

Central Asia

Caucasus

ANALYST

BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 5, NO. 6

Wednesday, March 24, 2004

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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/March 24, 2004

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China is keen to increase the SCO's profile as an instrument for promoting its economic influence in the region, under the guise of moving towards creation of a free trade zone. SCO's decision to establish its anti-terrorist center in Tashkent provides both China and Russia with a security presence in Uzbekistan. At the same time, one should not overlook SCO's significance for the hinterland of western Xinjiang, which Beijing is developing as a transit corridor from Central Asia to world markets through Pakistan.

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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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DE-ESCALATION IN ADJARA: SUCCESS FOR GEORGIA'S NEW GOVERNMENT

Jaba Devdariani

President Saakashvili confronted his first direct challenge when forced to handle the recalcitrant Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze. The Georgian government showed improved coordination, heightened resolve and increased flexibility in handling the crisis. Politically, President Mikheil Saakashvili scored a major success by pressuring the unruly Ajarian leader into concessions that may lead to the democratization of the autonomous republic. Despite conflicting interests, Putin's administration backed Georgia's central government.

BACKGROUND: The authoritarian leader of the Autonomous republic of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze, opposed the November 2003 'Revolution of Roses' which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power. Abashidze stepped up repression against his opponents in the autonomous region, and created obstacles to January 4 presidential elections. He was seen as courting Russia for support against Tbilisi following his several visits to Moscow, including consultations with the secessionist governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Tensions reached a peak as President Mikheil Saakashvili was barred from entering Ajaria by armed militias and police on March 14, when campaigning for the March 28 general elections. Abashidze accused the president of masterminding a coup.

In response, Saakashvili announced a partial blockade of Adjara, with Georgia's marine forces re-routing ships bound for Ajaria's capital, Batumi, to the port of Poti. Airspace and the border with Turkey were closed off. The bank accounts of Ajarian officials and companies associated with them were frozen. Saakashvili demanded a free political campaign during the run-up to the March 28 elections, the release of the arrested activists, and the re-establishment of central government control over Ajaria's customs at the border with Turkey and in the port of Batumi. Abashidze, who departed to Moscow before the blockade entered into force, called for Russian "peacekeeping troops" to be stationed on Ajaria's administrative border. Reports emerged of Ajarian authorities arming civilians and requesting assistance from Russia's military base stationed in Batumi.

De-escalation started after 6-hour talks between Abashidze and parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze on March 17, which opened the way for a meeting between Saakashvili and Abashidze. The two agreed that free campaigning would be allowed, the prosecutor-general would send a special team to investigate alleged cases of political repression, and the president would appoint representatives at customs points. As a result, sanctions on Ajaria were lifted.

IMPLICATIONS: Georgia's government has handled its first serious crisis. Similar situations in the early 1990s led to armed confrontation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which ended in the factual secession of those provinces. Although the Ajarian leadership has never called for secession from Georgia, a potentially dangerous armed standoff took place for five days on Ajaria's administrative border.

Georgia's government showed flexibility and coherence, as well as an emerging distribution of responsibilities between the

President and Prime Minister. An anti-crisis centre was established close to Adjara, in the town of Poti, led by the Prime Minister. Political decisions were taken by the cabinet in consultation with the President. After Saakashvili publicly announced the core policy, the Prime Minister led the government follow-up. The ministries of interior and security coordinated issues related to the blockade with the prosecutor-general, the ministry of finance and the central bank. No contradictory statements were made.

The President has largely coordinated foreign policy by holding phone consultations with the U.S. Secretary of State and the Russian president. He dispatched his two closest aides to crucial capitals – his head of administration to Ankara, and the head of the national security council to Moscow. Thus the lines of communication with the key foreign stakeholders remained open during the crisis.

Saakashvili did not shy from demonstrating muscle – maneuvers of elite motorized rifle battalions were kept as a deterrent, after speculations surfaced of the Russian military base providing Abashidze with tanks. At the same time, the Parliamentary speaker was employed as an envoy of good will, demonstrating the positive role of the legislature as well as the continued unity of the three leaders of the 'Rose Revolution'.

Concessions from Abashidze were reached quickly and, if implemented, represent a significant success for Tbilisi. The participation of Ajaria in the general elections of March 28 is crucial. Free campaigning is likely to bring the opposition into prominence and, subsequently, to Ajaria's parliament, previously exclusively dominated by Abashidze's Revival Union. If Saakashvili's supporters gain a majority in the parliament, Abashidze would be pressured to obey parliament's decisions.

Presidential representatives on customs checkpoint and in the port of Batumi may not provide for Tbilisi's direct control over operations there. However, through such presence, Saakashvili would receive credible information on smuggling and illegal flows that are thought to have helped Abashidze turn Ajaria into his own private fiefdom. A combination of these efforts may lead to Abashidze's gradual removal from Ajaria's leadership.

This first success is of great international value, as it breaks with the sad tradition of rough and incompetent crisis management, shows coherence and positions Saakashvili as a credible partner. Importantly, Russia's government was persuaded to play a positive role. Initially, the Russian Foreign Ministry accused Tbilisi of escalating the crisis; however, Saakashvili chose to

ignore these statements and drew on direct links with Putin. The Commander of the Russian troops in South Caucasus was sent to Batumi to personally ensure the neutrality of the Russian military base, whose commanders are known for their sympathies for Abashidze. Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov also visited Abashidze, while the details of his mission remain confidential. As a result, Saakashvili thanked Putin for his “nuanced and tactful” role in resolving the crisis.

Tensions with Abashidze are likely to persist, as the strengthening of the central control undermines the control Abashidze and his cronies wield on Ajaria’s political and economic life. Abashidze will likely attempt to erode current agreements, leading to bitter exchanges with Saakashvili in the future. Nevertheless, the past crisis undermined Abashidze’s portrayal of Saakashvili as a radical war-monger and gave Tbilisi leverage in future negotiations.

CONCLUSIONS: The Georgian government has shown improved competence and coordination, which is good news for Georgia and its neighbors. President Saakashvili has gone far to dismiss accusations of hot-headed radicalism, which prevailed before his election in January 2004. However, tensions with Ajaria are far from over, and the end result is what matters. The

peaceful dismantling of Abashidze’s authoritarian system of governance is a formidable task, which goes to the core of the state-building task set as a priority by the Saakashvili government.

Popular support allows Saakashvili to act with resolve, but would be withdrawn if the president is seen to cut under-the-table deals with Abashidze. Public opinion and the opposition will be watching whether the prosecution of Ajarian officials proceed, including the charges against its deputy Interior and Security ministers, who were accused of conspiring to murder the head of the local interior ministry department – an opposition sympathizer. Saakashvili is also expected to follow up on his demands of disbanding Ajaria’s security ministry, which is independent from Tbilisi – a point that was muted after the talks with Abashidze.

Russia’s position during the crisis has led to cautious optimism that Saakashvili’s pragmatic and largely friendly course towards Moscow is bearing fruit, especially at the level of the two presidents.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Jaba Devdariani is an analyst of South Caucasus affairs and founder of the internet magazine Civil Georgia (www.civil.ge)

FORMER DRUG USER SPEAKS OUT ON THE DRUG SITUATION IN KYRGYZSTAN

Ex-drug user, Sergey is 30 years old. He says it all started when he came back from service in the army. He was 21 years old. It was in the beginning of the 1990s. “I was looking at people – they were unhappy, too serious. Some of my friends became drug users. So I tried to avoid them, not to contact. But, at one moment, my old friend brought opium from the Issyk kul region. He asked me to sell it and split money. I agreed, because I was unemployed at that time, but knew the drug user community.” Sergey then decided to try what he sold. “I thought if I would inject once a month, I would not ‘sit down to the needle’. Then, when I started, I got addicted anyway. I started using once a week, twice a week, and then as much as I could afford. It turned out that when the drug reaches the blood, everything immediately switched on in my head. Thus, you can inject as much as you like. Moreover, you start feeling yourself psychologically and physically more comfortable with drugs in your blood than without.”

