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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/April 7, 2004

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SAAKASHVILI CONSOLIDATES POWER IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS9*Jaba Devdariani*

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has taken a decisive step towards consolidating his grips on power in the March 28 parliamentary elections and has received the go-ahead from the electorate for rapid reform. The significant success for Saakashvili's party in Ajaria is an important factor that may help to re-establish central control over this restless region. Yet given the large amount of single-member constituency parliamentarians, a sizable opposition is likely to emerge in the parliament, which could deny Saakashvili a two-thirds majority.

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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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THE PERILS OF FIGHTING TERRORISM IN PAKISTAN'S TRIBAL AREAS

Rahimullah Yusufzai

From a localized affair in South Waziristan, the conflict between Pakistan's armed forces and Islamic militants has now spread out to some of the other Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan. The spillover has alarmed the people as it has caused considerable loss of life on both sides. The recent firing of four rockets to hit specific targets in Peshawar city highlighted the kind of threat that the well-armed and trained tribesmen and some of their "guest fighters" now pose to President General Pervez Musharraf's government.

BACKGROUND: South Waziristan, the largest of the seven tribal agencies in FATA in terms of area, has always been difficult to govern. It is also one of the biggest in terms of population and has, therefore, been given two seats in the country's National Assembly compared to one for most of the other tribal regions. Maulana Abdul Malik and Maulana Merajuddin, the two parliamentarians from South Waziristan, are clergymen and are affiliated with the pro-Taliban religious alliance, MMA. This also explains the influence of religious scholars and Islamic political parties in the overwhelmingly conservative tribal region.

South Waziristan is largely mountainous, making it ideal for guerilla war. The landscape is dotted by forts that were built by the British in their largely unsuccessful colonial bid to crush the freedom struggle by the native tribes. South Waziristan, like the other six tribal agencies, is under-developed. The indicators for education, health, communication, etc are far below the national average. Government neglect has been endemic. The funding for development projects for South Waziristan and some of the other tribal regions has been increased since the US military intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001 in a bid to prompt the tribal population to cooperate with the Pakistan government in its war on terror. However, the funds are still far less than the need.

Two Pashtun tribes, Ahmadzai Wazir and Mahsud, inhabit and dominate South Waziristan. Most of the Pakistani tribesmen who gave refuge to the non-Pakistanis and are now fighting alongside them against the Pakistan Army belong to the Zalikhel section of the Ahmadzai Wazir tribe. There have been no reports of al-Qaeda and Taliban hideouts in the territory populated by the Mahsud tribe, which has achieved impressive literacy rates in recent years and produced scores of senior civil and military officers. However, the recent ambush against a military convoy that destroyed eight vehicles, killed 12 soldiers and injured about 24 took place in the Sarwakai area populated by the Mahsud tribe. Rocketing of Frontier Corps forts, blowing up of a small bridge in Latha area and other acts of sabotage were also reported from the Mahsud territory.

Many tribesmen from South Waziristan fought against Soviet occupation troops in Afghanistan. Subsequently, most of these fought alongside the Taliban against the Northern Alliance and the U.S.. The tribesmen, who are born fighters and learn the use of the gun at an early age in keeping with local traditions, acquired more sophisticated fighting skills during the Afghan war. Those skills have now enabled the militant tribesmen to put up fierce resistance to the Pakistan Army and Frontier Corps troops and

execute ambushes, plant landmines and fire rockets despite being outnumbered and outgunned.

IMPLICATIONS: The militants' were shrewd enough to extend their area of activity to force Pakistan's armed forces to operate on several fronts. They adopted diversionary tactics by rocketing an army position in the Dogar area of Central Kurram, killing four soldiers and injuring several others. Attacks were also launched against army and militia posts in North Waziristan in a bid to disrupt their supply lines and harass troops on their way to South Waziristan. In the thickly forested Shawal valley, militants sneaked into an army post through a stream at night and killed a major and a sepoy before they could retaliate. These attacks were also designed to convey a message to the government that the conflict would not remain confined to South Waziristan. The political administration as usual pressured tribal elders to apprehend and punish the culprits under the locally prevalent concept of collective responsibility or face the consequences. However, these tactics have yet to achieve the intended results.

Hostilities escalated further when four small-range rockets were fired at Peshawar. Though the rockets didn't cause much damage, but caused shock and added to the concern of the government. The Russian-made ROB-107 rockets were apparently fired from the Khyber tribal agency, authorities have yet to locate the staging area or identify the suspects.

The attackers managed to hit the Balahisar Fort, which is the headquarters of the Frontier Corps militia. The paramilitary Frontier Corps, whose officers are drawn from the Army, has been in the forefront of the military operation in South Waziristan and other tribal regions, while the newly appointed Corps Commander has been entrusted with the overall command of the ongoing action.

By now, it is clear that most of the militants managed to slip out of the cordon that the troops had laid in a 50 square kilometres area in Azam Warsak and its surrounding villages in South Waziristan. Military officials believe the militants escaped through a two kilometres long tunnel that linked the homes of two of the most wanted tribesmen, Sharif Khan and Nur Islam, in Kalosha village. The military demolished about 50 homes of the wanted tribesmen and then withdrew from the area to the regional capital, Wana. However, the matter is far from resolved and future military operations are very much on the cards.

There is no doubt that the army and militia suffered heavy casualties. At least 43 soldiers and 17 militiamen were killed and many more sustained injuries. Two junior officers were taken

hostage by the militants and killed. The army and militia also lost a number of military vehicles, arms and food and fuel in the ambushes. Eleven non-Pakistani militants were also reportedly killed. The number of Pakistani militants who were killed is not known. Besides, 26 civilians who were mostly women and children were caught up in the fighting and killed. The 162 persons, a majority of whom were Pakistani tribesmen, who were arrested by the troops are now undergoing interrogation. Some of the local tribesmen have already been released and the remaining are also likely to be freed in due course of time. The foreigners could expect to stay behind bars for long periods.

CONCLUSIONS: In spite of hopes, no "high-value target" has been captured so far. There is no evidence that Osama bin Laden, his deputy Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri or any other senior al-Qaeda figure is in the area. Members of the Western media, after converging on Islamabad for the imminent capture of Dr al-Zawahiri, have now started to return home. There were certainly a

number of Uzbekistanis, affiliated to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) holding out in the area along with Chechens, Arabs and Afghans. The IMU leader Tahir Yuldavesh was among the militants hiding in the area. Unlike the U.S. and its allies who were obsessed with bin Laden and Dr al-Zawahiri and looked at the military operation in South Waziristan in context of the capture or escape of the two al-Qaeda leaders, the priorities were entirely different for the Pakistan government. Pakistani authorities were counting their dead and hoping that the fallout of the situation in South Waziristan would not become uncontrollable.

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ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA SPEAKS OUT ON CHECHNYA

The Silk Road Studies Program at Uppsala University recently hosted a lecture by the renowned Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, whose reporting and books on Chechnya have made her famous.

Ms. Politkovskaya noted that she visits Chechnya as a journalist about once a year. Only a fraction of journalists are allowed to visit the war zone. After providing a historical background to the Chechen conflict, she argued that the brutality of the second Chechen war could be compared only to medieval times. Russian forces use extensive brutality in Chechnya, hiding behind the smokescreen of the international war against terrorism. The second Chechen war, she argued, is very cynical. It has been going on for four and a half years, longer than the Second World War in Russia. More than a million soldiers have been through the war on a rotational basis. Importantly, there is no idea or specific goal in the second war.

The war is concentrated around the civilian population, and its main facet is the *zachistka* or mopping up operations. A *Zachistka* is a large scale military operation, where forces of the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Chief Military Intelligence Agency (GRU) encircle an area accompanied by the usage of heavy artillery and armored vehicles. A *Zachistka* is conducted in the following manner: the village, usually with more than 20,000 inhabitants, is blocked, and nobody has a right to move from house to a house. Sometimes a *zachistka* can last for three weeks. Then the whole male population is taken to open areas, e.g. fields, where they are beaten while checking their documents. Later some are let go, but some stay, never to be seen again. Russian forces consider as male population any male from 10-11 years old up to 88 years. Russian forces usually explain the disappearances of the people with them being from

the resistance. It is impossible to grasp the logic in this extermination, as rows of extrajudicial executions have been reported.

One of the biggest problems in the second Chechen war is kidnappings. Three thousand people are proved to be missing. These are only those, whose relatives were able to present undeniable evidence.

Ms. Politkovskaya provided the example of an event on 29 February 2004, when four bodies were found in the forest and brought to the local mosque in a village in Chechnya. They were found in a pit, in an area where previously the military division *Dan-2* of the Ministry of Interior had been stationed. It is believed that they were questioned by servicemen from that division, and were not seen later. The only chance to find or to get any news about missing relatives is by checking the photographs of the dead bodies that are usually hung in the central market in Grozny. This activity is arranged by the people who lost any hope to get exhumation results from the experts. Relatives search their relatives by the clothing, since when soldiers kill a person, they often just take off their clothes and hang next to the body.

