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*Central
Asia-Caucasus
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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: Ideal length between 1000 and 1200 words.

KEY ISSUE: A short 100-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-400 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-400 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. 700-800 words.

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

Svante E. Cornell, Editor
Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst
Central Asia-Caucasus Institute
The Johns Hopkins University
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies
1619 Massachusetts Ave. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
Tel. +1-202-663-5922; 1-202-663-7723
Fax. +1-202-663-7785

RUSSIA PUNISHES THE OSCE – AND PUTS PRESSURE ON GEORGIA

Pavel K. Baev

Moscow's sharp demarche against the OSCE launched last December and continuing into mid-January was not entirely unexpected. President Putin and his lieutenants in charge of foreign policy had issued a series of critical statements about the Organization, accusing it of applying 'double standards' and engaging in 'intrusive mentorship'. Unlike in many other cases, Russia here followed words with deeds, effectively blocking the adoption of the budget for the OSCE activities in 2005. The key demand is to discontinue the OSCE monitoring of the Georgian-Russian border – and that in itself should be a matter of serious concern.

BACKGROUND: For most of its history, the OSCE was Moscow's favorite among European organizations, praised by Gorbachev as a key structure of his 'all-European house' and portrayed by Yeltsin as an alternative to NATO enlargement. Russia's most cherished idea about this all-inclusive body has always been to create a top executive body shaped after the UN Security Council, with a few permanent members and veto rights. The majority of member-states, however, see no good reason for granting Russia such privileged status, so Moscow by the late 1990s had practically lost interest in the OSCE's activities.

This indifference has gradually been giving way to irritation, and the OSCE's less than flattering report on the March 2004 presidential elections in Russia, which 'did not adequately reflect principles necessary for a healthy democratic election', was left without comment – but has not been forgotten. It was certainly the OSCE's quick and firm conclusion on massive falsifications during the October elections in Ukraine that turned Russia's irritation into anger, and President Vladimir Putin during his visit to Portugal asserted that the OSCE 'would continue to lose authority at the international arena and lose its very reason for existence'.

Further sharp exchanges between Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Colin

Powell took place at the OSCE annual ministerial conference in Istanbul on 6-7 December. It even proved impossible to adopt a traditional joint declaration. Exploiting the requirement for unanimous support, Moscow then voted down the approval of the OSCE budget for 2005 (approximately euros 200 million) and indicated that its proposals for reforms in the Organization were negotiable but the demand to discontinue the monitoring of Georgia-Chechnya border as 'mission accomplished' was not.

It should be noted that Russia's frontal assault against the OSCE is not supported even by its closest allies. For that matter, President Akayev expressed his gratitude to the OSCE for the help in strengthening Kyrgyzstan's law enforcement system on November 29, the same day as Lavrov's harshly critical article appeared in the Financial Times.

IMPLICATIONS: The pattern of Russia's attack against the OSCE is quite consistent but it is still unclear why the small team of monitors (70-strong in winter and 150 in summer) in Georgia was singled out as the main target. It is one thing to refuse the permission for the OSCE monitors to go to Chechnya where they would have uncovered new evidence of gross human rights violations, but it is an altogether different issue to discontinue the international presence at the border, which Russia should be interested in

keeping under close observation. Indeed, the OSCE has been able to check many signals on the alleged movements of Chechen rebels from the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia to Chechnya and back.

The unavoidable conclusion is that Moscow does not want its claims about a 'safe haven' for terrorists in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge to be independently checked. In the aftermath of the Beslan school massacre, Russian officials, and first of all Defense Minister Ivanov, issued several threats to deliver 'preventive strikes' to terrorist bases beyond the country's borders. Despite Putin's ambitious claims about 'wonder missiles' and improved power projection capabilities, it is sufficiently clear that Russia's strategic reach remains limited to its immediate neighborhood. All these statements could certainly amount to nothing more than a grand strategic bluff. Veteran Russia watchers may remember that back in Fall 2000, then Defense Minister Igor Sergeev threatened to deliver air strikes on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; Russia, nevertheless, has refrained from any participation in international peacekeeping operations in this country. In the Georgian case, however, this bluffing, which started back in September 2002 with Putin's ultimatum, seems to have accumulated to a critical mass. The desire to 'teach a lesson' to Georgia's dynamic President Mikheil Saakashvili, who scored an impressive victory over Russia recovering control over Adjara and did not blink during the risky escalation in South Ossetia during last August, could become irresistible. Much like in the confrontation around Tskhinvali, Moscow would prefer to have no witnesses to its brutal 'pedagogy', so the OSCE must leave.

CONCLUSIONS: Since Beslan in early September, Russia has not seen a major terrorist attack, but there are few doubts that another one would again strike deep and painful. The Kremlin cannot afford yet another demonstration of its inefficiency and helplessness, so a strike against Georgia could be in the cards. Russian Defense Ministry has announced plans for deploying the first battery of *Iskander-M* tactical missiles, which could become an instrument of choice. An additional benefit would be to prove the effectiveness of this weapons system to potential buyers, mainly in the Middle East.

Moscow currently denies plans to export these missiles to Syria, but the prototypes have been exhibited in several arms shows in the region. The strike, if it happens, is certain to trigger massive international criticism. Yet President Putin is confident in his ability to manipulate the counter-terrorist cause and has a potential trump card in his sleeve: Russian troops for Iraq. As for the OSCE, Russia is firm set to continue pushing it into irrelevance and this organization, quite unfortunately, is vulnerable to this pressure. Georgia now desperately tries to shift the monitoring operation under an EU aegis, but the newly-expanded Union has its hands quite full in the Balkans and seems to be in no rush to pick up a confrontation with Russia.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dr. Pavel K. Baev is a Senior Researcher at the International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO).



**Developing Counter-Narcotics
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Kairat Osmonaliev

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TOWARDS A BI-PARTY SYSTEM IN AZERBAIJAN?

Fariz Ismailzade

The abolishment of the proportional electoral system to Azerbaijan's Parliament in 2002 was considered by many as a blow to democracy. Opposition parties claimed that they could not survive and attract supporters without elections based on party lists. Yet, as time showed the majoritarian system of elections in fact benefited opposition parties. The absence of list-based competition between political parties led to a situation where opposition parties are better off forming a coalition than competing with each other. This, in turn, could be the start of a bi-party system in a long run, a system known for its relative stability but lack of choice.

BACKGROUND: In August 2002 the national referendum, held at the initiative of then President Heydar Aliyev, put forth 29 questions to be decided by voters. Among them was the abolishment of the proportional system of elections to the Parliament. The voters overwhelmingly supported the idea, thus transforming Azerbaijan's electoral system from 'mixed' to 'majoritarian only.' From now on, all 125 deputies to the Milli Mejlis (Parliament) were to be elected from single-mandate electoral districts.

At the time, opposition parties and NGOs fiercely defended the proportional system. Many argued that the abolishment of the proportional system would kill the multi-party system in the country and hurt democracy in the long run. Some oppositionists even stated that the government had made a move towards a total dictatorship in the country and the gradual disappearance of political parties. Indeed, political parties in Azerbaijan seemed more interested in those 25 proportional seats than in the 100 majoritarian ones. Although much of their reaction to the abolishment of the proportional system of elections was emotional and based on their hostility to the government, many indeed believed that it was the party lists and proportional elections that kept the parties floating and attractive during elections. By 2000, there were more than 40 parties in the country. Yet, at the same time bitter competition between the

opposition parties did not allow them to unite prior to the crucial parliamentary elections of 2000.

The proponents of the idea, mainly from the ruling party, argued that deputies elected from single-mandate districts feel more responsibility toward their voters in a concrete geographic area than deputies elected from the general party list would.

With the 2005 parliamentary elections approaching, opposition parties have renewed their dialogue towards consolidation. Major opposition parties such as the Popular Front, Democratic and Musavat parties have come out of tri-party negotiations saying that a preliminary agreement for a united coalition has been reached. Other minor parties and NGOs seem eager to join the coalition, which has been announced by the chairman of Popular Front party Ali Kerimli as "open for all democratic forces in the country."

IMPLICATIONS: The abolishment of the proportional system may have hurt the opposition parties in the short run. Foremost, the chairmen of the parties, who simultaneously fulfill the roles of fundraisers, godfathers and charismatic, irreplaceable leaders, lost the power they had when they were in charge of drafting the lists of candidates for the proportional elections. Members of the political parties now do not feel the necessity to completely submit to the party chairperson, as

the majoritarian race puts them on more equal grounds. Secondly, the absence of party lists made the opposition parties as such less attractive for potential members and politicians, as the race in a single mandate electoral district requires more personal power and popularity than the party's support, a support that the parties in many instances are unable to provide anyway.

