

Central Asia

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ANALYST

BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday, January 14, 2004

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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/January 14, 2003

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EDITORIAL PRINCIPLES

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

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Analytical Articles:

Analytical articles require a three to four sentence introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful judgment supported with concrete examples.

Analytical article structure:

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.

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: svante.cornell@pcr.uu.se and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

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KAZAKHSTAN'S ECONOMIC PROMISE REVISITED

Robert M. Cutler

Kazakhstan may well have better prospects for economic development than any other newly independent state. After it paid off its IMF debt in 2000 no fewer than seven years ahead of schedule, the organization closed up shop in Astana, not anticipating the need for further loans. Inflation has been steady since then at roughly 6.5 per cent. The country's three major economic tasks today are to attract foreign direct investment into non-energy sectors, to improve transparency and corporate governance (particularly in the metals and mining sector), and to create conditions for domestic small and medium enterprises to grow more dynamically.

BACKGROUND: Real GDP fell throughout the first half of the 1990s in all newly independent states, declining by about half in Kazakhstan. The country was also adversely affected towards the end of the decade by the Asian and Russian crises as well as by fluctuating world market prices for energy. However, Kazakhstan's economic performance has significantly improved since late 1999, due partly to capable macroeconomic engineering, partly to the rebound of world energy prices, and partly to spillover effects from energy-sector growth taking hold in the domestic economy. Thus although the country's GDP grew by only 1.7 per cent in 1999, in 2000 it was up 9.6 per cent over the previous year, with the figures being 13.2 per cent for 2001, 9.5 per cent for 2002, and 9.2 per cent for 2003 (the last figure an upward revision from 7.3 per cent expected).

Despite these impressive figures, the vast majority (well over four-fifths) of GDP growth comes from the energy and energy-related sectors. Consequently, one of the most important policy measures taken over the past two years was the creation of the National Fund of the Republic of Kazakhstan (NFRK), which helps to balance financial flows in the resource sector and can act as a cushion whenever commodity prices fall. Kazakhstan's national economy and budget are less vulnerable to externally induced shocks than heretofore.

The agreed delimitation of national sectors in the northern Caspian Sea between Kazakhstan and Russia has given birth to cooperation among firms from the two countries in the development of resources of offshore border structures. Kazakhstan will probably become one of the top ten oil producers in the world by the middle of the next decade, with a daily output likely to exceed three million barrels. The government's longstanding policy in favor of increasing domestic content in the oil and minerals sector is unlikely to change and unlikely to impede growth.

IMPLICATIONS: The country's current accounts deficit in 2003 was negligible, down from the 2.5 per cent of GDP in 2002. Kazakhstan was designated a "market economy" by the U.S. Department of Commerce in early 2002, and performance is at such a level that the American government plans to phase out economic assistance to the country.

In late summer 2003, Moody's Investors Service raised Kazakhstan's foreign currency debt ceiling to a Baa3 rating to and its foreign currency deposits ceiling to Ba1. This followed a similar rise in international ratings by Standard and Poor's. Remarkably, in a worst-case scenario projected by Standard and Poor's, even if oil prices fell to \$12 per barrel for a year, macroeconomic growth indicators would remain at about 4 per cent and the state budget deficit would not exceed 3 per cent.

The low domestic income (under \$2000 per capita annually) and large disparities among geographic regions and economic sectors nevertheless cast a question mark in the background of any eventual political succession to President Nazarbaev, whose term ends in 2006. Foreign direct investment, which is expected to continue growing at an annual rate of 6 to 7 per cent, should create possibilities for fast income growth, so long as exploitation of the country's energy resources remains efficacious and new export routes for them are found.

At present, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium is the pipeline of choice, and Kazakhstan intends later this decade to put oil production into the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) now under construction, turning it into the ABC (for Aqtau-Baku-Ceyhan) route. It is likely that the country will require still another export route later on: current options include China, Iran and through Russia to the Baltic.

CONCLUSIONS: Years of work to improve the regulation and supervision of the Kazakhstan's banking system seem ready to pay off in the wake of continuing foreign direct investment in the energy sector and new pipeline export capacity. In recent years, however, the energy sector has attracted between two-thirds and nine-tenths of all FDI, depending on how the calculation is made. It remains imperative to draw FDI to other sectors. One way to do this is to promote foreign investors' relations with domestic suppliers. Another is to improve transparency and corporate governance in the metals and mining sector, which remains exceptionally cliquish and opaque despite recent consolidation. A third is to lift protection from selected domestic SMEs, which are protected from foreign competition. This would allow more dynamic growth by the most competitive enterprises, even challenging established

domestic companies and importers through new economies of scale. That would in turn lead to the emergence of new social and political strata capable of playing a stabilizing role in the eventual post-Nazarbaev political transition.

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CHINESE REACTION TO THE UYGHUR PEOPLE

Every now and again a new billboard appears in Urumqi. They are all slightly different, but their message is the same. Kazakh stands beside Uyghur, beside Kirghiz and Uzbek and of course Han Chinese. All are smiling, exotically decked out in national costume, against a stunning backdrop of the snow-capped Tianshan Mountains.

They stand for peace and harmony, tolerance, understanding and of course equality between the varieties of peoples that populate Xinjiang. Every alleyway and street corner throughout the province is similarly, though not as colorfully graffitied. Unity in Xinjiang, at least in theory, is fashionable.

But in common with the Chinese educational style of memorization and recitation, whether or not the message ever sinks more than skin deep is irrelevant. Airing the problems experienced between the nations vis-à-vis each other is tantamount to the sin committed by airing such thorny issues as the Falun Gong, whose name even lingered over is a crime sanctionable by prison. To allude to ill feeling between ethnic groups or imply dissatisfaction with the government's method of handling ethnic relations can be interpreted as encouraging separatism. But no amount of window-dressing can disguise the fact that problems exist that no amount of propaganda can purge.

The more Chinese migrants who flood into Xinjiang every day, the greater the problems will be. Attempts by the government to dilute the Uyghurs, Xinjiang's native people, only stoke the fires of belligerence and discontent.

But there are two sides to this problem and a realistic assessment of what is happening in Xinjiang needs to account for both. It is not difficult to engage a Uyghur on the wrongs of Chinese migration, the invasion of his territory with Chinese imperialists, the Uyghur right to independence and their daily struggles for recognition amid the onslaught from the east. Foreigners are sitting targets for an army of Uyghur malcontents seeking a sympathetic ear. Few invitations to dinner pass without a reference to the latest injustice wrought by the "invaders," a critique of Han facial features, their eating habits and manners. Few Uyghurs would waste their breath in praise for the

Chinese or do so within earshot of another Uyghur. This would be tantamount to betrayal.

In fact for a Uyghur, the Chinese are an obsession. Very few actions are done, very few problems are understood and very few decisions are made by Uyghurs without a negative reference to their hated cohabitants.

The Chinese on the other hand expect the Uyghurs to fall in with their ways. The difference between the Chinese in Xinjiang and traditional ruling colonialists is that most Chinese are preoccupied themselves with the business of their own survival and many barely subsist. Thousands are drafted into dubious building "contracts" and discarded after six months without pay when government tax concessions for construction companies expire, and still thousands of others barely survive doing filthy menial tasks around the city.

Professional Chinese are difficult to draw on the subject of their Uyghur neighbors. They too are getting on with life in an increasingly competitive and materialistic China. They fret about their "one child" who they push through school, squeeze into further education using every bit of 'guanxi' (connections) they can muster and pay exorbitant amounts under the table on graduation for a coveted job. They too struggle with inequalities, human rights issues and pressures to join the Communist Party.

Uyghur reluctance to fraternize with their 'unclean' foe discourages individual friendships and socializing. Uyghurs tend to be viewed from a distance as a novelty, a minority group that is good at singing and dancing, and famous for its ethnic food. Government propaganda concerning the 'East Turkestan Terrorists' has installed a wariness and fear of the Uyghur people and most Chinese tend to give them a wide berth.

Most Chinese in the capital have no understanding of the Uyghur culture, have never attempted even the rudiments of the language and a vast proportion would be oblivious as to the nature of, or even existence of the gulf between the races.

Their benign indifference combined with paternal condescension keeps many Chinese from regarding Uyghurs as equals. The consequent Uyghur inferiority complex and

intransigence creates a climate of mistrust and intolerance. Few Chinese companies will employ Uyghurs as a result, in fact most state categorically that Uyghurs should not apply, thus breeding hostility.

A young Chinese professional returning from a short holiday among Uyghurs in the south of Xinjiang returned "amazed" that Uyghurs were a culture and people in their own right. Always having assumed that all Uyghurs spoke Mandarin, she was shocked to discover how few people understood her. Despite Chinese friends' warnings not to venture alone into Uyghur areas, she was surprised by the friendliness and hospitality she met. "We are always told to stay away from Uyghurs," she said. "But I felt no fear among them at all."

But despite her foray into "Uyghuristan", she continues to regard Uyghurs as little more than a tourist attraction in "her China." Like most Chinese women, she remain oblivious to the offence caused in Uyghur areas by her scanty summer clothing, her diet of pork, and love of beer. She is confused by the Uyghur insistence to live by "Xinjiang time" two hours behind Beijing time and makes no concessions to their hopes and dreams for "their" country.

Chinese and Uyghur live parallel lives in Xinjiang. Even those whose mastery of the language bridges the physical gulf find that Uyghurs are reluctant to confide in them the true nature of their feelings and the hatred that simmers beneath the surface.