In 2003 alone, Ms. Politkovskaya told the audience, Russia evidenced ten terrorist attacks on its territory. The majority of these acts were carried out by Chechens who lost their family members in the war, people who just disappeared after *zachistka*. In March 2004, the *Murids of Gazavat* claimed responsibility for the latest terrorist act in the Moscow metro of 6 February 2004. They said they are taking revenge for the events in the village *Aldy*. This goes back to 4-6 February 2001, when federal forces entered the village of *Novye Aldy* and carried out what can only be described as a bloodbath, during which 55 people were killed. The *Murids of Gazavat* said "it is our answer for the non-avenged,

we were waiting for a long time, and we cannot wait any more".

"The second Chechen war", Ms. Politkovskaya stated, "has started acquiring all the features of the Palestinian conflict. We [Russians], by our own hands molded this '*palestinized*' war. Until now, the Russian government does not want to acknowledge its mistakes in the Chechen war. Thus we created a situation where one side pictures Chechens who carried out blasts as heroes, and others, mainly the Russian government, pictures them as terrorists. Unfortunately, the *Nord Ost* tragedy did not teach Russian government a lesson. The example of this is the appointment of Ahmad Kadyrov as leader of Chechnya. Kadyrov is a very ruthless man, and a puppet of the Kremlin. As civilian Chechens say, "only federals can be worse than the *kadyrovtsy* (Kadyrov's people)."

War is a self-evolving business, Ms. Politkovskaya concluded. Military men are interested in the oil business and the weapons trade. The present war in Chechnya is now called a war against terrorism, since in the aftermath of the September 11 events, this turned out to serve Russian interests best. The following conclusions, according to Ms. Politkovskaya, could be drawn from the war:

- Russian society came into agreement with the state initiated terrorism;
- Extrajudicial executions carried out by the state led to a system of terrorism;
- Putin is pictured as a hero, who is fighting international terrorism;
- There is no discussion and questioning of Putin's actions at the societal level.

Maral Madi

LANGUAGE DEBATE IN KAZAKHSTAN REFLECTS RUSSIAN-KAZAKH TENSIONS

Alima Bissenova

The Kazakh leadership often employs the rhetoric of Kazakhstan's post-independence achievements – political stability and economic prosperity compared to harsh economic and political situation in other states of Central Asia and Caucasus. In this rhetoric Kazakhstan's ability to maintain 'inter-ethnic concord' despite the country's potentially volatile ethnic composition is especially emphasized. Fears that Kazakhstan would fail have not materialized. Although on the surface there is no visible antagonism between the Kazakh and Russian population, the fierce debates in the media and public internet forums about the status of the Kazakh and Russian languages indicate the tension underneath the 'inter-ethnic harmony.'

BACKGROUND: While benefiting from the positive consequences of soviet rule in terms of industrialization, universal literacy, public education, and medical care, Kazakhs also suffered the downside of the Soviet regime. As a nation, they paid a great human and cultural cost for 'socialism building' and 'progress' of the Soviet era. During the forced collectivization and sedentarization of the 1920 and 1930s, almost half of the Kazakh population died of starvation. The demography of Kazakhstan changed dramatically with the influx of Russians and other settlers from the European part of the Soviet Union. By the 1950s, Kazakhs became a minority in their titular republic and gradually came under the threat of complete cultural russification. The issue of the Kazakh language was among the main grievances articulated by Kazakh intellectuals in the wake of the national revival during Perestroika. This issue was addressed already in 1989, when the Supreme Soviet of Kazakhstan granted Kazakh the status of the state language and created the society for the protection of Kazakh Language 'Ana Tili' (Mother Tongue).

Kazakhstan's current constitution, adopted in 1995, also designates Kazakh as the state language. On the other hand, it recognizes Russian as the language of 'interethnic communication' and guarantees its 'equal use' in the government and media. Complete Kazakh Language proficiency today is required only of the highest state official, the President, as all candidates to Presidency should pass Kazakh Language test. When adopting the 1997 'Law on Languages' it was decided that the rest of the state cadre should be given 15 years 'grace' period to learn the state language. Under the State Program for Development of Languages (2001-2001), the government wants to ensure that Kazakh is gradually installed and used on an equal foot with Russian. However, the endorsement of the Kazakh language has not gone smoothly with the Russian-speaking population and seemed to exacerbate hard feelings that Russians already had about living in independent Kazakhstan and being ousted from the ruling elite. In addition, some measures to enhance the use of the Kazakh Language have been seen as a pretext to silence opposition, which as a rule is Russian-educated and Russian-speaking. For instance, the violation of the requirement of at least 50 percent Kazakh-language

programming has been used to close down independent TV stations associated with the opposition.

IMPLICATIONS: The majority of the Russian population perceives state promotion of the Kazakh language as unfair towards the Russian language and Russian-speakers. Many radically inclined Cossack, Slavonic and Russian public associations through media in Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as Russian diplomatic channels attempted to exert pressure on the government to recognize Russian not just as an 'language of interethnic communication' but as the second state language of Kazakhstan. They brought to attention that the promotion of the Kazakh Language in the government went hand in hand with Kazakhization of the state apparatus and the emigration of 1,6 million Russians from the country. The leadership of the Slavonic Public Movement "Lad" also made it clear that language is the main issue at stake for Russians to consider Kazakhstan their home. The main line of Lad's argument is that one doesn't need to learn Kazakh in order to live in Kazakhstan, there is no necessity for Kazakh, because all forms of knowledge and information are available in Russian, and all Kazakhs except for the state-sponsored returnees from China and Mongolia (oralmans) speak Russian fluently. Thus according to the movement, the government is trying to 'invent the bicycle' by translating all existing knowledge into Kazakh (also channeling public money into this project), and create difficulties for Russians by forcing Kazakh to be used equally (fifty-fifty) with Russian. One of the prominent leaders of the Lad, Michail Sytnik, published several works explaining that Kazakh is not fit for the modern public sphere because it cannot serve as a language of modern politics, science and education. Historically, he wrote, Kazakh never was the language of 'civilization' but just the language of nomad poetry.

Such statements in turn provoke Kazakh nationalists, who see in Russian reluctance to learn Kazakh another manifestation of colonial mentality and disrespect for Kazakh culture. There are some Kazakh nationalists who also criticize the state language policy for not showing enough persistence in making Kazakh the real de facto state language. In their demand for the wider use of the Kazakh language, Kazakh nationalists appeal to the nationalist citizenship tradition in Europe, where one is often required to know the language to become a citizen. Kazakhs also emphasize that

Russian demands will again put Kazakh in a position of inequality, as Kazakhs speak both Russian and Kazakh while Russians by and large do not.

The language debates show not only the gap between the Russian and Kazakh populations' expectations from the state, but also the growing social division among the Kazakhs themselves—a division between the elite and the people, as well as between newly urbanized Kazakhs who speak Kazakh and second or third generation city dwellers who usually speak Russian (in Soviet Kazakhstan, only one fourth of Kazakhs used to live in cities). The Kazakh-language media reasons that the situation of the Kazakh language in the country reflects the situation of the people who speak it. Despite state support, Kazakh remains the language of the poor and marginalized. If in Soviet times, the national elite in all republics had to be 'close' to their people to justify their status as the elite, today it is no longer required. For instance, parliamentarians have many times criticized Kazakhstan's diplomatic cadre (comprised mainly of ethnic Kazakhs) for not speaking Kazakh while they are supposed to represent Kazakhstan and Kazakh culture abroad.

CONCLUSIONS: The debates on the status of the language opens up a Pandora's box where one can observe a principle disagreement between Russians and Kazakhs on issues concerning the future of the country they share. The good news is that public space has been created for the discussion of these issues and for channeling the concerns of different segments of population. The state is taking notice of these concerns and, it seems, trying to find a way to promote the Kazakh language without antagonizing the Russian population. Thus unlike other Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan did not proceed with its plan of transition to the Latin alphabet.

Considering Kazakhstan's peculiar situation with a sizable and powerful Russian minority and almost 7,000 km of common border with Russia, it would be difficult to pursue state building based exclusively on Kazakh national identity. However, the government could just be playing for time: today the average age of ethnic Kazakhs is under 30, while the average age of Russians is over 60. That means ethnic Kazakhs will determine the future of Kazakhstan.

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AZERI PUBLIC EXPRESSES ANGER OVER THE IDEA OF TURKISH-ARMENIAN BORDER OPENING

The issue of the Turkish-Armenian border and speculations that the Turkish government might be willing to open it soon are again in the focus of the Azeri public. For the past week, leading Azeri media outlets, political parties and NGOs have been discussing the issue, which seemed to emerge out of nowhere.

The Turkish-Armenian border has been closed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, due to Turkey's condemnation of the Armenian aggression on Azerbaijan and the occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh. On numerous occasions, Turkish government officials have stated that Turkey would open the border with Armenia and establish full diplomatic relations with this country only after occupied Azerbaijani lands are liberated. Most recently, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, during his visit to Azerbaijan in 2003, reiterated his commitment to this policy.