A drug addict’s communication group also consists of only drug users, because by then he is unable to talk with ordinary people, nor is he interested anymore. “You are communicating with common people when you need to get money for a dose of heroin”.

As for getting the drugs, it is not a problem once one is in the system. One dose of heroin costs \$2.5. “You could inject as many doses as your budget allows. I was in debt with interests accrued, but still I was injecting 10-20 doses daily. Doses, called

‘checks’, are sold at so-called ‘check points’. When you are trying to stop, drug traders offer to give it for free. But when you are injecting regularly, they do not provide rebates. I tried drugs for the first time in 1992. I quit in 2002.

Cops caught us constantly, but we had been dealing with them. Friends, relatives – all ‘bought us out’ from imprisonment. The ‘check points’ were not closed by the cops, because they were headed by policemen. I suppose that they are the major suppliers of drugs to the check points. Some high ranking officials provide protection for the drug dealing cops”, says Sergey.

Sergey then tells of how he stopped taking drugs. “Overall, I have not been living in my house. Just once a month I visited my mother, changed my clothes and went away again. Once, I looked at myself in the mirror, and I was in shock, because I was so skinny. When I returned from army I weighed 120 kg. But after three years of injections, I was only 50 kg! Once, a friend of my sister’s came and told me I had dramatically changed. I told him I was on heroin. He said his brother had also been on heroin and he cured him from it. He shut his brother in an apartment, leaving him without drugs for a couple of months and he had healed out. He suggested to help me. He locked me in at my apartment on the ninth floor, brought all my clothes and just provided meals everyday.

15 days passed. My girlfriend visited me, but I was not allowed to leave room. I told her, ‘let’s quit together’. After a while, we persuaded her and we

were shut inside for a month. And at that moment I noted that when one drug addict opts out, he can help another heal faster. The first ten days I could not sleep. But when my friend joined, she was sleeping already on the second day. At that moment, she had been on heroin for 18 years...”.

Sergey says they were treated for a while. What was scary, he told me, was that they had not known what it was like to live without drugs. “We were so addicted that we could not imagine another life. We learned that one of our friends addict friends was attending a group of anonymous drug users. She told us several success stories how people returned to ‘ordinary life’, and we started visiting sessions. It was at the beginning, but at the beginning only. We are now attending it for two years and try to involve other drug addicts to join us. I noted that not all drug addicts want to free themselves from drugs. It seemed to me that if I wanted to, then all addicts wanted to as well. Some like drugs, other fear them. Some could not imagine life without drugs. They fear the physical pain. Therefore, drug users cannot return to ordinary life without external help.

It is now the second year that Sergey and his friend are visiting sessions. They follow the twelve step program that originated from the U.S. They have begun to build their lives again. “We saw former drug users who started a new life. We could do that too. My mother was happy, and life became easier”, concludes Sergey.

Aziz Soltobaev

WILL WASHINGTON CUT OFF TASHKENT?

Stephen Blank

In its dealings with Uzbekistan, the Bush Administration faces a quandary with long-standing roots in U.S. history. On the one hand, Uzbekistan's strategic collaboration with America in the global war on terrorism is regarded as exemplary and American forces want to retain use of the air base at Karshi-Khanabad. On the other hand, Washington's support for Tashkent has evidently not led the Karimov regime to make any tangible moves to improve its abysmal human rights and anti-democratic record. In response, Congress is now threatening to stop assistance programs to Uzbekistan – with potentially profound implications.

BACKGROUND: The State Department's annual human rights report continues to rank Uzbekistan as being among the worst offenders in this regard. Increasingly frustrated with Uzbekistan, Congress has legislated language in the Foreign Operations, Export Financing and Related Programs Appropriations Act for Fiscal year (FY) 2004 stating that the funds appropriated by this act will only be made available to the Uzbek government if the Secretary of State determines and reports that it is making progress on the human rights commitments it made to Washington in the Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation of 2002. Failure to obtain such certification means that the State Department will terminate all the aid programs it administers, Foreign Military Financing, International Military Education and Training Act funds etc. Unless Uzbekistan can show demonstrable progress, those funds will be cut off on July 1. Indeed, this date was slipped back to give Tashkent time to comply. Obviously any such cutoff will place America's continued presence at Karshi-Khanabad under a cloud.

Uzbekistan's human rights and democracy record has been the repeated target of external criticism for its violation of accepted canons of behavior in treaties and agreements to which it is a party. Ironically, it was Uzbekistan that pushed for the language on improving human rights policies to secure continued U.S. assistance and strategic cooperation. That language included calls for multiparty elections, a free press, and an independent judiciary. None of this has been forthcoming, however. Indeed, widespread repression has continued with no letup, while worries exist regarding the Uzbek economy. Moreover, Western reports and Congressional testimony have shown that torture is routinely practiced in Uzbek prisons where prisoners have no civil or human rights, and Uzbekistan scores particularly badly on the government's failure to address the trafficking of people, particularly women, illegally across borders for purposes of sexual exploitation.

In response to the lack of progress, Congress has essentially declared that it has had enough and will punish Uzbekistan through suspension of those aid programs that the State Department supervises. Yet strategically speaking, Uzbekistan is a vital outpost in the War on Terrorism and potentially in any future Asian strategy scenario for the U.S. military, whose main responsibility is, quite properly, defense of America's strategic interests.

While the aid and assistance programs that the Pentagon supervises are not included in this legislation and are therefore immune to such Congressional mandates for now, it is likely that further Uzbek noncompliance with the 2002 agreement's terms could affect those programs in the future.

IMPLICATIONS: Thus the different responsibilities and priorities accruing to the State Department and the Pentagon has led to differences between them with regard to Uzbekistan. But as yet there is no overt sign of inter-departmental friction, even though the two departments obviously have different priorities and hence different approaches to Uzbekistan. In the final analysis, the law has to be obeyed no matter how much time Uzbekistan may be given to comply with it. However, it is highly likely that the Pentagon fully grasps the gravity of the Uzbek dilemma. In Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's recent trip to Uzbekistan, human rights were publicly listed as being on the agenda. Hence the United States is bringing pressure to bear on Uzbekistan to make tangible and genuinely good faith efforts to democratize its politics. There can be no doubt that the State Department in particular feels this Congressional pressure and is strongly urging reforms and not only in Uzbekistan. After all, at every Congressional hearing on Central Asia its representatives are regularly subjected to questioning on these issues and cannot evade answering or responding to Congressional and external pressure.

However, it also seems clear that Karimov and his associates do not take this diplomatic pressure seriously as long as they think Washington needs them for strategic purposes as much if not more than they need Washington. In the worst case, cutting off funds, even if it is an act of pique and outrage at Tashkent's failure to actualize its promises more than a well-conceived strategic move, could be seen by some as the only way to get Karimov's and his government's attention.

Flowing from this quandary, Uzbekistan might actually make tangible gestures to improve its record and attempt to persuade external audiences that it might be turning over a new leaf. Alternatively, it might try to stonewall or bluff Washington as it has since the human rights question became an issue in the 1990s. In that case, the aid is likely to be cut off, whereas signs of genuine reform would probably bring about the State Department's certification of improvement.

A third way between these two more or less polar opposites may be devised to keep the aid flowing for a time and to get some sort of action that can be credibly represented as progress along the required lines.

CONCLUSIONS: Beyond these immediate prospects, the issues at hand reveal a much deeper strategic dilemma facing both governments. Uzbekistan's utter failure to reform jeopardizes not only its strategic partnership with Washington and its subsequent ability to defend itself against any military threat, but also its own internal stability. As noted above, it was Uzbekistan that argued for language on Human Rights to be included in the 2002 Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation. This stemmed from an insistence to that effect by the liberal and reform-minded elites of the Foreign and Defense ministries, most likely to be able to involve U.S. leverage in their struggle to move

reforms onward in the face of opposition mainly from the interior ministry and others.