Very soon, the Uyghurs will be a minority in Xinjiang and attempts to dilute them will have succeeded. Assimilation, however, will be slower in coming. Propaganda posters and slogans merely highlight the problems; they do nothing to solve them. There is a bottom line that no amount of campaigns will ever address, or indeed dare to address. The Chinese are taking over Xinjiang and will continue to do so with a vengeance. The Uyghurs wish they did not and want them to leave. In the end, Chinese indifference may hurt the Uyghur people, but the Uyghur reaction to it hurts no one but themselves.

Ruth Ingram

THE NEW GEORGIAN LEADERSHIP'S PROACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY

Blanka Hancilova and Jaba Devdariani

Mikheil Saakashvili won an overwhelming support in the January 4 Georgian presidential elections. Saakashvili's main tasks will be to balance relations with Russia, to deal with the unruly Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze, to curb corruption and to attract Western investment. His Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania is likely to steer regional politics. Georgia would like to continue to play a balancing role in relations with its South Caucasus neighbors, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the long run, Georgia may aspire for the role of the advocate of the South Caucasian cause in Europe.

BACKGROUND: Before resigning in November, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze sought to isolate the opposition triumvirate of Mikheil Saakashvili, Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze by sending his envoy Aslan Abashidze to Baku and Yerevan in order to paint the opposition as a dangerous nationalist clique which could endanger the Armenian and Azeri minorities in Georgia and the stability of the South Caucasus as a whole. Following Shevardnadze's resignation, the new Georgian leadership first sought to sooth Georgian relations with Russia. On December 28 – 29, State Minister Zurab Zhvania embarked on a trip to Baku and Yerevan. The meetings were held behind the closed doors, but one of the main aims of the visit was to reassure the respective leaderships about the constructive attitude of the new Georgian leadership towards the Armenian and Azeri minorities in Georgia, and about the continuation of good neighborly relations with both South Caucasus countries.

The precedent of change in the top leadership triggered by public protest against rigged elections in Georgia's has been worrying for the incumbent leaderships in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both parliamentary elections in Armenia and the presidential elections in Azerbaijan were contested by the local opposition and attracted rather strong criticism of the International Community. Whether realistic or not in its ambitions, the Azerbaijani opposition has been particularly upbeat about what they saw as the "victory of democracy" in Georgia. Hence, the official evaluation of Azerbaijani officials has been quite reserved, with foreign minister Vilayet Kuliyevev saying the change of guard in Georgia was received "normally" by Azerbaijan. In Armenia, where the seasoned Kocharyan government seems to be confident of its control over the country, foreign ministry spokesmen spoke about the possibility of opening "a new page" of relations with Georgia.

IMPLICATIONS: Zhvania has done his best to reassure neighboring governments that Georgia does not intend to 'export' its revolution. He also covered the big points of relations with the neighboring countries. With Armenia, he negotiated discounts on the rates of transit of Armenian cargo via Georgia. In Azerbaijan, he assured Ilham Aliyev that Georgia continues to place top priority on the timely completion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, a project which exemplifies the coinciding interests of Tbilisi and

Baku. It was also clear that representatives of both the Armenian and Azeri minorities were reported to have overwhelmingly voted for Mikheil Saakashvili on January 4.

The first visit was a gesture of good-neighborly relations, but the new Georgian leadership and Zurab Zhvania in particular are not likely to stop there. Georgia can be expected to conduct an increasingly active South Caucasus policy, attempting to bridge the differences among the three South Caucasus countries.

As Armenia continues to be under economic embargo by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Georgia is the only reliable transport route for Armenia – hence the Armenian government has a long-term vested interest in Georgia's stability. The positive reaction of the Armenian government to changes in Georgia's leadership can also be traced to initial conciliatory remarks of the new leaders towards Russia.

Armenia is seen as a primary security ally of Russia in the region, however the Kocharyan government has recently flirted with the idea of fostering relations with the West. Predictable Russo-Georgian relations could allow for joint Georgian-Armenian initiatives in the European format, which are likely to be well received in Brussels and EU capitals. The Azerbaijani leadership may be slightly more concerned in the short term with the recent changes in Georgia. Ilham Aliyev still has a relatively fragile position and the potential awakening of the opposition to the Georgian tune would be a nightmare scenario for him. It is nevertheless unlikely in the short term given the weakness and poor popular standing of the Azerbaijani opposition. The Armenian opposition may in fact even be more likely to benefit from the 'Georgia wind'. The pragmatism of the Georgian leadership, moreover, is good news for Azerbaijan. Georgia is interested in Azerbaijan's stability, as it hinges its hopes both for integration in the western economy and for strengthening western-led security frameworks to the transport of oil and gas from Azerbaijan and the Caspian region.

President-elect Saakashvili in his first statements emphasized European integration over bilateral relations with Russia and the United States. If this emphasis becomes firmly entrenched in the country's foreign policy, both Armenia and Azerbaijan could benefit from the current enchantment of the western powers with Georgia's "rose revolution".

Deeper integration into the European structures is presently, however, a tune of the future. Though the outcome of the January 4 Georgian presidential elections increases the likelihood of the EU offering Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan membership in its so-called "Wider Europe" initiative, the EU decision could take months and would amount to only a symbolic political declaration.

CONCLUSIONS: Importantly, the development of the South Caucasus tier of the Georgian foreign policy would largely depend on its ability to normalize relations with Russia. Negotiations over the withdrawal of Russian military bases in Georgia, one of which is located in the Armenian-populated province of Samtskhe-Javakheti, or a relaxation of Russia's visa regime with Georgia would be closely watched both in Yerevan and Baku. Kocharyan especially is more likely to seek active ties with Georgia if he would not feel that this could cause reprisals from the Russian side.

The new Georgian leadership currently commands the sympathies of the Western powers, and has some experience of lobbying for the regional interests of the South Caucasus in European institutions. Zhvania, in the capacity of the

Parliamentary Speaker, was the initiator of the inter-parliamentary consultations between the three South Caucasus countries. He is also known to have lobbied for the admission of Armenia and Azerbaijan into the Council of Europe in 2001.

A pragmatic course of the new Georgian leadership vis-à-vis Russia and South Caucasus may position Georgia as an active and welcome player for its two immediate neighbors. By declaring the European integration vector as a primary direction of its foreign policy, the Georgian leadership can create a constructive platform of cooperation in the South Caucasus, without alienating regional powers such as Russia and Turkey. The feasibility of this policy would largely depend on the perceived capability of the new Georgian government to undertake reforms within the country, as well as on some level of normalization in its relations with Russia.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Blanka Hancilova holds a doctoral degree from Charles University, and now serves with the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Jaba Devdariani is an analyst of South Caucasus affairs and founder of the internet magazine Civil Georgia (www.civil.ge)

ISKANDAR HAMIDOV IS FREED. WHAT IS NEXT FOR HIM?

In an effort to comply with its obligations toward the Council of Europe, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has issued a pardoning decree for 160 prisoners, including many political prisoners, held in connection with the military revolts of 1993-1995. Among the freed persons is Iskandar Hamidov, former Minister of Internal Affairs under the Popular Front government of 1992-1993, who was arrested in 1995 and sentenced to 14 years in prison for embezzlement of state funds. Iskandar Hamidov, alongside with Former Defense Minister Rahim Gaziyeu and the leader of the separatist movement in the South Alikram Humbatov, was considered the top political prisoner in the country both by the local human rights organizations and the Council of Europe. In his position of the Minister of Interior in 1992-1993, Hamidov acted as an independent maverick politician, crushing his political opponents with the use of force and championing nationalist rhetoric in regard to the war in Nagorno-Karabakh. He also chaired the ultra-nationalist party *Boz Gurd* (Grey Wolves), which promoted Pan-Turkic nationalism. Although the government of Azerbaijan claimed that so-called "political prisoners" have violated the laws of the country, human rights organizations and the Council of Europe insisted that these persons had not received a fair trial. When admitted into the Council of Europe in 2001, Azerbaijan undertook an obligation to reconsider the cases of all political prisoners and free the ones on the list of the

CoE. The repeated trial of Hamidov in the summer of 2003 did not produce the change of verdict and he was once again found guilty. The majority of local analysts believed that Hamidov was kept in prison for his public threats against the Aliyev government.

With the recent decree, newly elected president Ilham Aliyev showed his willingness to open a new stage in domestic politics. The majority of observers consider him more liberal than his father and many hope that under Ilham Aliyev, there will be further steps towards democratization in the country. Immediately after his release, Hamidov said that he had nothing against the new President and that he was looking forward to work with all political players to develop and strengthen the country. He also said that he would continue to lead his party (now renamed the Azerbaijan National Democratic Party), although refused to join any current political blocks or alliances. "There are many rumors now which party I will join. There are also those who want to use my name for their political purposes. But I will stay away from joining any political coalitions. I need time to get to know the political reality", said Hamidov. In a press conference held on January 7, Hamidov said that he would significantly restructure his party and will run for Parliament in the 2005 elections. In the last Presidential elections, Hamidov supported the candidacy of the opposition leader Isa Gambar of the Musavat party.

The pardoning decree was met with words of praise and approval by local NGOs and human rights activists. International organizations and foreign embassies also welcomed the act. In a meeting with Foreign Minister Vilayet Guliyev, Norwegian ambassador Steinar Gil welcomed the presidential decree and expressed hope that such acts would be continued in the future. However, there are also those who believe that it was done in an effort to please the Council of Europe prior to its winter session on January 26, in which Azerbaijan's fulfillment of its obligations will be discussed. Deputies from the opposition, representing Azerbaijan in the Council of Europe, complain that many more political prisoners still remain in prison, especially if considering the ones arrested as a result of the post-election violence in November 2003. Authorities insist that Azerbaijan has fulfilled its obligations toward the Council of Europe.

