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BIWEEKLY BRIEFING

Wednesday/January 28, 2004

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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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TURKMENISTAN'S MILITARY INVESTMENTS: THE START OF AN ARMS RACE?

Hooman Peimani

During the Remembrance Day ceremony on January 12, President Saparmurat Niyazov committed himself to "further strengthen" Turkmenistan's defense by keeping its military "highly trained and equipped." This reflected his government's efforts to boost its military power, as evident in its last year's "investing" of about \$200 million to maintain the Turkmen armed forces' "tactical efficiency". In the absence of a legal regime for the Caspian Sea, Turkmenistan's significant military expenditure compared to its annual revenues could provoke a large-scale arms race among the Caspian states. The latter have already started expanding their military strength especially in the disputed Caspian Sea.

BACKGROUND: As the only two Caspian states, the Soviet Union and Iran were the only military powers in the Caspian region in the Soviet era. Although the Iranians had a significant military presence, including a small Caspian Sea fleet, the Soviets were unquestionably the dominant military force with a very impressive Caspian Sea fleet. The disintegration of the Soviet Union increased the number of Caspian littoral states from two to five. Of the four ex-Soviet republics, Russia inherited the largest chunk of the Soviet military assets, including almost the entire Caspian naval force, leaving the remaining countries in a very disadvantageous military position. Like other sovereign states, efforts on the part of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to form their military forces was quite natural in the early 1990s when they were trying to consolidate their independence. Yet, especially in the second half of the 1990s, disagreements over the division of the energy-rich Caspian Sea, in the absence of a legal regime acceptable to all the littoral states, led to territorial disputes between and among them, including multiple ownership claims to a number of oilfields. Apart from political and security considerations, fear of losing those potentially revenue-generating fields to their neighbors created strong economic incentives for all the Caspian states to boost their military power.

The stakes were highest for the militarily weakest, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. In particular, in the late 1990s, Turkmenistan found itself in dispute with Azerbaijan over a few major operating and non-operating oilfields under Azerbaijani control such as Azeri, Chirag and Guneshli. Not only did those disputes damage their diplomatic relations, they triggered an arms race when Turkmenistan reacted to Azerbaijan's acquisition of two American military boats by purchasing several Ukrainian military boats. In 2001, disputes between Iran and Azerbaijan over an undeveloped oilfield called Alborz or Alov, respectively, resulted in an Iranian show of force. The three mentioned countries, along with Russia and Kazakhstan, have since sought to increase their military power, including with the assistance of non-regional countries, e.g., the United States (Azerbaijan) and Ukraine (Turkmenistan)

IMPLICATIONS: In this context, President Niyazov's statements on January 12 echoed Turkmenistan's security

concerns and its efforts to address them. Speaking on the occasion of "Remembrance Day" to mark the anniversary of the Turkmens' bloody defeat at the hands of the tsarist army in 1881 in the battle of Gokdepe, the president took the opportunity to point out the necessity of his country's military preparedness. While emphasizing the importance of having good ties with both Russia and the United States as a major component of the Turkmen policy of neutrality in foreign relations, he stressed Turkmenistan's need to increase and modernize its military power. Accordingly, failure in that regard resulted in its loss of sovereignty to Russia in the 19th century, a "mistake" which he stressed should not be repeated. Hence he described as crucial investing in Turkmenistan's defense and that the Turkmen forces should be able to operate the "most sophisticated military hardware and equipment."

Since the 1990s, Ashgabad has relied mainly on CIS countries, and first and foremost Ukraine, to supply its military needs, apart from unknown amounts of purchases of military hardware from Iran with which it signed military agreements in January 1994. Undoubtedly, Kiev has become Turkmenistan's main supplier of advanced weaponry, including state-of-the-art air defense systems. As reported in early January 2004, Turkmenistan in 2003 invested about \$200 million to maintain the "tactical efficiency" of its military forces. The amount included the cost of purchasing of "a number" of Ukrainian military boats (Kalkan-M patrol boats) and "several sets" of air defense detecting systems (Kolchuga passive radio electronic surveillance equipment). Reports suggests Turkmenistan's future receipt of ten "Grif (Kondor) multi-purpose boats" and ten "eight-ton Kalkan boats" presumably in 2004, while it is unknown whether they are part of the 200-million-dollar "investment".