In the long run, the abolition of the proportional system benefited the opposition parties in the country. Although it is too early for some oppositionists to realize this, some have been already stating that it is indeed the case. What many opposition parties did not notice or refused to notice in 2002 is becoming clear now. On the one hand, the abolition of the proportional system also abolished the bitter and unnecessary competition between political parties. Instead of fighting for 25 proportional seats, the opposition parties are now engaged in a dialogue on how to contest all the 125 majoritarian seats together. Since none of the existing opposition parties is strong enough to fight for all 125 constituencies, they have to look for potential allies in the areas where they are weak. This will allow them to share resources and thus form a united coalition – known as seat adjustments in other national contexts.

On the other hand, the proportional system was also used to put a tight grip and discipline on the ruling New Azerbaijan Party (YAP), in which the deputies were heavily dependent on the party headquarters. Now, with the majoritarian elections in place, many deputies wonder if they should rely on their own wealth and resources instead of waiting for the party leadership to help them. This, in turn, works to weaken the ruling party. Local media has already reported that several influential deputies from YAP advocated for the re-establishment of the proportional system. Rumors about this still circulate in local politics.

What is obvious in 2005 is that, perhaps for the first time in the post-Soviet history of Azerbaijan, the political spectrum is slowly moving from a multi-

party system to a bi-party system. It is not a coincidence that the U.S., UK and many other countries where the majoritarian system is practiced, have two main strong parties, whereas countries like Turkey and Italy, where party lists still exist, have a multi-party and often shaky political system.

In Azerbaijan, these two large political parties have not been formed yet, either logistically or ideologically. However, if things continue to develop in such a way, it should not be excluded that a bi-party system will be established in the country. One party will for the foreseeable future be the ruling YAP, with the ideological base of strong statehood and a heavy role for the government; and the other is likely to be a united opposition with an ideological base liberalism and smaller central government.

CONCLUSIONS: The parliamentary elections in November 2005 will be a key test to the development of political processes in the country. Should the opposition be able to unite, as seem to be the case presently, they will be able to pose a credible challenge to the ruling party. At the same time, the unification of the opposition parties will pave the way for their long-term merger and the formation of unified opposition front. This, in turn, could become the beginning of a large political force in a bi-party system, where rivalries between individual parties are less relevant. The abolishment of proportional system of elections will play a crucial role in the formation of such a system. Although it has several known shortcomings such as a lack of choice for voters, it can nevertheless boast with a record of a more stable system of government than a multi-party system.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Fariz Ismailzade is a freelance analyst on Caucasus politics and economics. He received his master's degree from Washington University in St. Louis and is a regular correspondent for various international media outlets.

UZBEKISTAN'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: GLASS HALF-FULL OR HALF-EMPTY?

Aftab Kazi

The Parliamentary Election in Uzbekistan was given modest western coverage. The coverage of world media and international organizations was limited to preconceived notions. Following controversies regarding the rejection of opposition parties' participation, independent foreign observers witnessed a well-planned and executed electoral process. The OSCE Limited Observers Mission acknowledged improvements in the electoral process, but concluded it did not meet OSCE standards. Most reports on the election nevertheless failed to note that the elections illustrate the gradual and controlled evolution of Uzbekistan's political system. As illustrated by the developing individual identities of the pro-government parties, Uzbekistan may not be complying with OSCE standards, but is moving in the direction of a more liberal and pluralistic system.

BACKGROUND: On December 26, 2004, official figures registered approximately 85% of the 14.32 million registered voters in Uzbekistan voting to elect the 120-member Legislative Chamber of the reformed bicameral Oliy Majlis (Parliament) and Kengashes (Councils). A total of 527 candidates from different parties filed applications. The opposition parties Birlik, Erk and Ozod were unable to participate in the election, having been barred in accordance with article 23 of the Central Election Commission Election Laws requiring eligible parties /candidates to provide signatures of at least 8% of the registered voter in districts contested to demonstrate an essential voter support base. The CEC had disqualified candidates, arguing they filed applications with false signatures. However 518 candidates from five political parties, independents and in coalition with the ruling Liberal Democratic Party contested.

The OSCE office in Tashkent claimed that the CEC denied it access to registration documentation related to approximately two-thirds of nominated candidates from opposition initiative groups, who were unable to contest. In spite of this significant setback, other evidence from the electoral process

since March 2004 suggests attempts at limited government dialogue with the opposition. The Birlik, Erk and Ozod opposition parties were officially permitted to stage public demonstrations outside the U.S. Embassy and OSCE office on November 26 and December 1, 2004 respectively. In the Uzbek context, this was a novel development.

Since the electoral preparations began in March 2004, the OSCE first decided not to send any observers; then resolved to send a Limited Observation Mission (LOM) of 20 members at the last minute, approximately two weeks before the election. On Election Day, foreign observers wanting to exchange notes with OSCE monitors found the LOM invisible at the polling stations. However, discussions among the 250 observers from 35 countries (58 of which were from CIS countries) confirmed a feeling that the brief OSCE statement focused on its limited pre-election day activities and opposition activities and less so the nine-month long overall electoral process and the actual polls on Election day. The relative absence of the LOM at the polling stations, and the speed of the OSCE press release the very next day, led to speculations among observers that the OSCE statement may

have been prepared by its Tashkent office alone without involving the LOM.

In the same spirit, a BBC broadcast on the morning of Election Day predicted “a lower voter turnout because of the rejection of opposition party candidates” before voting had even begun. Yet at numerous polling stations, independent foreign observers present at the polling stations witnessed crowds lining up to cast ballots.

IMPLICATIONS: Three separate groups of international observers offered opinions and impressions on the conduct of the elections on December 27. The CIS observers’ group was led by Vladimir Rushailo, and predictably lauded the process and called elections free and transparent by international norms in a press conference. Rushailo only admitted to minor problems and claimed OSCE officials agreed with the CIS observers group’s conclusions.

Secondly, a statement issued by Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj, head of the OSCE’s LOM acknowledged the mandated 30% quota for women in the House of Representatives as a significant development. However, he criticized the elections for not being democratic by OSCE standards, citing the lack of “political pluralism by blocking opposition parties from contest and depriving voters from genuine choice”. This statement acknowledged the limited scope of LOM to operate only in five electoral districts selected a week prior to election, but not on polling day. The third category was a group of independent foreign observers who were personally present at polling stations in large numbers. They were not asked for a joint public press statement. Their common opinion is hence impossible to establish, though most consulted by this author were impressed by the professionalism in actually carrying out the elections.

Comparatively speaking, the CIS mission’s credibility suffers from its record in earlier elections, seeming to be soft-hearted in monitoring, perhaps given similarities in political culture among the various CIS countries. The strength of OSCE

statement was its acknowledgment of some major developments, particularly on women participation, yet its greatest weakness was the inadequate scope of the LOM, which had not been able to observe the entire electoral process. The CEC has yet to comment on the OSCE’s statement that it denied the OSCE access to registration information.

Yet the OSCE’s statements reflect a simplistic view of the contestants in the election, especially of the five parties that were indeed allowed to contest the election. The OSCE and international media has routinely dismissed these parties simply because of their cordial relations with the ruling party. However, particularly in societies where a political party culture is nascent and only gradually evolving, these parties cannot be simply dismissed citing lack of pluralism. Although at their creation, these parties may have had little separate identity, they have since developed into political parties with different characters and ideological bases, indeed establishing their own contacts with like-minded political movements in the west and elsewhere. Although this does not amount to the creation of a western-type multi-party democracy, it does allow voters a modicum of choice and signifies the gradual political evolution taking place in Uzbekistan. A full-fledged observer mission with active participation at polling stations and possible mutual exchange of thoughts between OSCE/LOM and independent foreign observers could have helped to clarify these critical issues.