The Monitoring Committee of the Council of Europe discussed the recent events in Azerbaijan and recommended to the government to investigate the cases of those arrested in the post-election period. Although many in the opposition hope that the Council of Europe will implement sanctions towards the Azerbaijani authorities in connection with the political prisoners issue, more pragmatic analysts believe that this will not happen. Instead, Azerbaijan may be accorded some more time to improve the situation.

Fariz Ismailzade

INDIA'S CONTINUING DRIVE INTO CENTRAL ASIA

Stephen Blank

India's interest in Central Asia and its ability to act in defense of them has steadily grown during this decade. India is using all the traditional instruments of power at its disposal: economic, political and military. India seeks to upgrade trade, gain access to all sources of energy and help develop them, obtain publicly announced air bases in Central Asia, and to buy and sell weapons to and from regional governments. However, India's intensifying endeavors to gain an established place for itself in Central Asia are driven not just by a desire for influence, power projection capabilities, or the quest for energy, but by all these factors which are subsumed under a unifying strategic drive.

BACKGROUND: Historically the original Great Game came about due to Russian penetration and conquest of Central Asia, a process that alarmed the British Empire because it could discern no end to Moscow's or St. Petersburg's appetites. Hence in modern times, and in spite of the division of the Raj into India and Pakistan, Central Asia has been an important factor in regional security.

If anything, its importance grew first after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and then once the USSR collapsed and the Central Asian states emerged for the first time in history. As a result of these events Pakistan leapt into the fray trying to convert the area into its 'strategic hinterland' and attempting to compete with other governments through the employment of its economic and political instruments. When that did not work Pakistan exploited the opportunity to secure its own position in Afghanistan through the Taliban. These events, along with China's inroads into Central Asia as Russia's hold on the area slackened, galvanized Indian efforts to obtain a strong position in Central Asia.

But it was not just the threat of terrorism or the need for reliable energy supplies that drove New Delhi. Instead it was the realization held by recent governments that India had to break out of a purely South Asian position and frustrate what it discerned as joint Sino-Pakistani efforts to encircle and threaten it, not least in Central Asia. In this respect, mindful of threats occurring to its North and Northwest, India's governments began to update the security thinking that had animated the rulers of the Raj and now sought to project Indian power and influence into Central Asia and thwart Pakistan and China's plans there. Since 2000, India has substantially upgraded Central Asia's place in its foreign policy and defense priorities and resolved to deploy all the instruments of power available to it there. Thus it has steadily sought access to Central Asian energy projects and to major trade programs like the projected North-South corridor linking Russia, Central Asia and Iran with India.

IMPLICATIONS: But beyond purely economic and political links, India has also upgraded its strategic and military profile in Central Asia. It has now openly confirmed the presence of an air base at Ayni in Tajikistan. This is only the second Indian air base beyond India's frontiers (the first

is in Sri Lanka), but it testifies to India's new interest in and capability for power projection missions as well as its ability to threaten Pakistan from the rear and deny it a strategic hinterland. Indian officials are also busily negotiating deals with Central Asian governments like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan whereby India will either buy Soviet era military equipment like Ilyushin-76 transport aircraft (suitable for transporting troops or for mounting an aerial AWCS-like radar that it obtained from Israel, the Phalcon) or sell weapons to local governments. India is also discussing joint training, research and development initiatives with those states. But beyond obtaining access to energy projects, increased trade access through greater trade and participation in infrastructure projects and these military deals, the overarching Indian objective is quite clear and was summed up by an Indian official at the Ministry of Defense who commented on Defense Minister George Fernandes' recent visits to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakstan. "The visit is not that significant in terms of defense procurement. The accent is on building strategic space for India in the region and to encircle Pakistan."

These words speak for themselves. Central Asia has now become an important theater in the Indo-Pakistani rivalry that endangers the security of South Asia, making each region's security in some measure contingent upon the developments in the other region. Central Asia is thus a prominent element in both those countries' quest for greater strategic space, a phenomenon with particular significance for India. This is because New Delhi is clearly embarked upon a strategic quest for influence throughout Asia, and religious issues are not standing in the way of its rather successful quest for enhanced standing, prestige, presence, and influence from the Middle East to the Straits of Malacca. India's multi-dimensional approach to Central Asia resembles its approach to these other areas as well since in all cases economics and defense issues are combined, if not intertwined.

CONCLUSIONS: In this respect India's rising profile in Central Asia confirms the predictions made over a decade ago in many quarters that by the beginning of the twenty-first century India would be a major power to reckon with in Asia beyond South Asia and a force capable of projecting power

far beyond its formal borders. Those prophecies are now coming true. Consequently not only must any analysis or assessment of security trends in Central Asia take India into account, but India's presence in this area is likely to rise and probably come into political and economic rivalry with that of other major Asian players like China. Inasmuch as most governments' quest for influence here is predicated upon an effort to thwart other rivals' designs upon Central Asia, the addition of India to the mix will surely make the new great game still more complex. That multi-state rivalry embracing regional governments and distant powers like the United

States will surely continue to be and become even more complex as time passes, a rivalry that encompasses all the traditional dimensions of statecraft. Similarly, it is also clear that as far as Central Asia's future is concerned, India will not only play the game vigorously but that it is there to stay.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Professor Stephen Blank, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013. The views expressed here do not in any way represent those of the U.S. Army, Defense Department or the U.S. Government.

ISLAMIC GROUPS BANNED IN KYRGYZSTAN

In November 2003, the Supreme court of the Kyrgyz Republic issued a ban on four Islamic groups. Henceforth the activity of these groups, which the court officially labeled as terrorist and extremist, is considered illegal within the republic. These are the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which was declared extremist, as well as the Islamic Party of Turkestan, the East Turkestan Liberation Organization, and the East Turkestan Islamic Party that were announced terrorist.

Of these four groups, Hizb-ut-Tahrir is the most popular and active in Kyrgyzstan, whose members take actions mainly through oral propaganda and disseminate leaflets among local citizens calling for the overthrow of the constitutional system. It has recently been suspected by Kyrgyz security services of planning an attack on an airbase near Bishkek where American-led coalition forces are located. But Hizb-ut-Tahrir, whose members reject violent methods and act by means of persuasion, disclaimed the Kyrgyz government's accusation.

The Islamic Party of Turkestan, formerly known as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is known for its incursions into Kyrgyzstan's territory in 1999 and 2000. The other two groups that were banned by the Kyrgyz Supreme court, are among the Uyghur organizations that claim to act for the interests of the Uyghur people in China.

The initiative to ban the aforementioned groups came from the General Prosecutor's office of Kyrgyzstan, which addressed competent judiciary bodies in the beginning of this year. In May, the Pervomai rayon court in Bishkek made a ruling in support of

the initiative, which was later supported by the Supreme court of the country.

The General Prosecutor's office describes this move as a proactive measure against the spread of radical extremist streams in the country, which advocate ideas of political and religious extremism, nationalism and radical Islamic fundamentalism. It explained that the main threat to the country's national security and territorial integrity is posed by international radical extremist and terrorist groups, which have been trying to strengthen their position in the Central Asian region.

In an interview with RFE/RL, a representative of the General Prosecutor's office, Bakyt Osmonaliev, noted that the court ruling was needed because Kyrgyzstan is a signatory of a number of international agreements and that these groups were announced as terrorist and extremist because they have organized terrorist acts and other crimes and they have been carrying out active propaganda calling for the overthrow of the constitutional regime.

The Kyrgyz government and the law-enforcement bodies have welcomed the court's decision, which they claim laid a firm legal basis to suppress the illegal activities of these organizations. A Kyrgyz National Security Service representative told the Deutsche Welle that the court ruling finally "unleashed the hands" of the security forces regarding extremists and terrorists.

While the court decision evoked excitement among security services, it has evoked some concern and questions among some politicians, human rights activists, and public figures. Alisher Abdimomunov, Member of the Legislative Assembly of the

Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz Parliament) compared the ban on these groups to a fight against shadows, and is skeptical about the potential of the court ruling to bring effective results in the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Tursun Islam, a member of the "Ittipak" Uyghur organization in Kyrgyzstan, in an interview to RFE/RL evaluated this decision as inaccurate. According to him, there is no such party as the East Turkestan Liberation Organization per se, because in order to be a party there should be some kind of a charter and/or programme, which it does not have. The two Uyghur organizations were banned under the pressure of the Chinese government and it had less to do with the domestic security threat that they pose, according to Tursun Islam.

Kyrgyz human rights activist Tursunbek Akunov is of similar opinion. In an interview to IWPR, he said that banning these groups is related more with the attempts of the Kyrgyz government to please world powers such as the United States, Russia and China than with defending national security. Another Kyrgyz human rights activist, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Deutsche Welle said that this move constituted a license to further crack down on dissent. "Under the pretense of stirring up the fight against separatists, extremists and terrorists, persecution of the opposition and civil society activists will gain strength. The court ruling will give the government a free hand", he added.

Aisha Aslanbekova

HIZB-UT-TAHRIR'S INCREASING ACTIVITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Anara Tabyshalieva

The Geography of Hizbut Tahrir's activity is expanding in Central Asia: numerous leaflets are disseminated and clandestine cells are mushroomed from south of Tajikistan to north, in Baikonur of Kazakhstan. National governments respond differently to the new challenges lumping Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) with terrorist and criminal groups. Human rights activists in Uzbekistan complain that even during Ramadan, unfair repressions against Hizb-ut-Tahrir members continued. Despite that, thousands of followers of HT have been jailed in Uzbekistan, hundreds have been detained in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the movement spread out its activity among various ethnic groups attracting more youth and even schoolchildren.