The Azerbaijani public and the government view this issue as an important one. First, its importance lies with the symbolic solidarity of Turkey with its ethnic and linguistic "brother" Azerbaijan, and symbolizes Turkish sympathy for the Azerbaijani cause. Second, Azerbaijan hopes to force Armenia into political concessions on the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by maintaining a trade embargo on Armenia. Finally, Azerbaijan needs Turkey's alliance in keeping Armenia out of regional economic, trade and energy projects. If willing to open the border with Armenia, Turkey is risking to upset Azerbaijan on all of the above points.

Many Azerbaijani and international observers believe that there would be irreconcilable negative effects on bilateral Turkish-Azerbaijani relations should Turkey choose to open the border. By opening the border, Turkey and Armenia would not so much gain in economic terms, but it would also bolster's Armenia's policy of aggression. Hardline forces in Armenia, leading Azerbaijani observers argue, will feel even more self-reliant and bold.

Although emotional at first, the majority of Azerbaijani analysts believe that it is the desired membership in the EU and the constant pressures from this institution as well as the United States on the Turkish government that could push Turkey's decision to open the border and normalize relations with Armenia. But few believe that should Turkey do so, it will be granted membership at the European Union.

According to the independent daily *Zerkalo*, the representatives of the leading mass media outlets in Azerbaijan will travel to the Turkish-Armenian border and stage a protest action, called "Turks supports Turks". It will be aimed at showing Azerbaijani protest over the possible opening of the border. Meanwhile, other media representatives, such as Mirkadirov of *Zerkalo*, have called for a more pragmatic analysis of the situation and urged the Azerbaijani government to stop looking at the situation with idealistic naivety.

It is interesting that during this public outcry, official Baku has been keeping quiet about the

issue. No doubt, the Azerbaijani government will feel extremely upset and betrayed should the border open. However, it has been doing little to pressure Ankara at the diplomatic level. The opposition daily *Azadlig* has even accused the ruling party and President Ilham Aliyev of selling out the interests of the nation and quietly agreeing to the idea. "Ilham Aliyev has given his consent with the idea in order to ensure Turkey's support for his presidency," claimed the newspaper. *Zerkalo*, in its turn, speculated that official Baku has failed to persuade Ankara out of this idea by diplomatic means and has therefore created this public fuss in order to threaten the Turkish government with public condemnation in Azerbaijan.

In any case, the upcoming visit of Ilham Aliyev to Turkey will not be an easy one. It is clear that should the border open, it will be a significant blow to the foreign policy of Azerbaijan and its newly elected President Ilham Aliyev and will largely boost the political stance of Armenian President Kocharian. The latter is in desperate need of this support, as the Armenian opposition is mounting another wave of public protests against him. Turkey, its turn, hopes that Armenia will drop its so called "genocide" claims and that the opening of the border will allow Turkey to gain economic benefits as well as membership in the EU. Yet, Azeris are convinced that Turkey will be very much disappointed.

Fariz Ismailzade

KARZAI'S HERAT CHALLENGE: WEIGHING THE RESPONSE

Sebastian Sosman

The recent outbreak of violence in Afghanistan's Western province of Herat has ended two years of stability and peace in what had come to be known as Afghanistan's safest corner. Though the details remain murky, the assassination of Mirwais Sadiq, the son of Herat governor Ismail Khan and a minister in the transitional government in Kabul, appears to have been perpetrated by Zahir Nayeبزada, a local commander who professes loyalty to the Karzai government. As troops loyal to Ismail Khan crushed the uprising the Karzai government rushed a 1,500 member-strong "stabilization force" to Herat, while at the same time denying any hand in Nayeبزadah's actions. There is some talk of making this a permanent garrison of the Afghan National Army in Herat. Though the fighting has since ended, the situation remains tense, and Afghanistan may very well be facing its gravest crisis since the defeat of the Taleban just over two years ago.

BACKGROUND: Afghanistan's greatest historical challenge in the modern era has been establishing effective centralized administrative systems. The rugged Hindu Kush rises up in the center of the country, creating a "ring" of major economic hubs and arable regions. This ring system, by its very shape, acts to discourage centralization around one administrative hub. Kabul is in many ways just as peripheral to Afghanistan as Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif or Kandahar. This geographical problem is compounded by a diverse ethnography, and sustained patterns of invasion and great power interference. The December 2003 Constitution is not the first attempt to create centralized administrative systems in Afghanistan. It has been tried in various forms from the periods of British occupation through to the Communists and the Taliban. These efforts have consistently triggered violent backlashes against the central government.

Herat, because of its relative strength, distance from the capital, and geostrategic importance has been a source of frustration for those who have tried to consolidate centralized rule around Kabul-- either through imperial or domestic impulses. In the 19th Century, Herat was a persistent source of resistance to British-Afghan centralization efforts. A Herat-based force led by Ayub Khan routed the British at Maiwand in 1880. The city spent most of the century balancing, challenging, and drifting between Kabul and Tehran's spheres of influence. It was besieged or occupied twice by the Persians and "recaptured" by Kabul-based forces twice between 1836 and 1881, with each move factoring centrally in the Anglo-Russian struggle for dominance in Central Asia.

With a 1500-man armed presence now on the ground in Herat, Kabul once again finds itself in the familiar position of trying to reign in its most independent-minded province. Having put down Nayeبزadah's revolt and received assurances of non-involvement from the small U.S. garrison in Herat, Ismail Khan is weighing his next move. Though forces loyal to him in Herat easily outnumber the Kabul contingent, any action against them will force an open conflict with the central government, something that both sides have sought to avoid. The Kabul force, for its part, has taken up positions in the barracks where Nayeبزadah's soldiers resided.

IMPLICATIONS: This crisis has struck at a bad moment for the Governor of Herat. Other challenges have appeared on Ismail Khan's flanks: to the Northeast in Baghdis province (where, incidentally, Nayeبزadah is said to have sought refuge), a long-simmering conflict with the local governor has flared up once again, and Ismail Khan's soldiers are reported to have been involved in engagements. To the South, Farah province remains the only part of the Western Region where opium gangs and Taleban-like elements control much of two districts. His relations with the international NGOs in the region has also been tense. Yet it is the pressure from the central government (and by extension the U.S.-led Coalition) that weighs most heavily on Ismail Khan.

Following the violence of March 21, the situation remains extremely tense. Ismail Khan, grieving the loss of his son and rattled by the attempt on his own life, is now faced with the most serious challenge to his power in Herat since the Taliban captured the city in 1995. Khan has proven his ability to run effective insurgencies, and though he does not enjoy the popular support he once had, he nonetheless maintains strong relationships throughout the West. Also factoring into the equation are Khan's links with Iran, and his credentials as a "true" Islamic Revolutionary.

Ismail Khan deserves a great deal of the criticism that has been levelled at him by both the international community and Karzai's government. He has been accused of diverting tens of millions of dollars in customs revenues to private Swiss and German accounts. Human Rights groups have slammed him repeatedly over the past two years, largely over the status of women. Today Herat faces a suicide epidemic that is directly the product of his inability (or unwillingness) to work towards improving the basic condition of Herati women. Political opponents have been threatened, and aid agencies have been intimidated and looted.

But Ismail Khan is not a typical warlord. He is extremely conservative, something of a bully, and has a long and storied history as a military commander. But Herat is a quiet place. Ismail Khan is not where he is today because of gangster qualities in a collapsed state, but emerged in an administrative vacuum on the heels of the Taleban retreat, bolstered by a strong base of popular support, and a nudge from both the Iranians and the

Americans. Neither is Khan a nationalist. Though Heratis are fond of claiming a certain refined superiority over other Afghans, they bear their Afghan nationality with a characteristic pride. Khan's self-proclamation as the "Emir of the West," should be read as more of an early attempt to define Herat's relationship with Kabul within Afghanistan than any kind of declaration of independence. A visitor to Kabul and Herat will immediately notice the gap in relative administrative capacities. Herat is visibly cleaner, more orderly, and safer than the capital, in spite of the latter's access to cash from international agencies.

CONCLUSIONS: Over time, as Afghanistan gets back on its feet and evidence of effective national governance emerges, Herat and Kabul will naturally grow closer together. In a perfect world, an equilibrium will evolve over time. The constitution and the national institutions that form around it will grow roots. But by forcing the issue at this point, Karzai risks provoking a much more serious crisis, and sending Afghanistan into yet another

round of violence. Khan should be encouraged to participate in the democratic system, and to express his autonomous impulses through the mechanisms that exist in the constitution. But Kabul's recent move has shown that it still sees soldiers, not lawyers, as the solution. This reveals a degree of mistrust and discourages participative politics at a point when they need to be reinforced.

The deployment in Herat is being spun by the government as a "stabilization force" intended to guarantee the safety of Herat's citizenry. This assertion ignores the obvious: Ismail Khan's Herat has been the safest and most prosperous province in the country since the fall of the Taleban. Kabul has now put that in jeopardy. And though Karzai has the right to demand more of Khan, the question is how quickly -and how forcefully- he should act.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Sebastian Sosman is a SAIS Graduate who recently returned from working with a humanitarian NGO in Herat.