Turkmenistan's military purchases from Ukraine will likely continue as suggested in reports on its allocation of \$80 million for the "reinforcement of the maintenance and purchase of arms and equipment." The value of its arms purchases in general, and those from Ukraine in particular, could well increase in the near future at least partly in response to other littoral countries beefing up their military strength – especially Azerbaijan, with which its ties are unfriendly. Moreover, Turkmenistan's arms purchases from Ukraine could further expand if the two sides sign a new 25-

year agreement to provide Ukraine with Turkmen natural gas, as planned for February. Since the early 1990s, Ukraine's chronic shortage of hard currency has forced it to pay a significant portion of its financial commitments in industrial products.

CONCLUSIONS: Like any other sovereign state, Turkmenistan has a right to defend itself and thus make steps towards improving its military power. In itself, the amount of its current military expenditure is not significant for a country with the smallest military force in the Caspian region. Nor is it significant enough to suddenly change the regional balance of military power in its favor. However, Ashgabad's significant arms purchases compared to its limited annual

revenues in hard currency (about \$1-2 billion) could encourage, if not provoke, especially Iran, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to accelerate and expand their military build-up. In this respect, the contributing factors include Turkmenistan's serious territorial disputes with Azerbaijan over certain Caspian oilfields and an undeclared arms race between and among the Caspian littoral states. The resulting accelerated arms race could function as a provocative factor to complicate the peaceful settlement of current territorial disputes.

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UYGHURS IN KYRGYZSTAN UNDER CAREFUL GOVERNMENT SUPERVISION

Although Kyrgyzstan is a freer state than other Central Asian republics, the Uyghur community is under careful observation by the government. In the last few years, some Uyghur political refugees were illegally deported back to China. Local Uyghur organizations often receive guests from the security forces. This year, however, began with an overt threat from the KGB.

On January 13, 2004, the Bishkek human rights organization "Democracy" appealed to the presidents of the U.S., Russia, Germany, Great Britain, Turkey, Kazakhstan and to the Secretary General of the United Nations to pay attention to human rights violations of Uyghurs who live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. This appeal included demands "to call on China to stop executions of political prisoners; to insist China to respect human rights and the right of self-determination in Eastern Turkistan; to stop the forced resettlement of Chinese to East Turkistan (XUAR); and to condemn the Nepal, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan governments for the illegal deportation of Uyghurs seeking political asylum in these states to China". It asked for assistance in the cancellation of deportation of Uyghurs from the U.S. Guantanamo base back to China. In recent years, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have extradited several Uyghur activists to China, including Hamit Mamat, Iliyar Zordan, Kasim Mahpid, Jalil Turdi, Baivaacha, Mamat Yasin, Mamat Sadik and others.

Following the appeal, the Chairman of the organization, Tursun Islam, made public that he had been notified by Department 9 of the SNB (National Security Service, the successor of the Soviet-time KGB) to stop disseminating information about the illegal deportation of Uyghurs back to China.

Kyrgyzstan is multinational state, and Uyghurs are the fourth largest ethnic minority after Russians, Uzbeks, and Dungans (Hui). According to official statistics, there are about 50,000 Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan, but certain non-official statistics allege that the Uyghur compose about 200,000 people.

The discrepancy may be related to the fact that during Soviet times, Uyghurs were people of low standing, and therefore many Uyghurs registered as Uzbeks. There are also ethnic Uyghurs from XUAR, China, who came to Bishkek to trade. The common border along Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region has helped some politically active Uyghurs escape from China to Kyrgyzstan to seek political asylum.

Last year, on 28 July, the Uyghur community held a Kurultai (Congress) of the Uyghur Society in Kyrgyzstan, where among other the election of the chair of the Uyghur organization "Ittipak" took place. This, of course, was disliked by government officials, not to speak of the Chinese Embassy, given that Chinese authorities consider "Ittipak" a separatist organization. After the congress, officials from the Ministry of Interior (MVD) immediately came to the office of "Ittipak" and started to control documents. While such actions by law-enforcement agencies are regular events, it seems that after holding their Congress, the Uyghurs have been having more troubles with the government.