Uzbekistan's authoritarian morass and failure to implement reforms it had itself urged raises questions regarding the struggle for influence among various forces in Tashkent. Karimov may not control the country nearly as tightly as usually thought, and most importantly, the strength of the hawks in the ministry of interior may be underestimated. In any case, this raises doubts on Uzbekistan's future stability and risks exacerbating the country's vulnerability. If Uzbekistan is isolated due to its own misguided policies, not only the Karimov regime, but the interests of many other governments could be at serious risk.

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WHO IS THE NEW DIRECTOR OF THE TAJIK DRUG CONTROL AGENCY?

On 26 January 2004, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmonov dismissed Lieutenant General Ghaffor Mirzoyev from the position of Commander of the Presidential Guards, renamed into the National Guards, with 3,000 troops. After his dismissal, Mirzoyev was offered the position of Chairman of the Sports Committee, which he refused. In the same week, Mirzoyev was then appointed Director of the Tajik Drug Control Agency (DCA). Rustam Nazarov, the ex-director of DCA, was appointed first Deputy of the DCA. Mirzoyev was rather surprised by his dismissal. While assuring he was not going "to take up arms", he argued that his dismissal was the result of intrigues by people surrounding Rakhmonov. This appointment stirred many questions in the Central Asian and Russian media, given Mirzoyev's past and present links.

Ghaffor Mirzoyev, born in 1956 in Kulyab, is also known under the nickname "Sedoi" (grey haired), and was the closest ally of Rakhmonov during the events of 1997. Then, the presidential guards under Mirzoyev pushed out the forces of the infamous Makhmud Khudoiberdiev from Tajikistan. Mirzoyev was considered to be the closest ally of Rakhmonov.

Ghaffor Mirzoyev is a part of the "Parkhar" grouping of the Kulyab clan, whose leader is Makhmadsaid Ubaidulloev, Chairman of the Parliament (Majlisi Milli) and Mayor of Dushanbe. It is said in Dushanbe that there is a rivalry between Rakhmonov and Ubaidulloev for power. Ubaidulloev controls aluminum business and the distribution of foreign credit; his tolerant attitude towards drug trafficking has been alleged by numerous media outlets. Ubaidulloev is a powerful man with a tangible influence. Mirzoyev also has his share in the aluminum factory in Tursunzade.

Thus given the past and present links and influence, his appointment to the position of Director of the DCA is set to affect the future effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the DCA. There are several countervailing arguments as to why Mirzoyev was appointed to head the DCA. Firstly, it could show that Rakhmonov indeed is vulnerable to the opposition leaders, and does not want to escalate the deeper divide between him and Mirzoyev (who is supported by Ubaidulloev). And as leverage, Mirzoyev in fact controls over 3,000 devoted troops that could be used when necessary. In addition, there were reports that after his dismissal, Mirzoyev met several times with Mahmadrusi Iskandarov, who has grudge against Rakhmonov and also popular among opposition groups. Iskandarov is a Chairman of the opposition Democratic Party of Tajikistan. Iskandarov recently reminded Rakhmonov that according to the peace agreements of 1997 he cannot be reelected for one more seven year term. He was then dismissed from the position of Director of the state enterprise TajikGaz.

Secondly, Rakhmonov appointed Mirzoyev as a Director of the DCA and at the same time Tajikistan joined Interpol, in order to keep Mirzoyev in the light. The admission of Tajikistan to Interpol is crucial, since it will give leverage to Rakhmonov. If some of the opposition leaders make too much trouble, Rakhmonov could charge them with links to criminal activities (which indeed exist) and Interpol will grant Rakhmonov an additional leverage outside the country. Mirzoyev faces the choice of either taking his job seriously, working to stop drug trafficking, including that controlled by some of his close allies, or turning a blind eye on their activities and thus keeping good relations.

Thirdly, Deutsche Welle (DW) has implied that the change of the presidential guards was a result of agreements concluded between Rakhmonov and the Russians. According to the concluded agreement, accordingly, the presidential guards would be formed by the Russian federal border service, since the previous presidential guards (Kulyabis) had close links with the Islamic opposition, and strong links with the warlords of the Northern alliance. DW claims that this information was received by Iranian intelligence and passed on to Russian intelligence.

An additional factor that emerges from an analysis of recent reshuffles in the Tajik government, is that Rakhmonov is noticeably trying to surround himself increasingly by people from a specific district in the Kulyab region, Dangara, at the cost of other Kulyabis.

Another event is also important as a food for thought. In March, after almost one year of negotiations, Russia agreed within one year to transfer control over the Tajik-Afghan border to Tajikistan. Russian officials stated that Tajikistan put forward the conditions (e.g. writing off debts, paying for the optical station Okno) that were not acceptable to Russia. One such condition was that "in times of extraordinary situations, the President of Tajikistan can command the 201 Motor Rifle Division and to use it for the protection of national interests." Thus the Russian withdrawal of border guards further weakens the position of Rakhmonov, and could be the result of wise PR campaign by the sides interested in border transparency and an unwillingness to share profits ripped from the drug trafficking – but also the desire of Tajikistan to receive investments from Western donors.

Maral Madi

THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION MOVES INTO FIRST GEAR

Robert M. Cutler

China is keen to increase the SCO's profile as an instrument for promoting its economic influence in the region, under the guise of moving towards creation of a free trade zone. SCO's decision to establish its anti-terrorist center in Tashkent provides both China and Russia with a security presence in Uzbekistan. At the same time, one should not overlook SCO's significance for the hinterland of western Xinjiang which Beijing is developing as a transit corridor from Central Asia to world markets through Pakistan.

BACKGROUND: In 1996 a group of countries called the Shanghai five organized together for the purpose of delimiting and demilitarizing the international borders of the former Soviet territory with China, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Agreements about how to proceed with the task were reached in 1997, and the actual work has continued since then. In 1998, the five countries established annual summits and began to shift their focus to "anti-terrorism", a codeword they used before September 2001 to signify the containment of domestic insurgencies. Their Bishkek summit of August 1999 saw an agreement to create an anti-terrorism center in that city, and at the Dushanbe summit of July 2000 their defense ministers decided to plan and hold joint military exercises. Also at the 2000 Dushanbe summit, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov was present as an observer. The Shanghai summit of June 2001 saw Uzbekistan formally become a member of the cooperation mechanism, which was transformed into a new international institution, complete with secretariat and interministerial committees, and called the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). After a slow start in 2002, the SCO's St.-Petersburg summit in May 2003 approved development of a military arm to assist SCO anti-terrorist cooperation. The organization's first multilateral military exercise (called "Interaction-2003") took place that August in Kazakhstan and China, although without Uzbekistan's participation. In September of that year, the prime ministers of the member states agreed in Beijing to fund the SCO in the amount of \$4 million during 2004, establishing its secretariat in Beijing (moved from Shanghai in accordance with a September 2002 decision) and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent (rather than Bishkek, and beginning operations in January 2004). Today the institutions of the SCO are: the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, and the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, all of which meet annually; the Council of National Coordinators, which meets at least three times yearly; the Conference of Heads of Agencies, which establishes meeting mechanisms, such as it has already done for national attorneys general and defense ministers, for officials concerned with economic cooperation including transportation, and for heads of national law-enforcement, security, emergency, and disaster-relief agencies; the Secretariat; and the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS). Whatever weaknesses the SCO has shown so far during its short existence, it is alive and well and developing

at an accelerating rate. That is more than can be said of, for example, GUUAM.