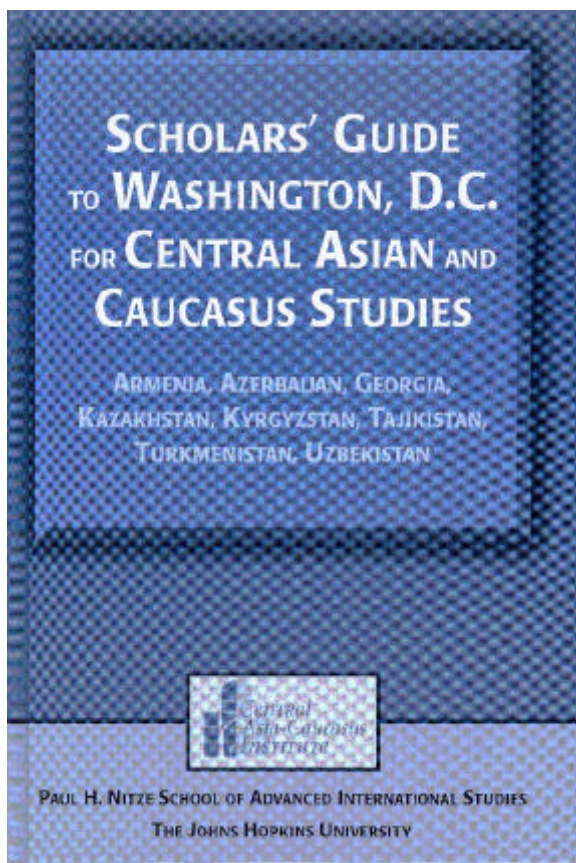
CONCLUSIONS: OSCE criticism of the referendum held in 2002 was a major impetus for the electoral laws applied since then and the pre-election political education and awareness campaign. Interaction with voters at polling stations and common folks in city markets, who voted early before opening shops, enabled independent observers to conclude that elections were conducted in an orderly manner within the gradually reforming operating levels of political culture in Uzbekistan. Meetings with officials and local experts suggested that a simultaneous creation of relatively liberal think tanks working together with parliamentary reform and gradually liberalizing

electoral processes reflected a commitment toward gradual political development. These approaches were stated especially by representatives of the Center for Political Studies, a liberal think-tank at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy in Tashkent, which considered Uzbekistan would learn more from the OSCE's constructive criticism.

Uzbekistan's elections may not have been conducted at standards established by the OSCE. Yet different political cultures cannot be judged uniformly outside their operating domains. Comparing Uzbekistan's elections with West European elections is unlikely to provide contextually correct conclusions. A deeper understanding of regional realities indicates that the

elections were a step forward in the electoral processes, hence forming a part of a gradual approach toward the creation of pluralism. Despite the controversy over the rejection of opposition parties, the December 26 elections introduced different political parties with their own identities, notwithstanding their coalition with the ruling party, and a commendable electoral management.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Professor Aftab Kazi is a Senior Fellow of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS. He participated as an independent international observer during the Parliamentary Elections in Uzbekistan.



The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute is proud to announce the publication of the Scholars' Guide To Washington DC for Central Asia-Caucasus Studies. The Guide was compiled by Tigran Martirosyan and Silvia Maretti and published by M.E. Sharpe, publishers.

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MASKHADOV'S CEASE-FIRE ANNOUNCEMENT AND THE SITUATION IN CHECHNYA

Murad Batal Al-Shishani

Chechnya's President Aslan Maskhadov on February 3 issued a presidential decree to all Chechen fighting forces to cease fire for a month as a gesture of good will to show his willingness to negotiate. Maskhadov forbade any use of weapons except in self-defense. The announcement is important to understanding the situation in the Republic that has been caught in a war for a decade. The announcement also raises several questions regarding the power Maskhadov actually yields and its influence on solving the Chechen conflict. It is an indicator of Maskhadov's power over the Chechen resistance forces, the interrelations between political powers in Chechnya, and Russia's earnestness in finding a solution for the crisis.

BACKGROUND: The second Russian-Chechen war erupted in 1999, and the Russian forces invaded the Republic and presented a formula for resolution of the conflict based on fraudulent elections that brought Chechnya's former *mufti* (religious leader), Ahmad Kadyrov, to power. Following Kadyrov's assassination in May 2004, the power was turned to Alu Alkhanov in the same way, and he became a head of a pro-Russian government. Consequently, political power in Chechnya was divided into three major wings: the first represented by the legitimate president, Aslan Maskhadov, who represents a moderate national movement calling for a peaceful solution to the conflict, pulling Russian forces out of the Chechen Republic, and negotiations. Among the most important figures of this movement are Vice President Ahmed Zakayev and Foreign Minister Ilyas Akhmadov. The second is a radical movement spearheaded by Russia's number one man on the wanted list, field commander Shamil Basayev. This movement is in alliance with the *salafi-jihadist* movement and calls for driving the Russian forces out to establish their version of an Islamic state. Finally, the third movement is represented by the pro-Russian Chechen government. This movement is itself divided into two wings: the formal wing represented by Alu Alkhanov, and an informal one represented by

Ramzan, the son of the former President Ahmed Kadyrov. Both are supported by Russia, in particular Ramzan, who along with his armed militia has created a state within a state formula. Ramzan Kadyrov's militia forces are also judged responsible for many of the human rights violation occurring in Chechnya.

Maskhadov's latest announcement is a "power test" in which he seeks to demonstrate his authority over Chechen fighters as a response to Russia's refusal to negotiate with him on the basis that he is a "terrorist". Independent reports and pro-Russian Chechen forces confirm that no major attacks or subversive actions by resistance forces have taken place since the announcement went into effect, while Russian and pro-Russian forces have continued conducting so-called mopping-up operations.

If Maskhadov's initiative continues to be successful, it will create a quandary for the pro-Russian movement that capitalizes on the argument that Maskhadov has no claim to power inside Chechnya and does not influence all forces there, hence a peace deal with him would not constitute an end to fighting. The announcement is a power test especially in being a response to the claim that the *salafi-jihadist* movement is in control of the Chechen

resistance, as Russian propaganda and some of the pro-Russian forces attempt to spread.

IMPLICATIONS: The moderate national movement, led by Maskhadov, Zakayev and Akhmadov is the major power center capable of pacifying the situation in Chechnya. The *salafi-jihadist* movement, on the other hand, is facing a crisis due mainly to the assassination of its leaders. Samer Bin Saleh Bin Abdullah Al-Swelim, better known as Amir Khattab, was poisoned in 2002, and his successor Abu al-Walid al-Ghamidi was killed in April 2004 – effectively killing the main Arab element in the leadership. Chechen supporters were also targeted, such as former Chechen interim President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was killed by Russian agents in Qatar. The leadership vacuum also worsened the lack of funding that the salafi-jihadists had experienced due to international efforts to halt terrorist financing, and it is apparent in many of the movement leaders' statements. On the other hand, the Beslan massacre and the hostage-taking of schoolchildren undermined the popularity of Shamil Basayev, who claimed responsibility for the operation. According to most Chechens, Basayev's action amounted to a desecration of their long struggle for freedom. Probably realizing this, Basayev was the first to announce his adherence to Maskhadov's order. Indeed, no resistance operations were recorded in the first days following the announcement of the cease-fire while at the same time human rights organizations recorded an escalation in arrests of citizens by local and federal forces.

The last movement, represented by the pro-Russian government, is also facing several dilemmas. The first is its near total lack of legitimacy; another is the very real possibility of conflict between its formal

and informal divisions. There is increasing evidence of Kadyrov Jr.'s involvement in corruption, including the illegal trafficking of oil and support for armed militias.

CONCLUSIONS: While Maskhadov wishes to prove his power in Chechnya and that this is the best solution for a peaceful finale to the Russian-Chechen war, the rejection by Moscow and the pro-Russian forces in Chechnya of the cease-fire is important. Accordingly, the pro-Russian government, supported by Russian forces, is likely even to escalate its provocative actions as part of its so-called mopping-up policy. As a result, there is a risk that the radical wing of the Chechen resistance will break the cease-fire and will proceed with attacks on Russian forces. Maskhadov, as mentioned above, ordered Chechen forces to resort to weapons only in self-defense.

The real danger is that Russia seems to believe that rejecting the initiative, or at least not welcoming it, will imply a success of its policy of 'chechenizing' the conflict. It would have been more feasible for Russia to welcome Maskhadov's initiative – or at least not reject it out of hand – because continuing with this policy of obduracy and refusal to negotiate with Maskhadov will only keep the reins in the hands of those benefiting from this brutal war.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Murad Batal Al-Shishani is a Jordanian-Chechen writer who holds an M.A degree in Political Science, specializing in Islamic Movements in Chechnya. He is author of the book "Islamic Movement in Chechnya and the Chechen-Russian Conflict 1990-2000, Amman 2001 (in Arabic).