BACKGROUND: Organized in Jerusalem in 1953 and having headquartered in London, Hizb-ut-Tahrir aims at establishing a single Islamic Caliphate incorporating all Central Asian republics of the CIS, along with the Muslim regions of Russia, China, and the northern Caucasus. Proclaiming a non-violent way to a theocratic state, this transnational movement, in Arabic the "Party of Islamic Liberation" has had some success at grassroots level, not only because of a well-organized underground activity and external support in finances and training, but also because of the perceived political exclusion of youth, increasing poverty, and unemployment in Central Asia. Supporters of the Islamic Caliphate advocate free trade and no borders between Muslim states. Their cells are actively functioning in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, disseminating anti-Western and anti-government propaganda in local languages and Russian, calling for disobedience to authorities and boycotting any elections. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir do not officially cooperate with each other; but both movements plan various types of caliphate, yet neither has an economic program or a political concept for the purported future ideal state.

Hizb-ut-Tahrir has several arguments that attract common people. It pretends to express the interest of all Muslims regardless of their national identity and educate post-Soviet Muslims in the right way. All Central Asian countries lack proper literature on Islam in the vernacular, consequently many young people eager to learn more about Islam pay attention to underground the teaching of the HT cells. One of the most powerful arguments of HT is advocacy of regional cooperation across borders. The idea of a unified state, reminiscent of the Soviet era with no national borders between Central Asian states is supported by traders, customers and many others involved in cross-border trade, which supplies the livelihood of a significant part of Central Asia's population. The anti-governmental agenda and the use of the theme of corruption, inequality and religious intolerance has also become popular, especially in areas where political parties are not allowed. In such regions, Hizb-ut-Tahrir has effectively substituted political parties. For example, in Uzbekistan, HT has the most favorable conditions as opposition political parties are muzzled and unable to operate. Another issue is that as a rule, many secular political parties except the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan close their eyes to the

religious peculiarities of the region. The simplicity of HT's ideology, including in its conceptualization of the concept of the Caliphate and its simple Islamic prescriptions for all the illnesses of the current turbulent times attract the attention of the young and less educated population. Moreover, overseas sponsors lavishly support HT cells by equipment and money to produce thousands of books, pamphlets and leaflets.

IMPLICATIONS: National governments have responded differently to the new challenge posed by Hizb-ut-Tahrir. In Tajikistan, over 600 members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir were jailed since 1998. In Kyrgyzstan, the persecution of hundreds of HT supporters has aroused a sound public discussion on whether HT should be registered or its members detained. The Uzbek leadership severely punishes anyone suspected of HT activity. Human rights activists in Uzbekistan complain that even during Ramadan, unfair repressions against Hizb-ut-Tahrir members continued. The political exclusion of ethnic minorities, youth and cross-border population could also further contribute to the growing activity of HT.

Despite these processes, the movement has some limitations. Often, Hizb-ut-Tahrir members deliberately exaggerate the number of their members. Compared to the activity of the rich Protestant churches from the U.S., South Korea and some European countries in Central Asia, Hizb-ut-Tahrir's purported success does not look as great. For instance ten thousand citizens of Kyrgyzstan, the majority Kyrgyz by ethnicity and originally Muslim have reportedly been converted by protestant missionaries in the north of the country. Meanwhile, an estimated three thousand natives of Kyrgyzstan have joined Hizb-ut-Tahrir cells. A similar situation exists in Kazakhstan, where more Kazakhs have converted into Protestantism than have been converted by Hizb-ut-Tahrir rhetoric. In Tajikistan, the 40,000-member Islamic Renaissance Party effectively restricts the spread of HT across the country. The influence of HT cells is close to insignificant in regions and cities marked by higher political participation, and multiparty activities on the mobilization of various ethnic groups and youth.

Secondly, the HT doctrine mistakenly appeals to anti-Semitic feelings, which are practically absent in Central Asia. It is also very unlikely that pan-Islamic initiatives and a supra-regional agenda

could be successful today among the fragmented subregions of the Central Asian countries. Focusing on criticism of the clandestine Hizb-ut-Tahrir, local decision-makers overlook other utopian movements openly seeking the restoration of the Soviet Union or the mass out-migration of hundreds of thousands of people to other countries in order to survive.

In general, the overwhelming majority of local people observes traditional values and rituals, and have little interest in foreign Islamic literature and organizations and the politicization of Islam. Even seventy years of enormous pressure and propaganda under the Soviet regime could not change the importance of traditional Islam in the region. The role of everyday Islam has greatly increased over the last decade, as a shortage of educated home-grown mullahs led to low resistance on the part of the youth to religious extremism. Some young people inevitably join religious extremist movements as a sign of protest against the old values of the Soviet generation that are discredited and irrelevant today, against the current economic hardship and the damage to trade done by regional disintegration.

CONCLUSIONS: National governments, official religious leaders and the public at large have a good opportunity to start a dialogue with Hizb-ut-Tahrir leaders and members in Central Asia to find a non-violent solution for preventing radical extremism. Politicians would be well served by considering some of the more reasonable criticism voiced by the radicals, which is actually what gives the movement popularity, such as corruption, social injustice, groundless repressions, neglect of unemployed young people, etc. Several years of Hizb-ut-Tahrir activity and persecution of its members has made the urgent need of higher political participation at the grassroots level and in particular by the youth evident, if the expansion of rich foreign religious groups in Central Asia is to be halted. On the whole, in all Central Asian countries, the prospects for religious extremism will much depend on continued reforms, political participation, especially by ethnic minorities and voters in remote and cross-border regions.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Anara Tabyshalieva is a visiting fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS.

KAZAKHSTAN'S LOWER HOUSE APPROVES DRAFT LAW ON THE MEDIA

Kazakhstan's lower parliamentary house, the Mazhilis, overwhelmingly passed the controversial draft law "On Mass Media" Dec. 25, with 53 deputies voting for the law and only six deputies voting against it. The draft law will next be considered in the Senate; experts say a hearing on the law will occur in mid-February. Journalists now say their only hope is that President Nursultan Nazarbaev will decide not to sign the law, as the Senate is expected to approve the law. Debate over the law had intensified in the two weeks preceding the Mazhilis vote, when journalists, human rights groups and international organizations vocally criticized the law, while pro-government politicians called on deputies to approve the law and condemned international involvement. Kazakh journalists staged a protest, releasing two special editions of the oppositional paper *Assandi Times*. The Dec. 19 edition featured several pages of materials about the draft law, and the front page displayed logos of organizations and newspapers who were against the draft law and the headline "To Our and Your Freedom!" There were also statements and open letters to Nazarbaev from several international organizations. The Dec. 26 edition had two pages of materials on the draft law. In addition, experts say the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe sent Nazarbaev a letter, offering to help draft a law that would comply with international standards for freedom of speech. Journalists and human rights groups have long criticized the draft law, which they say gives excessive power to the Ministry of Information and will allow it to shut down media outlets without a court hearing. The draft law is the

third and, experts say, most draconian of Kazakhstan's draft laws. *Assandi Times* editor Irina Petrushova said she hopes Nazarbaev will refuse to sign the law, and thus she plans another protest edition later in January. "We have no hope in the Senate, and a very small hope that the President will rethink and not sign this draft law. But, again, this is a very small hope. We will continue to speak out against this law," Petrushova said. She said she believed that if international organizations vocally opposed the draft law, the President would decide not to sign the law. But considering many politicians' recent statements, this seems increasingly unlikely. Nazarbaev said Dec. 23 that international organizations should not interfere in Kazakhstan's internal affairs and should "not dictate which laws to pass and which to reject." The day of the vote, the Mazhilis press service released a statement from Deputy Erasyly Abylkasymov, who said he had previously decided to vote against the law because of a certain wording. But upon reading it more carefully, he said he had decided he is "fully on the side of the government" because the West was urging Kazakhstan to reject the law in an attempt to control the country. "The West, of course, does not want us to be independent from them. In connection with this, I ask you to defend our informational space, and therefore I am in favor of passing the government's version [of the draft law]," Abylkasymov said in the statement. Other deputies expressed similar opinions. Abylkasymov also pointed to Russian opposition to the law, saying the Kazakh media was too Russified. Newspapers and TV stations, like

NTV and *Izvestiya*, are Kazakh counterparts of Russian organizations. In the draft law, the amount of material which can be rebroadcast is limited, and Kazakh-language programming must compose 50 percent of the programming and its playing time must be distributed evenly. Toby Mendel, Asia Program Director for the free-speech organization Article 19, said the law clearly contradicts international standards for freedom of expression, so it is not an "internal" affair of Kazakhstan. "By international agreement, by international law and by basic principles of respect for human dignity, human rights are not internal matters. No government that is serious about respecting human rights would make a claim like that. ... There is no question but that the law, if passed, would breach international standards relating to freedom of expression," he said. Article 19 released a report analyzing the draft law's provisions in September. Evgeniy Zhovtis, head of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law, said his outlook for the future of the media in Kazakhstan was "generally pessimistic" because this example showed that "no amount of protest ... can change anything." Nonetheless, he and other lawyers and journalists pointed to how novel recent protests have been; no similar protests with such wide international support have been staged by Kazakh journalists. The importance of the protest, then, may lie in whether it will bring continued solidarity.