IMPLICATIONS: According to Kyrgyzstani officials, the transfer of RATS from Bishkek to Tashkent resulted from an overall SCO judgment a year ago that Uzbekistan is today more susceptible than Kyrgyzstan to incursion by militant insurgents. Whereas for Kyrgyzstan, developing cooperation in trade and economic spheres is a means to increase security and stability in the region; for China the latter is a means to the former, which in turn serves to project Chinese influence. Four countries are members of both SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO): Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Adding Belarus to these four yields the composition of the Eurasian Economic Community, and adding Armenia to those five completes the membership of the full CSTO. The SCO's membership comprises the four first-named, plus China and Uzbekistan. The deployment of the Russian troops to Kant in Kyrgyzstan, in the framework of CSTO anti-terrorist programs, was no surprise to Beijing, which was kept more than fully informed by the Kyrgyz government. Yet the decision to place the SCO's anti-terrorist center in Tashkent is not without significance: it provides both China and Russia with a security presence in Uzbekistan, which has a recent history of guarding its diplomatic and strategic autonomy especially jealously. China is keen to increase the SCO's profile as an instrument for promoting the country's economic influence in the region, under the guise of moving towards creation of a free trade zone. Thus the six heads of governments approved in September 2003 at the Beijing summit a document entitled "Outline of Economic and Trade Cooperation of the SCO" that appears to have the eventual goal of establishing a free-trade zone among the participating states. Not all six governments, however, appear so enthusiastic. China would by far be the most advantaged by such an evolution. But even more modest economic cooperation would lead to deeper cooperation in security and geopolitical spheres, and the other members seem unwilling or unable to resist, even though they each try to put their own spin on it. Thus while the "Outline" document enumerates such goals as cooperation in transportation, energy, environment, telecommunication, consumer electronics and agriculture, authoritative Kazakhstani officials prefer to put the accent on the creation of favorable investment climate and on the growth of leading "high" technology and electronics, while still seconding the call for cooperation in energy and

transportation. At the same time, one cannot lose sight of SCO's significance as an instrument for the gradual increase of Sino-Russian strategic influence in Central Asia, opposing (at least in Beijing's eyes if not in everyone else's) the U.S. presence in the region. To ascertain this, it is necessary only to observe that the new SCO secretariat is headed by China's recent ambassador to Moscow, who speaks fluent Russian. Cooperation is already planned between the SCO's RATS in Tashkent and the CSTO's center at Kant.

CONCLUSIONS: It has been no secret for over a decade that Beijing, viewing Xinjiang as its geo-economic springboard towards the Caspian region, has flooded this region with ethnic Han immigrants who benefit most from economic development of the region's huge wealth, including not just oil and natural gas but also mineral resources. China has in the recent past funded the construction of connecting highways through the hinterland of western Xinjiang, this remotest of remote regions, promoting international trade flows there in order to strengthen its own strategic grip. Western Xinjiang borders not just Kazakhstan,

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but also Afghanistan and both sides of the Indo-Pakistani Line of Control in Kashmir (not to mention the oft-forgotten Chinese Line of Control, which lies across Kashmiri territory claimed by India). China's large contribution to the modernization of the Pakistani port of Gwadar foretokens an eventual trans-Pakistani route, transiting Xinjiang, for Central Asian trade with world markets. In this context, it is not without interest that both India and Pakistan have expressed interest in joining the SCO, with Pakistan showing a particular interest and China particularly sympathetic. Beyond being an eventual instrument of putative Sino-Russian condominium over Inner Asia, the SCO is a tool for heightening the strategic significance of the hinterland of western Xinjiang in particular, and enforcing Beijing's influence there.

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CASPIAN COUNTRIES MEET TO DETERMINE CASPIAN SEA LEGAL STATUS

On March 17 in Baku, the regular 13th meeting of the special working group (SWG) working out the Caspian Sea legal status at the level of deputy ministers of foreign affairs of the Caspian countries took place. The deputy ministers of foreign affairs of Azerbaijan (Khalaf Khalafov), Iran (Mehdi Safari), Kazakhstan (Ravil Cherdabayev), Russia (Viktor Kalyuzhny) and Turkmenistan (Hoshgeldi Babayev) participated in the meeting. The two-day meeting resulted only in insignificant progress.

The SWG was established during the first meeting of the five heads of the Caspian littoral countries in Ashgabat on April 24, 2002. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia have signed bilateral agreements dividing Caspian seabed and almost solved the problem in the northern part of the sea. Turkmenistan up to date has no fixed position on this issue and changes it occasionally. Iran supports the condominium approach, the joint ownership of the resources of the Caspian Sea as the best alternative.

When opening the meeting, Azerbaijani minister of foreign affairs Vilayat Guliyev noted the closer positions of the littoral countries as a result of bilateral and multilateral negotiations. Had Turkmenistan and Iran joined the Azerbaijan-Russia, Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan and Russia-Kazakhstan agreements on division of the Caspian seabed, it would have positively impacted negotiations on the Sea status and adoption of a convention, Guliyev declared.

The core issue on the agenda was the ongoing discussion of the draft convention of the Caspian sea legal status. It was proposed to discuss 11 disputed items of the Convention. Altogether, it contains 22 items, half of which have already been

agreed on. During the meeting, some positions on the items of the draft convention were successfully reconciled. At the meeting, an understanding was reached on particular issues concerning trade navigation, mechanisms to solve disputes and various areas for cooperation. The two-day meeting ended with a joint statement. Meanwhile, members of the working group have disagreements on several substantial issues, not only regarding division of the seabed, but also regarding water use and in particular navigation, the use and protection of biological resources, the environment, security, and the delimitation of state borders.

But as on prior occasions, the head of delegations positively assessed the result of the Baku meeting, emphasizing that this meeting made a positive input to achieving an agreement on the Caspian Sea legal status.

Mr. Khalafov noted that the two sides have agreed to continue work during the next meeting of the SWG. "The main problem while developing a draft convention and during bilateral negotiations still remains searching for a principle how to divide the sea. This is a cornerstone issue. The determination of the Caspian Sea's legal status is a long term process requiring well thought out steps. The issue of the Caspian sea legal status determination must be solved via compromise and based on international law".

He has also noted that the positions of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have recently moved closer. Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan bilateral negotiations on the Caspian Sea were discontinued more than a year ago, and have now been resumed. Khalafov said the negotiations on a median line principle of delimitation were ongoing.

Less diplomatic was the position of official Teheran. Iran claims 20% of the Caspian Sea for itself, refusing to accept the division of the Caspian Sea into five sectors based on the median line principle. Mr. Safari stated that Teheran will not recognize bilateral and

trilateral agreements on the division of the Caspian sea, until the signing of a five-state multilateral agreement. Simultaneously the Iranian position is to continue bilateral consultations which could contribute to achieving common agreements among coastal countries. According to Safari, Iran stands for the demilitarization of the Caspian Sea. "The countries in the region should reach peace and stability without attracting third parties. The presence on the Caspian Sea of foreign military forces would inevitably aggravate the problem of the legal status."

At a press conference for local media, the representative of Turkmenistan Hoshgeldi Babayev expressed satisfaction with the Baku consultations and hopes for successful work in future. Upon completion of the meeting, it was decided to hold the next SWG meeting at the end of May or the beginning of June in Kazakhstan. All Caspian countries supported Russia's proposal to hold meeting of the heads of the foreign offices of Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Iran and Turkmenistan in Moscow on April 6-7 this year.

Speaking about the prospects of the next summit of the Heads of Caspian littoral countries planned to take place in Teheran, Russian special representative Kalyuzhny stated it would take place as agreed during the first summit in Ashgabat in 2002.