The situation is only worsened as the Kyrgyz mass media regularly publishes articles labeling Uyghurs as terrorists and extremists. On 25 August, the newspaper "Vechniy Bishkek" published an article quoting First Deputy Prime Minister and Justice Kurmanbek Osmonov underlining that a specific threat in the region was Uyghur separatists organizations. Later however, on 24 October at a meeting with Uyghur community representatives, he argued that his statement had been misinterpreted, and that the situation remains unchanged.

The situation of Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan is dependent on several factors: first, the bilateral agreements between Kyrgyzstan and China including on the struggle against separatism and extremism in any forms. According to the "Vechniy Bishkek" newspaper (December 18, 2003 edition) a delegation of Kyrgyzstan's MVD, headed by minister Bakiridin Suvanbekov visited

the People's Republic of China, where they met with Chinese Minister of National Security, Zhou Younkan. The result of this meeting was that the two sides agreed on deeper cooperation between law-enforcement agencies, on effective exchange of information, as well as on cooperation in searching for "criminals". It is obvious that the main point here is related to Chinese Uyghurs.

The second factor is that Kyrgyzstan is keen not to see its relations with China disturbed, due to common borders and trade agreements. On September 6, 2003, Chinese Foreign minister Li Zhaoxing met with Kyrgyz foreign minister Askar Aitmatov in Bishkek, where they signed a treaty of cooperation and friendship, as well as cooperation against terrorism, particularly regarding the Eastern Turkistan Liberation Movement. Several days before this meeting, Li Zhaoxing visited Dushanbe, where he signed an agreement of cooperation in fighting terrorism, extremism and separatism. After this meeting, Li Zhaoxing told journalists that the two states jointly combat Uyghur separatists. The result is that on 26 November, Kyrgyzstan added several Uyghur groups to the list of terrorist organizations. A third and related factor is China's military assistance to Kyrgyzstan. In the last several years, China has granted financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan's military in the amount of 30 millions Yuan (ca. US\$3.5 million).

2003 was of crucial importance to Uyghurs in Central Asia, mainly because the Regional Antiterrorist Center of the SCO opened on November 2. The RATC is partly designed to fight Uyghur separatism in the XUAR, which in turn will influence the situation of Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan as well as in Central Asia. This became obvious after joint military exercises of SCO member states "Cooperation 2003" took place on August 6 in Kazakhstan, and on August 10-12 in the XUAR itself.

Rustam Mukhamedov

THE “UZBEK MODEL” OF DEVELOPMENT: SLOW, STABLE AND SHOWING SUCCESS

Andrew Buchman

President Islam Karimov's regime has been alternately derided and praised for the pace (slow) and scope (modest) of its economic and political liberalization policies. Yet Uzbekistan has done considerably better than simply weathering the storm of “triple transition” challenges facing the post-Soviet successor states: consolidation of national and state identity, democratization of the political system and reorganization of the economic system. Given significant development successes in the last twelve years, the gradualist elements of the ‘Uzbek model’ warrant careful consideration. Contrary to popular assumptions, Karimov's strategy seems to demonstrate that stability and development need not be mutually exclusive.

BACKGROUND: In the dozen years following independence, critics have predicted little success for Karimov's “zig-zag” development policies. Yet Uzbekistan has outperformed expectations.

President Islam Karimov has made quite clear, in numerous elaborations of his government's domestic and foreign policy, that Uzbekistan faces considerable security challenges that limit the degree and pace of liberalization his government can afford to pursue. Civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan have generated and strengthened destabilizing forces, as the influx of refugees, drug traffickers and militant political Islamic groups has been bolstered by such conflicts. With the exception of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan has faced the gravest threat of militant Islamic insurgency of any of the Central Asian republics. Similarly, Karimov has had to balance the overweening interests of such powerful states as Russia, the United States and Saudi Arabia—a formidable task in a tough political arena where missteps could result in severe constraints on Uzbek sovereignty. Just as the maintenance of political independence has required adroit maneuvering between superpowers, so too has preserving economic sovereignty and stability meant pursuing a significant measure of autonomy vis-à-vis sources of Western aid. As Hugh Pope reported in 1997 in the *Wall Street Journal*, officials are “committed to open markets, foreign investment and free trade...but look in horror at the social dislocation...ballooning debts and loss of control that (liberalization policies) have brought to their neighbors.”