FIELD REPORTS

DEATH OF ZURAB ZHVANIA CAUSES CONTROVERSY IN GEORGIA

Kakha Jibladze

On Thursday, February 3, Georgia's Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania unexpectedly died, reportedly from carbon monoxide poisoning. The country, still reeling from the bombing in Gori on February 1, was shocked as rumors of foul play immediately flooded the Georgian media. Zhvania's death, whether accidental or not, is a huge blow for both the country and President Saakashvili's administration. The longer questions go unanswered, the more serious the allegations appear.

Although representatives from the government quickly announced that Zhvania's death was caused by carbon monoxide poisoning from a improperly installed gas heater, Georgians first believed it was an act of terrorism connected to the car bombing in Gori. Both Russia and South Ossetia immediately denied any involvement. Human rights activists and political opposition parties began accusing the government of a cover up Thursday. Independent medical experts claimed that the investigation was not being carried out thoroughly, citing inconsistencies in official statements. The NGO Former Political Prisoners for Human Rights demanded that the government form an oversight committee made up of independent experts and journalists, but received no official reply. The Georgian government maintains that Zhvania's death was a tragic accident and, as of Monday February 7, agreed to invite FBI specialists to aid in the investigation. No official statement has been made about when the experts will arrive.

The promise of an investigation by the FBI is not calming the rumors of a government cover-up. In informal interviews conducted Sunday, February 6, the day Zhvania was buried, everyone questioned believed Zhvania was murdered. Whether the rumors are true or false is secondary to the fact that many Georgians are now comparing Saakashvili's handling of this death to the cover-ups that occurred while Shevardnadze was president. The fact that many other serious crimes are not being openly investigated only adds to people's concern.

Saakashvili has repeatedly supported the official version of carbon monoxide poisoning, but has made no statements concerning the allegations of sloppy investigation techniques, or the reported inconsistencies. His lack of initiative in dealing with people's concerns is only adding to their distrust. While he has asked the country to stand behind him during this time of transition, he has not provided any concrete proof of why Georgians should trust his administration to handle this investigation without any sort of oversight. In light of the past year's allegations of corruption in the government, these latest rumors could serve to alienate more of his supporters.

In addition to the concerns of a government cover-up, experts in Georgia are expressing doubt that the government can find a replacement for Zhvania who compares to his considerable political experience and ability. Several names have been proposed by the Georgian media, including State

Minister Kakha Bendukidze, Parliamentary Chairperson Nino Burjanadze, Chairman of the Supreme Court Kote Kemularia, Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili and Zurab Nogaideli, the Finance Minister. Having assumed the responsibilities of the prime minister himself, Saakashvili on 8 February nominated Nogaideli to the position. This quickly drew fire from Parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze, who openly disapproved of the nomination.

A political vacuum could not have occurred at a worse time for Georgia. Currently there is an extensive privatization program underway, largely overseen by Zhvania, that requires stability and

investor confidence. In addition, the new peace plan for South Ossetia is still in its initial stages; any interruption could kill the initiative. Due to the current lack of OSCE borders monitors on the Chechen, Ingusheti and Dagastani borders, Georgia is susceptible to Russian accusations of rebel fighters crossing into Georgian territories.

The FBI involvement lends credence to the investigation, but Georgian experts and activists also need to be involved. The faster Saakashvili can prove to the nation that there is nothing to hide, the easier it will be to win back their trust and remove the shadow of suspicion that is hanging over the administration.

WOONG THE TALIBAN

Daan van der Schriek

Efforts to win over at least part of the Taliban for the Kabul government are increasing – with the blessing of US officials. Yet the top leadership of the movement, including its leader Mullah Mohammad Omar, is excluded from any possible amnesty. But Mullah Omar still seems to be the undisputed leader of the Taliban, making successful reconciliation without his inclusion doubtful. Including him would cause severe problems with the Northern Alliance, which opposes a rapprochement with the Taliban in the first place.

Already before the presidential election last October, Hamid Karzai told the press several times that he had no problems at all with “ordinary” Taliban. He invited them to lay down their weapons and retake their place in Afghan society. Only the top 50-100 or so Taliban, “with blood on their hands,” could not count on such a lenient attitude – and should be punished.

In November, Zalmay Khalilzad, U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, proposed an official amnesty plan that now seems to have been adopted by the Afghan government: those ordinary Taliban who lay down their arms and pledge allegiance to the Karzai government will not be punished.

The U.S. lead in seeking a deal with the Taliban has been interpreted as a desire to finally end the lingering insurgency in Afghanistan so that they can fully concentrate on the problems in Iraq. And the Americans are pushing ahead. On January 16th, 81 Taliban prisoners were released from U.S. custody in Afghanistan. Officials described this as the first phase of reconciliation with the insurgents. “One category of Taliban want to come back... and the government is providing them [with] the opportunity,” said Chief Justice Fazal Hadi Shinwari at the occasion. Shinwari also claimed the

U.S. had agreed to release the remaining 400 Taliban prisoners in Afghanistan.

But are there really Taliban eager to “come back”? Analysts inside and outside the country believe that soon, a batch of Taliban may indeed lay down their weapons. But this may not succeed in ending the insurgency. “Ninety-five percent of the Taliban are still with Omar,” says Pakistani journalist and Afghanistan expert, Rahimullah Yousafzai. And not only is Omar excluded from the proposed amnesty – he does not even want to reach any agreement with the new Afghan authorities. In a statement released on January 20th, Mullah Omar denied negotiations between the Taliban and Afghan and U.S. officials were being conducted. “The U.S. and Afghan authorities... are trying to deceive the people of Afghanistan,” he said.

Mullah Omar had a point when he said that Kabul has failed to mention any influential Taliban figures willing to cross lines. Rumors abound that one of two former Taliban foreign ministers, Mullah Mohammad Ghous Akhund and Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, would be heading a future “democratic” Taliban-style party. But neither man is part of the Taliban any longer; neither was ever very influential within the movement; and even

then, neither is yet working with Karzai. Talks about a Taliban party might well be, therefore, “wishful thinking” on the part of the government, says Yousafzai.

Accommodation without Omar seems impossible. But including Omar – were he interested – in the process would create huge problems with the Northern Alliance (NA). Already, the movement that was an important ally for the U.S. to topple the Taliban regime in November 2001, feels it has lost political influence. In the new cabinet formed in December, the NA lost most important portfolios they had held in the interim administration. And an amnesty for the Taliban would probably make them unhappier still. An unsatisfied NA could create serious problems. Thanks to the drug trade, many militia commanders – not excluding some of the NA – have generated considerable riches: taxes from drugs are now the main source of income for militias. They could use this income to pursue their own agenda, opposing Kabul’s.

The amnesty proposal for the Taliban might create more problems than it would solve: it would hardly end the insurgency while it would create additional problems with the NA. Capturing Mullah Omar might after all be easier than accommodating him.

CAMPAIGNS FOR PRESIDENT’S RESIGNATION AND TERM EXTENSION FACE OFF IN KYRGYZSTAN

Nazgul Baktybekova

By the end of 2005, Kyrgyzstan will according to the Constitution have a new leadership as the incumbent President Askar Akaev, who has been in power for fourteen years and whose term ends this year, has repeatedly declared that he would not go against Constitution and run for the presidency. If this truly happens, Kyrgyzstan will become the first

republic in Central to witness a democratic transfer of power. As presidential elections draw near, conflicting campaigns – one for “resignation” and the other for “extension” – have been launched by opponents and supporters of the incumbent Kyrgyz President.

On 2 February the political bloc “For the Resignation of President Askar Akaev and Reforms for the People” proceeded to collect signatures for the early resignation of the incumbent President. This political bloc was formed in 2002 following the Aksy events when police opened fire on demonstrators, killing six local protestors. The political bloc unites six political parties: “Erkin Kyrgyzstan”, “Respublica”, “Kairan El”, “Erkindik”, Democratic Movement of Kyrgyzstan and “Asaba” party.

The bloc “For the Resignation of President Askar Akaev and Reforms for the People” explained that the campaign has been motivated by the latest political developments in the country. Topchubek Turgunaliyev, leader of “Erkindik” party, in an interview to RFE/RL said that the six parties of the bloc had agreed that if ex-ambassadors would not be allowed to run for parliamentary elections scheduled for 27 February, the bloc would launch a campaign for the resignation of President Akaev. The opposition leaders say that the decision prohibiting ex-ambassadors to register as candidates for parliamentary elections had been adopted to strengthen the power of the current leadership.