Gulnara Ismailova

THE WANA OPERATION: PAKISTAN CONFRONTS ISLAMIC MILITANTS IN WAZIRISTAN

Rizwan Zeb

The operation against presumed Al-Qaeda terrorists in Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) is far from over. The government is determined that the operation will only end with the surrender, capture or eviction of terrorists from the area. The Pakistani forces have achieved some results, as the terrorists are now mostly using light weapons. The world's attention has been focused on this operation due to the possibility of the presence of a "high-value target" in the area. Many tend to believe it is Al-Qaeda two Dr Ayman Al-Zawahiri. It could also include leader of the Islamic Movements of Uzbekistan.

BACKGROUND: Since September 11, 2001 and the American attacks on Afghanistan, many have claimed that South Waziristan, right across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is a readily available hideout for Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces. Pakistan, being a frontline state in this ongoing war against terrorism and a major U.S. ally, seems now to be taking every step possible to root out terrorists from this area. Since the beginning of 2004, Pakistani forces have operated in the South Waziristan Agency against the terrorists, mainly in Wana. It should be noted that this is the first time in Pakistan's history that a military presence of this magnitude has been seen in the FATA. Wana, capital of South Waziristan, is only several miles away from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. It is mainly populated by the Ahmedzai Wazir tribe. This tribe consists of nine sub-tribes or sections, the prime amongst them being the Zali khel and the Yargul khel.

The operations began in the second half of January, when authorities received reports that a number of Al Qaeda members could be hiding in the Klo Shah town. Exchanges of fire took place, though no foreign suspects were found, according to Pakistani Army spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan. Soon, an ultimatum was given to the tribal jirga for handing over several individuals accused of sheltering Al Qaeda figures. During the jirga, it was decided that a tribal lashkar (paramilitary force) would be created to assist the security forces in arresting the wanted. The joint efforts of the Pakistani forces and the tribal leaders led to the surrender of more than twenty suspects.

While addressing a gathering of tribal elders on March 15, President Pervez Musharraf said that there were 600 terrorists present in the area. These include Arabs, Central Asians, as well as Afghans. He guaranteed that these terrorists will not be handed over to any third country if they surrender. "If the lashkar fails, then the Pakistani armed forces will take action", he added. Reports suggest that apart from two wings of the frontier corps (FC), the Special service Group (SSG) is also active in the area; intelligence networks have also been strengthened.

IMPLICATIONS: The biggest ever-Pakistani operation in the tribal area is now under way. Almost 5,000 troops are operating in the South Waziristan settlements of Azam

Warsak, Shin Warsak, and Kaloo shah. The area witnessing most military concentration has a perimeter of about 12-15 miles. The terrorists have used heavy machine guns and are well entrenched in their hideouts. A number of terrorists have been killed and captured during this ongoing operation. 123 people have been arrested, of which 68 are in the custody of the political administration, whereas the rest are held by the Pakistan army. Government sources claim to have received vital information from those captured, though at the moment they are not ready to share it.

On March 18, Pakistani forces declared a temporary ceasefire, aimed at giving tribal elders time to negotiate with the militants for their surrender. The government has given three conditions to stop the operation: all held personnel should be freed; all the wanted men should be handed over; all foreigners should be told to leave the area, or their hideouts pointed out.

Major General Sultan said the operation would continue. "There is no ceasefire except a halt in fire in the area where the jirga has gone to negotiate. This operation will continue until all those wanted surrender or are captured or evicted." The jirga failed to produce any result up till now, and fighting is still raging.

Six bodies of fighters killed in the operation have been brought to Rawalpindi for a DNA test to ascertain their identities. This has led to speculations about the dead. The stiff resistance faced by the Pakistani forces and President Musharraf's statement on the eve of the operation that there is a high value target present in the area led to speculations. Though Pakistani authorities never claimed the presence of Dr. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda second-in-command, the global media is full of speculations on this account. One of the most eminent Afghanistan specialists, Rahimullah Yusufzai opines that in keeping with past experience, Al-Zawahiri is unlikely to be there because normally Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri stick together. And if he is in the area, according to him, there could be two explanations for this: "one, the two have decided to stay separately so that one is able to survive and run Al Qaeda in case the other is killed or captured. Two, that Bin Laden is long dead and that is why Al-Zawahiri is alone." Other reports suggest the high value

target may be Tahir Yuldash, the leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

Over the weekend, Brig (Retd) Mahmood Shah Secretary (Security) FATA told newsmen that the Pakistani forces have found a telephone exchange and a two kilometer long tunnel between the houses of two wanted men, Sharif Khan and Naik Mohammad. Many think that at least some of the terrorists might have escaped through these tunnels. According to Pakistani army source, the fighters are facing a shortage of ammunition: heavy firing has almost entirely stopped and they are only using light weapons.

CONCLUSIONS: The still ongoing operation in Wana is the largest ever by Pakistani forces in the tribal area. This operation is a clear indication of Islamabad's will and resolve to eliminate terrorists from its soil. The tribal area, however, is a problematic area. Governments in the past neglected it,

claiming that they are preserving traditions. The area suffers from many problems of governance and most parts of it lack even basic necessities of life, such as clean water, hospitals, education etc. Interestingly the present government, with a new vision and resolve, is undertaking development work in the area including irrigation, roads, schools, and orchards for the development of the area and the people. Achieving results in this operation is necessary, but developing the area and providing the public with basic necessities of life, freedom of choice and better facilities and opportunities is a high-value target in itself and needs to be achieved.

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LIVING WITH HIV IN KAZAKHSTAN

The February issue of the bulletin released by National AIDS Prevention Center clearly shows that the number of HIV-infected people in Kazakhstan keeps rising. The report says that over the first two months of 2004, 109 HIV-positive persons and 10 new AIDS patients were registered by health centers. Independent researchers argue, however, that to get a picture more or less close to reality official figures should be multiplied at least by five.

The spread of the deadly disease in Kazakhstan is widely acknowledged by authorities in national and local levels. Perhaps, the most alarming sign of the trend is the rising toll of the AIDS epidemic. In 2002, according to official sources, 2972 residents of Kazakhstan were reported to have contracted HIV. By March 1, 2004, according to the bulletin of the National AIDS Prevention Center, the number of the HIV-infected people rose to 4107. Since the beginning of the year, four people have died of AIDS.

Surprisingly enough, the coal-mining Karagandy region in Central Kazakhstan with a total population of 1,410,200 residents and 1330 HIV cases registers on the top of the list of the most infected areas, whereas the most densely populated South Kazakhstan (1,978,300 residents) has only 473 cases to report. Second on the list is Pavlodar region in the North, where the population barely totals 807,000. Nevertheless, 815 cases of HIV-infections were detected in that region. This indicates that the assumption that HIV-infection occurs almost exclusively in densely populated areas may be wrong.

As of March 1, according to the National AIDS Prevention Center report, 163 people were diagnosed with AIDS. More than half of the HIV-infected people, 2995 persons, are unemployed residents of Kazakhstan, and only 450 people with fixed or seasonal employment are listed among the infected with HIV. But the analysis of the National AIDS Prevention Center is incomplete in many

ways. For one thing, it does not include the socially marginalized high-risk groups such as prostitutes, homosexuals and drug addicts. The monthly bulletin of the National AIDS Prevention Center simply categorizes them rather vaguely as "unidentified groups".

Inconceivable as it may appear, official health centers and authorities in the regions are reluctant to even recognize the fact of the existence of homosexuals and lesbians in Kazakh society. In traditional Kazakh community governed for centuries by Islamic laws, pre-marital sex, abortion and even divorce, whatever may be the reason, are considered the most shameful acts.

For centuries, this puritan mindset served as deterrent against sexual promiscuity, which, in the eyes of the Muslim population of Kazakhstan, emanates solely from Western culture. Hence the widespread fear of being stigmatized as outcasts among the Kazakhs infected with HIV, particularly women, who in cases of contracting AIDS or extra-marital childbirth are often ostracized from their families.