Olivia Allison

NEWS BITES

SOUTH KOREA SIGNS AGREEMENT WITH KYRGYZSTAN ON LABOR MIGRANTS

16 December

South Korea has become the first country to sign an agreement with Kyrgyzstan on accepting Kyrgyz labor migrants. Korean agencies expressed an interest in receiving Kyrgyz workers in November 2002, but final arrangements were made only in September during a visit to South Korea by Kyrgyz Labor and Social Security Minister Roza Aknazarova. The ministry's employment centers will have responsibility for the selection and training of Kyrgyz citizens taking jobs in South Korea. A private Kyrgyz firm called Eldorado has concluded its own contract with South Korea to supply workers. The Foreign Ministry says it intends to launch television commercials in January that will inform job seekers about how to apply for work in South Korea, although Foreign Ministry Migration Department Director Zafar Hakimov told a press conference in Bishkek on 16 December that the number of Kyrgyz citizens seeking jobs abroad has declined since 2000. Interfax reported on 17 December that Hakimov attributed the decline to improvements in the Kyrgyz economy. (kabar.kg)

ALLEGED MOSCOW THEATER SIEGE PARTICIPANT ACCUSED OF BEING 'DOUBLE AGENT'

DIES IN CAR ACCIDENT

17 December

Khanpash Terkibaev, a Chechen journalist who some observers allege participated in the October 2002 seizure of a Moscow theater by Chechen fighters, was killed in a traffic accident near Grozny on 15 December. The agency quoted Grozny district administration head Shaid Dzhamaldae as saying that four other people riding in the car with Terkibaev also died in the accident, the causes of which are under investigation. In April, "Novaya gazeta" correspondent Anna Politkovskaya reported that Terkibaev traveled to Moscow with the Chechen fighters who seized the theater and ensured that their journey was unimpeded, and that he left the theater before Russian commandos stormed it. Politkovskaya, who interviewed Terkibaev, claimed he had been sent on the raid by Russia's special services. Terkibaev, who was reportedly accredited with the government daily "Rossiiskaya gazeta," denied involvement in the theater raid. On 16 December, following news of Terkibaev's death, Politkovskaya told Ekho Moskv, "It is a shame to speak ill of a dead person, but a person who betrays many different sides condemns himself." She said that after her interview with Terkibaev was published, "very many people, both from the Chechen side and from Russia's special services, said he wouldn't live much longer." "I was told that [radical Chechen field commander Shamil] Basaev had condemned him and that the [Russian] special services had condemned him," Politkovskaya said. "He was in Baku for a while, and people who were also there said things were not so good for him. As result, he wound up in Chechnya." Politkovskaya called Terkibaev "a

kind of double agent." "Nevertheless," she added. "I deeply regret that this last witness was killed." (RFE/RL)

PUTIN HINTS AT FURTHER MOVES AGAINST BIG BUSINESS...

23 December

President Vladimir Putin said on 23 December that while no wholesale revision of privatization is planned, this "doesn't concern people who didn't observe the law." "We often hear that the laws were complicated and it was impossible to observe them," Putin said in a speech to the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "So speak those who didn't observe them. This is nonsense. Those who wanted to did observe the law." Putin said that those who "consciously stole" should not get "preferential treatment." "If five or seven people did not observe the law, it does not mean that everybody did the same," Putin said. This sentence sparked speculation in various media that five to seven leading tycoons might soon meet the fate of jailed former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovskii. Putin also called for redistributing the "super-profits" of oil and gas companies, using such means as export tariffs and a tax on the extraction of natural resources. He added, however, that the government will work closely with business to decide how to proceed. (RBK)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT COMPLAINS OF FOREIGN INTERFERENCE IN CONNECTION WITH MEDIA LAW

23 December

Kazakh President Nazarbaev on 23 December appealed for international organizations to stop interfering in domestic Kazakh affairs and, in particular, to stop telling the country which laws to adopt and which to reject. Nazarbaev's comments came in reaction to recent appeals from international journalism organizations against the adoption of a controversial draft media law. The government draft has been sharply criticized by independent Kazakh journalists, who say it gives the state too much power over the media. The international journalism group Reporters Without Borders has said the draft does not meet international standards for freedom of the media and of expression, a view shared by other international organizations that have assessed the text, including the OSCE and the International Press Institute. (Deutsche Welle)

FORMER GEORGIAN ENERGY MINISTER SUFFERS HEART ATTACK UNDER INTERROGATION

24 December

After reportedly suffering a heart attack, David Mirtskhulava was taken on 24 December to a hospital from the Prosecutor-General's Office, to which he had been summoned for questioning about the embezzlement of some \$2.2 million intended to pay for electricity supplied to Georgia by Armenia. Georgian presidential candidate Mikhail Saakashvili said

Mirtskhulava was arrested because he planned to flee to Russia via Abkhazia. Saakashvili added that "someone should be held responsible" for the population having been left to suffer without light or heating. Mirtskhulava's lawyer Eka Beselia said her client is the victim of political persecution. (ITAR-TASS)

CHECHEN WARLORD BASAYEV CLAIMS LATEST ATTACKS IN RUSSIA

24 December

Breakaway Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev has claimed two suicide attacks carried out this month in southern Russia and Moscow and warned other attacks would follow, according to the pro-independence website kavkazcenter.com. "Our martyrs' fighting brigade carried out two attacks under our operation Boomerang in Yessentuki (Ingushetia) and in Moscow, aimed at forcing the Russians to make peace," Basayev said. He went on: "I emphasize that we did not aim to terrorize anyone. Our goal was to wipe out the accomplices to genocide of the people of Chechnya." The Pyatigorsk region of southwest Russia, where a bombing killed 46 people on December 5, was chosen "because that is the site of the Belaya Lebed detention center where hundreds of Chechen hostages are held," the warlord said. "They are victims of inhuman torture ... several of them have disappeared without trace." Turning to the December 9 attack in Moscow, Basayev said: "The target of our martyred sister in Moscow was the Duma," the lower house of parliament for which elections were held two days earlier. It was possible, he said, that "something prevented her from walking the 50 metres to her goal" before setting off the explosives that killed six people and wounded 14 others after the legislative elections in which President Vladimir Putin's allies won a sweeping victory. (AFP)

GEORGIAN, RUSSIAN LEADERS HOLD 'BREAKTHROUGH' TALKS

25 December

Acting Georgian President Nino Burdjanadze held talks in Moscow on 24 December with Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and, the following day, with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. Upon her return to Tbilisi, Burdjanadze described her talks with Putin as open, sincere, and a step toward overcoming mutual hostility between the two countries. Topics discussed reportedly included Russia's suspension of its visa requirement for residents of Georgia's Adjara Autonomous Republic, bilateral trade and economic cooperation, and the closure of the Russian military bases in Georgia. Echoing earlier statements, Defense Minister Ivanov told Interfax that Russia needs 11 years to withdraw its troops from Georgia. Responding to allegations by Russian presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembskii on 24 December that Georgia serves as a conduit for terrorists infiltrating Chechnya, Burdjanadze said on 24 December that she has inspected Georgia's border with Chechnya and Dagestan and is sure it is adequately guarded. On 26 December, however, she admitted that several Chechen militants killed last month had Georgian visas in their travel documents, but added that those visas were issued in 2000-01, and blamed "the previous Georgian leadership" which, she said "always denied the obvious." (Interfax)

TURKMENISTAN PROTESTS ASSAULT ON MOSCOW EMBASSY

26 December

The Turkmen Embassy in Moscow sent a note on 26 December to the Russian Foreign Ministry protesting an assault on the embassy on 25 December by unidentified people throwing bottles of black paint. According to some reports, on 26 December, radical writer Eduard Limonov's National Bolshevik Party claimed responsibility for the attack. The Russian Foreign Ministry responded to the Turkmen note with an expression of regret and a statement that the culprits are being sought by police. (RIA-Novosti)

KAZAKHSTAN SEEKS CASPIAN OIL CARTEL

28 December

The nations surrounding the Caspian Sea should create an OPEC-like oil cartel to help support global prices and reassure OPEC itself, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev said in interviews published on Sunday. Former Soviet Caspian states Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are not OPEC members, and their giant energy reserves are being developed by international majors such as ChevronTexaco Corp. (NYSE), BP Plc (BP.L), Royal Dutch/Shell Group (RD.AS) (SHEL.L) and Total (TOFN.PA). Iran, which also has a Caspian coastline, is already an OPEC member. "Global experts consider the nervousness of Arab countries and all of OPEC's comes not only from the massiveness of the Caspian reserves, but also because the region's states do not enter OPEC," said Nazarbayev in an interview with the Interfax news agency and Russia's Izvestia daily. "Therefore I have suggested to the Caspian states that we establish our own organization in advance," he said. "So far, unfortunately, this suggestion has not found an answer." Kazakhstan has staked its economy on developing extensive oil reserves such as the Kashagan field, the biggest new oil find in the last 30 years, and has attracted more than \$20 billion in foreign investment since the fall of communism. Nazarbayev said the nation needed more foreign investment. "It is completely obvious that to obtain the output targets that our country is planning, we cannot do without investment and the participation of foreign capital. Among our partners we would like to see, in the first place, Russian businessmen." "We are already holding active consultations with LUKOIL (LUKO.RTS)," he said, referring to the Russian oil giant. "We are open to cooperation with others." (Reuters)

ANOTHER GEORGIAN EMBEZZLEMENT SUSPECT SUFFERS HEART ATTACK

29 December

Former Georgian Railways Director Akaki Chkhaidze, whose Silk Road party was a member of the pro-presidential For a New Georgia election bloc, has reportedly been hospitalized in Batumi after suffering a heart attack. Earlier that day, Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Baramidze warned that a search warrant would be issued for Chkhaidze unless he turned himself in for questioning concerning suspected large-scale embezzlement. Meanwhile, officials from the Prosecutor-General's Office have still not been able to question former Energy Minister David Mirtskhulava, who is also recovering from a heart attack. (Caucasus Press)