In the meantime, supporters of President Akaev have also started a petition to change the Constitution so that he could run for another term. The campaign, which is by nature contrary to the President’s stated convictions, was initiated not by the government but by a professedly independent public group called “With the People, For the People” formed last summer in southern Kyrgyzstan. The group aims at extending President Akaev’s reign until 2010. The supporters of this campaign think that President Akaev should be

allowed to complete his reforms. In an interview to IWPR the Director of the “With the People, For the People” said that it is due to the efforts of the incumbent President that Kyrgyzstan today lives in stability and ethnic peace.

According to the Kyrgyz Constitution, at least 300,000 signatures would need to be collected before a national referendum could be held for the extension of the President’s term. At present the “With the People, For the People” group has reportedly gathered around 50,000 signatures, of which 30,000 were officially handed over to the State Secretary Osmonakun Ibraimov during a meeting held in December 2004.

The campaign to extend the President’s term has been harshly criticized by opposition forces, who say that it is unacceptable and a violation of Constitution. Some think that the initiative to extend Akaev’s presidency has been planned at the top levels including by the President himself, and they dismiss the idea that it came from the grassroots. Others suggest that it is an undertaking of some high-ranking officials who want to keep the status quo and retain the privileges they enjoy now for years to come.

The extension of the President’s term, which would require just another change of Constitution, is though by most observers to be too risky. If the term of the incumbent President is somehow extended, Kyrgyzstan runs the risk of losing the significant financial support rendered by International Financial Institutions, which could generate serious consequences for the country, given its huge external debt. In addition, serious attempts to extend the President’s term is likely to spark a wave of opposition to the regime.

IS KAZAKHSTAN SUPPLYING CANON-FODDER TO RUSSIA?

Marat Yermukanov

Displaying its independent stance, Kazakhstan has always distanced itself from Russia's war in Chechnya. Kazakh-language press in this predominantly Muslim-populated country shuns the use of terms as "terrorists" or "bandits" used by Kremlin propaganda to describe Chechen separatists. This neutrality of its important partner in CIS is not the reaction Moscow bargained for when it launched the military campaign. One indication of the Kremlin's desire to get its neighbors involved in the "anti-terrorist war" in Chechnya is the illegal drafting of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan into the Russian army.

From the very start of Russia's Chechen war Astana, anxious to avoid interethnic strife between its Russian and Chechen communities, assumed a highly ambiguous position on Moscow's North Caucasus policy, neither condemning nor eagerly supporting the long-drawn campaign. This ambiguity generated many inconsistencies in Kazakhstan's security partnership with Russia. Over the last three years the Interior Ministry of Kazakhstan did extradite a number of refugees from the North Caucasus, allegedly Chechen "terrorists", to Russia. Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry was vocal in condemning the hostage takers in the Beslan school last September, and received children from Beslan for mental rehabilitation.

However, Moscow responded with deep mistrust to all these manifestations of solidarity. The deputy Prosecutor-General of the Southern District of Russian Federal Forces Sergey Fridinskiy publicly announced after the tragedy that there were some Kazakhs among the hostage-takers in Beslan. The Foreign Ministry in Astana sent a note of protest and demanded a confirmation of this report. It appeared that hostage-takers mentioned by Fridinskiy were actually not Kazakhs but Kazakhstani-born Chechens and Ingush. This embarrassment did not cool down the Kremlin's

drive to drag Astana into the Chechnya affair. Speaking at the session of the UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee held in Almaty on January 26-27, the CIS Executive Secretary Vladimir Rushailo again alluded to unruly Chechens suggesting that separatists should be referred to as "terrorists", and not freedom fighters. He didn't deem it part of etiquette in Moscow's relations with its former domains to respect political terminology accepted in CIS countries to designate Chechen separatists. Kazakhstani security officials did not comment on Rushailo's words.

What really causes Astana a headache, rather than the imaginary encroachment of terrorists from the Caucasus, seems to be the bellicose calls from ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan to defend the Russian cause in Chechnya. On February 2, the chairman of the Almaty-based Russian Observer Research Center Fedor Miroglov disclosed at a press-conference that ethnic Russians from Kazakhstan were being recruited to serve in the Russian army and fight Chechen separatists. He said that last year, more than 100 Russians from different parts of Kazakhstan have been drafted into the Russian army through recruitment centers in the Russian cities of Novosibirsk and Omsk, located close to Kazakhstan's borders. According to Miroglov, Russian recruitment centers are expanding their activities in Kazakhstan unhindered by Kazakhstan's law-enforcement bodies.

For most ethnic Russians abroad, being drafted into the Russian army is the only way to receive Russian citizenship. Last year the Kremlin adopted a simplified procedure for granting citizenship to conscripts in the Russian army from other CIS countries. Apparently, the Russian authorities were compelled to take this step in view of the increasing casualties in Chechnya, although the Russian top brass has long announced the war in Chechnya to be over. Perhaps for fear of anti-war protests, the

Kremlin seems to be looking for canon-fodder in other CIS countries.

The revelations aired by Fedor Miroglov will hardly surprise those who follow the evolution of great-power mentality among ethnic Russians in CIS countries. Russians in Kazakhstan largely identify themselves with the Russian motherland and refuse to accept the state-imposed idea of Kazakhstani patriotism. That seems to be the main motivation for many ethnic Russian conscripts to dodge draft into the Kazakhstani army. The fragile ethnic factor in the army increasingly worries military specialists. Over the last six or seven years, many military officers of higher rank of Russian origin have gradually been replaced by Kazakhs. But for lack of military schools, Kazakhstan greatly depends on China, Russia and the United States to educate its officers. Most of the Russian military assistance comes within the framework of cooperation in fighting terrorism.

Under these circumstances, Kazakh authorities have to close their eyes to the recruitment of ethnic Russians into Russian army, although it is in fact tantamount to a gross violation of Kazakhstan's law on compulsory military service. Not surprisingly, although the network of illegal recruitment was operating in Kazakhstan almost openly, the National Security Committee remained inactive. In

Kazakhstan, fighting on a foreign soil as a mercenary is regarded as a punishable crime. The unusual tolerance of law enforcement bodies towards ethnic Russian volunteers can be explained only by Astana's cautiousness not to spoil relations with Kremlin.

At the same time, authorities cannot ignore the growing discontent among Kazakhstan's Chechen community over the double-game staged by Astana. Ethnic Chechens in Kazakhstan make up merely 0.2% of the population, but they strongly affect Russian-Kazakh relations. Recently, the leader of the Chechen Cultural and Ethnic Association in Kazakhstan Akhmet Muradov accused the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan of conducting an anti-Chechen campaign. That sends an alarming signal of impending strife between the communities. To reconcile them is beyond the power of Kazakh authorities, since the Russian Orthodox Church is fully and solely controlled by the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. All this tangle raises strong doubts about the independence of Astana's policy in Russia's war in Chechnya, condemned by the democratic community all over the world.



NEWS DIGEST

TURKMENISTAN THREATENS TO TAKE CASPIAN SEA DISPUTE TO UN

26 January

Turkmenistan expressed anger Wednesday at the lack of an agreement on dividing the oil-rich Caspian Sea, threatening to take the issue to the U.N. if the five countries on the inland sea don't reach a deal soon. The Caspian is believed to contain the third-largest energy reserves in the world, but its legal status has been in limbo since the 1991 Soviet collapse. Talks among shoreline nations Russia, Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan on its division have dragged on for years. The drawn-out process fosters "mutual accusations, arguments and conflicts" among the shoreline nations, Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry said in a statement, adding that the solution is to turn to international organizations and courts to resolve the problems. "If the negotiations among the sides do not lead to

mutually acceptable decisions, it will be necessary to appeal to international organizations, including the United Nations," the ministry statement said. The statement followed media reports quoting officials of Azerbaijan's state oil company as saying that Azerbaijan will not allow Turkmenistan to begin developing a disputed oil field that it wants to develop with a Canadian company, Buried Hill Energy. The field - called Serdar by Turkmenistan and Kyapaz by Azerbaijan - is on territory claimed by both ex-Soviet republics. Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan had planned to hold bilateral talks on the status of the Caspian late last year, but they were called off. (AP)

AFGHAN-IRANIAN HIGHWAY OPENS

27 January

The Afghan and Iranian presidents have opened a major road linking their two countries as part of reconstruction efforts aimed at boosting trade. It is estimated the \$60m Dogharun-Herat road, paid for by Iran, will carry over half of Afghan imports and exports. The highway has been called a modern day "silk route" and it is hoped it will eventually link the whole of Asia. Afghanistan's illegal drugs trade and its leaders' close ties with the US have tested relations with Iran. Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit to Iran to inaugurate the road and a power line is his first official trip since being elected last year. "This is a very important step on the way to Afghanistan's reconstruction," he said at a ceremony on at Dogharun on Iran's eastern frontier. Iranian President