For reasons of Islamic ethics, anti-AIDS campaigners and volunteers cannot simply go to Kazakh villages to teach safe sex or distribute condoms. This old-age morality clashes with realities of today. Market economy has caused a host of social problems, impoverished rural areas, and also broken up traditional family units. Ongoing unemployment and migration of villagers to cities are apparently among the reasons of changing sexual behavior and loosening morals among young people. According to statistics, migrants under the age of 29 make up 28% of the population of the capital city Astana. This stratum of the population is the most vulnerable to HIV and AIDS risks. Employers refuse to hire people with AIDS. "The infected people are doomed to slow death. There is nothing we can do about it. We distribute single-use syringes, condoms, educate people. But these measures are inadequate" says

Sergey Simukhin, the head of the AIDS Prevention Center in the North Kazakhstan region where the first infection of a child through blood transfusion, transported to a Moscow clinic for operation, occurred in 1984.

It is believed that most of the prostitutes who gather every night along the Sain Street in Almaty are girls from the countryside disillusioned in their search for a decent job. Many of them are willing to share a bed with anyone who offers 10 dollars. They are rarely tested for HIV. Analysis shows that women account for some cases of sexually contracted HIV cases recorded. But 79.8% of HIV infections are transmitted by intravenous drug users. It is also alarming that 54.4% of all the HIV-positive are in the age group between 20 and 29.

"The main carriers of AIDS are women. Our estimations indicate that 30% of the roughly 200 prostitutes in Astana are Kazakh women. They come to our office only on conditions that we observe confidentiality" says Balsa Kuantbayeva, the deputy director of the "Saktanu" ("Protection") public foundation in Astana. Another similar public organization "Vmesty" ("Together") was established this year in Almaty to provide moral support for people suffering from AIDS.

In general terms, most of the AIDS and HIV-related problems of Kazakhstan can be attributed to the ignorance of the threat of the epidemic in the past. The Law on Prevention of AIDS adopted in 1994 was limited to information campaigns on national level. This law does not respond to existing problems of creating a wide network of counseling and treatment centers, training highly qualified specialist doctors and joining international research organizations in working out efficient methods of medication. The HIV/AIDS pandemic will not abate unless a new law is adopted to activate economic levers to solve the problem.

Marat Yermukanov

NEWS BITES

KAZAKH PRESIDENT NAMES NEW ADMINISTRATION HEAD

11 March

Nursultan Nazarbaev on 10 March appointed Imanghali Tasmaghambetov head of the presidential administration. The move comes amid a general reshuffling that has seen Nazarbaev loyalist Nurtay Abyqae, former head of the presidential administration, become the speaker of the Senate, and Oralbay Abdykarymov, former speaker of the Senate, become Kazakhstan's state secretary. Tasmaghambetov has served as state secretary since June 2003. The 47-year-old Tasmaghambetov was also prime minister in 2002-03. The 59-year-old Abdykarymov was speaker of the Senate since December 1999. The weekly "Republika Assandi Times" on 27 February predicted that Nazarbaev would soon initiate a major staff reshuffle, from which Abyqae and first deputy presidential administration head Marat Tazhin would benefit. The paper further suggested that Nazarbaev might try to wrong-foot the opposition by bringing forward to the late spring the parliamentary elections scheduled for this fall. (RFE/RL)

FORMER CHECHEN DEFENSE MINISTER SAYS HE SURRENDERED VOLUNTARILY

11 March

Speaking at a press conference in Grozny on 11 March, Magomed Khambiev, who served as defense minister under Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, denied that he surrendered on 8 March because his relatives had been detained by Chechen security officials. Khambiev said both he and Maskhadov were against the incursion into Daghestan in the summer of 1999 by Chechen formations commanded by field commander Shamil Basaev, and that he does not understand why Maskhadov failed to prevent Basaev from launching that raid. Khambiev also said he thinks Maskhadov should follow his example and surrender to the pro-Moscow Chechen authorities. He said he is ready to pledge his loyalty to pro-Moscow Chechen leader Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov and to help "achieve peace and stability" in Chechnya. (RIA-Novosti)

FRENCH AMBASSADOR TO BE NAMED GEORGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER

11 March

President Saakashvili told journalists on 11 March that he intends to name Salome Zurabishvili-Kashia as foreign minister as she is ideally suited to promote Georgia's integration into European structures. Zurabishvili-Kashia, who was born in Paris in 1951 into a family that fled Georgia following the Soviet takeover in 1921, made her career in the French diplomatic service and was named French

ambassador to Tbilisi last year. Saakashvili said that during his recent visit to Paris he discussed Zurabishvili-Kashia's possible appointment with French President Jacques Chirac, and that he will grant her Georgian citizenship. He praised current Foreign Minister Tedo Djaparidze, who he said will be appointed to another post. (Caucasus Press)

TWO 'FREEDOM' DECREES FROM TURKMEN LEADER

12 March

Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov issued two decrees on 11 March, one allowing Turkmen citizens to leave the country freely and another guaranteeing them religious freedom, turkmenistan.ru reported. The first decree grants Turkmen citizens the right to leave the country unimpeded, provided they have a valid entry visa for the country to which they are traveling. Currently, Turkmen citizens require a stamp from the Foreign Ministry's consular section to travel abroad. The second decree guarantees the free registration of religious organizations. Human rights observers have singled out Turkmenistan for harsh criticism for limiting Turkmen citizens' ability to travel and for cracking down on religious groups in a country that is already considered one of the most repressive in the world. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT VISITS ARMENIA

12 March

Visiting Yerevan on 12 March, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili met with his Armenian counterpart Robert Kocharian and with Prime Minister Andranik Markarian to discuss bilateral cooperation, the problems facing Georgia's Armenian minority, regional conflicts and transportation. In a joint communique, the two presidents reiterated their shared desire to expand bilateral relations and to integrate into European structures, and noted the need for closer cooperation to combat international terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking. Saakashvili, however, apparently stopped short of making the one concession for which Yerevan was hoping. He said rail transport from Russia via Abkhazia to Armenia will be resumed only once the repatriation of Georgian displaced persons gets under way, and that Tbilisi will not favor any of its neighbors by lowering transit costs for freight shipped via Georgia. In late December, Markarian passed a written request to then-acting Georgian Minister of State Zurab Zhvania for a reduction of freight transport costs. (Caucasus Press)

CHECHEN FIELD COMMANDER THREATENS NEW ATTACKS ON RUSSIA

13 March

In video footage broadcast on 13 March by Al-Jazeera television, Arab-born Chechen field commander Abu Al-Walid vowed to launch new attacks against Russian civilians if the Russian president elected on 14 March "declares war on the Chechens." Four months ago, Al-Jazeera broadcast a similar threat by Al-Walid, whom Russian presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembskii described on 13 March as one of the four most influential Chechen field commanders still alive and fighting. (Reuters)

ARMY ALERT OVER GEORGIA DISPUTE

14 March

Georgia has reportedly put its armed forces on alert after President Mikhail Saakashvili was barred from entering the troubled region of Ajaria. Georgian TV showed footage of troops loyal to Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze blocking Mr Saakashvili's convoy at a checkpoint on a road into the region. Meanwhile Russia warned Georgia not to send its troops into the region. Mr Abashidze opposed the events of December 2003 which led to the ousting of former leader Eduard Shevardnadze. Mr Saakashvili is with security chiefs in the nearby town of Poti. Security Council chief Vano Merabishvili told the TV Mr Saakashvili's convoy was met with warning shots as it approached the checkpoint near the town of Cholokhi. The president decided to turn round, leaving other senior officials to negotiate with the local authorities. Late on Sunday President Saakashvili spoke by telephone with Mr Abashidze, who is in Moscow. A source close to Mr Abashidze told the Itar-Tass news agency the Ajarian leader had "expressed his dissatisfaction with Tbilisi's actions" but said he still adhered to "peaceful and constructive dialogue". The president asked when he could enter Ajaria. Mr Abashidze said he would have to return to Batumi first, the source said. The Interfax news agency said Mr Abashidze had claimed that Mr Saakashvili threatened to have his plane shot down. "I promised to personally tell him the time and the number of the flight. Let him try," Interfax quoted Mr Abashidze as saying. (BBC)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT ISSUES ULTIMATUM