KAZAKH BORDER TROOPS PUT ON ALERT AFTER UZBEK BLASTS

In the aftermath of bomb attacks in Uzbekistan, the Kazakh government announced security checks at all crossing points along the border with Uzbekistan. According to the Interior Ministry, additional task force squads were dispatched to border areas and strict security check procedures were introduced. Entry permissions were granted only in cases of exceptional urgency. Some observers think that all these efforts have little to do with warding off possible infiltrations from Uzbekistan.

It is not the first time that Kazakhstan demonstrates to the outside world and its citizens its capability to respond to any foreign terrorist attack. Officials believe that Kazakhstan is the only haven of peace and stability in Central Asia left intact by ethnic, religious strife in a turbulent surrounding. This idea is hammered home in various ways. Right after the bomb blasts in Uzbekistan, the president of Kazakhstan sent a message of condolence to his Uzbek counterpart.

This was followed by a unanimous condemnation of the perpetrators of bomb attacks in Uzbekistan by prominent religious leaders of Kazakhstan. In their appeal to believers of all faiths, the clerics call for joint efforts in fighting terrorism and international extremism. Most notably, the message underlines, that "we thank the Supreme Being who endowed the leadership of Kazakhstan and people of Kazakhstan with a sagacity to live in harmony despite ethnic and religious differences".

But public declarations, inherited from the practice of socialist propaganda work, fail short of diverting the threat of extremism. As was pointed out at the regional Conference held in Almaty under the aegis of the UN on March 16-18, arms trafficking in Central Asia has assumed unprecedented proportions. It was stated that people who deal in arms have direct links to drug dealers.

Police statistics cannot indicate even the approximate number of people who possess unlicensed firearms. Nevertheless, the seizure of Kalashnikov rifles, land mines and hand grenades from criminal elements has long become a part of the daily routine of the police. A few days ago a railway truck loaded with 26 tons of bombs was detected by policemen in Pavlodar. The deadly cargo, labeled as scrap metal, as subsequent investigations revealed, was sent from Shymkent in the South. This time police showed vigilance to prevent the arms from falling into the hands of criminals. But in the whole city, not a single bomb-disposal squad was to be found to defuse the bombs. Poorly guarded ammunition depots and corruption in the army pose far more serious threat than imaginable terrorist infiltrations from neighboring countries.

Shymkent, located on the border with Uzbekistan, has long earned an unenviable reputation of hotbed for radical Islamists. On March 29 the Shymkent city court passed a verdict of four years imprisonment on a Hizb-ut-Tahrir activist, Mr. Baysalbayev. He was incriminated in distributing extremist leaflets and recruiting new members for Hizb-ut-Tahrir. Every court ruling on Islamic extremists provokes, however weak, protests from the Muslim population and acid comments from Kazakh-language papers. Tied to its obligations within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Agreement and Western organizations, Kazakhstan has no other choice than to follow the international community in fighting terrorism. On March 31, the lower House of Parliament (majilis) ratified the border defense agreement earlier signed by the Eurasian Economic Community member-countries in Moscow.

The terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan may also have deep-running social implications for Kazakhstan. In

their last session, parliament members raised voices to bring ethnic Kazakhs living in Uzbekistan back to the land of their ancestors. It is estimated that 1.5 million Kazakhs live in Uzbekistan. Their lives are endangered by growing extremism. The Migration Office has planned to resettle 6216 families this year, but given the highly explosive situation in Uzbekistan that number is likely to grow. The government allocated 4.6 billion tenge to provide repatriated Kazakhs with housing and livestock. Although the scheme of bringing in ethnic Kazakhs fits well into the demographic policy of the government which envisages the increase of the total population of Kazakhstan to 20 million by the year 2015 it is hardly feasible for financial reasons.

The Predominantly Kazakh-populated southern regions of Kazakhstan on the border with Uzbekistan are economically the most underdeveloped areas. The rate of unemployment among the local population is the highest in the country. The gap between a handful of nouveau-riches and the impoverished masses is extremely wide. People without work and low income easily embrace the promises of Islamic extremists.

Dosym Satpayev from the Center for Fighting Terrorism notes that for the first time, Islamic suicide-bombers in Uzbekistan targeted not the civilian population, but the official elite. That is a timely reminder for the leadership of Kazakhstan, which limits its anti-terrorist efforts purely to militarized security measures. If the government fails to respond to the situation adequately by raising living standards in the southern areas to the levels of the North, analysts warn, the unrest in Uzbekistan may spill over into South Kazakhstan. And that is the worst outcome the further aggravation of the social and political problems can produce.

Marat Yermukanov

SAAKASHVILI CONSOLIDATES POWER IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

Jaba Devdariani

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has taken a decisive step towards consolidating his grips on power in the March 28 parliamentary elections and has received the go-ahead from the electorate for rapid reform. The significant success for Saakashvili's party in Ajaria is an important factor that may help to re-establish central control over this restless region. Yet given the large amount of single-member constituency parliamentarians, a sizable opposition is likely to emerge in the parliament, which could deny Saakashvili a two-thirds majority.

BACKGROUND: Georgia's Central Election Commission has announced the results with all votes cast on March 28 counted. These results are not officially final, as re-vote was scheduled in two districts of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic, Khulo and Kobuleti, on April 18. The count shows the Mikheil Saakashvili's National Movement-Democrats (NMD) in the lead with 67.02% of the votes cast and the Rightist Opposition bloc of two parties – New Rights and Industrialists – a distant second with 7.67%. Thus, out of 150 seats elected from the party lists the ruling bloc gained 135 and the opposition 15 seats. None of the other parties, including Aslan Abashidze's Revival Union, were able to cross the 7% threshold necessary to gain seats in the parliament. Importantly, the preliminary statements of the international observers evaluate the vote as a "step forward" towards free and fair elections.

The vote count for the 75 single-mandate Constituency MPs elected in first-past-the-post districts on November 2 was allowed to stand. The affiliation of these MPs will determine the final composition of the new Georgian parliament. 19 of these MPs supported president Shevardnadze, while the National Movement-Democrats have 17 MPs, the Rightist Opposition 8, the opposition Labor Party 4, and Abashidze's Revival Union 6. Runoff elections are scheduled in one constituency.

As a result, the ruling coalition would have 152 MPs and the Rightist Opposition 23. Hence, the NMD does not have a 'clear' constitutional majority of 157 votes (2/3 of the 235-member chamber plus one MP). Nonetheless, in practice the ruling coalition should be able to garner the constitutional majority, relying on those 19 Constituency MPs who supported the former president.

IMPLICATIONS: The parliamentary vote has confirmed the high public confidence in the leaders of the November 2003 'Rose Revolution'. However, despite some concerns for single-party rule, the vote showed that the opposition retains its voter base in Georgia. The overall voter turnout of 65% was high by European standards, but lower than usual for Georgia. Lower turnout figures were recorded in the capital. Experts tend to suggest that many supporters of the ruling party stayed at home, assured of their victory.

In this sense, the clearing of the 7% threshold by the Rightist Opposition indicates that they managed to bring their voters to the polling stations. The party also showed the political weight that is vested in nation-wide outreach and strength of local

chapters. According to preliminary results, in 52 out of 75 election districts the Rightist Opposition came second after the National Movement-Democrats.

The March 28 elections showed Revival's ratings plunge throughout Georgia, following Aslan Abashidze's standoff with Saakashvili. Humiliatingly for Abashidze, the NMD carried the vote in Ajaria's capital, Batumi. Results in several districts in Ajaria were annulled, as local administrators loyal to Abashidze obstructed the election process.

This success will give Saakashvili serious leverage over the recalcitrant local leader Abashidze, whose rule stands to be delegitimized by such a result. His Revival Union now lost its parliamentary representation through the party list for the first time since its establishment in 1995. This is likely to contribute to abolishing the parallel political system in Ajaria.

However, Abashidze has launched a bid to act as a focal point for the opposition that has failed to clear the threshold. The Labour Party, disappointed by its poor showing in the elections, is reported to be in talks with Abashidze over common strategy. Labour is alleging ballot fraud in favour of the ruling party and appealed 72 out of 75 district commission results in court.

The poor performance of the opposition heralds a change in the political elite. However, Saakashvili is unlikely to secure a rubber-stamp parliament, and a new opposition is bound to emerge both within and outside parliament. Along with the Rightist Opposition, one of the single-member constituency MPs, Niko Lekishvili, has announced an intention to create a faction consisting of some 30 of his colleagues. Lekishvili, a former administrative functionary in the Communist Party, was a State Minister under Shevardnadze in the mid-1990s and is one of Georgia's political heavyweights. Lekishvili faction is likely to be in tactical alliance with the ruling party, but may join the opposition on some issues, especially economic policies.