Mohammad Khatami said he wanted a "stable, dignified" Afghanistan. "I believe our security is Afghanistan's security," he said. "Our stability and Afghanistan's stability are linked. Our progress and development is linked to Afghanistan's development." Iran's Revolutionary Guards built the 120-km (75-mile) highway to the Afghan city of Herat. According to one of the engineers, interviewed by the Iranian state news agency, it was finished six months ahead of schedule. The road is said to have police stations, rest stops and 24 car parks to accommodate the heavy traffic that is expected. Iranian officials estimate that 60% of Afghanistan's imports and exports will travel on the road. (BBC)

AZERBAIJAN REJECTS TURKMEN CASPIAN PROPOSAL

27 January

Baku does not consider it expedient to refer to the UN or any other international organization the dispute between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan over the borders of their respective sectors of the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesman Metin Mirza told Interfax on 27 January. Turkmenistan recently held talks with a Canadian company on the possible joint development of the Kyapaz/Serdar oil field to which both countries lay claim; on 24 January the Turkmen Foreign Ministry suggested submitting the dispute over that deposit to international arbitration. (Interfax)

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS DENY 'INTERFERENCE' IN KYRGYZ ELECTIONS

27 February

Representatives of media NGO Internews, the OSCE center in Bishkek, and CIMERA-Kyrgyzstan (a Geneva-based organization that focuses on governance issues) held a news conference in Bishkek on 28 January to deny recent official allegations that international organizations are interfering in the run-up to Kyrgyzstan's 27 February parliamentary elections. "CIMERA-Kyrgyzstan is assisting in raising journalistic skills, but it does not interfere in internal affairs and is not involved in politics," said CIMERA-Kyrgyzstan spokesperson Vasilina Brazhko. Held amid rising domestic political tensions, the news conference follows comments Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Askar Aimatov made on 14 January to "Slovo Kyrgyzstan" in which he warned that "direct financial support of opposition parties and movements"

would be "a direct violation of our internal legislation." (akipress.org)

KAZAKHS TO PAY \$600 MLN FOR BG OILFIELD STAKE

28 January

Kazakhstan said on Friday it had agreed with an Eni-led consortium to pay more than \$600 million for half of British BG's stake in the giant Kashagan oilfield in the Caspian Sea. The sprawling ex-Soviet state in Central Asia could become one of the world's top 10 producers in the next decade and the Kashagan move reflects its desire to bring back under direct state influence strategic parts of the industry driving growth. The deal to buy half of the 16.67 percent stake in Kashagan comes nearly two years after BG first tried to pull out of the project and sell the stake to two Chinese firms -- a move that was blocked by other consortium members exercising preemption rights. "They (the consortium) have finally agreed with us and gave their consent. Thus, the (Kazakh) state will buy out 50 percent of this share," Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Vladimir Shkolnik told the Senate upper chamber of parliament. "This means that pretty large oil assets are returning under state control," he said. Kazakhstan's sector of the Caspian Sea is the key to its growing oil production -- fueling annual GDP growth just below 10 percent -- and Shkolnik later told reporters that new Caspian blocks would come up for tender later this year. The estimated market value of BG's stake in Kashagan is worth \$1.23 billion, Shkolnik said, the same price at which BG had earlier agreed to sell its stake to its partners. "To know the agreed price (for 50 percent of BG's stake), divide it by two," he said, adding the government might resort to external borrowing or the state budget to pay for the share. Kazakhstan's state oil and gas firm KazMunaiGas last week put the value of BG's stake at \$1.36 billion. (Reuters)

UZBEK LEADER WARNS HE WILL STOP UKRAINE-STYLE REVOLT

28 January

The leader of ex-Soviet Uzbekistan on Friday bluntly told the West not to try to foment Ukraine-style revolution in his country and declared he had the "necessary force" to stamp out any upheaval. Referring to successive revolutions in two other ex-Soviet States, Georgia and Ukraine, that have brought pro-Western leaders to power, President Islam Karimov said: "We will rein in those who move outside the framework of the law. We have the necessary force for that." Looking directly to Western ambassadors who were listening to his speech in parliament, Karimov added: "I don't want to delve too deeply into this matter. But those sitting up there in the balcony ought to understand that better."

The tough comment by Karimov was the latest sign from the five Central Asian republics, all of which operate one-man-rule political systems, that the authorities feared there could be attempts at protests to topple their rulers. Earlier on Friday Askar Akayev, president of Kyrgyzstan that borders Uzbekistan, was quoted as saying he also feared such a move by the opposition and warned, in a Russian newspaper, that this could lead to civil war. Karimov said there were clear attempts in Kyrgyzstan to stage "a flower revolution" there. "Maybe, we will manage to get away without yellow flowers in Kyrgyzstan," he said. Yellow has been adopted as the color of the Kyrgyz opposition. (Reuters)

OSCE FACT-FINDING MISSION VISITS AZERBAIJAN

28 January

An Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) delegation tasked with analyzing the situation in the seven districts of Azerbaijan bordering on Nagorno-Karabakh that are currently under Armenian control met in Baku on 28 January with President Ilham Aliyev and with Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry officials. Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov told journalists after the meeting that the mission members were given maps, documentation, and audio and video materials showing that the Armenian government has settled some 23,000 ethnic Armenians on those territories, and proving that those areas are used for the illegal cultivation of drugs. (Turan)

AFGHAN REPORT DEMANDS WAR JUSTICE

29 January

Afghanistan must address past war crimes if it is to find peace and stability, the country's independent human rights commission has said. "Continued impunity has given the perpetrators the opportunity to commit further abuses with no fear of prosecution," the commission said. Its report found 69% of Afghans were victims of crimes against humanity. Afghan President Hamid Karzai said improvements to police and judicial systems would protect human rights. The report questioned 6,000 people and found 90% of them wanted human rights violators removed from public office, while 40% wanted notorious perpetrators to be prosecuted. "Of central importance is the need to address past and present human rights violations, for us to ensure those responsible for egregious abuses do not succeed in wielding power," said United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, who attended the launch of the report. Killings and looting "Anyone who came to power carried out all sorts of injustices," said one man quoted in the report. "Killings, lootings, confiscation of people's property, sexual violations, bombardment of civilian homes... have all taken place," he said. Many warlords

still hold prominent positions under the new, elected Afghan government. "With the betterment of our police status, the prosecution system, the justice and judicial reforms... Afghanistan is going towards a society dependent on social justice and human rights," Mr Karzai said. The Kabul government's control remains weak. On Saturday, nine Afghan soldiers were killed and one injured in a landmine explosion near the town of Spin Boldak, close to the Pakistan border. (BBC)

OSCE ELECTION-OBSERVER MISSION OPENS IN TAJIKISTAN

31 January

The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights on 28 January officially opened its observer mission to Tajikistan's 27 February parliamentary elections, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reported. Mission head Peter Eicher said that monitors will assess the elections' adherence to international standards in terms of preparedness, observance of law, and media coverage. Eicher noted that while Tajikistan's election law ensures the overall transparency of the electoral process, it does not provide for sufficient balance in the composition of local election commissions. According to Tajikistan's Central Election Commission, the OSCE's long-term observer team will consist of 27 monitors from 16 different countries, with 10 monitors in Dushanbe and 17 in other regions of the country. (RFE/RL)

GAMSAKHURDIA'S WIDOW AGAINST AWARDED NOBEL PRIZE TO SAAKASHVILI

31 January

Former Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia's widow Manana Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia said the Nobel Prize should not be awarded to current Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia is the leader of a large union of Georgian opposition forces. "Saakashvili and his allies are not concerned about the fate of Georgia at all, all of his actions are dictated by the West, and he may receive a Nobel Prize for that," Archvadze-Gamsakhurdia told a press conference on Monday. (Interfax)