In the face of these challenges, the Karimov government has retained and centralized a great deal of power. Numerous analysts decry the repressive control of the government. Yet it is facile and even cynical to assume that Karimov is solely or even primarily concerned with the maintenance of his own ascendant position. The actions of the regime indicate a much more complicated interplay of influences and actions, both pro and anti-liberalization.

IMPLICATIONS: While President Karimov's public pronouncements should not be confused for official policy, they are revealing of the Uzbek leader's assessment of the forces shaping his country's future. Karimov has openly proclaimed the creation of an open, democratic market economy as a long-term goal. But Uzbekistan's development strategy envisions a long path

to this liberal democratic end. Karimov has chosen a cautious approach, favoring stability over the uncertain results of a rush to liberalization. Interestingly, a 1996 public opinion survey conducted by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems found that only 17% of the Uzbek population found the pace of change too slow. When people were asked why they were satisfied with their situation, the most common answer (19%) was because of “stability, peace and security.”

The Karimov government has taken steps to liberalize Uzbekistan's economy and spur development. Three crucial economic policies—monetary policy, privatization, and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) support—reveal successful efforts to further Uzbekistan's development progress.

Regarding Monetary policy, the Uzbek government in October 2003 lifted currency restrictions and shelved the practice of administering multiple currency rates. These acts ended a foreign exchange and currency regime that had been roundly criticized as a significant barrier to FDI and exports, and thus a drag to development. While monetary policy has remained relatively tight, inflation has responded by declining significantly, with forecasts of decline from 24% in 2002 to 14% in 2003 and 11% in 2004. Crucially, tightening fiscal and monetary policy has not been accompanied by the undermining use of the currency (som) to finance an increasing budget deficit. Rather, the deficit for the first 10 months of 2003 has been reported as less than 0.1% of GDP. Equally encouraging are forecasts of expected exchange rate stability: 971 som to the US dollar in 2003 is expected to rise to 1,043 som/\$1 USD in 2004 and 1,150 in 2005. It may be that Uzbekistan has managed, like Kazakhstan, to build a sound economic platform, *while avoiding* the initial collapse in output endured by Almaty and the other Central Asian republics.

Uzbekistan is pursuing a modest set of privatization policies as regards privatization and investment. For example, the government plans to sell loss-making state enterprises, offering investors an exemption from income tax. Also proposed is the sale of a majority stake in Uzbektelekom. However the primary engines of the Uzbek economy remain under state control. As of 2002, the Uzbek private sector accounted for 45% of GDP, as compared to 25% for Turkmenistan and 65% for Kazakhstan.

Agriculture, Uzbekistan's largest employer, is not liberalized, with the government exercising an unsurprising “cotton monopoly,” as

this crop is the country's largest single export earner. Likewise, Uzbekneftegaz, the central oil and gas company, also remains in state hands. One can surmise that this limited privatization expresses the intersection of efforts towards liberalization and steps to preserve sovereignty, for the government has preferred to fund development programs through external debt rather than allowing foreign equity. While FDI rose by 1.7% in 2003, reaching 27 billion som for the 1st half of the year, it still represents the lowest level of foreign per capita investment in the region. However, foreign aid and loans close this gap. U.S. aid to Uzbekistan has increased sharply in recent years, going from US\$85 million in 2001 to \$300 million in 2002. Bilateral lending and investment in the energy sector, particularly from Russia and the Ukraine, comprise another source of significant development capital.

In 2001, the Government made support of Small and Medium Size enterprises a cornerstone of its economic development strategy, calling on the administration to back the goal of doubling the share of GDP represented by such enterprises. By mandating such a focus, the government aims to address problems of unemployment, create a broader foundation for continued

growth, and thus further enhance Uzbekistan's social and economic stability. Though it is too early to analyze the outcome(s) of such a policy, the decision certainly represents a move toward economic liberalization and a significant development choice.

