

Central Asia

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ANALYST

BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday, September 24, 2003

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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/September 24, 2003

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In recent months, an increasing flow of specific corruption allegations, mostly backed by evidence in U.S. court cases, have begun to appear involving Central Asian and Caucasian leaders. While accusations of corruption at the highest level is common in the abstract in all former Soviet countries, the actual evidence to that affect has been scarce. These cases are likely to lead to loss of legitimacy for the leadership of a number of countries, but more significantly, these cases may also contribute to destabilization as it may spur public unrest or elite competition for power and control over resources.

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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

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Analytical article structure:

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

BACKGROUND: 200-300 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: 200-300 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

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

Specifications for Field Reports:

Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event, or about the work of an NGO. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed has for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 500-700 words.

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Svante E. Cornell, Editor

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THE NEW FACE OF CHECHEN TERRORISM

Michael Fredholm

Female Chechen suicide bombers have recently developed into a new and increasingly serious threat to Russia. Previous Chechen acts of violence were primarily aimed at military targets and took place in the Northern Caucasus, and did not aim to kill large numbers of Russian civilians. The attacks by female suicide bombers have reversed these patterns. While this is unlikely to change the course of the war, it will have important implications for Russia's leadership, which is now being forced to provide what its rhetoric has always promised: security for Russia's citizens from terrorist attacks.

BACKGROUND: On July 5, 2003, two female suicide bombers blew themselves up during a rock concert at the Tushino airport in Moscow. This attack was followed on July 9 by an attempted bombing of a restaurant in downtown Moscow, on Tverskaya-Yamskaya street. In addition, a number of explosive devices of the same type as was used on the previous occasions was found stored in Tolstopaltsevo outside Moscow on July 24. While the use of terrorist tactics in the Chechen war is not new, these events are a novel pattern.

Foreign Islamic extremists of Arab origin began to engage in suicide bombings in Chechnya already in mid-2000. These were carefully coordinated attacks on military targets by mainly male suicide bombers who used the Middle Eastern method of exploding trucks loaded with explosives near the target. Units of Chechen fighters then often followed up the attacks by conventional means. Similar attacks have continued to occur since, including devastating ones aimed at a government building in Znamenskoe, in Chechnya, on May 12, 2003 and a military hospital in Mozdok, North Ossetia on August 1, 2003.

Chechen women took part in fighting already during the First Chechen War, in 1994-1996. However, they only recently turned to suicide attacks against civilians, another method learnt from the Middle East. Examples include a suicide bombing in the Chechen town of Iliskhan-Yurt on May 14, 2003, and the suicide bombing of a bus in Mozdok on June 5, 2003. Underlying factors no doubt include a feeling of hopelessness among Chechen women, many of whom have lost family members in the war. Besides, many are likely destitute. It is hardly coincidental that female suicide bombers have become known as the "black widows."

The key factor that made several Chechen women turn to terror was probably the failed hostage-taking in the Dubrovka theatre in southern Moscow on 23 October 2002. A unit of Chechens, including many women, took hundreds of civilians hostage. In the First Chechen War, hostage-taking operations such as Shamil Basaev's 1995 raid on Budennovsk were pivotal episodes with regard to the outcome of the war. Basaev launched what appeared to be a suicidal operation against a Russian target, yet emerged victorious with only few casualties. In addition, his raid resulted in widespread

international media attention on the Chechen cause as well as outspoken Russian public criticism of the war as many Russians blamed their own government for its incompetence and heavy-handed tactics. In 2002, the Chechens who took part in the in Dubrovka hostage-taking probably hoped to duplicate the success of Basaev's raid seven years earlier. For this reason, the operation was probably intended to take hostages rather than kill Russians. The goal might have been to regain some measure of sympathy from the West, the support from which had diminished since the American War on Terror began in 2001.

However, the Dubrovka operation produced little sympathy for the Chechen cause abroad and none whatsoever in Russia. Besides, the response of the Russian security organs, to gas both hostage-takers and hostages (more than a hundred of whom were killed by the gas) and then slaughter all the hostage-takers probably persuaded many Chechens that the only remaining solution was to engage in suicide bombings of the type that the Arab extremists in Chechnya have long favoured.

IMPLICATIONS: Despite the fact that the increased numbers of female suicide bombers would seem to be a natural reaction to the events in Dubrovka rather than any kind of premeditated war strategy among the Chechens, the phenomenon indicates a fundamental shift in the nature of the war in Chechnya. The earlier cases of Chechen terrorism and hostage-taking were either aimed at military targets or, if not, were never planned to result in large numbers of killed civilians. Basaev's 1995 hostage-taking in Budennovsk was in practice aimed at a military target: a garrison town hospital in which Russian military personnel was recuperating. Besides, interviews with Chechens who participated in the raid indicate that the hospital was only a secondary target, chosen when the primary target could not be reached. Even the suicide bombings committed by foreign extremists in Chechnya were aimed at military targets, typically barracks or headquarters of the Russian Interior Ministry Forces in Chechnya.

The Chechen suicide bombers are unlikely to change the outcome of the war in Chechnya militarily. Chechnya remains unstable, and any Russian reaction to the suicide bombings in the form of increased repression - in Chechnya or directed at

Chechens living in Russian cities such as Moscow - will no doubt only encourage yet more Chechens to engage in terrorism. Yet, the Russian security organs have stepped up surveillance of Chechens present in the Russian cities - and could hardly do otherwise when suddenly faced with a real threat of terrorism.

However, the new threat of terrorism brings implications for the political and social development of Russia. Since 1999, Russian President Vladimir Putin has gradually increased the powers of the state, motivating this with the need to protect Russian society from Chechen terrorism. Yet the Russian claims of Chechen involvement in the 1999 apartment building explosions in Moscow and elsewhere have never been substantially proven, and except in the Northern Caucasus, the threat from terrorism was always minimal. The security organs never, or only seldom, had to face a genuine need to use their new powers to fight real, not imagined terrorists. Beginning with the Dubrovka hostage-taking, this situation has changed. President Putin and the Russian security organs will henceforth have to deliver the security that the increased state powers were meant to provide.

CONCLUSIONS: Russia from now on will have to live with sudden acts of terrorism aimed at civilians in Moscow as well as other major cities. Whether this will alter the public

image of President Putin remains to be seen. He has hitherto enjoyed the image of a tough commander-in-chief of a small victorious war in the Caucasus. However, if Putin cannot deliver the security that he has promised, even he - and certainly the security organs - may eventually lose the support of the public.

On the Chechen side, it remains unclear to what extent the Chechen leadership under President Aslan Maskhadov is able to prevent, or even influence, the shift in tactics. Maskhadov immediately condemned the Dubrovka hostage-taking. He has also condemned other attacks aimed at civilians. Yet, the Chechen leaders no doubt realize that the foreign support lost since 2001 will hardly be regained as long as some Chechens engage in suicide bombings. On the other hand, a situation that pushes men and women so far over the edge that they choose to become suicide bombers is not one that can be solved by logic and negotiations alone. The war in Chechnya is unlikely to be over soon.

AUTHOR BIO: Michael Fredholm is a defense analyst working for the Swedish government. He has written extensively on the history, defense, and security policies of Eurasia. The views presented in this article are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily represent those of the Swedish government.

KYRGYZSTAN'S ENERGY SECTOR MIGHT SOON FACE CRISIS

The energy sector of Kyrgyzstan is in a sad state. Overall losses in this sector constitute 45%, of which 17% is so called technical losses whereas 28% of it has been generated from thefts and non-payments, *KyrgyzInfo* reports. Stealing electricity has acquired a massive character among the population. There are even cases when power engineering specialists join in a conspiracy with the users and together steal electricity. As a result, the energy system does not get necessary replenishment, which consequently influences the tariff rates.

On September 18 at a press conference held in the information agency *AKIpress*, the Chairman of the Legislative Assembly (lower chamber of the Kyrgyz parliament) Committee on matters of fuel and energy Tairbek Sarpashev said that if the situation keeps its current pace, a crisis in the energy sector can come in January or February of 2004. According to him, at present there are three important issues in the energy sector of Kyrgyzstan. Since the division of the "Kyrgyzenergo" into three companies, a system of interrelation among them has not been worked out yet. The population's debt for used gas has reached an unprecedented level, constituting 2,622 million som (ca 42 som/\$1). Social tensions are rising. Besides, this year's rainy season negatively influenced the energy sector. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan's need for water was not significant, which led to the reduction in generating electric power. Consequently there will be no gas from

Uzbekistan in exchange for electrical energy. According Sarpashev, on top of that power engineering specialists owe Uzbekistan 7 million US dollars for supplying the Bishkek thermoelectric plant.

