequences of Iran's nuclear and missile projects has stressed that successful completion of those programs would dramatically transform Eurasia's security situation. We can already begin to see this happening with Turkey which shares a border with Iran and which has become increasingly nervous about Iran's nuclear and missile program. Turkey still seeks to join the EU, is effecting a rapprochement with Russia, and is also simultaneously a member of NATO. It also still has a substantive working relationship with Israel, particularly among both states' armed forces, and is still insecure regarding Kurdish terrorism and aspirations to a state. Iran's activities threaten to transform the balance around Turkey and have led to clear signs of new modifications in Turkish policy.

BACKGROUND: Turkey has stated that it has sent messages to Iran asking it to desist from building nuclear weapons. Indeed, as an aspirant to membership in the EU it could do no less without enraging Brussels, and the key members of the EU who are leading the negotiations with Iran. But it has a delicately balanced relationship with Iran. Its border with Iran has been quiet for centuries. Iran is also a major source of Turkish energy imports, providing almost a fifth of Turkey's energy imports. Both Iran and Turkey also share common apprehensions about Kurdish independence drives in their own states and in Iraq as well as fears of re-emerging Kurdish terrorism in their two states. And with a Muslim-led AKP government in power in Ankara, Turkey undoubtedly is highly sensitive to charges about supporting non-Muslim regimes against Iran.

Nevertheless, while it has made clear its apprehensions to Israel about possible Israeli preemptive strikes against Iran through Turkish air space, the Turkish government and military are clearly moving to protect themselves against possible Iranian nuclearization. Turkey has resumed bilateral military talks with Israel and is evidently upgrading intelligence cooperation with Washington, not only to counter Kurdish terrorism

in Turkey but also to monitor developments in Iraq. At the same time the Turkish government, acting on its military's urging, has now opened an international tender for anti-air missiles which could also be used as anti-missile missiles to block or deter potential Iranian attacks upon Turkey. Thus this tender has stimulated competition among foreign suppliers to provide it with the appropriate missiles and the main contenders appear to be America, Israel and Russia.

The Russian firm Almaz-Antey is gearing up to offer Turkey its S-300-PMU-2 missile known as Favorit, and Russia has evidently approached Turkey about co-production of the S-300 missile, perhaps in this variant. Such gestures are a part of the larger Russo-Turkish rapprochement that has been effected since 2003 through major gas sales, burgeoning trade and shared apprehensions about American policy in Iraq and about the EU's demands on both states for reforms. Even if Moscow and Ankara claim to have also developed common interests with regard to developments in the Caucasus, it remains the case that for Ankara membership in the EU is the main priority. Consequently it could not, even if it wanted to, go against the EU on the sensitive Iranian issue. But this issue also clearly has the potential to influence

Ankara back toward collaboration with Western powers like America and Israel.

IMPLICATIONS: Should Ankara gradually return to enhanced security and defense cooperation with the West, the results would be seen in the Black Sea and Caucasus areas as well as vis-à-vis Iran. Such an outcome is by no means a certainty, but it is revealing just how important Turkey is as a player in its various regions that Moscow is again willing to raise Iranian ire by providing Turkey with these missiles for after all, they would be intended primarily to deter Iranian threats. This shows Turkey's growing importance to Russia, if not to other actors. In other words, should Iran continue with its missile and nuclear programs, doing so would undoubtedly begin to affect the postures and calculations of all the key players in Eurasia.

This means that the potential repercussions of an Iranian program would be felt in Iraq, throughout the areas of Kurdish habitation in Iran and Turkey as well, and in the greater Middle East. But they would also resonate throughout the Caucasus and Black Sea areas if not also throughout the Caspian and Central Asia. For example, to the extent that Turkey can draw closer to the West and possibly accelerate the negotiations over its entry into the EU, it is also possible that some progress could be made with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh talks. Those deadlocked at the last bilateral meeting of the principals in Rambouillet and at the meeting of the Minsk group in Washington. But, as this author has argued elsewhere, Turkish entry into the EU would obviously bring about a changed situation or place pressure on Turkey to alter its posture vis-à-vis Armenia which could then generate further movement toward resolving this war. Enhanced cooperation with Russia, on the other hand, might result in less financial support for Chechens coming from Turkey which would lead to different possible outcomes in Eurasia. If Turkey is forced to maintain a deterrent posture against a truculent

Iran, this could also force NATO to consider once again the question of defending Turkey, an issue that generated a huge fiasco in 2003 and contributed to the undermining of Turkish trust in its allies and in America. This time, a more positive stance toward the issue of defending Turkey, not just against missile attacks, but also against foreign-backed terrorism, might go far to restore some of the previous warmth in Turco-Western relations. Indeed, Prime Minister Erdogan alluded to this when stating that NATO membership indicated Turkey need not worry of Iranian nukes.

CONCLUSIONS: Presently it is far too early to predict how Turkey's relationships with its most important interlocutors will evolve, and it is in any case premature to make predictions as the way the Iranian issue will unfold is unclear. Nevertheless it is important to realize the issues involved and the stakes for all concerned with regard to Turkish strategic options, because those will be crucially influenced by the overall course of events with regard to Iran's nuclear and missile projects. Turkey is forced to balance its defense, energy, trade, anti-terrorist and Kurdish concerns along with those of relations among key players America, the EU, Russia, Israel, Iraq, Iran, and the Caucasus as it tries to navigate among the potential shoals of alternative solutions to the anxieties caused Iran's programs. Turkey's answers to those issues, will in turn help define the parameters of what is possible in all these volatile regions of the world and its relationships with all these key actors. As the Chinese ideogram puts it, crisis signifies both danger and opportunity. The crisis generated by Iran's missile and nuclear programs constitutes both a crisis and an opportunity, not only for Turkey, but also for all its partners.

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RATS EXERCISE IN TASHKENT: CONCERN OVER NUCLEAR TERRORISM?

Nicklas Norling

In early March, Uzbekistan hosted a joint anti-terrorism exercise within the framework of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). The exercise, dubbed Vostok-antiterror-2006, brought together the SCO member states in a drill concerned with the protection of vital infrastructure from terrorist capture. The Uzbek Defense Ministry revealed the Institute of Nuclear Physics (INP) in Tashkent possessing a nuclear reactor had been used. The INP has been of prime concern for the U.S. and has been identified as especially vulnerable to terrorists attempting to get their hands on nuclear materials. With a reported resurrection of the IMU and instability with the Andijon upheaval this summer, Uzbekistan and RATS seem increasingly concerned over risks to the research center.