CONCLUSIONS: Karimov's gradualist approach may be seen as a careful merging of policies for economic stabilization *and* liberalization. As a result, Uzbekistan is indeed making development progress. Second only to Kazakhstan in levels of per capita social spending, Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian country able to return to 1989's level of GDP by 2001. Uzbekistan's economy has shown consistent growth in the last 12 years. And perhaps most importantly, average wages and household incomes have increased, albeit slowly, and the country's human development indicator shows the highest gain in the period 1990-2000 of any country in the region. Uzbekistan's critics may need to reconsider more positively the 'Uzbek model' of development.

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HARASSED JOURNALISTS IN KAZAKHSTAN GET OPPOSITION BACKING

Since being accused of slander by a high-placed government official, the "Vremya" weekly reporter Gennady Benditskiy has become a celebrity in Kazakhstan's opposition circles. The libel charge was brought against the journalist, always lauded for his professionalism, by the director of the "Republican Innovation Foundation" Asgat Zhabagin, one of the figures depicted in sensational revelations of "Vremya" as a corrupt element.

Last year, the highly-rated "Vremya" ran a series of articles shedding light on the roots of corruption and large-scale embezzlement among the top echelons of power. One of these criticisms touched on the raw the director of the "Republican Innovation Foundation" (RIF) Asgat Zhabagin, who served as deputy prime minister in the years 1993-1994 and then as a Minister of Energy Resources. The journalist alleged that US\$1.5 million (an astronomical sum by Kazakhstan's scale), allocated to the Defense Ministry to pay off long-standing debts to Russian and Ukrainian military industry, was by some intricate way diverted to the accounts of the "RIF".

Asgat Zhabagin did not wait long to sue the journalist for allegedly damaging his reputation. But neither he nor his lawyer Vitaly Ginsburg could refute the well-documented facts contained in the article. More than that, in the course of further debates Vitaly Ginsburg admitted that the money intended as a payment for jet fighters delivered from Ukraine and Russia was actually used by middlemen "to finance political campaigns". This revelation added oil to fire. Apparently there were more influential figures pulling strings behind Zhabagin. The President of the country himself demanded from the Prosecutor General's Office that the investigation into the case be completed within a month. Since there was nothing

substantial to use as an indictment against Benditskiy, the Prosecutor General's Office asked for an additional month. If proven guilty, the journalist may be sentenced up to three years of prison terms.

But given the increasing protests from the opposition about the harassment of journalists, the court is unlikely to send Gennady Benditskiy to prison. The "Ak Zhol" Democratic Party leaders launched an appeal to all democratic forces of Kazakhstan to rally for the defense of Gennady Benditskiy. Leading opposition parties and human rights organizations set up a Public Committee to protect the "Vremya" journalist. Speaking at the session of the Committee on January 20, its chairman Bolat Abilov said that the principal issue on the agenda was not so much the case of Benditskiy or that of "Vremya" as the fate of democracy. He went on further to say that "this case can be considered as an attempt of deep-rooted corporate corruption to strangle the freedom of the press". Committee members also appealed to the Russian Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights and the Ukrainian "Nasha Ukraina" movement. To give more public weight to its actions, the Committee is planning to stage a demonstration in Almaty on February 6 demanding a fair court decision in the Benditskiy case.

Since the beginning of the year, political parties and non-government organizations in Kazakhstan have noticeably stepped up their drives for the defense of journalists. On January 15, amid outcries from the opposition field, another unruly journalist, Sergey Duvanov, jailed last year for allegedly raping a teenage girl, was released from his confinement in a penal colony to be transferred to a settlement with better conditions. He served one third of his prison terms. Yevgeny Zhovtis, the director of the Kazakhstan

Bureau of International Human Rights Organization, expressed serious concern about health conditions of Sergey Duvanov. He said that clinics refused to hospitalize Duvanov. "We always regarded our penitentiary system as one of the most rapidly developing institutions in our country, more or less conforming to international standards, but now these processes cause more alarm" said Yevgeny Zhovtis. He hopes Duvanov will soon resume his work at the Human Rights Bureau, but before that the journalist must undergo a medical examination and treatment.

Last year, Sergey Duvanov, alongside with outspoken opposition figures Mukhtar Ablyazov and Galimzhan Zhakyanov, was the winner of the annual "Liberty" prize. This year the prize went to human rights activist Baltash Tursumbayev, former editor of the "Soz" paper and Yermurat Bapi (both currently in exile), former editor of the "Vesti Pavlodara" Igor Vinyavski and Gennady Benditskiy.