Corruption and theft are being named as the main reasons for the poor state of the country's energy sector. As Sarpashev says, corruption and theft in this sector have become systematic, beginning with minor theft and ending with exerting influence on the decision-making processes on top governmental levels. Recently at the session of the Legislative Assembly, during which the issues within the country's energy sector were discussed, deputies agreed that corruption in the energy sector has been acquiring a new and more massive character. According to the deputies, billing non-existent users has become a usual phenomenon. Then these sums turn into consumers' debts, which in turn result in massive power cuts. For example, in rural areas power cuts take place almost on daily basis. The supply of electricity in many villages is carried out according to a certain schedule.

Stealing energy by individuals as well as various enterprises has also become quite natural in Kyrgyzstan. For example, the head of the financial department of the state company "Kyrgyzgaz" Salamat Aitikeev said that users' debt for natural gas only for July constituted \$5 million. The company has been unsuccessfully trying to stop massive theft of gas from pipelines. Only in

Bishkek during the past five months, 54 bills on violation of rules of gas use were drawn up. Besides, as the representatives of "Kyrgyzgaz" point out, by stealing gas people not only bring harm to the state, but they also put their own lives and health under threat since they join the gas distributing network without following any security norms.

Deputy Sarpashev and other specialists in this sphere think that the only way out of this situation and of preventing crisis in the energy sector is to toughen measures and administrative as well as material punishment for stealing. Another suggestion is technical re-equipment in controlling the use of resources and structural change, which envisage electronic meters and establishment of Major Users' Directorate. For this purpose the World Bank is going to allocate US\$5 million to Kyrgyzstan.

The situation in the energy sector is indeed alarming since its worsening consequences may not only result in everyday inconveniences for the population, but it may also put the economic well-being of the country under threat. The support of the World Bank could become an important step in the fight against infringers. However, without joint efforts of all parties even such a generous help cannot drag the country's energy sector out of the trap of corruption and theft.

Gulzina Karim kyzy

KYRGYZSTAN: THE POLITICAL SUCCESSION GAME

Rafis Abazov

In Summer 2003, President Askar Akayev confirmed that he would not run for reelection in 2005 after completing his constitutionally granted term. There is a broad consensus that he will probably step down from the presidency, as his reputation has been severely tarnished in recent years. During recent months, general discussion about the succession has shifted to the issue of a likely successor. Many experts think it a real possibility that an immediate member of the family, such as Akayev's wife Meerim Akayeva, might inherit the presidency. In light of the events and new political trends in Central Asia and the Caucasus, this scenario looks increasingly credible.

BACKGROUND: In traditional Central Asian societies, the concept of keeping all political power within the extended family has very strong roots. This notion survived 100 years of Russian and later Soviet modernization. It was, therefore, natural for the debate about political succession in Central Asia to switch from procedure to personalities. Increasing signs tend to point to political leaders stepping down and transferring power to family members.

The Russian colonial administration often accepted the transfer of political or administrative office to the immediate members of families or clans among the native administration, but the Soviet authorities had a very different attitude, attempting to fully eliminate any signs of nepotism. They tried to bring people from different backgrounds to the administrative and party positions in the republic, in order to break tribal alliances and patronage networks. The highest government or party apparatus positions in Kyrgyzstan were regularly rotated, with representatives from the same family or even the same region never inheriting such positions. Yet by the mid-1970s, Kyrgyz clans and patronage networks had been consolidated into two major clans – centered in the north and south of the republic, respectively, and a system of unwritten rules rotating the post of First Secretary between the northern and southern clans was established.

Political stability and political balance were achieved through behind-the-scenes bargaining processes tacitly approved by the Kremlin patrons, and through compromises achieved between major representatives of the competing clans. This contributed to the relatively stable political environment in the republic. But at present, there is no mechanism ensuring that a rotation will take place.

While succession issues have been deferred in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, President Yeltsin in Russia hand-picked a young and energetic successor, who provided him with guarantees of personal security and financial safety. But although President Putin honored his main promises, he had by 2003 made major assaults on Yeltsin's family's financial interests, and especially on Yeltsin's close associates – the so-called oligarchs. Therefore since mid-2003 and especially in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, there has been much discussion of possible succession solutions. Politicians increasingly talk about the possibility of succession falling to incumbent presidents' immediate family members;

for example, Ilham Aliyev is gradually replacing his father, Heydar Aliyev. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the president's wife, Meerim Akayeva, or his sons have been frequently named among potential candidates.

IMPLICATIONS: The absence of a stable succession system has major negative implications for Central Asia and for Kyrgyzstan in particular. Firstly, uncertainty over the issue of political succession undermines the economic environment in Kyrgyzstan, as according to the IMF the republic was the only member of the CIS to experience negative economic growth in 2002. The major issue at stake is redistribution of the economic wealth acquired through the process of privatization in the 1990s. There is anecdotal evidence that many businesses have tended to move to the shadow economy, while those among the current circle of cronies try to rip off as much profit as possible. Secondly, the focus on behind-the-scenes deals between the major clans, and the exclusion of the political opposition from the bargaining process, tends to result in the radicalization of the opposition. Kyrgyzstan's most experienced politician – former Vice-President Felix Kulov – was imprisoned for seven years on dubious charges following a questionable trial; meanwhile the former opposition leader in the parliament, Daniar Usenov, was prosecuted on unconvincing criminal charges, which constitutionally barred him from standing in parliamentary or presidential elections. Many opposition groups, especially those that were associated with the "Movement for the Resignation of President Akayev" became more radicalized and ready for confrontation, as was demonstrated in the *Aksy* tragedy of March 2002 (when the police killed six opposition protesters in southern Kyrgyzstan). The political situation may deteriorate even further, and if such deterioration continues unchecked it could lead to a military confrontation with numerous casualties.

Thirdly, military and law-enforcement agencies have tended to move into mainstream politics and play increasingly active roles in the political life of the republic. According to a survey study by the *Litsa* newspaper in summer 2003, military and political leaders with links to the National Security Service and Police represent almost a quarter of the top 20 politicians. These institutions are seen as the only political forces capable of stabilizing the country in an environment of political confrontation where political parties cannot achieve

compromise. Former Interior Minister Temirbek Akmataliyev, and General Bolot Januzakov, chairman of the National Security Service, and others have been considered as potential presidential candidates in case of emergency and political instability. The danger is, however, that once the military come to power, there would be no guarantee of them agreeing to share power with civilians, nor that they would go ahead with political liberalization and democratization.

CONCLUSIONS: In order to ensure a smooth succession in Kyrgyzstan, there is a need for a series of institutional and political changes and cooperation between the incumbent president and the opposition. There are no straightforward formulas for 'exit' strategies, but at least several steps appear to be quite obvious. The broadening of the bargaining process in order to produce a political compromise is one example. Another element could be political decentralization and some reduction of presidential powers, through the delegation of certain decision-making and bargaining powers

to the *Jogorku Kenesh* (Parliament of Kyrgyzstan). Another important step would be some form of amnesty for past privatization and business activities of the 1990s, plus amnesty for capital returning from overseas accounts. There is not a single public official or opposition figure who could not be brought down by corruption allegations arising from the shady legal environment and wild rush of capitalism of the 1990s. Further steps may be necessary in order to ensure a viable succession mechanism, which in turn would set a positive precedent in the region.

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SCANDAL ON THE ILLEGAL EXPORT OF ORGANS TO GERMANY IS FLARING UP

The deputies of the Kyrgyz Parliament condemned the government, and especially the Ministry of Healthcare, for having illegally sent corpses and human organs from Kyrgyzstan to the clinic-museum of the famous surgeon Gunter von Haggens, but also concealed related violent deaths. In a special parliamentary session devoted to the "Scandalous Facts of the Illegal Transportation of Corpses and Human Organs and Facts of the Concealment of Violent Deaths", member of parliament and initiator of the investigation Akbokon Tashtanbekov stated that he knows the facts of export to Germany of more than 500 human corpses. Mr. Tashtanbekov says that besides the Ministry of Healthcare, which had accomplished the transfer of corpses, employees of the GDPI, Customs Service and the Republican Forensic Medical Examination Bureau were involved as well.

An agreement on Cooperation between the Kyrgyz State Medical Academy (KSMA) and the clinic of Gunter von Haggens was signed in 1996. According to the agreement, a specially created institute of plastification ("Plastinatsiya institute") under KSMA had started to supply human corpses, and getting training aids in turn. Until the year 2000, von Haggens properly sent back corpses received from Kyrgyzstan and processed in his clinic, which had taken their place in the museum of the institute of plastification. However, as the former Director of the Institute Valeriy Gabitov claims, the Germans did not return several lots of corpses, sending instead nearly 14 tons of biodegradable

waste for burial. Mr. Gabitov, who currently is hiding from the investigation and who had provided a testimony for the investigation by means of a videotape, says that "until the present, at least 30% of the displays of the German clinic- museum were done from Kyrgyz corpses.