GEORGIAN POLITICAL PARTIES DISAPPROVE OF PLANNED WEALTH TAX

29 December

In separate statements reported by Caucasus Press, the New Rightists, the Union of Traditionalists of Georgia (STK), and the Socialist Party have criticized a planned wealth tax announced on 22 December by Minister of State Zhvania. STK Chairman Akaki Asatiani and the Socialists termed the tax a return to Bolshevism, while David Gamkrelidze of the New Rights called it "populist." Asatiani also criticized the proposed abolition of the land tax. Acting Georgian President Nino Burdjanadze proposed on 23 December renaming the draft bill on the wealth tax the "solidarity law," while on 24 December David Salaridze, chairman of the parliament commission on tax revenues, welcomed the proposed wealth tax but said the definition of wealth should be more precise. He suggested it should apply to owners of residences worth more than 300,000 laris (\$139,000) and automobiles worth more than 150,000 laris. (Caucasus Press)

TATAR CONSTITUTIONAL COURT ENTERS FRAY OVER CYRILLIC ALPHABET

29 December

Tatarstan's Constitutional Court issued a ruling on 24 December stating that the republic has the right to determine which script is used in writing the Tatar language, RFE/RL's Tatar-Bashkir Service reported. The court was considering an appeal by the republican legislature's Committee on Science, Education, Culture, and National Issues. In September 1999, the Tatar legislature passed a law restoring Latin script for the Tatar language, and a year ago, the State Duma passed a federal law making Cyrillic mandatory for all state languages. The committee's chairman, Razil Valeev, told TNV television that the court's decision does not put an end to the issue, noting that the "problem of defining the official language of a republic has long since turned into a political matter rather than a legal one." He added that his committee will seek further discussion of the matter in the republican legislature and might seek additional clarification from the federal Constitutional Court. (RFE/RL)

FORMER FSB OFFICER CLAIMS HE'S BEEN TORTURED

29 December

Aleksandr Goldfarb, acting vice president of the New York-based Foundation for Civil Liberties, told Ekho Moskvyy on 27 December that Mikhail Trepashkin, a former Federal Security Service (FSB) lieutenant colonel imprisoned on charges of revealing state secrets, has detailed alleged torture by his jailers. According to Goldfarb, Trepashkin was denied food and water for up to 48 hours, deprived of sleep, kept in sub-zero temperatures, handcuffed in a painful position, and denied a shower for a month. The mistreatment allegedly took place between 30 November and 20 December in the Matrosskaya Tishina Prison and the building of the Moscow District Military Court. Goldfarb said the methods used on Trepashkin are exactly the same as those used against imprisoned Soviet dissidents. He also said Trepashkin's only crime is to have "too deeply investigated the explosions of the apartment buildings in Moscow and Volgograd in 1999." (RFE/RL)

FOREIGN MINISTRY CRITICIZES STATE DEPARTMENT RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM REPORT

30 December

The Foreign Ministry's information department on 29 December criticized a U.S. State Department report on international religious freedom for 2003, saying it "contradicts the spirit of partnership" between Russia and the United States and is "counterproductive" for establishing a "comprehensive dialogue," RBK reported. The report, which was released on 18 December, states that the Russian authorities have imposed restrictions on some religious groups and do not always respect the Russian Constitution's provisions for the equality of all religions before the law and the separation of church and state. It further charges that the security services "were increasingly treating the leadership of some minority religious groups as security threats." The report can be seen on the State Department's website at <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/27404.htm>. The Foreign Ministry called the report "tendentiously biased against Russia" and said it "ignores profound positive changes in relations between the state and religions that are reflected in the constitution and legislation." (RFE/RL)

FORMER AZERBAIJANI INTERIOR MINISTER PARDONED

30 December

Iskander Hamidov was released from jail on 30 December in accordance with a presidential decree pardoning or reducing the sentences of 160 prisoners. Hamidov, chairman of the nationalist Boz Gurd party, was sentenced in September 1995 to 14 years' imprisonment upon conviction on charges of embezzlement, abuse of his official position, and causing grievous bodily harm. He was retried at the insistence of the Council of Europe, which had designated him a political prisoner, and sentenced in July 2003 to 11 years imprisonment on the same charges. Hamidov was met by some 150 supporters when he left jail, and a motorcade of some 150 cars accompanied him first to a Muslim pilgrimage site and then to his home. (Turan)

FORMER AZERBAIJANI OIL SECTOR HEAD SAYS CASPIAN OPEC UNREALISTIC

31 December

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev's recent proposal that the Caspian littoral states should create a cartel analogous to OPEC to regulate oil production is not feasible at the present time, Sabit Bagirov, a former president of Azerbaijan's state oil company SOCAR, told Interfax on 31 December. Bagirov pointed out that "the Caspian states have not yet reached a level of oil production that could account for a significant share of the market," and that it is "too early" for Azerbaijan to make specific commitments on export quotas to any organization. But he added that a coordinated policy will be needed by 2010, assuming that Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan attain optimum levels of output by then. Nazarbaev said on 28 December that the Caspian states should establish a counterweight to OPEC "before it is too late." (Interfax)

KAZAKHSTAN LAUNCHES SPACE PROGRAM**3 January**

Kazakhstan has launched a space program by sending a government commission to Russia's Khrunichev State Space Center to build the Kazakhstan's first telecommunications satellite. Kazakh Prime Minister Daniyal Akhmetov discussed the construction and launching of the satellite with Khrunichev Center Director Aleksandr Medvedev in Astana on 31 December. The project, which also includes the training of Kazakh aerospace specialists, will be financed through a state innovation fund that was set up in 2003. Since the country gained its independence, Kazakh officials have talked about using the facilities at the Russian-leased Baikonur Space Center for a Kazakh space program. (Kazinform)

GEORGIA ELECTS A PRESIDENT**4 January**

According to exit polls and unofficial estimates, National Movement Chairman Mikhail Saakashvili was elected Georgian president on 4 January with between 85-90 percent of the vote, Georgian and Russian media reported. Of Saakashvili's five rival candidates, former Imereti Governor Temur Shashiashvili polled just under 2 percent and the others less than 1 percent. Mdzleveli candidate Zurab Kelekhsashvili's 3 January request to pull out of the ballot reached the Central Election Commission (CEC) too late for his name to be removed from ballot papers. Acting President Nino Burdjanadze and Minister of State Zurab Zhvania, who together with Saakashvili launched the protests that resulted in the forced resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze on 23 November, have congratulated Saakashvili on his victory and announced that their bloc will align with Saakashvili's to contest the upcoming repeat parliamentary elections. The OSCE has urged holding that ballot in April or May, and Saakashvili said on 4 January that Burdjanadze, who will now return to her earlier post as parliament speaker, will announce the date "in a few days." (Caucasus Press)

UZBEK OPPOSITION MOVEMENT'S REGISTRATION ATTEMPT REJECTED**4 January**

The Uzbek Justice Ministry has rejected the opposition Birlik (Unity) movement's second attempt to register as a political party. The first registration attempt was rejected in October 2003. According to Birlik Secretary-General Vasila Inoyatova, the movement is eager to register so that it can participate as a party in parliamentary elections scheduled for the end of 2004. Without registration, Birlik members who want to run in the election will have to do so as independent candidates. Inoyatova said that some Birlik members have already started collecting the 50,000 signatures required for registration as an independent. (Deutsche Welle)

OSCE SAYS GEORGIAN BALLOT SHOWED 'PROGRESS'**5 January**

The conduct of the 4 January Georgian presidential election reflected "notable progress" and "political will" on the part of the country's leadership and constituted "a welcome contrast to the deeply flawed 2 November parliamentary elections,"

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly President Bruce George said in Tbilisi on 5 January, according to an OSCE press release (http://www.osce.org/news/generate_pf.php3?news_id=3802). Craig Jenness, who headed the International Election Observation Mission, commented that "we noted clear improvements, particularly in the conduct of voting, new voters lists, the legal framework, and overall election administration." But at the same time, he added that "there were nevertheless clear concerns," including political imbalance in election administration in favor of the interim leadership and the continued lack of clear separation between party and state structures. (RFE/RL)

AGREEMENT SIGNED ON U.S. FINANCING OF TAJIK-AFGHAN BRIDGE**5 January**

Tajik Transport Minister Abduszhabol Salimov and U.S. Ambassador to Tajikistan Richard Hoagland have signed an agreement on U.S. financing of construction of a bridge linking Tajikistan and Afghanistan across the Pyandzh River. The United States agreed in principle last year to finance construction of the Pyandzh Bridge, and U.S. construction specialists have already inspected the site. (Khoovar)

IDEOLOGUE OF ANTI-OLIGARCH CAMPAIGN CALLS FOR STRATEGY OF 'NATIONAL REVENGE'**5 January**

National Strategy Council Director Stanislav Belkovskii in separate interviews with RosBalt on 24 December and "Zavtra," No. 52, said the main goal for President Vladimir Putin in 2004 will be to present the country with a new political course, which could be called "the strategy of Russian national revenge in all possible forms." Belkovskii, who is widely believed to have foreshadowed the campaign in recent months against the oligarchs with his analytical reports last summer stated that the essence of the new course "will be to put an end to the epoch [of former President Boris Yeltsin] and to bring to power a new anti-Yeltsin elite." Putin also should announce that the only way for Russia to prosper in the 21st century is through its complete domination of the "post-Soviet space," which is "its historical-geographical area." To this end, Russia should invest enormous economic and military means into the restoration and support of pro-Russian elites in the former Soviet republics, Belkovskii said. (RFE/RL)

10 CANDIDATES MAKE FIRST CUT IN RACE FOR PRESIDENCY**5 January**

Central Election Commission (TsIK) Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov told reporters in Moscow on 5 January that 10 people have completed the first steps to compete as candidates in the 14 March presidential election. Four political parties -- the Communist Party, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), the Party of Life, and the Russian Regions party -- have nominated candidates. The Communists are backing State Duma Deputy Nikolai Kharitonov. The LDPR has nominated party-security-service head Oleg Malyshkin. The Party of Life has nominated its leader, Federation Council Chairman Sergei