The National Movement-Democrats are not a coherent entity, but a coalition of several parties. Political differences exist among the radical wing of Saakashvili's National Movement and the allied Republican Party, the centrist former team of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, and the moderate conservatives of Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze. Some of the NMD's own young political cadre and professionals are likely to seek limelight by being active in the parliamentary committees. In the short term, the ruling coalition will encounter strongest opposition from

outside parliament. At least some of the political parties that failed on March 28 will stay intact to run in the 2005 local elections. The private media and NGOs are also a formidable force. Some civil society organizations and think tanks are in a good position to provide specific, alternative policy agendas and to use the media to voice their views.

CONCLUSIONS: The new parliament, dominated by a single political grouping, should provide an efficient basis for speedy political and, especially, economic reforms in close partnership with the government. The parliament is set to endorse the legislative initiatives of the government in the fields of law enforcement and the judiciary, such as introducing the revised Criminal Procedure Code. The Rightist Opposition and

Lekishvili's faction are likely to stir a debate on taxation and revenue collection reforms which are to be reviewed already in May. Industrialists (now members of the Rightist Opposition) proposed their own tax code last year, which was adopted in the first hearing.

Relations with Ajaria will remain central in the short term. If Abashidze does not succumb to the strengthening of opposition to his rule within Ajaria, relations with Tbilisi are likely to enter a more stable phase of haggling over a constitutional settlement on the division of responsibilities.

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

AZERBAIJAN'S DEFENSE MINISTER VISITS WASHINGTON

Colonel-General Safar Abiyev, Defense Minister of Azerbaijan, recently concluded a relatively low-key, but, apparently very successful, visit to the United States. Although Safar Abiyev's visit had been in planning for over a year, it was repeatedly postponed for various reasons. In fact, this trip's low profile comes in contrast with the previous much-publicized visits. Announcements about the visit and the specific dates were made only shortly before the occasion. These could reflect both an influence of the less pompous, technocratic approach to leadership by the younger president Ilham Aliyev – and efforts to avoid antagonizing the nervous Kremlin.

During his one-week visit to the United States at the invitation of U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Safar Abiyev completed a comprehensive program traveling to Tampa, Florida; San Antonio, Texas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; as well as New York City, and held meetings with members of the U.S. Congress as well as with U.S. civilian and military leaders. At these meetings, various aspects of military cooperation between Azerbaijan and the U.S. were covered, including the security of the main export pipeline projects, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines. Azerbaijan's defense chief repeatedly touched upon the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and the threat this conflict poses to the stability and development of the region. Though not mentioned in the Azerbaijani official reports, but undoubtedly discussed, were problems related to Iran and Russia.

Minister Abiyev is an advocate of closer military cooperation with the United States and has hosted high ranking U.S. officers such as Secretary Rumsfeld in Baku. Only in March of 2004, Abiyev received U.S. delegations, including the U.S. State Department's deputy director for security and policy in Europe Eric Schultz, U.S. mission adviser at NATO Bruce Rogers, Deputy Commander of the U.S. European Command General Charles Wald, and others. Emphasizing the importance of the region at these meetings, the American side repeatedly stated that the scope of Washington's interests includes overall security in the region and

its vital, primarily energy, infrastructure. Importantly, the U.S. is also moving ahead with more funding for increase in security cooperation. Special attention will also be paid to further integration of Azerbaijan into Euro-Atlantic structures through NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

Secretary Rumsfeld reiterated his gratitude for Azerbaijan's strong active support and participation in the U.S.-led anti-terror coalition. No doubt, Minister Abiyev was especially pleased to hear praise for the performance of Azerbaijani troops serving in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. As part of the joint efforts to curb proliferation of WMDs and trafficking, Rumsfeld and Abiyev agreed to expand cooperation in strengthening the security of Azerbaijan's sector of the Caspian.

Neither Baku's cooperation with the United States on security issues, nor Azerbaijan's objective of integration into Euro-Atlantic community is a new development. Yet Moscow continues to make a point of making its displeasure over the U.S.-Azerbaijan partnership known. Russia is concerned with the political situation in Azerbaijan and its reaction to Safar Abiyev's words about possible deployment of U.S. military bases into Azerbaijan a few months ago was not slow to come. Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Nikolai Ryabov said that if foreign bases were deployed in Azerbaijan, Moscow would take retaliatory action, in particular by slapping a visa regime on Baku. Thus, the Kremlin still possessively watches the region through the prism of the past and sees any independent steps by the pro-Western regional governments as a threat to itself.

Baku has been very careful recently not to antagonize Russia excessively. Unlike neighboring Georgia, where Russian bases are still a significance presence, Azerbaijan, the first post-Soviet nation to get rid of Russian military on its soil as early as 1993, can afford the luxury of friendliness with Moscow. Yet given that Moscow's vision of friendship is best exemplified in the region by Armenia's complete military and economic dependence on Russia and the history of Russia's

open support for Armenia in the latter's war with Azerbaijan, there is a limit how far Azerbaijan can accommodate Kremlin's demands.

Before Minister Abiyev's visit to the U.S., a possible agreement on deployment of US military bases in Azerbaijan had been a subject widely discussed in the Azerbaijani media. Both sides, however, deny information related to such deployment. Last week, in Baku, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage also pointed out that "he had not discussed military bases during his meeting with Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev, "because his country had "no desire" to "set up bases in Azerbaijan". Nevertheless, it is hard to exclude some form of U.S. military presence in Azerbaijan in the near future, both as a result of deepening bilateral cooperation and the necessity based on the region's realities. This is especially clear given the evolving restructuring of U.S. global military presence abroad, to adjust to new realities and new security threats that are radically different from those of the Cold War. Given Azerbaijan's critical geographic location as the only country bordering both Russia and Iran and forming, with Georgia, a corridor from NATO territory to Central Asia, it is hard to imagine that the restructuring of U.S. military bases would bypass Azerbaijan.

Safar Abiyev's visit symbolically preceded another round of NATO expansion, this time through inclusion of the Baltic nations, by a couple of days. As the Alliance moves eastwards, it should also look at ways to promote stability and security in the strategically crucial Caspian region. Perhaps, Azerbaijan's possible future acceptance into NATO as a member should also be seen in this context. For now, though, Abiyev's successful visit comes as another evidence of Baku's deep-rooted pro-Western strategic orientation. Incidentally, the visit's lower profile suggests that Azerbaijan's objective is to further the working relationship rather than to seek photo-ops.

Narmina Rustamova

NEWS BITES

ADJAR LEADERS' DIPLOMATIC PASSPORTS REVOKED

24 March

The diplomatic passports of more than 500 Adjar officials -- including Adjar State Council Chairman Abashidze; his son, Giorgi, who is mayor of Batumi; and Interior Minister Djemal Gogitidze -- have been revoked in order "to remind them that it is inadmissible to exceed their competencies," Georgian Interior Minister Giorgi Baramidze announced on 24 March. President Saakashvili ordered a review of all diplomatic passport holders last month after former President Shevardnadze's son-in-law, Gia Djokhtaberidze, was apprehended at Tbilisi airport as he was about to leave the country on a diplomatic passport. (Caucasus Press)

U.S.-GEORGIAN BILATERAL SECURITY AGREEMENT SIGNED

24 March

Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania and U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard Miles signed a new bilateral agreement on security assistance on 23 March, Civil Georgia reported. Under the terms of the agreement, the United States is to provide almost \$2.5 million in assistance to reform and modernize Georgian law enforcement agencies. The assistance is to upgrade and expand the Georgian Police Academy, create a new criminal forensic lab, and finance enhanced legal capabilities of the Georgian government. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIAN PRESIDENT ACCUSES ADJAR LEADER OF SEEKING TO RECRUIT MERCENARIES

25 March

President Saakashvili told journalists on 24 March that he has information that Adjar State Council Chairman Aslan Abashidze is seeking to hire foreign mercenaries in Chechnya and Ukraine for use in the event of an armed standoff with the central Georgian government. Abashidze denied those allegations. In Kyiv, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry summoned Georgian Ambassador Grigol Katamadze on 25 March and demanded an explanation of Saakashvili's remarks, which it termed "inadmissible" in the light of Ukraine's efforts to help resolve the Abkhaz conflict. (Caucasus Press)

AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT DENIES EXISTENCE OF AGREEMENTS ON KARABAKH SETTLEMENT

26 March

Ilham Aliyev told journalists in Baku on 24 March on his return from an official visit to Tashkent that there is no truth to Armenian claims that during talks in early 2001 in Paris and Florida, his father and predecessor, former President Heidar Aliyev, reached agreement with Armenian President Robert Kocharian on resolving the Karabakh conflict. Armenian officials have repeatedly said the two presidents reached an informal agreement, but the late Azerbaijani president and other senior Azerbaijani officials have steadfastly denied it. Addressing

a conference in Bratislava last week, Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian said Heidar Aliyev and Kocharian committed to paper in Florida in April 2001, but did not sign, an agreement reached orally in Paris two months earlier. Guliev argued that one cannot speak of an "agreement" that remained unsigned. Also on 24 March, it was reported that Guliev will not travel to Prague for talks with Oskanian scheduled for 29 March, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported on 25 March. (RFE/RL)