In a personal interview, Tashtanbekov stated that "the turnover of this shadowy business is in the tens of millions of U.S. dollars". He also repeatedly claimed to possess authentic documents about all facts of the illegal export of corpses. According to the deputy, the Institute of Plastification had taken away unclaimed corpses of prisoners from Kyrgyz prisons to the Forensic Medical Examination Bureau and had sent them to Germany. Employees of the administration, as it asserted, received \$10 per corpse. The sum to which von Haggens purchased the corpses is unknown, but there is information that he had insured each corpse for DM100,000. Bank remittances from Germany to Kyrgyzstan were received constantly. Moreover, the clinic museum sent humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan in the form of refrigerators, video appliances and other equipment. The Plastification Institute's Director Valeriy Gabitov, by his own admission, had received for the nearly 300 000 DM "in different forms" during the period.

Former employees of the Institute of Plastification say that the partners in the transportation of Kyrgyz corpses to Germany began to cover their tracks from February of this

year. All people related to the process were dismissed. Dozens of corpses remained in cold stores at the Institute and when the investigation began, it turned out that several corpses received from places of detention had obvious traces of violent death. Members of the investigation attest that militiamen attempted to hide the facts of violent deaths of prisoners. Moreover, according to some information, the corpse of the relative of a Kyrgyz official, who disappeared several months ago, had been found among the remaining corpses.

The Economic Policy and Business Committee of the Jogorku Kenesh of Kyrgyzstan recommended to the government of the country to consider the dismissal of one of the Deputy Ministers of Healthcare, of the president of the Kyrgyz State Medical Academy and the chief of the GDPI. In spite of Kyrgyz deputies' loud accusations, there is an opinion that this scandal is no more than an attempt by several deputies to raise their rating among the electorate. There are rumors in Bishkek that a personal conflict between the initiator of the investigation and Healthcare officials caused this scandal. Mr. Tashtanbekov has not yet shown promised documents. Thus, the cause of accusation is only the videotape recording with confession of Valeriy Gabitov. However, the deputies had no chance to talk to him directly. The position of von Haggens on this issue is also unknown. Earlier, he has repeatedly claimed only to work with Kyrgyz colleagues on a legal basis.

Aziz Soltobaev

THE IMU: ALIVE AND KICKING?

James Purcell Smith

A number of violent events in Central Asia in the last few months points to strong signs of a resurgence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the possibility of renewed violent attacks against civilians in various parts of Central Asia. The deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, the sighting of IMU militants in Kashmir and Tajikistan, and two possibly related explosions in Kyrgyzstan indicate that the IMU managed to regroup and may be planning strikes in the near future. The movement is active in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir, and is possibly looking for "soft targets", a Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and various resistance groups' operations in Iraq have done.

BACKGROUND: Since December 2002, there have been increasing signs of a revival of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. In late 2001, this organization renamed itself the Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT), thus openly proclaiming its purposes of controlling the entire Central Asian region, disregarding the five existing nation-states and their boundaries. The Kyrgyz newspaper "Vecherniy Bishkek" reported on July 23 that bomb explosions in the "Oberon" market in the Bishkek on December 27, 2002 and in a branch of "Bakay bank" in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh on May 8 were directly linked to the Islamic Movement of Turkestan. This notion received further confirmation by in an interview with the first deputy Interior Minister of Uzbekistan Bakhadir Matliubov to "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" on July 29, 2003. He argued that the Osh bomb was assembled and detonated by members of the IMT, Ilkhom Izzatullaev of Kokand and Azimbek Karimov of Andijan. Both cities are located in Uzbekistan's portion of the Ferghana valley. Matliubov stated that "after the defeat of Taliban, followers of radical Islamist organizations spread into all countries of Central Asia". Furthermore, reports have emerged that residents of remote districts of Uzbekistan's southern Surkhandarya region noted the appearance of armed men in mountain areas, supposedly members of the IMT, and that influx of foreign funds to the IMU has also occurred. Experts on international terrorism indicate real threat stemming from the combination of re-organized terrorist infrastructure and available manpower and financing, indicating that the countries of Central Asia still have to do more and cooperate in order to safeguard themselves from terrorism.

IMPLICATIONS: Financing for the IMT units, it has been argued, comes through Pakistan, whereas militants themselves infiltrate into Kyrgyzstan from neighboring Tajikistan. Since 1999, President Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan has regularly vowed that there is not a single terrorist on the soil of his country. However, the sequence of events proves that Tajikistan has continuously been used by terrorists as a staging point for actions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. There is little to suggest that this could not be the case again. In 1999, the IMU invaded the southern Batken region of Kyrgyzstan from the Sogd province and the

Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous region of Tajikistan, and the following year, IMU fighters invaded the Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan from the Shaartuz district of Tajikistan. This led Rakhmonov to lose face, as it exposed his inability to control Tajikistan's territory – or the various field commanders integrated in his government after the 1997 peace treaty that ended the Tajik civil war.

As Rakhmonov's control over Tajikistan's territory has not improved appreciably, the long-term cooperation against terrorism and stability in Central Asia are still facing the challenge of Tajikistan's weakness. There are credible reports from western intelligence services that IMT fighters are finding hospitality in Tajikistan. Up to a hundred IMT members are hiding in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous region, in the villages of Khushad, Khevaspor, and Ayvanj, in the Shaartuz district of the Khatlon and Sogd regions of Tajikistan.

Moreover, reports indicate that IMT operatives are able to operate in Pakistan, including its ideological leader Tahir Yoldash. Several hundred IMT members may be operating in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, where they have long-standing close links with outlawed Islamist movements such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba. Patronage of the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam, which incidentally was the main ideological sponsor of the Taliban, is also present for the IMT. With the JUI being an influential member of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, the Islamist coalition group that forms the government of the NWFP, the IMT leaders have been able to find sanctuary among Pakistani Islamist circles. Pakistani officials openly state that their counter-terrorism efforts are focused almost solely on the fight against Al-Qaeda and Pakistani sectarian groups threatening the government. In turn, Taliban or regional extremist groups, who pose a lesser threat to the Pakistani government, are not being given priority. The IMT has detachments of fighters in Afghanistan as well. In the Kunar and Paktia provinces of Afghanistan, IMT guerrillas are reportedly operating with Al Qaeda or Taliban units. But their activity is not limited to the southern parts, as small groups of IMT fighters have been spotted in mountain passes of the northern Badakhshan province, near Tajikistan's borders, and possibly protected by Northern Alliance field commanders.

The strength of criminal networks in Central Asia also helps the IMT. IMT fighters have retained strong connections especially with traffickers of narcotics in Central Asia, and are reported to use the same smuggling routes used by traffickers for bringing fighters across the borders between Afghanistan and Central Asia, and between Central Asian states.

CONCLUSIONS: These events all paint a very troubling picture of growing security threats to Central Asia. In a time of desperate needs for economic transformation and reforms, when all countries of the region, especially Afghanistan, need stability in order to attract foreign investments and rebuild their national economies, some forces are intent on destabilizing the regional situation. This is direct challenge to the regional security of Central Asia and thereby to international security more broadly. With the ongoing deterioration of the security situation in Iraq and Afghanistan, terrorist groups and their sponsors are feeling reinvigorated, and are acquiring the courage to base

themselves in Kashmir and Tajikistan, as well as in Afghanistan itself, with a view to stage hit and run operations.

The threat of radical Islamic terrorism in Central Asia is not over. While the IMT remains geographically scattered, it is increasingly re-organizing, and apparently able to keep communications open between its various detachments. Moreover, while much of its strength is held up in areas far from the Fergana valley, increasingly small numbers of fighters are active inside Central Asia. This poses a clear and present danger, especially if the IMT follows the path of Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Iraqi resistance groups of focusing on hit and run operations on soft targets. Cooperation between Central Asian states in the struggle against terrorism is therefore as important as ever.

AUTHOR'S BIO: James Purcell Smith is an expert on Russian and Eurasian affairs, based in New York.

TENSIONS AGAIN RISING IN NORTHWESTERN AZERBAIJAN

The situation in the northwestern Zaqatala and Balakan areas of Azerbaijan has deteriorated recently, primarily due to the activities of armed gangs. A series of attacks on police as well as on civilians in the region has given birth to suspicion that these actions are of a deliberate nature.