US WARNED OVER AFGHAN DRUG CULL

1 February

The US has been warned by some of the world's leading aid agencies that its plan to eradicate Afghanistan's opium fields could backfire. In a letter to new US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, they warn that any "premature" act risks destabilising large parts of the country. They call for a greater emphasis on providing rural development and alternative crops for opium farmers. The UN says drug exports now account for 60%

of Afghanistan's economy. The US has strongly backed Afghan President Hamid Karzai's declared "holy war" against the drugs trade. Washington announced in November it would spend \$780m in an attempt to eradicate the country's crop, which now supplies about 75% of the world's opium. But 20 non-government agencies - including Care, the International Crisis Group and Oxfam - have urged caution. They point out that many farmers depend on the crop to earn their living and any "premature effort" to wipe it out will play into the hands of government opponents. "It's a policy that needs to be handled in a very careful, progressive fashion - it needs to allow for the rise of alternative livelihoods before you start eradicating the drugs," said Robert Templer, the Crisis Group's Asia programme director. They say any short-term solution could just drive opium production underground or into more remote areas. Longer-term solutions are needed, they say. This includes greater rural development, the provision of alternative livelihoods, access to infrastructure and new ways for the communities to police themselves. The US has postponed plans to spray Afghan opium crops from the air, but says it will continue to destroy them on the ground. The move came after the Afghan government reacted angrily at the mystery spraying of herbicide on opium crops in eastern areas in November. (BBC)

BLAST KILLS ONE IN TAJIK CAPITAL

1 February

A suspected car bomb in front of Tajikistan's Emergency Situations Ministry on 31 January killed at least one person and injured four others. The cause of the explosion remains unclear, but the Military Prosecutor's Office said the blast appears to have been a terrorist act. The explosion, which was powerful enough to damage nearby buildings, killed the presumed suicide car bomber - a 40-year-old Dushanbe resident. No further information on the individual's identity was available. Tajik security forces have opened a criminal case under Article 179 of the Criminal Code, which covers acts of terrorism. Sayfullo Safarov, deputy head of the Strategic Research Center of Tajikistan, told Avesta the blast could be an attempt to destabilize the situation in the country in the run-up to the 27 February parliamentary elections. In an apparently unrelated incident the same day, a fire broke out in the building that houses the State Security Ministry. A ministry spokesman told Avesta that the fire was started as a result of a short circuit and was brought under control with no casualties. (Avesta)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT DECRIES BLOATED COMPANIES

1 February

At a cabinet meeting on 1 February, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev criticized state-owned companies, banks and large holding companies for holding too many noncore assets. Nazarbaev said overly large companies need to slim down, adding that bloat hinders competition and stifles small business. "They should rid themselves of their noncore assets in line with the market by selling them into a competitive environment," Nazarbaev said. Nazarbaev cited Kazakhstan Temir Zholy, the national railroad company, as an example of a structure with too many noncore assets. Setting out economic priorities, he said Kazakhstan needs to attract 30 transnational companies to work in the country's processing industry. Nazarbaev asked the government to complete a program for housing development in the first quarter of 2005 and to present a program for developing a micro-credit system in the next two weeks. (Kazakhstan Today)

KYRGYZ OPPOSITION HALTS RALLIES

1 February

Supporters of former Foreign Minister Roza Otunbaeva, co-chair of the opposition movement Ata-Jurt, announced at a press conference in Bishkek on 31 January that they have suspended their public protest to take part in the election campaigns of opposition candidates for parliament, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reported. Protests have taken place in Bishkek since a district election commission barred Otunbaeva on 6 January from running in the 27 February parliamentary elections. The commission argued that Otunbaeva did not meet the five-year in-country residency requirement, a provision that has kept other ex-ambassadors off the ballot as well. Otunbaeva told journalists at the 31 January press conference that she and other former ambassadors will appeal to the Constitutional Court in an attempt to secure the right to participate in elections. (RFE/RL)

PROTESTORS IN GEORGIA DEMANDS HIGHER LIVING STANDARDS

2 February

At a rally in Tbilisi on Wednesday organized by trade unions, about 2,000 people demanded an official minimum wage that is up to the minimum subsistence level and protested the unemployment level and delayed payments of unemployment benefits. Speakers at the rally said President Mikheil Saakashvili had failed to live up to the expectations of ordinary people who supported him during Georgia's "Rose Revolution" of November 2003 and that ordinary people were even worse off today than a year ago. The rally participants issued a warning that, if their demands remained unsatisfied, there would be more rallies and demonstrations and that demands for the dismissal of the Georgian leadership would be put forward. (Interfax)

GEORGIAN AIDE SUSPECTS RUSSIA BEHIND CAR BOMB

2 February

A close confidant of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili on Wednesday pointed the finger at Russian involvement in a car bomb that killed three policemen in the Black Sea state. Saakashvili himself has described Tuesday's attack in the town of Gori as a "political act of terrorism" planned by Georgia's enemies and prepared outside the country. But he did not accuse his giant northern neighbor of involvement. However Giga Bokeria, a key decision-maker in the Georgian leadership who also serves on parliament's defense and judicial committees, told Reuters there was little doubt elements in Russia were behind the attack. "When we talk about the forces outside the country that could prepare this act of terror, there's no question that we are talking about specific forces in Russia," he told Reuters. The bomb exploded outside the police headquarters in Gori, the birthplace of Josef Stalin, which lies just outside Georgia's rebel province of South Ossetia, where peacekeepers from Georgia, Russia and the Russian region of North Ossetia keep watch over an uneasy peace. There was no official suggestion that Russia was suspected of involvement in the Gori bomb -- the worst attack since Saakashvili came to power a year ago. But Bokeria's finger-pointing marks a step back for relations, just a week after Georgia unveiled an autonomy plan for South Ossetia. Bokeria said Gori was deliberately chosen to make it look like Ossetian separatists -- who exchanged fire with Georgian peacekeepers for two weeks last year -- were behind the attack. "We shouldn't be deceived by the place chosen for this act of terror. We don't think it in any way implies that the South Ossetian leadership was involved in this crime." South Ossetian officials condemned the attack and denied any involvement. (Reuters)

TURKMENISTAN DECLARES 2005 YEAR OF RUKHNAMA

2 February

The Turkmen parliament has approved a decree declaring 2005 the year of President Saparmurat Niyazov's book, Rukhnama. The previous two years had been proclaimed years of Niyazov's father and mother, Atamurat and Gurbansoltan-edzhe. In 1998, Niyazov suggested creating a program for the spiritual development of Turkmenistan. The book, which he then proposed to call Rukhnama, was meant to become a charter of a man's behavior, a collection of laws and standards for Turkmen society. The main purpose of the book, as Niyazov said, is "directing spiritual development and restoring forgotten traditions, which will help restore the spirit of the people." In honor of the book, September was

renamed Rukhnama, while Saturday is now called Rukhgyun (day of spirit). (Interfax)

ABSENCE OF VENTILATION KILLED GEORGIAN PREMIER - EXPERTS

3 February

High carbon monoxide levels in the apartment visited by the late Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania were caused because of the absence of a ventilation system, said Tbilgazi city gas company emergency service chief Nugzar Mkheidze. "Technicians have checked the heating system in the apartment where Zurab Zhvania and Raul Yusupov died. They said the gas system and the stove were alright, but the apartment did not have a ventilation system. The stove was burning oxygen and emitting carbon monoxide," Mkheidze said. (Interfax)

PRO-MOSCOW GOVT. DISMISSES CHECHEN REBEL CEASE-FIRE

3 February

Chechnya's Russian-backed government Thursday dismissed a rebel cease-fire declaration, saying it was a publicity stunt that could not be trusted. But analysts said the offer from rebel leaders Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basayev suggested they were responding to an increasingly strong desire in faraway Moscow to end a war that has started to infect much of the North Caucasus. "The Chechen government is open to any attempt to bring peace to our people," a spokesman quoted pro-Moscow Chechen President Alu Alkhanov as saying. "But as regards Maskhadov and Basayev, they have never fulfilled the responsibilities they have adopted. This is just another attempt to draw attention to themselves." Kremlin officials did not comment, and the General Prosecutor rapidly announced new criminal charges against the two men. Russian President Vladimir Putin has consistently rejected the idea of talks with people he calls terrorists. But analysts said he might be more open to peace overtures after fierce battles in three regions outside Chechnya in the last month. These have graphically shown how brittle Russian control has become in the 10 years since the start of a war that has killed 20,000 Russian troops and tens of thousands of civilians. "There are people around Putin who are suggesting it is time to end the Chechen war," said Alexei Malashenko, a security analyst from the Carnegie Center. "Maskhadov and Basayev could see this is a favorable time for such an approach." (Reuters)

LAVROV CRITICIZES POLITICAL REMARKS ON ZHVANIA'S DEATH

3 February

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has called on Georgian politicians to refrain from reaching biased conclusions on Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's death.