BACKGROUND: Before the break-up of the Soviet Union, Central Asia played an active role in the development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) due to its massive reserves of uranium tapped for fissile material. As the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Soviet military-industrial complex left behind significant amounts of WMD as well as poorly guarded reactors and facilities for uranium enrichment. These facilities have been of increasing concern for the states in the region, as well as the United States, as nuclear weapons and material could get into the hands of terrorists or rogue states. The Institute of Nuclear Physics in Tashkent has been considered as especially vulnerable to terrorism due to the presence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the country and their ties to Al Qaeda. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama Bin-Laden's top deputy, reportedly bragged that: "We sent our people to Moscow, to Tashkent, to other Central Asian states, and they negotiated, and we purchased some suitcase [nuclear] bombs." The truth behind this could be disputed, but the fact remains that the United States have since 9/11 invested large sums to prevent such a development in Central Asia.

Some of this assistance has been designated for the Institute of Nuclear Physics. The institute was founded in 1956 and is located 30 kilometers outside Tashkent. The INP operates a 10 megawatt research reactor, and it is the largest nuclear research center in Central Asia. Early on, the United States identified the risks involved with the INP and in

1997 the U.S. Department of Energy issued a report on improving nuclear materials security at the institute. To improve protection, entry control systems, an alarm assessment system, delay barriers, and improved communications systems were put in place. Security grills were installed at the entrance and on the windows at the ground level, video cameras and video display systems were mounted, and interior intrusion detection sensors were set up in critical areas of the facilities. After 2001, further measures were financed by the U.S. including a sensed external detection fence and new security doors. In addition to these safeguards, the INP has also repatriated some of the highly enriched uranium (HEU) to Moscow, and converted the reactor with American assistance to utilize low-enriched uranium fuel. According to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried, 70kg of HEU have been repatriated to Russia, but it remains unclear how much, if any, remains at the institute.

If there is one issue that the U.S. and the Central Asian states accord equal weight in terms of national security, it is nuclear theft and proliferation in the post-Soviet space. This is not least seen in the Central Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone initiative launched by the five states where the importance of nuclear security and non-proliferation in the region is stressed. The Central Asian states are also particularly vulnerable to nuclear theft given their close proximity to Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. In the words of

Bekhzod Yuldashev, Head of the Institute of Nuclear Physics in Tashkent: "The whole world is concerned about this stuff...Uzbekistan is a pivotal transit point."

IMPLICATIONS: In March 2000, this was made evidently clear as a truck, heading toward Pakistan, was intercepted on the Kazakh-Uzbek border with uranium hidden in 10 lead containers concealed among scrap metal. This led the then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to announce a \$3 million package in assistance to improve Uzbek border security, and install radiation detector scanning.

However, although Uzbekistan might see a threat in uranium transiting the country, there is no real risk of terrorists acquiring nukes at the INP. With most of the HEU being repatriated to Russia from the INP and tightened security at the facilities, any terrorist attempt to capture the INP would most likely not result in any major gains. As access to HEU more or less is the key to terrorists acquiring nuclear weapons, the low-enriched uranium used at INP is not of much value for acquiring a nuclear weapon. Iraq tried to enrich uranium for a decade but did not succeed, and it is highly unlikely that Al Qaeda or any other terrorist organization would have the ability or the facilities to do so either.

That does not mean that an attempt to seize the INP is unlikely. Political unrest or revolution in Uzbekistan would provide an opportunity for terrorist elements to gain control over the facilities and cause major damage as well as a potential hostage situation. As reported, the exercises carried out by RATS also involved the training of Special Forces for a potential hostage situation at the INP. With the Andijon uprising last summer, recent reports of a potential resurrection of IMU, as well as the currently strained relationship between Uzbekistan and the United States, there might indeed be a real threat to the INP if Uzbekistan's internal situation worsens. In addition, repatriation of nuclear material from Central Asia and the INP require significant planning due to the high risks involved and tight security needed. Some assessments indicate that at present speed, repatriation of all nuclear materials and HEU in Central Asia could take more than a decade.

Even though evidence about the IMU's resurrection remains inconclusive, it is clear that the IMU has

posed the greatest threat to nuclear theft in the region, and that it was the group that caused the American response to the INP in the first place. The IMU's links to Al Qaeda make it an organization that should be closely monitored.

The presence of the United States in the region reduced the threat of nuclear theft significantly, due to the measures taken including repatriation, high-tech border control equipment, the crack-down on Al Qaeda and IMU, raising the risks involved in transiting uranium. Terrorists could most likely not rely on organized crime networks for transport as these networks are pre-occupied with the less risky and more profitable drug trade. However, should the U.S. depart as its operations in Afghanistan wind down or as Russia is seeking to push it out of the region, Central Asia would again be increasingly vulnerable to terrorism. RATS seems to be showing that it is the pragmatic arm of the SCO, and its development shows that the aim is to set up a Special Forces group that would be fit to handle security threats following a U.S. departure from the region.

CONCLUSIONS: Three conclusions could be drawn from the exercises and their location at the INP: First, a terrorist capture could produce a potential hostage situation in an important building. But nuclear theft is highly unlikely as the INP has converted all or most of its production to low-enriched uranium. Secondly, with instability in Uzbekistan, the possible resurrection of the IMU, as well as a deteriorating relationship with the U.S., SCO and RATS is seeking to replace the U.S. and show preparedness in case it faces a similar situation as for example the Beslan raid, not least due to the high risk nature of the INP. Third, RATS is increasingly showing that it is the pragmatic arm of SCO. In divergence from the power-politics involved in exercises such as Peace Mission 2005 this summer, RATS seems to engage in exercises that could prove valuable for anti-terrorism in the future.

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FIELD REPORTS

DESPITE SCANDALS, GEORGIA'S OPPOSITION FAILS TO IMPRESS

Kakha Jibladze

Georgia's ruling National Movement has weathered scandals and protests over the past month. However, despite ample possibility and opportunity, the struggling opposition has not found a way to capitalize on the mistakes of the current government.