Mironov, and Russian Regions has tapped former Central Bank Chairman Viktor Gerashchenko. At the same time, nonpartisan voter groups have nominated six candidates, including incumbent President Vladimir Putin, Rodina faction leader Sergei Glazev, Union of Rightist Forces co-Chairwoman Irina Khakamada, former State Duma Chairman Ivan Rybkin, pharmaceutical tycoon and State Duma Deputy Vladimir Bryntsalov (Unified Russia), and businessman Anzori Aksentev-Kikalishvili. The six non-party candidates must gather at least 2 million signatures in support of their candidacy by 28 January in order to qualify for the ballot. (RIA-Novosti)

PUTIN HONORS TROOPS WHO QUASHED DAGHESTAN INCURSION

5 January

At a 5 January Kremlin ceremony, President Putin awarded medals and orders to a group of military intelligence (GRU) special-forces troops who participated in the military operation against a group of Chechen militants who penetrated into Daghestan on 15 December, RIA-Novosti and ORT reported. An unidentified GRU officer who spoke at the award ceremony said that as a result of the operation "a major group of rebels led by a serious field commander has ceased to exist" and that the public will soon learn more about this. (RIA-Novosti)

MOSCOW WRITES OFF HUGE MONGOLIAN DEBT

5 January

Russia has decided to write off \$10 billion in Mongolian debt, the lion's share of that country's indebtedness to Moscow that was accumulated during 70 years as a Soviet satellite. Mongolia was Russia's third-largest debtor after Cuba and Syria, and the amount of the forgiven debt is about 10 times the country's annual GDP, polit.ru reported. Under the agreement, Ulan Bator will repay just \$300 million, which it intends to raise through a state-bond issue. In recent years, Mongolia has been energetically developing economic ties with the European Union, Japan, and the United States, a process that has been retarded by the country's debts to Russia and China. Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin said that the agreement with Mongolia could be of interest to other countries that have enormous "Soviet debts" that they are unable to repay. (newsru.com)

APPEAL FOR AZERBAIJANI DETAINEES' RELEASE REJECTED

6 January

The Prosecutor-General's Office has rejected an appeal by parliament deputies representing the opposition Azerbaijan Popular Front Party for the release on bail of dozens of opposition activists arrested following the clashes in Baku in the wake of the disputed 15 October presidential election. The deputies argued that the detainees -- including Democratic Party of Azerbaijan General Secretary Sardar Djalaloglu; People's Party of Azerbaijan Chairman Panakh Huseinov; and Rauf Arifoglu, editor of the opposition newspaper "Yeni Musavat" -- do not pose a threat to society and would not attempt to flee the country if released pending trial. The prosecutor-general's refusal branded the appeal slanderous and inaccurate. It further affirmed that the detainees have committed serious crimes and there are no grounds for their release pending trial. (Turan)

KYRGYZ AUTHORITIES COMPENSATE VICTIMS OF POLICE VIOLENCE

7 January

The governor of southern Kyrgyzstan's Djalal-Abad Oblast, Zhusupbek Sharipov, has ordered that the families of the five demonstrators who were killed by police in March 2002 in the oblast's Aksy Raion receive 1,000 soms (\$23) each, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported on 5 January. Twenty-five residents of the raion who were wounded in the police attack will also receive 1,000 soms. One of the grievances frequently voiced by the victims of the assault has been the failure of the authorities to provide compensation. In another decree, Sharipov ordered that the families of people killed during the incursions of armed Muslim extremists into southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 receive compensation of 10,000 soms per family, while people wounded in the fighting will receive 5,000 soms each. (RFE/RL)

TAJIK DRUG AGENCY REPORTS 9.6 TONS OF AFGHAN NARCOTICS SEIZED IN 2003

7 January

Avaz Yuldashev, head of the press office of the Tajik Agency for Narcotics Control, announced on 7 January that Tajik law enforcement and Russian border guards seized 9.6 tons of illegal drugs along the Tajik-Afghan border in 2003. This represented an increase of 3 tons over 2002. The total included 5.6 tons of heroin. Yuldashev said the cultivation of opium poppies and other plants providing the raw material for contraband drugs is expected to double in Afghanistan in 2004, and complained that the international antiterrorism campaign in that country has not affected drug production. (RIA-Novosti)

TURKMEN FOREIGN MINISTRY SAYS EXIT VISAS WERE TEMPORARY MEASURE

7 January

Echoing Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov's assertion earlier this week that Turkmenistan does not require exit visas, the Turkmen Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 7 January that the exit-visa regime reinstated in March 2003 was only intended to prevent people allegedly involved in the November 2002 purported coup attempt against Niyazov from leaving the country. The exit-visa requirement has been replaced by a special stamp obtainable from the ministry's consular section upon presentation of an entry visa to the country of destination, the same requirement that applied after the suspension of the exit-visa regime in 2001. The ministry insisted that citizens of Turkmenistan are guaranteed freedom of movement in accordance with international standards. Restrictions on freedom to leave the country apply only to people involved in criminal or civil cases. (RIA-Novosti)

U.S. CONGRATULATES GEORGIAN PRESIDENT-ELECT. U.S.

7 January

President George W. Bush telephoned Mikheil Saakashvili on 7 January to congratulate him on his victory in the 4 January presidential election. Bush reportedly expressed support for Saakashvili's plans to advance democratic and market-oriented economic reforms, to fight corruption, to strengthen the partnership with the United States, and to bolster relations with Russia. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department has urged the new

Georgian leadership to "work in close cooperation" with the IMF, which is to send a mission to Tbilisi in early February to discuss a possible new loan program, Caucasus Press reported on 8 January. The State Department noted that agreement with the IMF is a prerequisite for discussing with the Paris Club the possibility of rescheduling Georgia's \$2 billion national debt. (Caucasus Press)

CONTROVERSIAL OFFICER TO HEAD GEORGIAN PEACEKEEPERS IN IRAQ

7 January

Georgia will send a 207-person peacekeeping contingent to Iraq in early February, Defense Minister Lieutenant General David Tevzadze told journalists on 7 January. Some 70 Georgian officers, including 20 medical personnel, were deployed to Iraq in August 2003, where they are serving in Tikrit in the U.S. sector. Tevzadze said the new contingent will not include any medical personnel. Unidentified Georgian Defense Ministry sources said that the new contingent will be commanded by a colonel who was expelled from a training course at the U.S.-funded George Marshall Center in southern Germany for assaulting a U.S. serviceman. On 13 December, U.S. Ambassador to Tbilisi Richard Miles said the Georgian peacekeeping contingent in Iraq will expand to 500 men by the summer of 2004. (Caucasus Press)

ABKHAZ LEADER PROPOSES SIGNING PEACE TREATY WITH GEORGIA

8 January

Abkhaz Vice President Valerii Arshba told Abkhaz State Television on 8 January that he believes an agreement on peace and the nonresumption of hostilities would constitute a favorable foundation for beginning talks with Georgia's new leadership. Arshba has suggested such a peace treaty on several occasions since Shevardnadze resigned on 23 November. Arshba also stressed that firm action by the new Georgian leadership "to disband the gangs and armed groups that are committing acts of terrorism and sabotage in Abkhazia" would have "a positive effect on the peace settlement process and build mutual confidence." The prospects for a rapprochement appear minimal, however, in the light of Georgian President-elect Saakashvili's rejection of a federal model for Georgia and his insistence that Abkhazia should be an autonomous formation within a unitary Georgian state. (Interfax)

KAZAKHSTAN DETAINS AZERBAIJANI FISHING VESSEL FOR ALLEGEDLY POACHING STURGEON

8 January

Officers of Kazakhstan's Border Service detained an Azerbaijani fishing vessel on 31 December for poaching sturgeon, according to a Border Service press release. The vessel, registered in Baku, was reportedly found to be carrying 2 tons of sturgeon and 3 kilograms of black caviar. The boat was escorted to the Kazakh port of Bautino, where its special tackle for catching sturgeon was confiscated. The boat's crew faces charges of poaching in Kazakh territorial waters. According to the Border Service, four Azerbaijani vessels were found poaching sturgeon in Kazakh waters last year. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

PAID MEDICAL SERVICE INTRODUCED IN TURKMENISTAN

8 January

Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov has issued a decree introducing paid medical services in Turkmenistan. The objective of the measure is to reduce state health-care expenditures. In 2001, Niyazov cut the number of state-employed health-care workers by several thousand for the same purpose. The present decree requires that specialized medical facilities in Ashgabat and oblast centers become self-supporting. The number of low- and mid-level medical personnel is to be reduced by 15,000. Emergency services, natal care, and children's facilities will continue to provide free services, as will facilities treating cancer, tuberculosis, alcoholism and drug addiction, and mental-health problems. (ITAR-TASS)