The situation in this region deteriorated once before, in the summer of 2001. Then from June to September 2001, members of an illegal armed grouping led by Haji Magomedov conducted armed strikes on police posts and patrol stations in Zaqatala and Balakan. During this period, the gangs killed 4 policemen and 2 civilian inhabitants, and also injured 10 law enforcement officers. In the summer of 2002, a series of armed attacks on divisions of the interior ministry forces and police departments in the same regions also occurred. As a result of these attacks, one officer was killed and 6 policemen were injured.

As a result of operations carried out last year, law enforcement bodies detained and initiated criminal proceedings against 23 criminals. Murder and robbery were only a part of the crimes they were accused. According to the induction, the basic purpose of the terrorists was the creation of a separatist Dzhar-Balaken republic on the territory of Azerbaijan. Acts of vandalism, such as the blowing up of the bust of sheikh Shamil in the regional center Zaqatala (400 km northwest of Baku) seemed to be intended to arouse interethnic tensions in this region with large Dagestani, especially Avar population. Moreover, the murders of both civilians and representatives of law enforcement bodies seemed to contain a political purpose.

About 30 members of the group have been arrested to date, three of which were sentenced to life in prison. Yet despite these measures, many criminals are still free. The head of the illegal armed group, Haji Magomedov, was killed last year during an exchange of fire with border guards.

The most recent series of events began on the night of August 14, 2003, when a group of armed people took seven people hostage in a mountainous part of the

Balakan area (450 km northwest of Baku). Later six hostages, all inhabitants of the Zaqatala area, were released, while kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$20,000 for the last hostage, an inhabitant of the Gabal village of the Lagodekhi area of Georgia. However, law enforcement bodies freed the last hostage. No data was given on the identity of the perpetrators. However, this immediately raised fears that this was carried out by members of the armed group that killed several people in 2001-2002.

Only days later, an armed attack on police in the Balakan area wounded two officers. At approximately 1:00 am, someone threw stones at a police car, forcing the officers to stop the car. As the officers left their car, several unknown persons fired at them with handguns. Then on September 18 at 4:00 am, two armed criminals carried out a strike on a gasoline station located on the Zaqatala-Balakan highway. Criminals stole eight million Azerbaijani Manats (ca. US\$ 4,000) and wounded police officer Kerim Lachinov, who tried to put up resistance. Lachinov was hit by three bullets, and attackers disappeared, with the entire operation taking ca. 10 minutes. Lachinov was placed in the reanimation branch of the central hospital of Zaqatala.

Commenting on the attack, the head of the police department of Zaqatala Rafik Abbasov noted that robbers were armed with Ak-47 submachine guns and a silenced pistol. The public prosecutor of this area has initiated a criminal case.

Additional forces from the interior ministry forces were dispatched to the region, working with the police and border troops to apprehend the criminals. According to Abbasov, the perpetrators have not been identified. They have not excluded that they belonged to Haji Magomedov's group.

The Head of the State boundary service of Azerbaijan Elchin Guliyev informed, that the search for criminals was complicated by the mountainous and forested landscape of the area. According to experts, analyzing a series of the armed strikes, it is possible to tell with confidence that the attacks occur with some regularity.

Several months ago, members of the same gang made a similar strike. The style of the previous attacks was very similar to the last armed raid, suggesting that the same gang is active. This has increased worries that the government failed to take out a criminal grouping in the northwestern part of the country, implying that the frontiers of Azerbaijan are not as well guarded as was thought. But the nature of the events remains disputed. A first explanation is that it is an incessant criminal dispute between various groupings. The analysis of the events shows that the purpose of the criminals is the transformation of Balakan and Zaqatala areas to an uncontrolled territory for use in criminal purposes, as was the case in Georgia's Pankisi gorge. In particular, terrorists pursued the purpose of using Zaqatala for the abduction of wealthy people from Azerbaijan, Russia and Georgia for ransom. In addition, it is argued that this district was planned to be used for the cultivation, manufacture and transit of drugs.

A second version that is frequently returning is "the Russian trace". It is alleged that the events are in reality provocations by the Russian special services, seeking to worsen the internal political situation in Azerbaijan. For this purpose, the national minorities compactly living in region and having close connections with Russia, and in particular with Dagestan are used. It is known that already in 2001 Haji Magomedov planned to stir the population to action for the creation of a separate Avar homeland. There is also a connection between Armenia and separatism in the northwest of Azerbaijan.

According to court materials, it is known that if Armenian forces promised to allocate US\$300,000 and more than a thousand firearms to Avars that staged operations in Azerbaijan.

In any case, the processes occurring in the north-west of Azerbaijan seem to be of a systematic character, leading some analysts to fear that the situation in this region can go out of control.

Gulnara Ismailova

CORRUPTION SCANDALS DOG CENTRAL ASIAN LEADERS

Stephen Blank

In recent months, an increasing flow of specific corruption allegations, mostly backed by evidence in U.S. court cases, have begun to appear involving Central Asian and Caucasian leaders. While accusations of corruption at the highest level is common in the abstract in all former Soviet countries, the actual evidence to that affect has been scarce. These cases are likely to lead to loss of legitimacy for the leadership of a number of countries, but more significantly, these cases may also contribute to destabilization as it may spur public unrest or elite competition for power and control over resources.

BACKGROUND: An ongoing trial in New York looks set to implicate Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev for corruption and bribery charges relating to the energy industry in Kazakhstan. Similarly in Uzbekistan, Western press revelations emerging

out of the contest for custody of the grandchildren of President Islam Karimov by his daughter Gulnara in a New Jersey court reveal an astonishing accumulation of wealth by her through her or her father's power over the state economy. Likewise, a New York court case is presently implicating Azerbaijan's State Oil Company and potentially the leadership in that country in similar scandals. Most cases relate to the misuse of state revenue, in countries where the distinction between state revenue and corruption is often absent.

This phenomenon should not be thought of strictly as a Muslim or Central Asian one. Virtually every post-Soviet government is mired in official corruption, e.g. in the case of Ukraine and Russia not only in energy contracts, but also in the sale of weapons and defense technologies, much of which receipts go to wholly unaccountable political slush funds or personal funds under the control of the President. Similarly the end-users of these weapons, a requirements of contracts, are often faked with the result that weapons go to rogue states, insurgents, terrorists, or dictators without little or no accountability.

Thus the enormity of state corruption and the accompanying belief of high-ranking officials that they need not account to anyone are among the major causes for the low level of state legitimacy and public participation in government. In many cases government in these republics is not all that different from organized crime, and the criminal penetration of the regime, whether in terms of corruption by officials or by drug runners and the like who then

seek protection, either by bribery or by election to high office, is commonplace. But the costs to democracy, stability, security and prosperity go beyond the deprivation of the people of their economic assets or of the substitution of short-term personal gain for long-term productive investment. Indeed, the costs go even beyond the inherent corrosion of legitimacy endemic in places of large-scale corruption.

IMPLICATIONS: It is not only that large-scale corruption undermines both the domestic and international legitimacy of the regime in question, or its economic health. Nor is corruption's harm limited to the fact that it replaces politics with cronyism, patronage, criminality, and often a large degree of violence as has been the case throughout the entire post-Soviet space. Not only is the law and the rule of law made a mockery by this spectacle, the government's ability simply to administer the country or to defend itself also comes into question. Thus throughout the Chechen war, the rebels have gotten their weapons from Russian soldiers who are themselves the victims of unpunished corruption and therefore replicate this kind of anomic behavior as well. Moreover, the resources with which to reconstruct Chechnya or to govern other parts of Russia or other former Soviet republics are lacking because they have long since been stolen and remain unaccounted for.

Official corruption on a large scale undoubtedly is responsible for all these pathologies. But in the Central Asian and South Caucasian instances, there is another aspect to the revelation of large-scale corruption which could prove of consequence and which has hitherto been overlooked. Because these regimes are based on corruption, when a succession comes, candidates will be evaluated on the basis of whether or not they can keep the "grave train" flowing, much more than any concept of national interest. Therefore revelations of corruption in western media or courts will contribute to eroding the legitimacy of the Karimov, Aliyev, and Nazarbayev families, and they will raise doubts among other members of the elite in these countries, and perhaps similarly in other countries as well, as to the viability of letting them continue to run the show. Where corrupt elite factions are in fact ruling the country, their paramount concern is the stability of their "rents". If that is

called into question, the risk is apparent that they will resort to violence. The succession to Boris Yeltsin in 1999 was clearly a case in point because his "family" launched a war against Chechnya, among other reasons, to secure their hold on official largesse and corruption. Therefore in Central Asia and the Caucasus, further public revelations about the extent of official corruption in the family of the ruling class can indeed trigger elite instability, popular unrest, or both. In

either case, it would not be surprising to find an outbreak of political violence revolving around competing claims to power and thus to wealth. Such manifestations can only further destabilize and imperil weak states as it is unlikely that this political violence can be confined to one state. Again, Chechnya is a case in point, as it has repeatedly threatened to engulf Georgia as well.