ABDUCTED GEORGIAN NGO HEAD RELEASED

26 March

David Badzagua, who was abducted by Abkhaz gunmen in Abkhazia's Gali Raion in January, was handed over to Georgian police on 26 March. Badzagua told the independent Georgian TV station Rustavi-2 that his captors informed him that he was taken hostage because of his activities as head of an NGO that promotes friendship between young Georgians and Abkhaz. (Caucasus Press)

KAZAKHSTAN READIES 'ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT' PROJECT

26 March

A working group led by Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister Grigori Marchenko approved the overall concept and strategy for Kazakhstan's "electronic government" project at a 26 March meeting. The project's stated aim is to increase government efficiency, information accessibility, and transparency by making as much information as possible available to citizens. Project developers include representatives of the executive branch, experts from Kazakhstan's information-technology sector, and businesspeople. The project will soon be presented to the cabinet. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

RUSSIAN BANK TO HANDLE TURKMEN DEBT COLLECTION

29 March

Russia's privately owned National Reserve Bank (NRB) will represent Turkmenistan in the country's efforts to recover its international debts. The agreement came in the course of a meeting between NRB President Yurii Kudimov and Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov. Turkmenistan hopes to collect \$500 million in debts from Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, as well as \$50 million from a number of Russian commercial banks. In remarks delivered after his meeting with Niyazov, Kudimov stressed NRB's experience in the debt market. NRB is one of Russia's largest investment banks. (RosBalt)

'TERROR' BLASTS ROCK UZBEKISTAN

29 March

At least 19 people have been killed and 26 others injured in a series of blasts and attacks in Uzbekistan. Prosecutor General Rashid Kadyrov said suicide bombers killed three policemen and a child in an attack at a bazaar in the capital, Tashkent. There were also three fatal shootings of policemen in Tashkent, and a

blast at the home of an alleged extremist in Bukhara, that killed 10 people. Uzbekistan's president linked foreign extremists to the attacks. In a televised address to the nation, President Islam Karimov stressed his view that whoever was responsible must have connections with a foreign organisation. Officials said two of the blasts - in Tashkent's crowded Chorsu bazaar were carried out by women suicide bombers operating for the first time in Central Asia. "These were terrorist acts," Mr Kadyrov told reporters at a news conference in Tashkent, blaming religious extremists. "There is reason to believe they were prepared over a long period and co-ordinated from a centre, possibly abroad," he said. Foreign Minister Sadyk Safayev said the attacks were aimed at undermining the US-led coalition against terrorism, in which Uzbekistan has been a staunch ally of Washington. Police said they had found radical Muslim literature among explosives at one of the crime scenes, however no-one has so far claimed the responsibility for the attacks. The alternative view is that Uzbek militants are adopting a new way of striking at old targets - in this case the police. The police - who wield great power in Uzbekistan - are widely seen as instruments of the state rather than defenders of the law. The bombs at the Chorsu bazaar exploded at about 0900. One of the female suicide bombers blew herself at a nearby police rally ground, while the other set off the bomb at a bus stop. In separate incidents late on Sunday and early on Monday, three police officers were killed in shootouts with gunmen in and around the capital. (BBC)

TAJK OPPOSITION PARTY'S REGISTRATION REJECTED

29 MARCH

Tajikistan's Justice Ministry turned down the opposition Taraqqiyot Party's application for registration on 29 March. According to the Justice Ministry, 11 of the 1,173 people listed as party supporters have denied involvement with the party. Taraqqiyot Chairman Sulton Quvvatov told the Avesta website on 29 March that party members were "illegally detained and even tortured" to force them to renounce their party affiliation. Quvvatov vowed to file an appeal with Tajikistan's Supreme Court. If that is unsuccessful, he said, Taraqqiyot will take its case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague. (RIA - Novosti)

NO CONSCRIPTS TO SERVE IN CHECHNYA FROM 2005 - GENERAL STAFF

30 March

Conscripts will not serve in Chechnya starting from 2005. "In accordance with the federal target program, the 42nd motorized division and the 46th division of the Interior Ministry's Interior Troops will be staffed with contract servicemen by the end of 2004. We are hoping that there will be no conscripts in Chechnya beginning from 2005," Colonel General Vasily Smirnov, the head of the main organizational mobilization department of the Russian General Staff, told reporters in Moscow on Tuesday. The military commissariats in Chechnya will recruit conscripts as usual, Smirnov said. "Of course, there are restrictions on the Chechen military commissariats for objective reasons. However, conscription will be conducted this spring by all military commissariats in Chechnya," he said. (Interfax)

US OFFERS HELP ON UZBEK ATTACKS

31 March

The US has offered to help Uzbekistan probe the attacks which have killed at least 42 people in the last three days. American Secretary of State Colin Powell made the offer in a telephone call to his Uzbek counterpart. Uzbekistan says 23 people died when suspected militants blew themselves up during a gun battle with special forces in the capital, Tashkent, on Tuesday. On Sunday and Monday, 19 people were killed and 26 injured in bombs in Tashkent and the city of Bukhara. The US and Uzbekistan have been close allies since the 11 September attacks, after which the Uzbek government made its airspace and military facilities available to US forces, facilitating the operation to remove the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has since become an important strategic outpost for the US. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that while the two countries may have co-operated in the war on terrorism, Uzbekistan must introduce democratic reforms: "More democracy is the best antidote to terror," he said. No-one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, the bloodiest seen in the former Soviet republic for years. Uzbek officials have suggested one group, Hizb ut-Tahrir, could be to blame. But the group, which has its headquarters in London, has denied any involvement, saying it "does not engage in terrorism, violence or armed struggle". Another group under suspicion is the home-grown Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The group's leader Tahir Yuldashev is accused of orchestrating the series of deadly bomb attacks in Tashkent in 1999. However, Shahida Tulaganova of the BBC's Central Asia Service says that the group, which fought alongside the Taliban during the Afghan conflict is now in tatters, with many of its leaders being held by the US in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. (BBC)

ONLY TWO PARTIES PROCEED TO GEORGIAN PARLIAMENT

31 March

Only two Georgian political parties, the ruling party United National Movement-Democrats and the Right- Industrialists, have obtained enough votes to be represented in parliament, the Central Elections Commission (CEC) announced on Wednesday. The interim results of the vote counting shows that the United National Movement-Democrats received 67.2% of the vote, the Right- Industrialists 7.6%, Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze's party Democratic Revival Union 6.2% and the Labor Party 5.8% in the parliamentary elections last Sunday. To gain seats in parliament, a political party must receive at least 7% of the vote. "These are only preliminary results of the elections. The final results will be confirmed after district elections commissions and courts consider complaints," CEC Chairman Zurab Chiaberashvili said. (Interfax)

DETAINED AZERBAIJANI OPPOSITIONISTS PROTEST PROCEDURAL VIOLATIONS

31 March

Six prominent Azerbaijani opposition figures arrested last fall for their alleged role in the 15-16 March clashes in Baku in the wake of the disputed presidential election have written to First Deputy Prosecutor General Ramiz Rzaev to protest procedural violations in the ongoing investigation of their case. Specifically, they complain that they have been pressured to sign a statement

that they have familiarized themselves with the investigation findings, although they have not been granted the statutory minimum period of time in which to do so. (Turan)

GEORGIAN RIGHT-WING OPPOSITION FEARS REVISION OF ELECTION OUTCOME

31 March

Gogi Topadze and David Gamkrelidze, co-leaders of the Industrialists-New Rightists election alliance, told journalists in Tbilisi on 31 March that they suspect the Georgian authorities of planning to annul the 28 March election results in constituencies in Akhaltsikhe, Akhmeta, Kareli, Gardabani, and Signakhi where their bloc collected a large number of votes. As of late 30 March, with 93 percent of the ballots counted, the ruling National Movement-Democrats had 67.7 percent, followed by the Industrialists-New Rightists with 7.6 percent. No other party had surmounted the 7 percent minimum required to win parliamentary representation under the proportional system. Abashidze's Union for Democratic Revival was in third place with 6.13 percent of the vote. (Caucasus Press)

78 ABDUCTED IN CHECHNYA IN 2004

31 March

Seventy-eight Chechen residents have been kidnapped in the republic since the beginning of the year, the Memorial human rights center said. "Our tentative report suggests that 78 residents have been abducted in Chechnya since the beginning of 2004. Of them, 33 have been released, 41 are believed to have gone missing and four have been found dead," Memorial spokesman Dmitry Grushkin told Interfax on Wednesday. A total of 60 Chechens have been killed in the republic in 2004, Grushkin said, adding that "of them, 30 were civilians, six were officials of Chechen security agencies, seven are presumed to be members of illegal armed units, and 17 have yet to be identified." "A total of 495 people were abducted in Chechnya in 2003. Of them, 155 were released, 52 were found dead and 288 are still missing," he said. Asked who is responsible for the abductions, Grushkin said that he "has a feeling that more people have been kidnapped by Chechen security agencies. Rebels are continuing to abduct people as well. Feuds between criminal groups can be blamed for a certain percentage of abductions." Grushkin complained of ineffective investigations into these crimes in Chechnya. "We sent a letter asking the prosecutor's office to provide information on virtually every abduction. They open a criminal case following every abduction. Most of the prosecutor office's replies to our requests say that the kidnapers have not been found," he said. Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov told the republic's governmental session in Grozny on March 18 that some 3,000 people were believed to have gone missing in Chechnya over the past few years. Kadyrov also criticized law enforcement agencies for their ineffective involvement in investigating abductions. (Interfax)