RUSSIA EXTENDS LEASE OF SPACE-LAUNCH SITE

9 January

Russia on Friday extended its lease to use a space-launch site in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan through 2050, after agreeing to let this Central Asian nation play a role in future space projects. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev agreed to extend Russia's use of the Baikonur cosmodrome, Russia's sole launch facility for manned space missions. Financial details were not released. Under the previous lease signed in 1994, Russia paid \$115 million annually. Russian launches from Baikonur are the only links to the international space station since the U.S. shuttle fleet was grounded after the Columbia disintegrated during its return to Earth in February, killing all seven astronauts on board. The space station's current inhabitants — American Michael Foale and Russia's Alexander Kaleri — blasted off from the cosmodrome on the Kazakh steppe in October. Earlier media reports said Kazakhstan wanted more rent money or a share of profits from commercial launches at Baikonur. The Central Asian country has frequently complained that the \$115 million fee is inadequate and does not compensate for ecological damage caused by launches. But the main concession won by Nazarbayev appeared to be an increase in Kazakh participation in the facility — including the training of Kazakh cosmonauts. Further negotiations regarding the Soviet-era facility, which Kazakhstan inherited after the 1991 collapse of the former Soviet Union, were expected to continue. The new agreement also envisions Kazakhstan's involvement in space exploration projects. "We think that Kazakhstan has not only Baikonur to offer, it has a good intellectual potential," Putin said. The two countries also agreed that Russia would help launch a communications satellite for Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan will pay the costs of that launch. Kazakhstan, the wealthiest of Central Asia's former Soviet republics, is eager to cooperate with Russia, which owns the main available oil pipeline routes linking the landlocked region with world markets. Putin, who arrived in Kazakhstan on Friday, made the Central Asian nation his first foreign destination this year as Moscow steps up efforts to regain influence in the strategic, energy-rich region. (AP)

UZBEKISTAN FAILS US HUMAN RIGHTS TEST BUT WINS WAIVER FROM PENALTY

11 January

The United States has determined that Uzbekistan's human

rights record does not meet standards for participation in a US threat reduction program for former Soviet states but will not suspend the Central Asian nation, the State Department said. President George W. Bush waived the penalty for national security reasons, finding that the continued participation of Uzbekistan -- a key US ally in the war on terrorism -- was "critical," said Lou Fintor, a department spokesman. He said Secretary of State Colin Powell had reported to Bush late last year that Uzbekistan had not made enough progress on human rights to participate in Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) programs. "However, the president determined that Cooperative Threat Reduction programs in Uzbekistan are sufficiently critical that he decided to exercise his waiver authority," Fintor said. CTR programs seek to reduce the threat posed by Soviet-era weapons of mass destruction and their components by destroying them, cleaning up weapons labs and storage sites as well as employing former Soviet scientists. Under the legislation that created the programs, a country's participation is dependent on meeting certain human rights criteria every year unless a presidential waiver is granted. Despite Uzbekistan's cooperation with the US-led war on terrorism, the United States and others have been highly critical of President Islam Karimov's government, accusing it of myriad rights abuses. But some rights watchdogs have expressed deep concerns that the United States is easing up on pressure for reforms in order to keep Karimov's government on its side in the anti-terror war. US officials, including Jones, have repeatedly denied those charges. (AFP)

RUSSIA SUPPORTS TAJIK TAKEOVER OF PROTECTION OF AFGHAN-TAJIK BORDER

11 January

Deputy chief of the Russian border-guard service Lieutenant General Aleksandr Manilov said on 11 January during a visit to Novosibirsk that Russia supports the idea of Tajik border guards gradually taking over responsibility for guarding the Tajik-Afghan border, adding that the Russian border service's directorate in Tajikistan would remain. Tajik border officials said on several occasions in 2003 that Tajikistan is ready to assume responsibility for protection of the country's border with Afghanistan. Manilov said Tajik border troops are still unable to guard the entire length of Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan by themselves. The timing and other details of a transfer of responsibility for protecting the Tajik-Afghan border is expected to be addressed by a joint commission of Tajik and Russian border officials later this year. (ITAR-TASS)

KYRGYZSTAN GETS 90,000 TEXTBOOKS FROM RUSSIA

12 January

The Russian Embassy in Bishkek announced on 12 January that the Russian Federation has shipped 90,000 textbooks to Kyrgyzstan for use in schools throughout the country that use Russian as a language of instruction. The textbooks were paid for from Russian government funds. According to the embassy, more than 100,000 textbooks were given to Kyrgyzstan in 2003. The Kyrgyz Education Ministry said that more than one-quarter of the secondary schools in Kyrgyzstan use Russian as the language of instruction. At present, a debate is raging in the Kyrgyz parliament over a draft language law that some see as

undermining the status of the Russian language in Kyrgyzstan. (Interfax)

BORDER BETWEEN KAZAKHSTAN AND RUSSIA TO BE FIXED UNTIL END OF 2004

12 January

Delimitation of the 7,500-km section of the Russian-Kazakh border will be completed by the end of 2004, the deputy head of the Federal Security Service's Federal Border Guard Service, Lt-Gen Alexander Manilov, said on Monday. Manilov and a group of officers are accompanying the first deputy director of the FSB and director of the Federal Border Guard Service, Vladimir Pronichev, in his working visit to Novosibirsk. "The Russian and Kazakh sides have agreed on the establishment of some 7,000 km of the border line. The agreement on cooperation on border issues between Russia and Kazakhstan, signed by the presidents of the two countries in Astana on 9 January, will accelerate this process," Manilov has said. The agreement, besides the delimitation of the border, defines fields of cooperation between the Russian and Kazakh Border Guard Services. "It is, in the first place, the fight against terrorism, weapons smuggling, drug trafficking and illegal migration, as well as an exchange of information regarding the situation on the border," Manilov added. The heads of the Russian and Kazakh Border Guard Services also signed an intergovernmental agreement on the activities of border representatives. "Now, they are given the status of a state's representative on the border," Manilov said. (ITAR-TASS)

PAKISTAN'S PM MAKES VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN

12 January

Pakistan's prime minister promised on Monday to step up efforts to stop al-Qaida militants and their Taliban allies from using Pakistan as a base for attacks in neighboring Afghanistan. Making his first official visit to Afghanistan, Jamali held talks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul and said later that his country was determined to fight extremism. "We want to ensure, and do our double best, that there is no crisscross from Afghanistan into Pakistan, or from Pakistan into Afghanistan," Jamali said at a joint news conference in a courtyard of Karzai's palace in the Afghan capital. Afghan officials have urged Pakistan to take a tougher line against al-Qaida and Taliban militants who are launching attacks in Afghan territory and then retreating into Pakistan. At least 36 people, most civilians, have been killed in such cross-border attacks in the last week. Jamali defended Pakistan's efforts to date, saying it has deployed 65,000 troops to the border's tribal belt and is manning 800 border posts. Islamabad has also rounded up hundreds of al-Qaida suspects in the area, thought to be a possible hiding place of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden. However, the success of the crackdown depends largely on the cooperation of the border belt's deeply conservative people, many of whom sympathize with the Taliban and have a long tradition of independence from the central government. Last week, Pakistani troops could not capture 15-20 al-Qaida suspects who had taken refuge in South Waziristan, one of several tribal regions along the border. Authorities gave tribal leaders a two-day ultimatum Saturday to hand over three tribesmen suspected of sheltering the foreigners. The deadline expired Monday, but there appeared to be no handover or penalties. Instead, South Waziristan elders

announced they were creating a militia to hunt down suspects, said Rahmatullah Khan Wazir, a senior government official in Wana, the region's administrative center. "We have received a positive response from the Wazir tribe," said Wazir, himself a member of the tribe. "They will extend full support to us by arresting any foreign terrorists, if they are hiding there." South Waziristan is just across the frontier from Afghanistan's Paktika province, where U.S. troops have been hunting Taliban and al-Qaida fighters who launch attacks against them and sneak back into Pakistan. Jamali dismissed speculation that Pakistan was under U.S. pressure to increase border security. "It's our duty. We don't need pressure for that work," the prime minister said. (AP)

RUSSIA OBJECTS TO KAZAKH PLANS FOR ANTI-AIRCRAFT-DEFENSE MODERNIZATION

13 January

Prior to the weekend summit of the Kazakh and Russian heads of state, Kazakhstan announced plans to modernize its anti-aircraft-defense system with help from the United States, Great Britain, and Germany, "Kommersant-Daily" reported on 12 January. However, Russian Defense Ministry officials asserted this would violate a 1995 CIS agreement on a common anti-aircraft system. After President Nursultan Nazarbaev's talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the recent summit, the Kazakh plan for an international tender was dropped. "Kommersant-Daily" asserted that by announcing it was seeking international help in modernizing its anti-aircraft defenses, Kazakhstan succeeded in getting Moscow to reduce significantly the price it would charge for such modernization. (RFE/RL)

UZBEKISTAN PLANE CRASH KILLS AT LEAST 36

14 January

A domestic airliner crashed Tuesday on approach to the airport in Uzbekistan's capital, the Interior Ministry said. At least 36 people, including the top U.N. official for Uzbekistan, were aboard and no survivors were reported. The plane was an Uzbekistan Airways Yakovlev-40 en route from Termez, in the country's far south along the Afghanistan border. An Uzbekistan Airways official in Moscow, Eduard Mirzoyan, was quoted by the news agency Interfax as saying 36 people were aboard. Richard Conroy, the senior United Nations official for Uzbekistan, was aboard the flight, said U.N. Development Program spokesman Bill Orme. It wasn't known if Conroy, a 56-year-old British-Australian citizen, had died. "We can confirm that he was on the plane," Orme said. "We are not aware of any other U.N. officials being on that flight." Termez became a major hub for humanitarian aid into northern Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, and aid workers and other foreigners commonly fly on flights between that city and the Uzbek capital. German troops have also been using the airport in Termez as a support base for peacekeeping troops in Afghanistan. At the Tashkent Airport, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyayev and some aides approached a group of people waiting for the flight's arrival and led them into a nearby room. Later, a woman ran out of the room, crying "Oh, my beloved!" The plane crashed on approach to the airport in heavy fog. The crash area was sealed off to the public, but one airport worker said the plane appeared to have hit a stanchion of approach lights and flipped over, hitting the outside of a wall surrounding the landing area. The area adjacent to the landing area is a mixture of industrial buildings and open spaces. It was not clear whether any buildings were damaged in the crash. Several hours after the crash, the airport announced that it was closed due to bad weather and that arriving flights were being diverted to Samarkand, about 200 miles to the southwest. (AP)