CONCLUSIONS: Undoubtedly corruption charges will be denied or rebutted as being political. And indeed, the truth of accusations should not be taken for granted, given that there are foreign communities, either of exiles or of NGOs, who have an interest in discrediting the regimes accused of corruption. But these charges are political in a deeper and more dangerous sense because they can contribute to the further degradation of political life in their host countries as elites and/or masses are moved to fight more openly and therefore more violently for power and access to the spoils thereof. Ironically, the charges of corruption, however well-founded they may be, may not lead to better governance in the short term but to something worse or at least to a

continuation of the same phenomenon – albeit with different players. Since corruption is endemic to politics everywhere, it would be naive to imagine it could be rooted out of new states with no tradition of the rule of law, public service, or the national interest. Yet the campaign to expose large-scale official malfeasance must go on lest it lead to a failing state, an all too likely a phenomenon as Africa's experience indicates. The dilemma for those who would expose this corruption then becomes multiple: what do they achieve by doing so, and can they put in place remedies and people who will not lead the next generation of reformers to re-enact the same drama a second time or who will not lead the post-Soviet regimes into the dead end so visible across so much of Africa?

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KAZAKHSTAN INITIATES DIALOGUE BETWEEN RELIGIONS

Kazakhstan manifested its ever-present desire to be in the limelight of world politics this week when it widely publicized the opening of the Congress of World Religions in Astana. This world forum, which brings together 17 delegations from all continents, will undoubtedly add some luster to the image of Kazakhstan as a trust-building nation in Central Asia.

Talking to journalists in Astana on September 20, deputy foreign minister Mukhtar Tleuberdin said, that Kazakhstan, as a country setting example of peaceful coexistence of as many as 40 confessions for other nations, had every moral right to hold the Congress of World Religions. The congress, scheduled for September 22-24, will mark, as the deputy foreign minister stressed, a significant event in enforcing the international standing of Kazakhstan. The most highlighted point of this event is the open dialogue between as different world religions as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism.

Ambitious as it may appear, Kazakhstan's unrelenting drive to play a mediator between warring sides, irreconcilable religious factions, be it in India and Pakistan, or in Central Asia and beyond, is motivated by a sober calculation, necessitated by both economic and geopolitical interests. A huge melting pot of all imaginable confessions and sects, Kazakhstan is watching armed conflicts in various places of the world with growing alarm. Although the mainstream confessions in Kazakhstan are Islam and the Russian Orthodox Church, western missionaries are expanding their activities with amazing speed.

At the same time, the leadership is keen on mending its relations with the OSCE, which were somewhat overclouded by the government crackdown on Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan party leaders, and

other western humanitarian institutions on the one hand, as well as with financially strong Islamic countries in the Arab world and Southeast Asia on the other.

Events on the eve of the Congress of World Religions were symbolic in this respect. On September 12 the King of Malaysia paid a visit to Kazakhstan. Apart from agreements reached on economic cooperation, the sides issued a communiqué which underlines the importance of a dialogue between civilizations, cultures and religious organizations.

Just three weeks before the opening of the Congress of World Religions, Almaty played host to the annual meeting of the Council of managers of the Islamic Bank of Development, one of the major investors to Kazakh economy. Since its admittance into the membership of the Islamic Bank of Development, Kazakhstan received \$90 million of investment to develop its oil transport infrastructure, and small and medium businesses. This year's meeting in Almaty was highly productive for Kazakhstan. The Islamic Bank's officials signed an agreement promising \$9.4 dollars on beneficial terms for the construction of water supply systems in Karagandy region in central Kazakhstan.

Adilbek Zhaksybekov, who chaired the Almaty meeting of the Islamic Bank of Development, did not miss the occasion to propose the acceptance of Uzbekistan into the Islamic Bank as the 55th member-country. His proposal was approved. Will the gesture of goodwill be duly appreciated by Uzbekistan? Controversies between the two neighbors have run too deep to be settled so soon. Official sources say there have been sixteen shooting incidents in the last two years along the Kazakh-Uzbek border which led to loss of human lives.

Observers in Kazakhstan believe that attempts of Uzbek security forces to eradicate the extremist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan was not successful enough to eliminate the threat of renewed acts of terrorists. According to some media reports, militants from that organization are regrouping their forces in the areas bordering with South Kazakhstan. The signs of the revival of religious extremist forces in that region became apparent this summer, when a group of young men, belonging to Hizb-ut-Tahrir movement were arrested for distributing books justifying the attacks against "infidels".

Officials in Kazakhstan have on many occasions called the public to draw a borderline between terrorists and true followers of Islam. This line of policy produced positive responses from other Muslim countries. Kazakhstan also remained cool to the repeated Chinese attempts to get Kazakhstan's backing in its crusade against what they call "Uighur extremism". Indeed, for a country with a fairly large Uighur population being involved in that conflict would mean an ethnic unrest in the already inflammable southern regions.

The tolerance of Kazakhs to non-Muslims, according to the zealots of Islam, may drive a nail into the coffin of national identity. They assert that Islam represents a core of the spiritual renaissance of Kazakhs. They grumble when they see government members shake hands with Catholics, hug Buddhists and embrace Judaists during official ceremonies. But tolerance and unprejudiced approach to religious issues is the only reasonable policy for Kazakhstan. And precisely that policy makes Kazakhstan a suitable place to hold the Conference of World Religions.

Marat Yermukanov

NEWS BITES

MASS PRISON BREAKOUT IN GEORGIA, 100 ON RUN 10 September

More than 100 convicts were on the run in the former Soviet republic of Georgia Wednesday night after a mass breakout from a prison in which two guards were shot dead, the justice minister said. Roland Giligashvili said a total of 128 prisoners escaped from Rustavi prison some 15 miles south of the capital Tbilisi, though nine were quickly recaptured. Interfax news agency quoted separate justice ministry sources as saying the prisoners had been helped on the outside by armed accomplices. "All roads in and out of the town have been blocked. The search is still going on," Interior Ministry spokesman Patta Gomelauri told Reuters. The mountainous Caucasus country has been hit by conflicts with breakaway regions, attempted coups, kidnappings and economic problems since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. (Reuters)

NO PEACE UNTIL ARMENIA WITHDRAWS FROM OCCUPIED AZERBAIJANI LANDS

11 September

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict cannot be resolved until Azerbaijan's territorial integrity is restored, Armenia withdraws from occupied Azerbaijani lands, and displaced people are returned to their homes, Azerbaijani Prime Minister and presidential candidate Ilham Aliyev said in a televised address late on Wednesday. "Everybody needs to know that Azerbaijan will use whatever means at its disposal to liberate its lands," Aliyev said. Azerbaijan will not establish economic relations with Armenia until the conflict is resolved, he said. "I call on non-governmental organizations to end relations with Armenia and not to deal with the aggressor nation. We do not need this for such relations pose a danger to us. There will be no talks or relations until they leave our lands," he added. Some opposition presidential candidates promise to liberate Karabakh within six months after they take office, Aliyev said. "Isa Gambarov [leader of the Musavat party], would not trade lands nor liberate the occupied territories. So would [People's Front of Azerbaijan leader] Ali Kerimov who once held a senior position but left the country when the situation had deteriorated. So would [National Independence Party leader] Etibar Mamedov who has made it possible for Armenians to overrun Lachin. The nation has already got rid of them once and their return is out of the question," Aliyev said. The opposition leaders who speak of corruption in the country have, however, "joined efforts with the key corruption figure [Democratic Party leader accused of embezzling public property] Rasul Guliyev," he said. Whatever the opposition says and promises is deception and "slander of the president, the government and myself. But the people know the truth." (Interfax)

OSCE LAUNCHES ELECTION-MONITORING MISSION IN AZERBAIJAN

11 September

The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) launched its election-observation mission on 11 September to monitor Azerbaijan's 15 October presidential election. The OSCE mission in Azerbaijan consists of 30 international election experts from 18 OSCE countries, and it will deploy 500 observers to monitor the election campaign and media coverage and to assess voting throughout the country. Speaking at a Baku press

conference, the head of the OSCE mission in Azerbaijan, Peter Eicher, stated that the coming presidential "election is a critical test for democracy in Azerbaijan." He noted that after more than a decade of undemocratic rule, "Azerbaijan deserves a free and fair election." (Interfax)