March has been a trial for Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and his government. First, they scrambled to rescue a dubiously slow investigation into the murder of 28 year-old Sandro Girgvliani; high officials within the ministry of interior affairs were implicated in the crime and it took over a month before Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili ordered the arrest of four minor officials. In addition, three high-ranking employees implicated in the crime eventually resigned despite the fact they had not been charged.

While the arrests of MIA employees sounds impressive, it was the victim's family and opposition-led protests that kept the case in the spotlight, forcing the ministry to act more quickly. In addition, opposition-led protests against a new law requiring all merchants use cash registers added weight to the pressure on the government. Opposition leaders like the Labor party's Shalva Natelashvili and the Conservative's Koba Davitashvili hoped to use the public's displeasure about the new law as a platform against the overall popularity of the National Movement. The scandal surrounding the Girgvliani murder added weight to their cause, and the Republican opposition party and

Salome Zourabichvili's newly formed 'Georgia's Way' joined the protests.

However, even with newly found credibility, the opposition leaders did not manage to turn the tens of mini-protests into a surge of public support. Instead of using the issues as a platform to indicate the larger problems that threaten the government and the reform process, Natelashvili and his colleagues resorted to the same tried and true methodology of their past failures: grand standing and calls for Saakashvili's immediate removal.

While protestors came out in relatively large numbers - at its height the protest against Merabishvili and the cash registers combined brought an estimated 1,000 people to the city center - those questioned only offered mediocre support for the opposition parties themselves. It was the issues that seemed to support the protests, not a massive drop in popularity for the National Movement or a surge of popularity for the opposition parties.

Last week two new scandals appeared on the political scene. A prison riot on March 27th resulted in the deaths of several inmates as well as serious injuries. However, despite the fact that both issues are potential disasters for the ruling party, there has been no sign of a serious public outcry; protestors lined up in front of the prison immediately following the riot, but opposition MPs could not even get a move for an independent investigating commission past the parliament.

On March 31, the Republican Party's Valery Gelashvili was stripped of his parliamentary credentials. According to the National Movement, there is significant proof that Gelashvili was involved in arson to help his construction business. However, the opposition claims the evidence is shaky at best. In protest to the decision, several opposition parties walked out of the parliament during the vote concerning Gelashvili, and MPs from the New Rights, Industrialists and Democratic Front (which is made up of members from the Republican and the Conservative parties) are threatening to boycott the parliament as an act of protest.

Time and again, the National Movement has been able to use the opposition to their advantage, despite the fact that facts back up the opposition's stance. For example, Davitashvili, along with other members of the united opposition Democratic Front, threatened a hunger strike in front of Prime Minister Zurab Noghaidei's office earlier this month if the government refused to reconsider the law on cash registers. Noghaidei invited them in

for a talk; on live television they bickered and shouted, interrupting the prime minister while he remained calm and cool. Regardless of who was right during their debate, Noghaidei won points for the National Movement because of his professionalism and the opposition once again resembled small children fighting in the school yard.

Local elections for seats in the parliament are scheduled for this fall; primary elections among the opposition groups are slated for sometime in early summer. If the struggling opposition leaders do not find a way to regroup and show the public a united, professional struggle for justice in the National Movement-lead parliament, they run the risk of once again being defeated at the polls by the ruling party. A democracy requires a multi-party system; the sooner Georgia's fractured opposition can turn itself into professional political parties, the better it will be for the country.

FORTHCOMING KYRGYZ PARLIAMENTARY BY- ELECTIONS BECOME UNPREDICTABLE

Nurshat Ababakirov

On March 30, the Central Election Commission denied Rysbek Akmatbaev, an influential businessman, the right to run for the Jogorku Kenesh (parliament) as a candidate from the Balykshy district #69. This resulted in general anxiety both in the public and the government because due to the aggressive protests mounted by Akmatbaev's supporters, which demanded the government to restore his position.

The long determination of Rysbek Akmatbaev to get into the parliament, as he said, was to resume the work of his brother and Parliamentarian

Tynychbek Akmatbaev, who was killed in a prison riot last year.

Having registered him on 7 February, the Central Election Commission annulled his right on the grounds that Rysbek Akmatbaev has not lived for five consecutive years in Kyrgyzstan, which, according to the law, prohibits a person from being a candidate. Moreover, a court case regarding Akmatbaev's involvement in the murder of law-enforcement officer Chynybek Aliev, was still being reviewed at the time of registration. The court eventually acquitted him because of lack of evidence.

Following the CEC decision, an estimated 1,500-2,000 protesters, mostly coming from the Issykkol oblast, turned up in front of the government building to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Felix Kulov and the restoration of their candidate's right to run for the parliamentary by-elections, which will be held on April 9. Rysbek Akmatbaev stated that he personally wanted the resignation of the Prime Minister, who he accuses of involvement in his brother's death. Protesters, who threaten to spoil the upcoming elections, also blocked the main road connecting Bishkek and Cholpon-ata, the hometown of Rysbek Akmatbaev.

Humble people, especially from his home region, see Rysbek Akmatbaev as a "Robin Hood" because of his underground patronage, although he denies connections to the criminal world. Overall, he spent seven years in prison, being convicted twice for being engaged in extortions, racketeering and fighting. He is alleged to be one of the leaders of criminal groups in the north of Kyrgyzstan.

As a reaction to the protests, up to 1,500 law-enforcement forces were mobilized to maintain security in the streets surrounding government buildings. 400-500 heavily equipped soldiers from the National Guard encircled the White House. However, despite the apparent aggressiveness of the crowd, President Kurmanbek Bakiev managed to deal with the supporters of Rysbek Akmatbaev, saying that Rysbek should turn to the court, which would decide whether the CEC decision was right or wrong.

The leader of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society, Edil Baysalov, who was also registered as a candidate in the same constituency as Akmatbaev, initiated the process of cancellation of Akmatbaev's registration. Even though the decision of CEC was based on voting, where 9 members out of 10 voted for the annulment of Akmatbaev's rights to run for parliament and legal grounds, supporters of Akmatbaev perceived it as a decision based on political motives.

For some experts, the tandem, which was built between the President and Prime Minister before

the presidential elections, is in question, because they practice different policies. In this case, the president came out to the protesters, while the prime minister categorically refused to have a dialogue with protesters that he called supporters of criminals. President Bakiev also warned the government of its failure to have a dialogue with the people, reminding them of last year's revolution, where the former government also wanted to suppress meetings with force but instead was ousted from the country.