"Let us leave politically motivated conclusions on the conscience of those who are making them," Lavrov told a press conference on Thursday. He was commenting on a Georgian parliamentarian's claim that the Tuesday terrorist attack in Gori and Zhvania's death on Thursday are interrelated and that Moscow is behind them. Such conclusions "do not help find the truth and do not promote the development of Russian-Georgian relations," Lavrov said. "Russia is truly interested in developing relations with Georgia," he said. (Interfax)

ZHVANIA'S DEATH MAY HAMPER OSSETIA SETTLEMENT - OFFICIAL

3 February

The death of Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania may have a negative effect on settling the nation's conflict with the self-proclaimed republic of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali sources said. "South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity deeply regrets the tragic death of Zurab Zhvania and has extended his profound condolences to the Georgian people over this loss. He believes that Zurab Zhvania played a highly positive role in the Georgian-Ossetian settlement process and does not rule out that the negotiating process may now become more complicated," Irina Gagloyeva, head of South Ossetia's information committee, told Interfax from Tskhinvali on Thursday. (Interfax)

U.S. HEALTH-CARE INITIATIVE STARTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

3 February

Kent Hill, USAID assistant administrator for Europe and Eurasia, told a news conference in Almaty on 3 February that the United States has launched a five-year, \$30.5 million program to improve health care in Central Asia. Hill said, "The program is aimed at assisting the Kazakh government and other Central Asian states in improving, above all, the quality of first aid provided to the population." In Kazakhstan, which will receive 25 percent of the funds, the program will work to reform health-care financing and management. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the program's aim is to improve sanitary and epidemiological services. (Interfax-Kazakhstan)

ARMENIAN OPPOSITION VOWS TO CONTINUE PARLIAMENT BOYCOTT

4 February

Viktor Dallakian, secretary of the opposition Artarurium parliament faction, told journalists on 3 February that the parliamentary opposition will continue the boycott it began one year ago but will suspend that boycott to participate in debates on issues of crucial importance, including compensating the population for the loss of deposits in Soviet-era savings accounts, Noyan Tapan reported. Dallakian further described as "a polite

rejection" the response by the ruling three-party coalition government to the opposition's proposals for compromise over the package of constitutional amendments drafted by President Robert Kocharian. Earlier on 3 February, the three parties issued a statement welcoming the opposition's proposals. At the same time, the statement said the opposition should not make its participation in discussions on constitutional reform contingent on acceptance of its proposals. (RFE/RL)

MASKHADOV WILL SURRENDER IF BASAYEV IS DEAD – OFFICIAL

4 February

Rumors about the death of separatist leader Shamil Basayev are being circulated in Chechnya, but this information will be confirmed only after law enforcement agencies produce evidence proving his death, the republic's State Council Chairman Taus Dzhabrailov told Interfax by phone on Friday. "Rumors about Basayev's death are being spread in Chechnya. But only law enforcement agencies can confirm his death by showing this man's body or some video tapes to the public," Dzhabrailov said. Basayev's death would deliver a blow to all remaining guerrilla groups in Chechnya, he said. "He is such a major figure that in the event of his death, any vigorous terrorist activities on the territory of the republic or outside it will be out of the question. If Basayev's death is confirmed, [separatist leader] Aslan Maskhadov will take rapid steps to search for various opportunities to surrender to law enforcement agencies," the official said. (Interfax)

RUSSIA CALLS BASAYEV TV INTERVIEW SUPPORT FOR TERRORISTS

4 February

Moscow regards the airing of an interview with Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev on British TV as direct media support for terrorists, the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a Friday press release. "We consider the step as direct information support for terrorists operating in the North Caucasus," the ministry said. "In the present conditions, any attempts to justify giving a platform to terrorists, whose hands are stained with the blood of innocent victims, including children, by references to freedom of speech look cynical, to put it mildly," the ministry said. (Interfax)

CHECHEN ADMINISTRATION WON'T HOLD NEGOTIATIONS WITH LEADERS OF SEPARATISTS

7 February

Chechen administration says there will be no negotiations with the leaders of separatists. "The stand of the national administration is invariable - there will be no political contacts with Maskhadov and his circle,"

Chechen State Council Chairman Taus Jabrailov told Interfax by telephone. He commented on a Monday interview by Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov. "The present-day situation in the Chechen Republic is very much different from what it was in 2000 or even 2002. The republic and its people have chosen the way of peaceful development. Power bodies have been formed, and illegal armed units are simply unable to dictate their will on the republican or national administrations and influence the situation in Chechnya," Jabrailov said. (Interfax)

WOMEN TRADERS PROTEST IN ANDIJON

7 February

A group of 100 Uzbek women blocked traffic in Andijon on 4 February to protest new commercial regulations that they say are depriving them of their livelihood, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reported. The women complained that new regulations require them to buy a trading place at the market for up to \$5,000, an unrealistic sum for traders whose inventory is only worth \$50 to \$60. The women say they depend on small-scale trade because there is no other work in the region. The women dispersed after speaking with officials. Andijon Deputy Governor Tohir Tuychiev said the regulations are justified because the women are engaged in illegal trade. (RFE/RL)

SAAKASHVILI TO NOMINATE FINANCE MINISTER NOGAIDELI FOR PREMIER

8 February

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has decided to nominate Finance Minister Zurab Nogatideli for prime minister, said Saakashvili's press secretary Alana Gagloyeva. Nogatideli will have to submit his proposals on a new Cabinet composition to the president within two days, she said. (Interfax)

U.S. FORENSIC EXPERTS ARRIVE IN GEORGIA

8 February

Six U.S. forensic experts arrived in Tbilisi early on 8 February to participate in the ongoing investigation into the circumstances of the death on 4 February of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, Caucasus Press reported. U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard Miles told the independent television station Rustavi-2 on 8 February that the arrival of U.S. specialists does not reflect on the professionalism of the Georgian investigators assigned to the case. Miles also said that the U.S. experts will also help to investigate the 1 February car-bomb explosion in Gori, but he ruled out a connection between that incident and Zhvania's death. On 7 February, the independent television company Mze reported that Georgian Ambassador to the U.S. Levan Mikeladze telephoned Zhvania at 1.19 a.m. on 4 February, just hours before Zhvania died of carbon-monoxide

poisoning. Meanwhile, opposition politician Irina Sarishvili-Chanturia told journalists on 7 February she is convinced that Zhvania's death was murder, and that other members of the Georgian leadership were responsible, rustavi2.com reported. (RFE/RL)

UN TO HEAR KYRGYZ CASE ON AKSY EVENTS

8 February

Sarpai Jaichibekov, a lawyer for a number of residents of Kyrgyzstan's Aksy region, told RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service on 7 February that his clients' cases will be heard by a UN committee. The case involves individuals who suffered during demonstrations in Aksy in March 2002, when police opened fire, killing six protestors. While some court proceedings took place in Kyrgyzstan, Jaichibekov's clients feel that those who stand behind the tragedy went unpunished, and that the world body is now their only hope of obtaining justice. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIAN NEWSPAPER WARNED OVER CHECHEN INTERVIEW

9 February

Russian authorities formally warned Kommersant newspaper on Tuesday after it published an interview with a Chechen warlord who has a \$10 million price on his head, Interfax news agency reported. After three warnings, the authorities could close the paper. In the interview in the business daily on Monday, Chechen rebel Aslan Maskhadov confirmed an earlier cease-fire

order and said Russia should hold peace talks with separatists in the war-torn region, or "the blood will flow for a long time." "In publishing the interview, the newspaper provided a terrorist wanted by the federal authorities and Interpol with an opportunity to publicly justify terrorism and threaten continued terrorist activity," a source in the government's media supervisory service told Interfax. He said the action was being brought under a law, which forbids using the media for encouraging or condoning extremism. "The federal service for supervising observance of the law in the mass media ... issued an official warning to the Kommersant editorial office about the unacceptability of violating the law of the Russian Federation," he said. Maskhadov denies he is behind attacks on civilian targets, but Chechnya's pro-Moscow leadership rejects that claim and says Maskhadov would have little to put on the table if he could not promise an end to attacks such as last year's seizure of a school at Beslan, where more than 330 hostages died. Russia put a \$10 million bounty on both Maskhadov and Basayev after the Beslan massacre, prompting the two fugitives to offer \$20 million for Putin's capture. Kommersant's owner, exiled billionaire Boris Berezovsky, has infuriated the Kremlin by sniping at Putin with impunity from his London base. In the latest row, Berezovsky was quoted on Tuesday as saying that Chechen rebels had a nuclear bomb, a claim dismissed by Russian officials who said Russia could account for all its nuclear devices. (Reuters)