AZERBAIJAN OIL SECTOR GOOD TARGET FOR TERRORISM - OFFICIAL

11 September

The chief of civil defense in the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry, Dzhabad Gasymov, warned on 10 September that the country's oil infrastructure is a potential target for international terrorism. The official added that Azerbaijan has solicited assistance from NATO's Civil Defense Committee and is hosting a joint counter terrorism exercise with NATO experts. The 11 September exercise involved a simulated security operation at the Azerneftyanacag oil refinery, including measures to protect the facility from a terrorist attack. Gasymov revealed that the exercise is part of a broader plan to protect the country's oil pipelines against terrorism and added that the Defense Ministry has an "urgent need for a crisis center" to prepare for possible terrorist attacks in the future. The NATO Civil Defense Committee convened a meeting in Baku on 10 September and oversaw the exercise. (Interfax)

KAZAKH OPPOSITION, AUTHORITIES COMPLAIN OF DIRTY CAMPAIGN PRACTICES

11 September

As Kazakhstan's 20 September nationwide elections to local councils approach, both the opposition and the authorities are complaining of the "dirty" campaign practices being employed. Opposition Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK) official and Almaty city council candidate Petr Svoik showed a news conference in Almaty a leaflet allegedly written by him, but which he said was actually a provocation by a "powerful and influential body." The leaflet offers to pay for information on people who do not trust the DVK. The head of the public-relations department of the Almaty city police, Colonel Alikhan Bektasov, said the DVK suspects that a major pro-government political party engineered the provocation. He said such dirty tricks are increasing as the election approaches, and the police have set up special groups in every raion to deal with them. The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) issued a statement on 11 September saying the number of complaints it has received about dirty campaign practices has been increasing. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICIAL WANTS CHECHEN MILITIA CONFINED TO BARRACKS

11 September

Speaking at a press conference in Moscow on 11 September, Ella Pamfilova, who heads the Russian presidential commission for human rights, argued that the Chechen militia commanded by Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of Chechen administration head Akhmad-hadji Kadyrov, should be confined to barracks for the duration of the presidential election campaign. Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov is the clear favorite among the eight remaining candidates for the 5 October Chechen presidential ballot. Pamfilova said either federal troops or Chechen police should guarantee order at polling

stations, and that "people affiliated with [presidential] candidates" should not be in a position to influence the outcome of the vote. Pamfilova expressed regret at the decision of some Russian human rights activists not to participate in monitoring the 5 October ballot. (Interfax)

KYRGYZ PARLIAMENT COMMITTEE CONFIRMS PRESIDENT CANNOT RUN AGAIN

12 September

The Government Affairs Committee of the lower house of Kyrgyzstan's parliament confirmed on 11 September that President Askar Akaev is not eligible to run for president again in 2005, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. According to committee Chairman Absamat Masaliev, Akaev's present term is illegal. The Kyrgyz Constitution allows a president only two terms in office, but the Kyrgyz Supreme Court ruled prior to the last presidential election that Akaev's first two terms should not be counted, because those elections took place before the adoption of the present constitution. Akaev has said repeatedly that he will not run in 2005, but the opposition is distrustful. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ OFFICIALS CONCERNED ABOUT ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

13 September

Officials and migration experts in southern Kyrgyzstan are concerned over the growing numbers of illegal immigrants into that part of the country, according to the UN news agency IRIN. The officials warned that the immigrants, who come primarily from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in search of work, are causing reductions in local wage rates and worsening the socioeconomic situation, which could result in destabilization. According to these officials, 4,000-5,000 Uzbek citizens are working in the areas near the border of the two countries, earning less than \$1 a day, if they are paid at all. Reportedly, Kyrgyz farmers are particularly interested in the cheap labor. An official of the NGO Center for Support of Civil Initiatives told IRIN that the Uzbek government wants to combat the problem by strengthening controls along the border, but the Kyrgyz side finds this approach unhelpful. (akipress.org)

ATOMIC ENERGY MINISTER DEFENDS IRAN

15 September

Atomic Energy Minister Aleksandr Rumyantsev has once again defended Iran from charges that it is violating the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), telling ITAR-TASS on 15 September that "there is no convincing evidence to justify complaints against Iran" by the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Speaking at the IAEA's general conference in Vienna, Rumyantsev denied that nuclear cooperation between Iran and Russia, which is helping build the Bushehr nuclear-power plant, violates international law. He even insisted that "under the IAEA charter, nuclear powers are obliged to help other states develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes." (ITAR-TASS)

TAJIK OFFICIAL SAYS MOST DRUGS BEING TRAFFICKED THROUGH AREAS GUARDED BY RUSSIANS

15 September

Rustam Nazarov, director of Tajikistan's Drug Control Agency, told a news conference on 15 September that up to 90 percent of the contraband drugs being trafficked into Tajikistan from Afghanistan are being brought in through areas guarded by Russian border troops. Nazarov attributed this to the successful blocking of the

highway to Osh in neighboring Kyrgyzstan as a drug-transit route. He quoted international estimates that 70 percent of Afghanistan's drug output is exported through Iran and Pakistan, with 30 percent passing through Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. (RIA-Novosti)

THOUSANDS RALLY IN SUPPORT OF AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION CANDIDATE

15 September

Some 10,000 people attended a rally on 14 September in the town of Yevlakh, 300 kilometers north of Baku, in support of AMIP Chairman Mamedov. Mamedov pledged that if elected president, he will launch a state program to develop the region's economy. The local authorities made every effort to prevent voters from attending the rally, closing the two main streets leading to the town's central square where it was to take place, declaring 14 September (a Sunday) a working day, halting buses bringing voters to the rally from neighboring raions, and threatening the inhabitants of outlying villages that they would be stripped of their Azerbaijani citizenship if they attended the rally. On 15 September, Ramiz Orudjev, who heads AMIP's Gyanja branch, was summoned to police for questioning about the previous day's rally and subsequently charged with injuring a pedestrian in a traffic accident one week earlier. (Turan)

TWO AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITION PARTIES AGREE ON SINGLE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

16 September

The Supreme Council of progressive wing of the divided Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AHCP) decided on 14 September to support the candidacy of Azerbaijan National Independence Party (AMIP) Chairman Etibar Mamedov in the 15 October presidential election. AHCP (progressive wing) Chairman Ali Kerimli will therefore withdraw his candidacy, having offered earlier to do so in the event that his party, AMIP, the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan and the Musavat Party reached agreement on backing a single opposition candidate. The four party leaders narrowly failed to do so during talks in London last month. According to zerkalo.az on 16 September, Kerimli and Mamedov will sign a formal agreement on 16 September on an election coalition, and if Mamedov is elected president, the AHCP will nominate the prime minister. Kerimli predicted that other opposition parties will also join the AMIP-AHCP coalition, but did not specify which ones. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIAN JUSTICE MINISTER SUBMITS RESIGNATION

16 September

Roland Giligashvili formally submitted his resignation to President Eduard Shevardnadze on 15 September, but it is not clear whether Shevardnadze has accepted it. In his letter, Giligashvili explained his resignation in terms of the current crime situation and moral climate in Georgia, adding that Shevardnadze ignored his repeated pleas to take action to remedy the situation. In his regular Monday radio interview, Shevardnadze on 15 September again said that the transfer of responsibility for the Georgian prison system from the Interior Ministry to the Justice Ministry was premature. A lack of trained guards at prisons was the primary reason for the series of high-profile jailbreaks, culminating in the escape late on 10 September of 129 prisoners from the Rustavi penitentiary. Seven of those escapees have been apprehended in Azerbaijan, raising the number recaptured to 72. (Caucasus Press)

TRUCK BOMB KILLS THREE IN INGUSHETIA

16 September

Three people were killed on 15 September and some 31 injured when two suicide bombers drove a truck loaded with explosive through the barriers surrounding the building in Magas, Ingushetia, where the local offices of the Federal Security Service (FSB) were located. The deputy head of the FSB's Chechen branch, Mikhail Safonov, was among the injured. At an emergency meeting on 16 September, Ingushetia's President Murat Zyazikov ordered police and security officials to intensify their search for those responsible for the bombing, ingushetia.ru reported. (RFE/RL)

PACE SLAMS PRESIDENTIAL-ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN AZERBAIJAN**16 September**

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) delegation currently visiting Baku issued a statement on 16 September listing its concerns over the country's ongoing presidential-election campaign. They said the composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC), 10 of whose members are nominated by political parties loyal to the authorities and five by opposition parties, "is a source of major concern," and called on the CEC to "take urgent steps to meet the requirements of the election law." They advocated that the outcome of the ballot be made public immediately, even though the Election Law provides for a delay of 48 hours. They criticized "the heavy media bias in favor of the incumbent president and his supporters," and noted numerous complaints by opposition candidates and NGOs of harassment and intimidation by the authorities. They said the resulting "prevailing climate of overall political mistrust...creates a tense if not explosive political situation," and called on the authorities to use the remaining four weeks before the ballot to create equitable conditions for all candidates in order to ensure the election is free and fair. (Turan)