The situation marks Kyrgyzstan's reputations with a black spot in the eyes of the international community. Many embassies already expressed their concern when Rysbek Akmatbaev's supporters demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Felix Kulov for his alleged involvement in the murder of Chynybek Akmatbaev. Evgeniy Shmagin, Russia's ambassador in Kyrgyzstan, said that the situation is 'loosing its predictability'. The Ambassador of the U.S. in Kyrgyzstan, Mary Jovanovich, referred to the situation when criminals threaten the Prime Minister and want to be elected into parliament as a direct threat to the democracy.

Nevertheless, on March 3, the court ruled that Rysbek Akmatbaev had the right to run for parliament as a candidate. It is not clear why the court overturned the CEC's decision. The CEC announced its intention to appeal to the court to prove the correctness of its decision, but it ran out of time since the registration of a candidate can only be rejected five days before the election.

The result of this upcoming election remains unclear, considering Edil Baysalov's popularity among urban people while Rysbek Akmatbaev is highly supported by his co-villagers and other people from Issykkol oblast. On another note, it is also doubtful that the situation will stabilize, given that Akmatbaev's representative, Ismail Kochkarov, stated in a press-conference that Akmatbaev's life is in danger, underlining the recent assassination of three of his friends.

PRESIDENT SEZER IN BAKU – TO RESCUE BARMEK?

Fariz Ismailzade

Turkey's President Ahmed Necdet Sezer paid a visit to Baku to hold negotiations with his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, Prime Minister Artur Rasizadeh and other high ranking officials. The visit, originally scheduled for early February and postponed due to a heavy snow storm in Baku at the time, could not find a better timing.

Azerbaijani-Turkish relations have been threatened by the massive governmental attacks launched against the Turkish electricity company Barmek in the past month. Although these attacks have existed ever since Barmek was granted the license to operate the electricity distribution network of Baku and northern regions of Azerbaijan for a period of 25 years, the intensity and practical implications of these verbal attacks showed that local analysts' fears regarding the real intentions of the government might be coming true.

For a while, Azerbaijani experts believed that certain circles in the ruling elite lobby for the annulation of the contract with Barmek in order to replace it with the Russian electric monopoly RAO-UES. Frequent visits by RAO-UES head Anatoly Chubais to Baku further ignited these fears and rumors. However, last month's visit by Russian President Vladimir Putin to Baku and the subsequent arrest of several high ranking employees with Barmek became clear warning signs for Barmek. The Ministry of Taxes and the Prosecutor General's office launched an investigation into Barmek's financial documents, and in the words of the General Prosecutor Zakir Garalov, "some initial financial misappropriations have been identified."

The loss of Barmek and Azerbaijan's electricity network could be a major blow to Turkish economic and national interests in Azerbaijan. Bilateral relations already suffer enough from the problems of Turkish businessmen in Azerbaijani customs and other governmental offices as well as the "cold

shoulder" attitude that Baku receives from the pro-Islamist government of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Azerbaijan is also unhappy with the delay in the construction of the crucial Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which has been delayed by the Turkish side by more than a year.

Barmek's departure from Azerbaijan could also be a major blow to Azerbaijan's national security because the Russian company RAO-UES already controls the electricity distribution and power generation networks of neighboring Armenia and Georgia, and thus the acquisition of Azerbaijan's network would complete Russia's plans to take control over the energy assets of the South Caucasus and thus gain a major tool for political influence.

After meeting one-on-one with President Aliyev, President Sezer announced at the press conference in Baku that "Azerbaijani-Turkish relations are an example for other countries in the region in terms of the level of strategic partnership." This seemed like a very optimistic assessment of the bilateral relationship. Sezer also praised Azerbaijani efforts to build economic and political relations with the unrecognized republic of Northern Cyprus, a move which has been heavily lobbied by Ankara and which cost official Baku worsened relations with the European Union and its veto-power holding member, Cyprus. The diplomatic politeness continued as President Aliyev thanked Turkey for continuous support on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and said that "Azerbaijani-Turkish relations continue in all sectors, be it political, economic and humanitarian."

Despite problems, there are indeed reasons to sound an optimistic note. Bilateral trade has grown from \$500 million in 2004 to \$750 million in 2005 and is expected to further grow to reach the \$1 billion mark. Sezer also pointed out that Turkish

businessmen had invested \$2.2 billion in foreign direct investment in Azerbaijan.

President Aliyev also informed journalists that the two leaders had discussed the Kars-Akhalkalaki regional railway project, which would link Turkey with Georgia and Azerbaijan and by-pass Armenia, thus further benefiting the East-West energy and transportation corridors and allowing railways goods from Asia to reach targets in Europe faster and with greater ease. This project already drew much criticism from Armenia and pro-Armenian

legislators in the U.S. and Europe, yet Azerbaijan and Turkey seem to be determined to complete it. Two days prior to Sezer's arrival, Azerbaijan's Transport Minister Ziya Mamedov told the Azerbaijani press that an evaluation and feasibility analysis of the project had been completed and reported to the President Aliyev.

Should Baku and Ankara be able to pull this major regional project off, bilateral relations will reach new heights – perhaps irrespective of Barmek's fate.

KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN MOVE FROM RIVALRY TO COOPERATION

Marat Yermukanov

The official media in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have gone out of their way to depict Nursultan Nazarbayev's March 19 visit to Tashkent as an outstanding historic event. The brotherly hugs at the welcoming ceremony in Islam Karimov's Dormon presidential residence, and the markedly friendly tenor of the talks were highly suggestive of a thaw in relations between the neighbors.

After his inauguration ceremony, the re-elected Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev was constantly shuttling between Tashkent and Moscow. The timing of the trip to Uzbekistan could not be better. Islam Karimov, deeply disillusioned with the Americans and rebuked by the West for the Andijon debacle, desperately seeks the renewal of ties with Moscow and Astana. At a joint press conference, Karimov fumed over the growing threat of terrorism and drug trafficking in Central Asia which, in his view, demands an alliance between "traditional partners in foreign policy" led by Russia. The Uzbek leader swallowed his pride and called Nursultan Nazarbayev "a wise leader and a friend". Not surprisingly, he angrily lashed out at

the World Bank which allegedly distorted economic figures on Uzbekistan, presenting the country as a poverty-stricken part of Central Asia with a 32 percent inflation rate and miserable per capita income figures. Nazarbayev softened the tone of his Uzbek friend's anti-western verbal avalanche, and directed the discussions into down-to-earth economic matters, stressing that imports of Uzbek cement and other construction materials would boost industrial production in Kazakhstan.