14 March

Following his 14 March telephone conversation with Abashidze, President Saakashvili told journalists in Poti that he has issued an ultimatum to Abashidze to comply with his demands within 24 hours. Saakashvili demanded that Abashidze guarantee him and members of the Georgian government freedom to enter and travel around Adjara; observe freedom of expression and campaigning in the run-up to the 28 March parliamentary elections and ensure that ballot is democratic; disarm illegal armed groups; and cede to Tbilisi control over customs, borders, communications, finances and the port of Batumi. If Abashidze fails to comply, Saakashvili said he will close Adjara's internal borders with the rest of Georgia and the external border with Turkey; close the Batumi airport and port and ban cargo transit through Adjara; and freeze the bank accounts of legal entities registered by the Adjara authorities. Describing Abashidze's

actions as an armed revolt, Saakashvili said his goal is to protect the constitutional rights of Georgian citizens and the country's territorial integrity. (Caucasus Press)

US 'KILL THREE' IN AFGHAN BATTLE

15 March

US forces in Afghanistan say they have killed three militants and detained 13 in a raid on a cave in the southern province of Zabul. An American military spokesman said that dozens of US troops, including special forces, took part in the raid in Qalat on Saturday night. The spokesman said the operation was part of the latest offensive, codenamed Mountain Storm, against the Taleban. He said the deaths took place after an exchange of machine gun and rifle fire. "We surprised them and we went there and we landed there," said US spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Bryan Hilferty. "The people we killed, we engaged them with direct fire with rifles and machine guns." Three militants were killed in the resulting fire fight and five detained, he said, with eight more suspects detained later. Lieutenant-Colonel Hilferty did not identify the suspects detained, but there are reports that three Taleban commanders were among those arrested on Sunday. The operation is the latest in a series of military actions in Afghanistan. Lieutenant-Colonel Hilferty said it involved patrols, searches and small scale assaults across the country's south and east. In January, the coalition's commander argued that Osama Bin Laden would be caught within a year. The US says Operation Mountain Storm is designed to keep pressure on what it calls the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan. Pakistani forces have been pursuing members of al-Qaeda and the Taleban in the tribal areas that border Afghanistan for several weeks. The US-led coalition is working in co-operation with the Pakistanis in what it says is a hammer and anvil strategy - to capture any militants that flee across the border. (BBC)

RUSSIA'S PUTIN SWEEPS TO VICTORY

15 March

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been swept back to power, after thrashing his rivals in Sunday's poll. With more than 99% of the ballots counted, Mr Putin had 71.2% support, while his nearest rival, Communist Party candidate Nikolai Kharitonov, had only 13.7%. At a news conference hours after the polls closed, Mr Putin vowed to push ahead with economic reforms. He also dismissed criticism from US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had suggested that Mr Putin's rivals had been denied media access. The image of Mr Putin as a 21st-Century tsar evidently appealed to a people whose country has historically been ruled by a firm fist from the centre, the BBC's Stephen Dalziel in Moscow says. But he adds that the lives of many Russians are still being blighted by the worst elements of the Soviet past which Mr Putin will need to address during his second term in office. "All the democratic achievements will be guaranteed," Mr Putin told reporters in Moscow, wearing a black sweater and a black jacket with no tie. "And we shall not stop with what has been achieved. We shall strengthen the multi-party system," he

said. Mr Putin also firmly brushed aside Mr Powell's criticism as "dictated by the domestic political balance" with upcoming US elections. "In many so-called developed democracies there are also many problems with their own democratic and voting procedures," he said, referring to the controversial George W Bush's victory over Al Gore in the 2000 poll. Russia's election officials said 64.3% of the registered voters cast ballots. Analysts - who widely predicted Mr Putin's landslide - earlier said only a failure to reach the turnout requirement - 50% of the vote - would have prevented his victory. (BBC)

OSCE CALLS ELECTIONS WELL MANAGED BUT NOT GENUINELY DEMOCRATIC

16 March

In a 15 March press release posted on the organization's website (http://www.osce.org/news/show_news.php?id=3931), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) concluded that the 14 March presidential election, while "well administered," lacked elements of "a genuine democratic contest. The release quoted Ambassador Christian Strohal, director of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, as saying: "Candidates were provided with the opportunity to present their messages to voters. This was, however, devalued by the state-controlled media displaying clear bias in favor of the incumbent." Rudolf Bindig, head of the monitoring delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), noted that while ballot counting went smoothly at most polling stations observed, significant problems were reported in one-quarter of counts monitored. (RFE/RL)

BOTH SIDES IN GEORGIAN STANDOFF ARM IN ANTICIPATION OF AGGRESSION

16 March

Adjara Interior Minister Djemal Gogitidze told Interfax on 15 March that 3,000 Georgian troops backed by 12 tanks are poised to invade the autonomous republic, but that Adjara forces are capable of repelling any such aggression. Georgian Defense Ministry spokeswoman Nino Sturua told the same agency the same day that while some army units are on alert, none has been deployed to the border with Adjara. Georgian State Security Minister Zurab Adeishvili claimed in Poti on 15 March that over the past three years Abashidze has created three special-forces units manned by former criminals with an estimated total strength of more than 1,000 men. Abashidze himself said on 15 March that the Adjara authorities have begun issuing weapons to the population in order not to leave women and children unprotected. Adjara militia forces armed with automatic rifles have been grouping close to the internal border with Georgia. Gogitidze on 16 March estimated the number of Adjara militia deployed at the border at 400 men, backed by several armored personnel carriers. (Interfax)

EUROPEAN COMMISSIONER BEGINS CENTRAL ASIA TOUR IN KAZAKHSTAN

16 March

EU External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten arrived in Kazakhstan on 15 March at the start of a five-day trip during which he will also visit Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, Kazinform reported the same day. Patten's trip will focus on "bilateral relations, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, and the need to accelerate the process of political and economic reforms," according to a 12 March EU statement. Patten struck a note of cautious criticism in his initial remarks in Kazakhstan, warning political and business leaders that "torture and other human rights violations, the restriction of fundamental freedoms...[are] precisely the conditions that breed and nurture the hate and grievance that underlie terrorism." Kazakhstan received 135 million euros (\$165 million) in EU aid from 1991-2001, RFE/RL reported on 15 March. Patten's tour, the highest-level EU attention the region has received since 1996, will bypass Turkmenistan, which has increasingly shunned international dialogue. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIAN COURT FREEZES CNPC CASPIAN EXPORTS-TRADERS

17 March

Oil exports of China's state oil firm CNPC, flowing from Kazakhstan to Russia's Black Sea via the Caspian CPC link, have been seized on the orders of a Russian court, traders and industry sources said on Wednesday. There was no immediate official explanation for the move, and it remained unclear which court in Russia had passed the ruling. CNPC and the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) declined to comment. One Moscow-based industry source said the reason behind the court ruling was a request from an unknown Russian firm to freeze all CNPC's assets in Russia until a dispute between the two firms was over. "It looks like they can't export crude and are barred from doing anything with it because of a Russian court decision," the source said. "We hear that CNPC's volumes have been arrested," said one London-based trader. Another London-based trader added: "There seems to be some issue with the availability of CNPC cargoes." U.S. ChevronTexaco-led CPC ships around 350,000 barrels per day of Kazakh crude, mainly from Chevron's giant Tengiz field, to Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossiisk for further re-exports to Mediterranean markets. CNPC, China's largest oil firm and parent of PetroChina, joined the group last year after it built a pipeline connecting its fields in Kazakhstan to the trunk line. The firm typically exports one or two cargoes a month from Novorossiisk. (Reuters)