KYRGYZ OPPOSITION PARTY FILES SUIT AGAINST NATIONAL GUARD CHIEF**17 September**

The Kyrgyz opposition Ar-Namys Party has carried out its threat, made in April, to file a libel suit against National Guard commander General Abdygul Chotbaev, gazeta.kg reported on 16 September. The party charges that it was slandered in an article by Chotbaev that appeared in "Argumenty i fakty Kyrgyzstana," No. 17, on 23 April, in which he asserted that through its opposition activities Ar-Namys was "earning" the financial support of the United States. The party, and the U.S. Embassy in Bishkek, vehemently rejected Chotbaev's assertion that the United States was supporting Ar-Namys. The party is demanding a public apology from Chotbaev, a printed retraction, and 5 million soms (\$116,000) each from the general and the newspaper in compensation for damages to party members. BB

KAZAKH PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER CONSIDERS CREATING OWN POLITICAL PARTY**17 September**

Dariga Nazarbaeva, head of the official Kazakh television system and eldest daughter of President Nursultan Nazarbaev, told journalists in Pavlodar on 16 September that she is considering turning the public association Asar into a political party, centrasia.ru reported today. She and nine other prominent figures founded Asar in May 2003 with the stated goal of providing help to less-well-off segments of the population and to young people. The name of the association means "mutual assistance." Nazarbaeva has been promoting Asar, which reportedly now has branches in almost all

oblast administrative centers, to groups of university students during her current trip through northern Kazakhstan, telling them that young people should play a greater role in the country's political life. (RFE/RL)

U.S. DIPLOMAT SAYS AZERBAIJANI ELECTION MUST BE FREE AND FAIR**17 September**

At his first press conference since his arrival in Baku, new U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Reno Harnish called on the Azerbaijani leadership on 17 September to ensure that the 15 October presidential ballot is "free and fair...in line with international standards," and to punish severely anyone who tries to falsify the outcome. Harnish stressed that Washington does not support a specific presidential candidate, and that it is for the electorate to exercise its right to choose a new president. He said Washington is concerned not only about the actual voting, but also the conduct of the election campaign. He said all candidates should have equal access to the media and be able to meet with voters and hold campaign rallies. (Turan)

CHAIRMAN OF KAZAKH LOWER HOUSE QUESTIONS USE OF ARMS BY UZBEK GUARDS ON KAZAKH BORDER**17 September**

The chairman of the Mazhilis (lower house) of the Kazakh parliament, Zharmakhan Tuyakbai, told journalists on 17 September that he has asked Prime Minister Daniyal Akhmetov to clarify the situation along the Kazakh-Uzbek border, where there have been at least 16 cases of Uzbek border guards using weapons against Kazakh citizens since the common border was delimited. The most recent incident was reported on 9 September. Tuyakbai asserted that such use of weapons by border guards is illegal. During the parliamentary session on 17 September, members questioned Deputy National Security Committee Chairman Maksut Narimanov about the shootings and were told that usually the Kazakh citizens were to blame for not using official border crossing points, and that the Uzbek guards defended their use of firearms by asserting that the Kazakhs were stealing cattle. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

US PLEDGES EXTRA AFGHAN AID**18 September**

The United States Treasury Secretary, John Snow, says America intends to give Afghanistan about \$1bn in extra aid, and called for other countries to match that amount. Speaking during a visit to Kabul, Mr Snow said Afghanistan remained a critical priority for the United States, and reconstruction must succeed. Mr Snow is due to attend a donor conference on Afghanistan in Dubai over the weekend. Correspondents say President Hamid Karzai's government has complained bitterly that pledges of billions of dollars of aid have not been fulfilled. The World Bank and the United Nations have estimated Afghanistan's reconstruction needs at \$13bn-19bn. (BBC)

LEADING AZERBAIJANI NEWSPAPERS SIGN MEMORANDUM ON ELECTION COVERAGE**18 September**

Reacting to an initiative by Azerbaijan's recently created Press Council, the editors of Azerbaijan's leading print media signed a memorandum in Baku on 17 September undertaking to observe strict objectivity in their coverage of the ongoing presidential-election campaign and to refrain from libelous statements. The signatories further pledged to give all presidential candidates the

opportunity to publicize their campaign programs and to respond to criticism. (zerkalo.az)

OSCE REGIONAL MEDIA CONFERENCE ENDS IN KYRGYZSTAN

19 September

The fifth regional conference of Central Asian media sponsored by the OSCE's Office of the Representative for Freedom of the Media ended in Bishkek on 18 September with the adoption of a declaration that called for the media to be able to "exercise their corrective function toward the economic interests and activities of politicians and their families without any legal or other consequences," uzreport.com reported on 19 September. The declaration, signed by the 120 participants in the conference, added that the corrective function of the media is essential for the future success of Central Asia's economic development. The conference, which was titled "Media in Multicultural and Multilingual Societies," was attended by journalists from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, government officials, parliamentarians, and civil-society activists. According to the report, the Turkmen authorities refused exit visas to potential participants from Turkmenistan. (RFE/RL)

FOUR FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS SIGN ECONOMIC ZONE ACCORD

19 September

The four largest former Soviet republics signed an accord to create a single economic zone on much of the territory of the former Soviet Union. The pact between Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine is aimed at being a first step toward creating a common market and is one of the most concrete accomplishments in the 12-year history of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). But comments by some of the signatories suggested that implementation of the pact, which must still be ratified by the signatories' parliaments, could stall. Russian President Vladimir Putin said the four-way pact would lead to "an increase in the competitiveness of our goods in international markets, ease contacts between manufacturers within CIS and will create good conditions for the development of our economies." But other signatories were less enthusiastic. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko said he signed the pact "with the gravest of doubts." The authoritarian leader is currently embroiled in difficult negotiations with Russia on a separate Russo-Belarus monetary union. Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma had faced both domestic and international pressure not to sign the pact, with critics saying it could hurt Kiev's hopes of someday joining the European Union and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Kuchma said he signed the agreement because the European markets "are closed for us." (AFP)

US DIPLOMAT RAISES HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS WITH UZBEKISTAN

19 September

Amid criticism of US support for the autocratic regime in Uzbekistan, a senior US diplomat insisted that the United States was not blind to the allegedly systematic abuses committed by its anti-terror ally. Attending the opening of an office for the US democracy group Freedom House, Stephan Minikes, US ambassador to the 55-nation Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, said he had discussed "education, torture, conditions of trial, conditions of arrest" at a meeting with Uzbekistan's Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov. Uzbekistan has been a key US ally in the Central Asia region since the start of US-led military operations centred on neighbouring Afghanistan in

2001 and continues to host US forces at its southern Khanabad airbase. Critics have repeatedly warned that the Uzbek security forces could actually fuel terrorism by driving discontent underground. Rights groups estimate the number of political and religious prisoners in Uzbekistan to be as high as 6,500, while a UN rapporteur last year said that torture by the security forces appeared to be systematic. Minikes said he had raised the issue of last month's sentencing of journalist Ruslan Sharipov to five-and-a-half years imprisonment on homosexuality and sexual abuse charges. "We can certainly make clear the importance of that matter and every other matter," Minikes told journalists. How much scope for maneuver Freedom House's office in Tashkent will have remains unclear, but it has been presented as a space where issues of freedom and democracy can be debated without fear. Freedom House is in the process of setting up a non-state printing house in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which has been presented as a potential means of distributing critical texts around the Central Asia region. (AFP)

TAJIK BORDER OFFICIAL SAYS TAJIKISTAN READY TO TAKE OVER GUARDING OF AFGHAN BORDER

19 September

Major General Nuralisho Nazarov, First Deputy Chairman of the Tajik Border Protection Committee, told journalists on 19 September that Tajik border troops are ready to take responsibility for guarding the Tajik-Afghan border. The Afghan section of Tajikistan's frontier has been guarded by Russian border troops under an agreement signed between the two countries in 1993. Nazarov said the Border Protection Committee has submitted to Russia its proposal for a gradual transfer of responsibility to Tajik troops. He added that although there have been no frictions among Russian and Tajik border troops, cooperation between the two sides has left much to be desired. In addition, Nazarov noted, 90 percent of the Russian border troops serving in Tajikistan are actually Tajik citizens. (Asia-Plus Blitz)