There are many obstacles to the implementation of the seven interstate agreements ranging from agricultural cooperation to road communication that were concluded in Tashkent. In 2005, trade turnover made up \$500 million, a 15.8 percent increase from 2004's trade volume, albeit no comparison to the trade between Kazakhstan and China or Russia. Many analysts wonder how the relatively developed market economy of Kazakhstan will form a tandem with Uzbekistan with its snail's pace of privatization. Astana is increasingly worried about the growing number of Uzbek illegal migrants employed in low-paid jobs in South Kazakhstan. A

week before Nazarbayev's visit to Uzbekistan, Kazakh police deported 50 Uzbeks illegally working at construction sites in Almaty. The demographic boom in densely populated and economically poor Uzbekistan poses a social threat to Kazakhstan. On the other hand, the Uzbek economy, riddled by political instability, is ill positioned to offer resistance to Russian and Kazakh financial and industrial groups eyeing big slices of the Uzbek economic pie. Kazakhstan's Basis A Corporation made public its plans to privatize Uzbekistan's cement producing plant, while Russian Vympelkom telecommunications company sets its eyes on the Uzbek cell phone operators Buztel and Unitel. Despite all Islam Karimov's friendly smiles, Astana suspects that the Uzbek government covertly tries to limit Kazakhstan's access to the Uzbek economy. A recent presentation on Uzbekistan's mineral resources in the Aral Sea was attended by Uzbneftegaz, the Korean National Oil Corporation, Russia's Lukoil Overseas and China's CNPC. Is it coincidental that Kazakhstan, a next-door oil power, was not invited to this gathering?

One of the major sticking-points in normalizing Kazakh-Uzbek relations is the unsettled border problem. The demarcation process is likely to drag on for an indefinite period of time while frequent shooting incidents along the 2,300 kilometers long border are poisoning relations within communities in border areas with a mixed population. Since 2001, border guard agencies have registered more than 20 border incidents in which local Uzbeks and Kazakhs were involved. The latest event happened on February 24 this year, when Uzbek border guards chased a lorry with suspected contraband flour, and penetrated into the Kazakh village of Konyrat, provoking a skirmish with locals. This is not an isolated case, since truckloads of flour are being smuggled into Uzbekistan day and night bypassing checkpoints. Diesel oil and gasoline are also illegally brought from Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Tleukhan

Kabdrashitov, plays down shootings along the border, ascribing these incidents to 'unskilled and unprofessional approach by border guards to their duties'. His Uzbek counterpart Turdigul Botayorov takes the matter more seriously, saying that so far two countries reached agreements on only 10 border-crossing points.

Most of the areas of cooperation mapped out since the signing of the Agreement on Eternal Friendship on October 31 1998, are beset by a host of hurdles. It is not yet clear when a water resources consortium of Central Asian states, a project advocated by World Bank, will become a reality. In water management policy, much hinges on relations between Tashkent and Astana. On the eve of Nazarbayev's visit to Uzbekistan, the Kazakh Electricity Grid Operating Company (KEGOC) claimed that the Uzbek electricity company Uzbekenergo owes \$1 million to Kazakhstan.

Yet the thaw in Kazakh-Uzbek relations is easily noticeable. Tashkent dropped its accusations against Astana for 'sheltering terrorist groups in training camps in South Kazakhstan', a rhetoric often brandished by Islam Karimov after the March 2004 Tashkent bombings. Uzbekistan agreed to supply South Kazakhstan with relatively cheap gas for \$55 per 1000 cubic meters. And finally, Nazarbayev and Karimov made a joint statement of friendship and cooperation. Good neighborly relations between Astana and Tashkent serve the interests of China and Russia, seeking geopolitical counterbalance to American influence in Central Asia. But many aspects of a political rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are something of a déjà vu. It should be recalled that in January 1994, the two neighbors signed an agreement on setting up a Single Economic Space with nothing to show for it. The practical implementation of agreements reached during Nazarbayev's visit remains in limbo.

NEWS DIGEST

KYRGYZSTAN REMEMBERS REVOLUTION

24 March

One year after the uprising which drove the Kyrgyz president from power, the new government of this Central Asian republic has been celebrating. A public holiday has been declared with a military parade and other festivities in the capital, Bishkek. But many people say the new leaders have not fulfilled promises to fight corruption and rebuild the economy. Hundreds of students in Bishkek's central square on Friday re-enacted the storming of the presidential palace. The actors tore away the black shrouds around a tower symbolising the Kyrgyz constitution and freed those trapped in a great spider's web around it. The new President, Kurmanbek Bakiev, addressed the invited audience, telling them that Kyrgyzstan would never return to authoritarianism and was becoming a free and just society. Bishkek's great central square was then filled with martial music and the tramp of boots as the Kyrgyz army paraded its soldiers and armoured vehicles before the country's leaders. But many people will have listened to the president's televised speech with scepticism. There was widespread satisfaction when the long-serving previous President, Askar Akayev, fled into exile in Moscow. But supporters of the revolution hope for an end to widespread corruption and for an improvement in the sluggish Kyrgyz economy. Neither has come about. The government hopes these public celebrations and a holiday will hope improve the people's mood. (BBC)

KAZAKH DEMOCRACY COMMISSION MEETS

24 March

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev chaired the first meeting of a new democratization commission in Astana on March 24, "Kazakhstan Today" reported. The commission is charged with developing a democratization program for 2006-2011. In his remarks, Nazarbaev noted, "I don't rule out that it may be necessary to conduct a constitutional reform as well." Nazarbaev stressed that the people should decide whether Kazakhstan should have a presidential or parliamentary form of government. He also suggested that legislation should be changed so that political parties elected to parliament receive "partial government funding." On NGOs, Nazarbaev said, "Let them not have to beg from international

organizations. We are capable of directing their efforts to the needs of the Kazakh people ourselves." Alikhan Baimenov, head of the Ak Zhol Party, told the commission that parliament should be granted greater powers. Baimenov also urged the authorities to register the Alga party, which was recently denied registration by the Justice Ministry. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