DONORS PLEDGE \$8.2BN AFGHAN AID

1 April

Donor countries have pledged \$8.2bn (£4.4bn) in aid for Afghanistan over the next three years, said Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani. The pledges were made after an appeal by Afghan President Hamid Karzai at a two-day donors conference in Berlin. Afghanistan has also agreed with its six

neighbouring countries to step up cooperation over drug trafficking. President Karzai told delegates that drugs were undermining the "very existence" of his country. Mr Ghani said he was "delighted" by the pledges from donor countries - which are significantly higher than at the last donors conference in Tokyo in 2002. The largest donor is again the United States, which has promised \$2.2bn over the next two years. Britain has virtually doubled its financial commitment, by pledging \$900m (£500m). "The pledges today make it possible to meet the hopes of our citizens that we will be able to participate in a dream of a better future," Mr Ghani told a press conference. He said that \$4.4bn had been pledged for this year alone. "This is 100% of our target". But the figure still falls far short of what the Afghans had hoped for. The Kabul government says it needs \$27.5bn over seven years to rebuild the country. Officials hope more money may be forthcoming if elections planned for September are successful, adds our correspondent. The World Bank's country director for Afghanistan, Alastair McKechnie, has defended the amount of development aid being sought by Kabul. He put the total cost of two decades of war at about \$240bn. "The figure of \$27.5bn may seem a lot but it will simply help Afghanistan get back on the track from which its people were brutally wrenched in the late seventies," he said. (BBC)

AZERBAIJANI PROSECUTOR CALLS FOR PRISON TERM FOR POPULAR IMAM

1 April

The prosecutor has called for Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, the popular imam of Baku's Djuma Mosque, to be sentenced to 4 1/2 years' imprisonment for his alleged role in the clashes in Baku on 16 October in the wake of the previous day's disputed presidential election. Ibrahimoglu, who also heads the Center for the Defense of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Belief, was accompanying a group of OSCE election observers who witnessed, but did not participate in, the 16 October clashes between police and opposition supporters. In his closing statement he told the court that "I feel like a victim of the inquisition. I realize that if the opportunity presented itself, I would be burned at the stake... The charges against me are absolutely groundless." Azerbaijan's State Committee for Religious Affairs released a statement on 1 April stressing that it played no role in Ibrahimoglu's arrest or trial. At the same time, the statement pointed out that Ibrahimoglu's congregation is illegal insofar as it has failed to register with the committee, and that it occupied the Djuma Mosque illegally without first securing permission from the Culture Ministry, which is responsible for historic buildings. (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJAN MARKS GENOCIDE DAY

1 April

In a 31 March address to mark Azerbaijani Genocide Day, President Ilham Aliyev accused Armenians of pursuing a policy of genocide against Azerbaijanis for the past two centuries with the aim of driving Azerbaijanis from their territory and incorporating it into a "Greater Armenia." He said Azerbaijan is working to eliminate the consequences of "Armenian aggression," and that he is certain the Karabakh conflict will be resolved "in keeping with international legal norms." Genocide Day was first observed in 1998 at the behest of Ilham Aliyev's

father and predecessor Heidar Aliyev, marking the date in 1918 when predominantly Armenian Bolshevik forces killed some 50,000 people in Baku. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA PUZZLED BY U.S. CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE'S RESOLUTION

1 April

Duma Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Konstantin Kosachev (Unified Russia) expressed bewilderment on 1 April at a 31 March U.S. House of Representatives International Relations Committee resolution calling on U.S. President George W. Bush to make efforts to suspend Russia's participation in the Group of Eight (G-8) leading industrialized countries. The U.S. resolution -- which was authored by Representatives Thomas Lantos (Democrat, California) and Christopher Cox (Republican, California), and Senators Joseph Lieberman (Democrat, Connecticut) and John McCain (Republican, Arizona) -- states that Russia should be excluded from the G-8 because it is not observing the principles of democracy. Kosachev said the U.S. resolution stems from a misunderstanding of the nature and function of the G-8. Speaking in Berlin, Foreign Minister Lavrov said on 1 April that the U.S. resolution is not serious and attributed it to election-year politics in the United States. (ITAR-TASS)

MILITARY SAY BASAYEV MIGHT HAVE LEFT CHECHNYA

2 April

Military sources in Chechnya are not ruling out the possibility that rebel leader Shamil Basayev has stepped down as commander of the rebel groups in the republic and fled. The sources said that they came to this conclusion based on reports from former rebels. Col. Ilya Shabalkin, spokesman for the regional headquarters for the counter-terrorism operation in the North Caucasus, quoted these reports as saying that a Mojahedin session has not been held for the past three years. "The rebels say that neither Maskhadov nor Basayev has ever attended these sessions. Moreover, nobody has any idea about their whereabouts. It has long been rumored among rebels that Basayev stopped commanding rebel units and left Chechnya," Shabalkin said. "However, in order to put pressure on rebels, some high-profile leaders, such as Umarov, make some of their supporters pretend to be envoys of Maskhadov or Basayev before the sessions' participants. This has been going on for a long time," he added. "Judging by the number of rebels leaving their groups, the deceitful tricks of rebel commanders not only fail to work, but, moreover, provoke a reverse trend and increase the number of people who turn themselves in," Shabalkin said. (Interfax)

NEW AZERBAIJANI FOREIGN MINISTER APPOINTED

2 April

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev on 2 April appointed a career diplomat as his new foreign minister. The new foreign minister, Almar Mammadyarov, replaces Vilayat Guliyev, who held the post since 1999. Mammadyarov served with the Azerbaijani Embassy in Washington and as ambassador to Italy. Reaction to the news was mixed, with former Foreign Minister Tofik Zulfugarov saying the move "is undoubtedly a positive fact" that

will allow a career diplomat to be able to reorganize and improve the Foreign Ministry. Opposition leader Ali Kerimli of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AHCP) offered an opposing view, suggesting that the appointment of a relatively unknown person reflects the government's intention to limit the role and influence of the foreign minister. Kerimli added that the appointment of Zulfugarov is based more on his record as an "obedient functionary" with no political standing than on diplomatic experience with credentials. (Turan)

MEN SUSPECTED OF PLANNING ATTACK AGAINST SAAKASHVILI DETAINED

2 April

Georgian State Security Ministry officials have detained a group of people suspected of planning an attack on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgian Deputy State Security Minister Gigi Ugulava told a news conference on Friday. "A group of assassins was sent to Tbilisi by highly placed officials in the Ajarian Interior Ministry and Security Ministry," he said. The four people were sent to Tbilisi "to study the [Georgian] president's routes," he said. "Another two members of this group are currently hiding in Batumi," Ugulava said. Ugulava gave no further details. Interfax currently has no information on the reaction of the Ajarian authorities to this statement. (Interfax)

UZBEKISTAN SEEKS INFO ABOUT MILITANTS ARRESTED IN PAKISTAN TRIBAL AREA

3 April

Uzbekistan has sought information about its citizens arrested during operation by Pakistani military against the al-Qaeda suspects in the tribal region, bordering Afghanistan. "We have received a communication from the Uzbek embassy in Islamabad and Pakistani embassy in Uzbekistan, to provide the details of the people of Uzbek origin arrested during the operation," Foreign Office spokesman Masood Khan said. Pakistan military says that around 167 militants, including Uzbek nationals have been arrested in the last month major military operation in South Waziristan tribal region against foreign militants and those sheltering them. "We are considering the proposal and have not yet responded to request by Uzbekistan," Khan told reporters in Islamabad. Pakistan government had also said that leader of Uzbekistan Islamic group Tahir Yuldeshtov was injured during the Waziristan operation. There was no independent confirmation of the claim. A two-week army offensive against al-Qaeda that ended on Sunday left around 100 dead, according to the military. One ambush of an army convoy on 22 March near Saroki area left 19 soldiers dead, eight of whom were shot after being taken hostage. The hunt for their killers has also been stepped up with thousands of armed Mahsud tribesmen searching homes and asking for information. Meanwhile, the Pakistani army has again stepped up its campaign to drive out al-Qaeda fighters and their supporters in South Waziristan. Reports suggest that helicopters have dropped leaflets urging tribesmen to convince the supporters to leave the area. The government has also renewed an amnesty offer to foreigners associated with al-Qaeda who give themselves up. Governor of North West Frontier Province, retired Lieutenant-General Syed Iftikhar Hussain Shah, said if the foreigners surrendered and the tribe harbouring them gave an undertaking

not to commit violence, they could be allowed to leave with their families. The army says 46 soldiers and 63 opposition fighters died in the two-week South Waziristan offensive against "terrorist structures" that ended on Sunday. Another 163 fighters were arrested, it says. (Pakistan.link)