UP TO 350,000 TAJIK CITIZENS WORKING ABROAD, LABOR MINISTER SAYS

19 September

Tajik Labor Minister Mukhamadsho Ilolov has announced the results of a recent countrywide poll conducted by his ministry that shows that as many as 350,000 Tajik citizens are working abroad. As of 2002, the Tajik population was estimated at 6.23 million. About 90 percent of the labor migrants are working in Russia, Ilolov added, with small numbers having found jobs in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Most leave to search for work independently, without carrying out the necessary formalities, which according to Ilolov is the source of their problems with the authorities of the countries in which they seek jobs and also with employers. The minister appealed to potential labor migrants to use the services of organizations licensed to export labor and familiarize themselves with Russian legislation on foreign citizens. (centran.ru)

LOW VOTER TURNOUT FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

21 September

Elections to local maslikhats (councils) were held throughout Kazakhstan on 20 September, with only 56.4 percent of the eligible electorate having voted by poll-closing time, the Central Election Commission reported. Council members were elected in 2,062 electoral districts; a second round will be held in 433 districts and 59 will have to hold new elections. It was reported that there were

more than 400 election observers from political parties and NGOs active in Astana alone, in addition to international observers. No major violations of election law were reported in the capital, but there were numerous cases of attempted "family" voting -- where one person presents the documents of an entire family in order to vote for all family members. According to reports, older voters were the most likely to come to the polls. (khabar.kz)

WORLD BANK OFFICIAL LAUDS ARMENIAN POVERTY-REDUCTION PROGRAM

22 September

Donna Dowsett-Coirolo, who is the World Bank's director for the South Caucasus, on 19 September praised Armenia's economic growth as "very impressive," RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. She also described as "very good" the 12-year poverty-reduction program approved by the government last month. Dowsett-Coirolo predicted that the bank will continue and may even increase its funding for Armenia in a new four-year Country Assistance Strategy to be unveiled next year. But at the same time she encouraged the Armenian leadership to do more to ensure that the benefits of economic growth are extended to rural areas. (RFE/RL)

CIS PRESIDENTS SIGN STATEMENT ON ABKHAZ CONFLICT

22 September

The CIS leaders who attended the CIS summit in Yalta on 18-19 September signed a statement on 19 September reaffirming their commitment to earlier statements upholding Georgia's sovereignty over the breakaway Republic of Abkhazia. On 22 September, Georgian President Shevardnadze said during his regular Monday radio interview that Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov refused on 18 September to include the Abkhaz issue in the agenda for the CIS foreign ministers' meeting that day. Shevardnadze persuaded the presidents of Russia and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and Leonid Kuchma, respectively, to include Abkhaz among the issues to be discussed by CIS presidents on 19 September. Shevardnadze added that Putin confirmed his support for Georgia's territorial integrity and for the repatriation to Abkhazia of Georgian displaced persons who fled the region during the 1992-93 war. Putin and Shevardnadze signed an agreement on the sidelines of a CIS summit in Sochi in March on repatriation and the restoration of rail communication between Russia and Georgia via Abkhazia. (Caucasus Press)

AGREEMENT SIGNED ON RUSSIAN AIR BASE IN KYRGYZSTAN

22 September

Kyrgyz Defense Minister Colonel General Esen Topoev and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov on 22 September signed an agreement in Moscow authorizing the opening of a Russian air base in the Kyrgyz town of Kant. The signing took place in the presence of both countries' presidents, and the agreement is the result of months of negotiations, particularly over funding issues. The final agreement specifies that the Russian side will be responsible for funding the base, but it will not have to pay rent or other fees. About 15 Russian Su-25 and Su-27 fighter jets will be stationed at Kant, along with 300 Russian service personnel. Those aircraft have an operational range of about 2,000 kilometers and will be used to provide air support to the 201st Motorized Infantry Division, which is deployed in Tajikistan. Ivanov said the base's runways are to be lengthened to accommodate military-transport planes. (kabar.kg)

UZBEK EMBASSY ACCUSES KAZAKH MEDIA OF BIAS IN REPORTING BORDER INCIDENTS

22 September

The Uzbek Embassy in Almaty has issued a statement accusing the Kazakh media of biased reporting about recent incidents along the two countries' border. The embassy asserted that the Kazakh media have been carrying reports that reflect negatively the state of Kazakh-Uzbek relations, and that "certain people" in Kazakhstan are trying to use the border incidents for "populist or other narrow political ends," thereby creating tensions and provoking anti-Uzbek sentiments. The embassy warned that irresponsible statements by Kazakh officials could combine with media bias to worsen relations and, possibly, to inflame tensions in border areas. The statement, which was presumably a response to reporting on a shooting incident on the border in early September, was read to journalists by Uzbek Ambassador to Kazakhstan Turdykul Botayorov. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

ARMENIA-DIASPORA BUSINESS CONFERENCE OPENS

23 September

Some 900 Armenian businesspeople, 150 of them from the Armenian diaspora, congregated in Yerevan on 22 September for a three-day forum to discuss ways of promoting diaspora investment in the economies of Armenia and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. Addressing participants, President Kocharian complained that some diaspora businesspeople regard investing in Armenia as "a heroic sacrifice," and demand special privileges from the government. NKR Prime Minister Anushavan Danielian estimated investment in the unrecognized enclave at \$35 million. He said the economy grew by 40 percent in the first eight months of 2003, which, he continued, creates good prospects for establishing a free economic zone in the town of Shushi, Noyan Tapan reported. (RFE/RL)

CHINA, RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA SEEK CLOSER ECONOMIC TIES

23 September

The six-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organization, initially set up as a political alliance, took a step toward economic integration Tuesday with China proposing the creation of a central Asian free trade zone. The alliance, formed in Shanghai in 1996 and upgraded in 2001 to battle terrorism in the wake of the Sep. 11 attacks in the U.S., includes China, Russia and four central Asian nations - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. China's Premier Wen Jiabao proposed the creation of a free-trade zone as a long-term objective during talks Tuesday with his five counterparts, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. In the lead-up to the creation of such a zone, Wen said the Shanghai Cooperation Organization should work together to streamline cross-border trade between the six nations by reducing red tape and non-tariff barriers. Wen also proposed greater cooperation between the six nations on major development projects, including transportation, energy and telecommunications. He urged the six nations to improve technical cooperation in industries such as agriculture, home appliances, light industry and textiles. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov said the six documents signed during Tuesday's meeting marked the organization's shift from a political to an economic phase. "Our organization's initial phase has essentially come to an end," Kasyanov told reporters. "Today we now undertake the signing of a multilateral economic cooperation framework to give new

momentum to efforts to boost our economic and trade ties." (Dow Jones)

NEW US AMBASSADOR TO KABUL

23 September

President Bush has announced that his special envoy in Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, is also to become the new American ambassador in Kabul. The White House said the appointment of Mr Khalilzad, who was born in Afghanistan, would help to speed up reconstruction efforts there. Mr Khalilzad replaces the current ambassador, Robert Finn. His appointment has to be confirmed by the senate. Last week President Bush asked Congress for an additional \$1.2bn for Afghanistan's reconstruction, and \$11bn for American military operations there. (BBC)

US GRANTS TURKEY 8.5 BLN DOLLAR LOAN TO AID ECONOMY AFTER IRAQ WAR

23 September

The United States granted Turkey a loan of up to 8.5 billion dollars to help Ankara's economic reform program and soften the blow struck to its battered economy by the war in neighboring Iraq. Announcing the loan on the sidelines of the IMF meeting in Dubai, US Treasury Secretary John Snow said Turkey must in return cooperate with the United States in Iraq. But he insisted that the deal was in no way linked to possible Turkish military involvement in the country's reconstruction. Washington has been pressing hard

on Ankara to send troops to aid rebuilding the increasingly lawless Iraq, but the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has refrained from taking a decision due to strong objections at home. "The purpose of the assistance is to support Turkey's ongoing economic reform process, and to mitigate the economic impact on Turkey related to Operation Iraqi Freedom," Snow said in a statement. "It is in the US interests that Turkey maintains its economic stability and continue its ambitious economic and political reform process," he added. Turkey's economy is emerging from the worst crisis in its modern history, after turmoil in the banking sector sent markets plunging and investors fleeing the country in 2001. Snow praised the "great strides" made by Turkey in recovering from the crisis of 2001, saying the country's growth had been strong over the past year and a half, while inflation had returned to historic lows. The loans from the United States carry a maturity of 10 years, with a four-year grace period for repayment, and will be paid out over an 18 month period in four equal installments. They are also being extended under two key conditions. Firstly, Turkey must implement "strong economic policies" while, perhaps more significantly, it must also cooperate "with the United States in Iraq", according to the text of Snow's statement. The grant replaces a much larger package Turkey forfeited in March after its parliament refused to allow US soldiers to use its territory as a springboard for the invasion of Iraq, a decision which hurt traditionally strong bilateral ties. (AFP)