ABKHAZ AUTHORITIES RELEASE DETAINED GEORGIAN FILM-MAKERS

25 March

Following talks between Irakli Alasania, President Saakashvili's adviser for Abkhazia, and Sergei Bagapsh, president of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia, three Georgians detained by the Abkhaz authorities on suspicion of espionage were handed back on March 25 to representatives of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz government in exile. The three Georgians, who were arrested while filming churches and other monuments in Abkhazia, were handed over at a bridge over the Inguri River that marks the border between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia. The three Georgians were arrested on March 4 and remanded to three months' pre-trial detention. (Caucasus Press)

OSCE OFFICIAL VOICES OPTIMISM ON KAZAKH BID FOR CHAIRMANSHIP

27 March

OSCE Chairman in Office and Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht said on March 27 during a meeting with President Nazarbaev in Astana that Kazakhstan has the best chance of any Central Asian country to chair the OSCE. Noting that Kazakhstan hopes to chair the OSCE in 2009, De Gucht said, "For the OSCE, it's very important that it be headed by a country located to the east of Vienna. We feel that Kazakhstan is the worthiest candidate for the [chairmanship] post in the OSCE in Central Asia." De Gucht also praised Kazakhstan's democratization prospects. He said, "In view of such phenomena as stable economic growth and tolerance in society, I believe that Kazakhstan has all the prerequisites to begin far-ranging democratic transformations, and I think that the country will manage this task." (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

SEVEN INMATES KILLED IN PRISON MUTINY IN TBILISI - RIGHTS ACTIVISTS

27 March

Unofficial reports claim seven inmates were killed and 19 injured in an operation to quell unrest at Tbilisi Prison No. 5 early on Monday, Yelena Tevdoradze, chairman of the parliamentary human rights committee, told the press. Blame for the mutiny and the premeditated murder of inmates lies with the Interior Ministry and Penitentiary Department, leader of the Right Opposition Party David Gamikrelidze told a news conference on Monday. He demanded the dismissal of Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili and Penitentiary Department chief Bacho Akhalaya. (Interfax)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT SAYS PRISON RIOT INTENDED TO DESTABILIZE COUNTRY**27 March**

Mikheil Saakashvili told a National Security Council session on March 27 that the riot and attempted mass jail break at a Tbilisi prison earlier that day was part of a bid by unspecified criminal elements to destabilize the situation in Georgia. He said the authorities "will not talk with bandits" and vowed "zero tolerance" towards criminals. Saakashvili further praised the response of police and security forces deployed to suppress the riot, in which the Georgian authorities have confirmed that seven people died. Ninety-six prisoners have since been transferred from the Tbilisi jail where the riot took place to the Rustavi penal colony. (Caucasus Press)

KYRGYZSTAN TO RECEIVE \$105 MILLION FROM DONORS IN 2006**28 March**

Kyrgyz Finance Minister Aklybek Japarov announced on March 27 that international financial institutions will loan Kyrgyzstan \$105 million in 2006, Kabar reported. The announcement came after two weeks of talks with representatives of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank, and Germany's KfW Entwicklungsbank (KfW Development Bank). Some 40 percent of the funds will go to the Agricultural Water Use and Industry Ministry, 20 percent to the Transportation and Communications Ministry, and 13 percent to the Health Ministry, with the remainder distributed to other social projects. As of December 31, 2005, Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt stood at \$1.44 billion, with the largest amount, \$680 million, or 47.4 percent, owed to the World Bank. (gazeta.kg)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENTIAL-ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ARRESTED ON**ESPIONAGE CHARGES****28 March**

Presidential-administration department head Simon Kilidze has been arrested on charges of treason and espionage for an unnamed foreign state, Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili told journalists in Tbilisi on March 28. Merabishvili said that Kilidze began passing secret information to a foreign intelligence service in 2004 and has been paid at least \$20,000 for doing so. (Caucasus Press)

RUSSIAN MIDEAST EXPERT OFFERS HIS COUNTRY AS A MODEL**28 March**

Yevgeny Primakov -- a former foreign minister and current president of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as a veteran Middle East expert -- told the first-ever meeting of the Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group in Moscow on March 27 that his country is a model for good Christian-Muslim relations, news agencies reported. "There is perhaps no other state with a population made up of a Christian majority and Muslim minority that could serve as well as Russia as an example of their living peacefully, the interpenetration of cultures, and the creation of a diverse communality," Primakov added. (RFE/RL)

CHINA TO LEND TAJIKISTAN \$172 MILLION**29 March**

China plans to loan Tajikistan \$172 million for investment projects in Tajikistan. Ghafur Rasulov, a spokesman for Tajikistan's Economy and Trade Ministry, told Regnum that the funds are part of a \$900 million loan package China has made available under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, whose members are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Tajik Economy and Trade Minister Hakim Soliev is currently in Beijing for talks on Chinese support for projects in Tajikistan, Soliyev said. (Regnum)

KYRGYZ EX-PRESIDENT WILL NOT APOLOGIZE FOR HIS RULE**29 March**

Maksim Maksimovich, a lawyer defending former Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev, told a news conference in Bishkek on March 29 that Akaev does not intend to make any public apologies for his actions as president, Kabar reported. Maksimovich said that Akaev is currently teaching at Moscow State University and living in one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's residences near Moscow.

Maksimovich also said that he has formally requested that Kyrgyz Prosecutor-General Kambaraly Kongantiev conduct a criminal investigation into allegations by former Prosecutor-General Azimbek Beknazarov that Akaev offered him a bribe if he dropped criminal charges against the ex-president. (akipress.org)

RUSSIA EXTRADITES SUSPECTED ISLAMISTS TO UZBEKISTAN – FSB

29 March

Russia has arrested on its territory and extradited to Uzbekistan 19 people suspected of links with the international Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir since the start of 2006, Sergei Smirnov, first deputy director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), said on Wednesday. "Hizb ut-Tahrir poses the greatest danger on the territory of Central Asian states" and is "carrying out propaganda of terrorism not only in Uzbekistan but also in Russia," Smirnov told reporters after a meeting of the governing body of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. (Interfax)