POWELL PRAISES PAKISTAN OFFENSIVE

17 March

US Secretary of State Colin Powell has praised Pakistan for its crackdown on its border with Afghanistan against suspected al-Qaeda fighters. Fifteen soldiers died in fierce clashes on Tuesday. Officials say 24 tribesmen or al-Qaeda suspects were also killed. Mr Powell is in Islamabad for talks on the

hunt for militants and the recent nuclear proliferation scandal. It is the highest-level visit by the US since a Pakistani nuclear scientist admitted to selling secrets abroad. Mr Powell flew in from a one-day stop in Afghanistan where he pledged further US support to rebuild the country. While in Kabul, Mr Powell said the operation showed Pakistan had "picked up the pace" in the battle against militants. "We regret the loss of Pakistani life in this effort but it shows, I think, good intentions on the part of Pakistan not to allow these tribal areas to be used as a haven for the Taleban," he said. At the start of his tour, Mr Powell had urged Pakistan to get tough with militants on the border. Tuesday's operation in South Waziristan was the fiercest clash with pro-Taleban tribesmen since October, when eight foreign militants and two soldiers were killed in the remote border area. Reports from the area suggest the military was surprised by the extent of the resistance. The BBC's Rahimullah Yousafzai in Peshawar says that along with the soldiers killed, 22 were injured and others fell into the hands of the militants. Six government officials are missing and 23 military vehicles, including three armoured personnel carriers, were destroyed during an ambush by scores of militants, he says. Local reports suggest far fewer militants died than the army claims. It has long been thought that Osama Bin Laden and leading elements of al-Qaeda are hiding in the mountainous region separating Afghanistan and Pakistan. (BBC)

KAZAKH JOURNALIST ACQUITTED

17 March

Gennadii Benditskii, a correspondent for the weekly "Vremya," was acquitted on 17 March of libel charges. Asygat Zhabagin, head of the Republican Innovation Fund, sued Benditskii for libel in December 2003 over an investigative article the journalist wrote about the alleged disappearance of \$1.5 million from the Kazakh Defense Ministry. The case was widely seen as an attempt to use the courts to muzzle an excessively inquisitive journalist. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

CHECHEN WEBSITE CLAIMS FSB PREPARING TERRORIST BOMBINGS IN FRANCE

17 March

An FSB officer who was one of nine Russians taken prisoner by Chechen resistance forces in Itum-Kale Raion in southern Chechnya on 14 March has told his captors that the FSB has shipped some 200 tons of explosives to France in preparation for staging four separate terrorist attacks, chechenpress.com reported on 17 March, quoting the Chechen information agency Kavkaz-Tsentr, which claimed to have received that information by e-mail from the Southwestern resistance front. That front is commanded by field commander Doku Umarov. The alleged FSB agent said the terrorist acts will be perpetrated by four groups, each comprising two FSB agents, and that he was tasked with establishing contact with the Chechen resistance and trying to persuade its representatives to claim responsibility for the attacks after they take place in return for \$2 million in cash. Stratfor on 17 March reported that the French authorities "are taking seriously" a letter faxed

to several French newspapers the previous day warning of imminent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists, and that French intelligence believes that militant Chechens might be involved in those planned attacks. (RFE/RL)

CHECHEN PRESIDENT THANKS EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

18 March

In a statement dated 18 March and circulated by chechenpress.com, Aslan Maskhadov, who was elected Chechen president in January 1997 in a ballot recognized by both Russia and the international community, expressed his gratitude to the European Parliament for its adoption on 26 February of a declaration formally condemning as an act of genocide the 1944 deportation on orders from Soviet leader Josef Stalin of the entire Chechen people to Central Asia. Maskhadov expressed the hope that the European Parliament will follow up by adopting a similar statement condemning the ongoing war in Chechnya as genocide. He warned that the indifference of much of the international community to Russia's systematic annihilation of the Chechens is impelling thousands of young men to join the ranks of the Chechen resistance, and that some of those volunteers "believe they have the moral right to use against the enemy the methods he uses [against us, but] which we condemn." (RFE/RL)

KAZAKH PARLIAMENT PASSES MEDIA BILL

18 March

Kazakhstan's Senate approved a parliamentary conciliatory commission's amendments to a new bill on media on 18 March. Since the Majilis, or lower house, passed the amendments on 17 March, the bill has now cleared its last parliamentary hurdle and now awaits President Nursultan Nazarbaev's signature. The bill, which was drafted by Kazakhstan's Information Ministry, has drawn harsh criticism from free-speech advocates. As recently as 16 March, Yevgenii Zhovtis, director of the Kazakhstan office of the International Bureau for Human Rights, told Interfax-Kazakhstan that the draft law fails to meet international standards and will enable the authorities to extend their control over the media. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

TAJIK OPPOSITION PARTY ACTIVISTS END HUNGER STRIKE

18 March

The leaders of Tajikistan's opposition Taraqqiyot Party announced at a news conference on 18 March that they are ending the hunger strike they began on 12 March. The four party members, two deputy chairman among them, initiated the hunger strike to protest the Justice Ministry's four-month-long delay in registering the party. The erstwhile hunger strikers told journalists in Dushanbe on 18 March that they "will continue to defend civil society's right to political pluralism and democratic values within a constitutional framework." Justice Minister Khalifabobo Homidov told the news agency that the registration procedure has indeed gone beyond the stipulated time frame, but his ministry will

continue to review the party's documents for "as long as is necessary." (ITAR-TASS)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT, ADJAR LEADER AGREE TO SHELVE DIFFERENCES

18 March

During talks in Batumi on 18 March that lasted over three hours, Mikheil Saakashvili and Aslan Abashidze reached an agreement under which the latter will comply with key demands made by Saakashvili on 14 March, in return for which Saakashvili pledged that the "restrictions" imposed on transporting goods across Adjar territory will be lifted at midnight on 18 March. The most important of those demands is to ensure that voting in Adjara in the 28 March national parliamentary election is free and fair. Abashidze also undertook to have weapons distributed to the population earlier this week collected. The two sides agreed to the appointment of a Georgian presidential official who will monitor revenues from customs and the transit of goods across Adjar territory. Both leaders sought to play down the tensions of recent days, which Saakashvili described as "a misunderstanding," adding that "conflict" between Tbilisi and Batumi is out of the question. (RFE/RL)

TAJIKISTAN, IRAN ANNOUNCE MEDIA COOPERATION

19 March

Tajikistan and Iran have reached an agreement under which Iranian radio and television will be rebroadcast in Dushanbe. Tajik Communications Minister Said Zubaydov and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting head Ali Larijani have signed a memorandum of understanding to set up an antenna in Dushanbe to relay broadcasts from one Iranian television station and one radio station. A group of Iranian experts is slated to arrive in Dushanbe in two-three weeks to provide technical support for the project. (Asia Plus-Blitz)

ARMENIAN PRESIDENT AGAIN ARGUES AGAINST ELECTING YEREVAN MAYOR

22 April

Robert Kocharian told journalists in Yerevan on 19 March that he considers it inexpedient to amend the constitution to provide for the election of the mayor of Yerevan, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. The mayor of Yerevan is currently appointed by the president. Kocharian reasoned that the capital is home to one-third of Armenia's population, and that "a great potential for conflict" could emerge if a mayor were elected who represented a political party in opposition to the president and government. Robert Nazarian, whom Kocharian fired from the post of mayor in July, argued several months later that the mayor's powers are limited, and that the office will remain ineffectual until the municipality is headed by an elected mayor who is accountable to the population. (RFE/RL)