GEORGIAN ARMY READY TO COMBAT CRIME IN AJARIA - DEFENSE MINISTER

3 April

The Georgian armed forces, if necessary, will be ready to take part in operations to restore the constitutional order in Ajaria, Georgian Defense Minister Gela Bezhushvili said at a press briefing in Tbilisi on Saturday. While commenting on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's recent statement about the armed forces' readiness to curb all manifestations of separatism in Ajaria, he said that "the armed forces have participated in anti-criminal operations jointly with the police on many occasions." "In Ajaria we are witnessing criminal manifestations and violations of the constitution," said Bezhushvili. He said that the Ajarian authorities are supplying citizens with weapons and forming armed groups, "which must not go unnoticed." He noted, however, that "internal problems should be settled exclusively by political means." Asked whether the Russian military base may support the Ajarian authorities, Bezhushvili said that in Moscow he had received firm guarantees from the Russian military authorities that Russia will not interfere in Georgia's internal affairs. (Interfax)

SOROS BELIEVES FUND CAN HELP BEAT CORRUPTION IN GEORGIA

3 April

In an interview published in the Saturday issue of the Ukrainian weekly Mirror of the Week, Soros said he really believes the attempt to set up proper conditions for government officials is a step towards eradicating corruption. As was reported earlier, the development and reform fund was set up with Soros's participation in March to provide additional monthly allowances of \$1,500 for the president and other top officials and \$1,200 for the ministers and prosecutor general. The general extra salary budget for the Georgian government officials is expected to amount to \$2 million. Soros argued that if a top official receives a salary of \$1,500, this would make it possible to invite a skilled specialist to the post and demand that he perform his duties conscientiously. If a road police officer earns \$150, measures can be taken so that he cannot extort money from teamsters, Soros said. Moreover, if road police officers wear badges indicating their names, those engaged in bribes would be easier to uncover and dismiss from their jobs to replace them with more honest ones, he said. As for prospects for establishing a similar fund in Ukraine, Soros noted that Georgia passed a corresponding legislation, which Ukraine could do as well. Describing the current situation in Georgia, the American philanthropist said he believes authoritarian rule cannot be established in that country. He admitted that when only one political force is represented in parliament, this poses some danger, but there are people in civil society who are committed to the ideals of democracy and who will control the authorities. (Interfax)

GEORGIAN PEACEKEEPING TROOPS TO DEPLOY IN IRAQ

5 April

Georgian Defense Minister Gela Bezhushvili announced on 5 April that 155 peacekeeping troops will be deployed to Iraq in the next few days. An additional 55 peacekeepers are also to be sent to Iraq for a six-month peacekeeping mission next month. Although 70 Georgian troops previously served as peacekeepers in Iraq from August 2003 to February 2004, this latest deployment was repeatedly delayed by an agreement between Georgian and U.S. military officials over the financing of the mission. (ITAR-TASS)

KAZAKH-UZBEK BORDER BACK TO NORMAL

5 April

Checkpoints on the Kazakh-Uzbek border are once again functioning normally. Heightened security measures during and immediately after the terror attacks in Uzbekistan between 28 March and 1 April had enforced a near shutdown in cross-border traffic. Though document checks and inspections "are being carried out thoroughly," Kazakh officials told the newspaper that travelers have been able to enter Uzbekistan for the last two days. While traffic is allowed through during the day, checkpoints are closed at night. Despite the return to relative normalcy, Kazakh border-patrol units remain on alert. (Kazakhstan Today)

UZBEK PRESIDENT SPEAKS WITH BUSH BY TELEPHONE

5 April

Islam Karimov accepted condolences from U.S. President George W. Bush in a 2 April telephone conversation in which the two leaders discussed the recent string of violent incidents in Uzbekistan, uza.uz reported the same day. Bush stressed that "the terrorist acts in Uzbekistan are inseparably linked to the chain of crimes committed by international terrorism," the news agency reported. (RFE/RL)

U.S. REPS URGE REFORMS IN UZBEKISTAN

5 April

A U.S. congressional delegation urged the Uzbek government Monday to press ahead with democratic reforms in the wake of terror attacks that killed 47 people last week, saying it was "the natural and correct step." Calling the attacks an attempt "to destabilize the government of Uzbekistan," U.S. Rep. David Dreier, R-Calif., said the United States was willing to help determine who was behind the series of bombings and shootings. Uzbek authorities are still hunting for those suspected of carrying out the attacks. "How many? If we knew that, then we'd be the happiest people in the world," Prosecutor-General spokeswoman Svetlana Artikova said. Officials have said unspecified international terror groups were responsible for the attacks, which mainly targeted police, killing 10 officers and four civilians. Thirty-three alleged terrorists were killed in four days of explosions, suicide attacks and assaults on police that began March 28. Dreier said the attacks should prompt the Uzbek government to enact reforms. "I happen to believe that from this tragedy, moving toward the goal of bringing about greater political freedoms and economic freedoms is the natural and correct step," Dreier told reporters after meeting with Uzbek Foreign Minister Sadyk Safayev. A U.S. State Department report on human rights in Uzbekistan released in February said the

government was committing "numerous serious abuses." At least four people died in custody last year because of mistreatment by authorities, the report said, and between 5,300 and 5,800 people were in prisons for political or religious reasons. Dreier's delegation was in Uzbekistan to "conduct oversight on the U.S. regional security presence, including the ongoing operations in Afghanistan," the U.S. Embassy in Tashkent said in a statement. (AP)

US AFGHAN ENVOY ANGERS PAKISTAN

6 April

Pakistan has angrily denounced comments made by the US ambassador to Afghanistan that America may move against "terrorists" based in Pakistan. Pakistan's information minister said the army could deal with the problem and the comments were "harmful". He said Pakistan would never allow foreign troops on its soil. Islamabad has repeatedly rejected Afghan complaints that it is not doing enough to stop cross-border raids by al-Qaeda and Taleban remnants. Correspondents say the issue of American troops being deployed in Pakistan is extremely sensitive and likely to be deeply unpopular among most of the public. US Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad sparked the row on Monday when he said that America could not allow "terrorist sanctuaries" in Pakistan to "fester indefinitely". He said one of the greatest worries for the US was the fact that the Taleban and other hostile groups continue to use Pakistan as a base in which they train and operate. "We have told the Pakistani leadership that either they must solve this problem or we will do it for ourselves," Mr Khalilzad said in a speech to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank. Mr Khalilzad said that Washington would prefer Islamabad to deal with the problem, and that the Pakistani government had agreed. "We are prepared to help President Musharraf," he said, "because one way or another the problem will have to be dealt with." But Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Ahmed Rashid said the army was fully capable of "confronting terrorists" and it was not necessary for US troops to cross the border from Afghanistan. Pakistani troops "have sacrificed their lives in fulfilling their pledge to combat terrorists", he said. "We do not need anybody in our territories - neither can permission be given to anyone. "These kind of irresponsible statements can create political problems for us. "We are the country that has delivered the best results in this war... our progress is far better than anybody." It is not the first time that the US Afghanistan ambassador has been at the centre of a row - last month he also irritated Islamabad by saying that

al-Qaeda fugitives were launching attacks into Afghanistan from Pakistani soil. (BBC)

DEFENSE MINISTER WARNS OF RISING TIDE OF TERRORISM

6 April

Speaking at an international conference on the role of the military in combating terrorism on 5 April in Norfolk, Virginia, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov called on NATO countries to move from "theoretical evaluations to practical steps in the joint fight against international terrorism," RTR reported. Ivanov mentioned recent terrorist acts in Spain, Russia, and the Middle East and warned that the tide of global terrorism is rising. "Soon we defense ministers and senior security officials will be discussing international terrorism while sitting in highly protected concrete bunkers," Ivanov told the conference. He also criticized NATO's role in Kosova, saying, "today the NATO stabilization operation there has -- I'm not afraid to say - failed." While in the United States, Ivanov will meet with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and U.S. national security adviser Condoleezza Rice. (RFE/RL)

ARMENIAN POLICE IGNORE ATTACKS ON JOURNALISTS DURING OPPOSITION RALLY

6 April

As a number of uniformed police passively watched, a number of journalists and cameramen were blatantly assaulted and injured in an organized attack by unknown assailants during an opposition rally on 5 April, according to RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau and Arminfo. The journalists were attacked after they were observed filming several coordinated incidents involving groups of men disrupting and threatening opposition supporters. Police units observed the disruptive acts, which included the pelting of opposition speakers with eggs and throwing firecrackers into the crowd, but failed to react. The police further remained passive as the groups of men attacked several cameramen and photographers, destroying or seizing their video equipment. National Unity Party leader Artashes Geghamian, himself repeatedly pelted with eggs as he addressed supporters, claimed in a later RFE/RL interview that the assailants "were bodyguards of three or four business tycoons close to Kocharian." The only police action throughout the day was limited to blocking all roads leading into the capital, preventing larger numbers of opposition supporters from attending the rally, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. (RFE/RL)