KARABAKH CONCERNED ABOUT VIOLATIONS OF CEASEFIRE

30 March

The Foreign Ministry of the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh Republic has expressed concern over increasingly frequent violations of the ceasefire by the Azeri military. "Violations at the disengagement line by the Azeri military have become regular lately and instances of shooting were reported during monitoring missions," the Azeri Foreign Ministry said in a statement circulated in Stepanakert on Thursday. "These actions directly derive from Azerbaijan's continuing inflammatory rhetoric, which, however, has not been adequately assessed by the countries and organizations concerned," the statement reads. The statement was made in the wake of the recent failure in the monitoring of the disengagement line by experts of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in the northwestern sector of Karabakh's Martakert district on March 29. Armenia and Azerbaijan traded recriminations for the failure. (Interfax)

HEAD OF KYRGYZ PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION WINS LIBEL CASE AGAINST EX-PRESIDENT'S WIFE

30 March

Usen Sydykov, head of the Kyrgyz presidential administration, on March 30 won a libel case against

Mairam Akaeva, wife of former President Askar Akaev, and a Kyrgyz newspaper. A court in Bishkek ruled that Akaeva will have to pay Sydykov compensation of 50,000 soms (\$1,200), while the newspaper "Bely parakhod" will have to pay 10,000 soms (\$250). Sydykov sued after Akaeva claimed in an article that Sydykov was one of the main organizers of a campaign against the Akaev family. Sydykov had initially sought damages of \$1 million. (akipress.org)

UZBEK PRESIDENT VISITS SOUTH KOREA

30 March

Uzbek President Islam Karimov and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun signed a strategic partnership declaration in Seoul on March 29, Uzbek television reported. The visit also produced a number of South Korean investment initiatives, the South Korean news agency Yonhap reported. South Korea's National Oil Corporation (KNOC) and Korea Gas Corporation (KOGAS) signed a memorandum of understanding with the Uzbek state oil and gas company Uzbekneftegaz to explore, and possibly develop, two oil and two gas fields in Uzbekistan. Korea Resources Corporation signed an agreement to mine uranium, iron, and gold in Uzbekistan, "The Korea Herald" reported. Korea will also loan Uzbekistan \$30 million for an information-technology education project, "The Korea Times" reported. The newspaper noted that 230,000 ethnic Koreans live in Uzbekistan. (RFE/RL)

OVER 250 TERROR ATTACKS PRE-EMPTED IN SCO COUNTRIES IN 2005

30 March

Over 250 terror attacks were pre-empted in countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2005, Vyacheslav Kasymov, Executive Committee Director of the SCO's Regional Anti-Terror Agency, said. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, besides al Qaeda, are listed as terror organizations in five of the SCO's countries, Kasymov told the press after a meeting of the Agency's Council in Tashkent on Wednesday. The SCO is comprised of Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. About 400 suspected terrorists are on the Agency's wanted list, Sergei Smirnov, the Russian Federal Security Service's Deputy Director who heads the Russian delegation to the Council session, told reporters. (Interfax)

AFGHAN CONVERT "WOULD BE KILLED"

31 March

An Afghan man who could have faced the death penalty for becoming a Christian has said he would probably have been killed had he remained in Afghanistan. Speaking to journalists in Italy, where he has been given asylum, Abdul Rahman, 41, thanked Pope Benedict XVI for leading the campaign to have him freed. He said he never wanted to return to Afghanistan and was concerned for the safety of his family there. Afghan MPs have condemned his release and said he should have not have left. Mr Rahman was freed on Monday after being deemed mentally unfit to stand trial on a charge of apostasy. Conversion, or apostasy, is a crime under Afghanistan's Islamic law. Mr Rahman spoke to journalists soon after Italy formally granted him asylum on the grounds of religious persecution. "In Kabul they would have killed me, I'm sure of it," he said. "If you are not a Muslim in an Islamic country like mine they kill you, there are no doubts." He said he was "happy" to be in Italy and thanked the pope for "having acted on my behalf". Mr Rahman is now under protection at a secret location in Italy, the interior ministry has said. There had been an international outcry at the prospect of the Christian convert being executed for his religious beliefs. The Pope wrote to Afghan President Hamid Karzai last week, saying that dropping the case "would bestow great honour upon the Afghan people and would raise a chorus of admiration in the international community". Politicians in Afghanistan opposed Mr Rahman's release from trial as "contrary to the laws in place in Afghanistan", and condemned Western "interference" on his behalf. The case has highlighted ambiguities in Afghanistan's constitution over the interpretation of religious issues. (BBC)

KYRGYZ POLICE SAY IMU ACTIVISTS DETAINED IN SOUTH**31 March**

Police in Osh arrested six alleged members of the banned Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) on March 30, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported, citing law-enforcement sources. Osh Deputy Police Chief Suyun Omurzakov told RFE/RL that police conducted early-morning searches at three addresses. "At two of them we found the people we were looking for," he said. Akylbek Boyonov, deputy head of the Osh region's security department, told RFE/RL that police had acted on a tip-off from Uzbekistan's National Security Service. An unidentified police official said that police arrested 12 people in Osh and Uzgen. "Six of the arrested are members of the IMU and the radical Hizb ut-Tahrir party. The six others are being

interrogated," the official said. He added that "one of the IMU activists managed to escape after opening fire on policemen as they attempted to capture him in a private house in Uzgen. According to preliminary reports, he may be accompanied by another two IMU supporters." (RFE/RL)

BISHKEK RALLY DEMANDS KULOV'S RESIGNATION**31 March**

Up to 3,000 people have joined a rally in downtown Bishkek to protest the Kyrgyz Central Election Commission's decision to bar Ryspek Akmatbayev from running in parliamentary elections, the action's organizers told Interfax. Police have put the number of protesters at around 500. The demonstrators are holding banners with slogans reading "Ryspek Akmatbayev is Our Deputy!" and demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Felix Kulov. "The rally was authorized by the city authorities. It is legal," one of the organizers said. "The rally has no time limit. It will continue until the protesters' demands are met," he said. "Police will not interfere. It is a peaceful action," Bishkek police chief Moldomus Kongantiyev told Interfax. (Interfax)

RIGHTS GROUP BLASTS KAZAKHSTAN OVER REFUGEE RETURN TO UZBEKISTAN**31 March**

Human Rights Watch (HRW) announced in a March 29 press release that it has written a six-page letter to Kazakh President Nazarbaev asking him to investigate the forced return of Uzbek nationals from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan. The statement said that HRW has obtained new evidence linking Kazakh security forces to the seizure and return of four Uzbek nationals in November 2005. In all, nine men "disappeared" from southern Kazakhstan in November and were later transferred to Uzbek custody, HRW alleged. Four of them had been registered as asylum-seekers by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. HRW expressed concern about the men's fate and stressed that their forced return is a violation of international law. "These men went to Kazakhstan seeking safety, but now face torture and imprisonment," said Holly Cartner, HRW's Europe and Central Asia director. She added: "It is a violation of international law to return people to a place where they will be persecuted and tortured. Kazakh officials had an obligation to know the risk these men faced if returned, but sent them back anyway." (RFE/RL)

ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN EXCHANGE ACCUSATIONS OVER CEASE-FIRE VIOLATIONS

31 March

An Azerbaijani serviceman was killed on March 30 when Armenian forces opened fire near the village of Alibeyli in Tovuz district; he was the sixth serviceman to die from enemy fire this month, zerkalo.az reported on March 31 quoting the press service of the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry. The Armenian and Azerbaijani defense ministries have each blamed the opposing side for opening fire on March 29 and preventing a routine monitoring by the OSCE of the Line of Contact separating the two sides, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. The OSCE has not commented on that incident. Also on March 29, the Foreign Ministry of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic issued a statement criticizing as "inadmissible" international mediators' "attempts to lay equal responsibility on all parties of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict for violations of the cease-fire regime," Noyan Tapan reported. That statement identified Azerbaijan as having instigated the cease-fire violations and argued that the international community's failure to acknowledge this risks further destabilizing the situation in the South Caucasus. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIA CHARGES SOUTH OSSETIAN LEADER'S ENVOY WITH SMUGGLING

1 April

Georgian police have arrested an envoy of the president of the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia on suspicion of smuggling cigarettes into Georgia, the Georgian Interior Ministry said. Vazha Khachapuridze, who may face a prison term of up to five years if proved guilty, was arrested near the village of Ergneti after more than 1,500 cigarette packets with Russian excise stamps were found in his car, the ministry told Interfax. He was taken to a police station in the Shida-Kartli district. (Interfax)

KAZAKHS PONDERING "DESERT VEGAS"

2 April

Authorities in Kazakhstan say they are talking with investors about building a gambling and entertainment complex near the commercial capital, Almaty. President Nursultan Nazarbayev said he had long thought of building a sort of Las Vegas on the vast empty steppe outside the city. Officials say a new complex would help to control the growth of casinos and gambling in Almaty itself. Kazak authorities have long been uneasy about gambling growth in major

cities. Almaty residents fret about the effects on children, or about old people pouring their pensions into slot machines. Almaty now has nearly 40 casinos. Their colourful neon lights make some of the most impressive displays in a city which has been transformed in recent years. But President Nazarbayev has said he wants to move the casinos and the hundreds of smaller gambling businesses out of the city entirely, to the shores of Lake Kapchagai, a huge reservoir 80km (50 miles) away. (BBC)

NO ETHNIC ENMITY SEEN BEHIND ATTACK ON KABARDINO-BALKARIA MINISTER – PROSECUTORS

2 April

Moscow prosecutors have given their go-ahead to a criminal investigation into an attack on Kabardino-Balkaria Culture Minister Zaur Tutov under charges of inflicting bodily injuries. "Nothing suggests thus far that the attack was motivated by ethnic enmity, but all theories will be checked," an official with Moscow's Eastern District Prosecutor's Office told Interfax. Tutov was beaten up by unidentified attackers following an impulsive argument. He suffered a fracture of the jaw and facial injuries, and was taken to a hospital late on Saturday. Earlier reports said that Tutov, who is also a well known singer, was beaten up by unidentified young assailants when he was collecting his daughter from a dance studio. A source in law enforcement told Interfax that the assailants allegedly shouted nationalist insults. Spokesperson for Kabardino-Balkaria's presidential press service Dzhamilya Khagarova told Interfax that, "young assailants, shouting: 'Russia - for Russians!' severely beat up Tutov, a popular singer of Russian lyrical songs. The singer suffered a fracture of the jaw and concussion of the brain," Khagarova said. (Interfax)

KUWAIT MAY OPEN ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTER IN TATARSTAN

2 April

Talks will be held with Kuwaiti ministries and organizations regarding plans to open a Kuwaiti Islamic cultural center in Russia's predominantly Muslim republic of Tatarstan, Tatar President Mintimer Shaimiyev said at a Sunday meeting with Kuwaiti Justice Minister Abdallah al-Matuq. Shaimiyev attaches great importance to developing spiritual ties between Kuwait and Russia, particularly Tatarstan, which is witnessing a vigorous religious revival, the Tatar president's press service told Interfax. Today Tatarstan has 1,100

mosques, compared with 23 in the late 1990s, Shaimiyev said. Shaimiyev is to meet with Kuwaiti head Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah on Monday and will round off his Middle East tour on April 3. (Interfax)

“TALEBAN” KILL TURKISH ENGINEER

3 April

A Turkish engineer has been shot dead by suspected Taleban militants while working on a road construction project in western Afghanistan, officials said. The engineer was pulled from his car and shot when travelling along the border of Farah and Nimroz provinces. His body was set alight by the militants, an official said. Militants have repeatedly attacked US-funded road works in Afghanistan and have killed or kidnapped several foreign workers in the past year. The Turkish engineer was travelling with three police guards on Sunday when gunmen in another car forced their vehicle to stop. The three guards were released. There has been an upsurge in violence in southern Afghanistan over the last year, making some parts no-

go areas for aid workers. Attacks in 2005 left more than 1,400 people dead - Afghanistan's bloodiest year since US-led forces ousted the Taleban in late 2001. (BBC)

PUTIN SAYS MEETINGS WITH NAZARBAYEV ALWAYS PRODUCTIVE

4 April

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he believes each of his meetings with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev results in "the development of new projects and agreements and new levels of dialogue." Speaking at a press conference in Moscow on Tuesday, Putin pointed to significant growth in trade turnover between Russia and Kazakhstan, saying that the two countries are "committed to strengthening multilateral ties." Nazarbayev said all former Soviet republics have realized in the fifteen years of independence that "only through integration at the modern level is it possible not only to develop bilateral relations but also to facilitate each other's economic development." (Interfax)