With parliamentary elections just around the corner, some political forces are clearly trying to make a political windfall from the harassment and persecution of journalists by power-wielding despots. This drive may strengthen the position of the opposition. Authorities, on the other hand, pressed for genuine political reform by international human rights organizations and not used to other methods of dealing with the opposition other than ruling with iron fists, seem to be entangled in problems of their own making. Actions of the opposition were partly provoked by a highly controversial draft of the media law, restricting further the rights of journalists, recently approved by a pliant parliament.

Marat Yermukanov

AHMAD KADYROV'S VISIT TO SAUDI ARABIA

Murad. B. Al-Shishani

The visit of Ahmad Kadyrov, head of the pro-Russian Chechen administration, to Saudi Arabia on January 14-18 was his first state visit since his widely condemned election as president of Chechnya last October. Four purposes can be inferred from Kadyrov's visit. First, attempting to win recognition as the "legitimate" president of Chechnya. Second, obtaining economic aid to assist in his undertaking "to rebuild Chechnya", a clear effort to strengthen his rule. Third, to coordinate with the Saudi State on the issue of so-called terrorism; and fourth, to highlight a pole that represents "Official Islam" in Russia which aims at promoting the Russian foreign policy in the Islamic world.

BACKGROUND: Kadyrov intended his visit to win him recognition in the Islamic World as the President of Chechnya, successfully as Saudi Arabia was concerned. He was officially received, and presented himself as "the President of all Chechens". He announced that the Republic of Chechnya is going to sign a "historic" agreement with Russia giving Chechnya large economic powers by which it will not be exempt from taxes to the Russian Federation, instead using them to rebuild its infrastructure. Kadyrov also talked of a strategy to reduce the Russian troops in Chechnya to 10,000 soldiers, positioned in barracks away from inhabited areas.

To further emphasize his status as the "legitimate" President of Chechnya, as opposed to those who came before him, Kadyrov indicated that Dudayev and Maskhadov did not consult with Chechens on the matter of separation from Russia "because they feared the Chechen people will vote for remaining a part of Russia". At the end, he said he would establish a dialogue with Maskhadov provided the latter "surrenders and puts an end to terrorist attacks and apologizes to the Chechen people, and then the courts will decide his fate".

Rebuilding Chechnya is nevertheless the largest and most obvious problem facing Ahmad Kadyrov in his efforts to assert his power in a country ravaged by a war that lasted 10 years and left large numbers of refugees and unemployed. In that spirit, it was clear that Kadyrov wanted to use his visit to Saudi Arabia to obtain much-needed aid. He noted that the economic agenda was one of the most important discussed in the talks, including with the President of the Islamic Development Bank. He also met with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Saudi businessmen, discussing the possibility of investing in Chechnya.

Kadyrov emphasized that humanitarian aid from the Saudi Kingdom was discussed, but added that any delay in receiving these aids "from the Arab and Islamic countries capable of offering such aid will delay the process of rebuilding [Chechnya] more than we think". These elements illustrate Kadyrov's efforts to solve his dilemma of reconstruction by channeling support from Arab and Islamic countries.

Besides recognition and economic, counter-terrorism was a focal point of Kadyrov's visit. The Russian Ambassador to Riyadh declared that a joint committee of specialists responsible for discussing bilateral coordination in the fight against terrorism

had been formed. The specifics and targets of this cooperation remain unclear, though the Arab fighters in Chechnya are likely to be a main concern in this coordination effort, especially given that the most notorious ones have been Saudi nationals. Indicating the sensitivity of the topic, Kadyrov actually contradicted himself on the issue. In response to a question regarding Arab fighters in Chechnya, he said that there are no precise numbers of the Arab fighters in Chechnya, but named a Saudi national called Abu Omar as the head of the Shari'a Court in Chechnya during 1997-99. In another interview, Kadyrov declared that there were no Saudi fighters volunteering in Chechnya. "Not one Saudi national was captured among the terrorists ... Arab fighters came to Chechnya between the years 1996 and 1995, but now they have no presence on Chechen territory".

IMPLICATIONS: The visit was clearly a continuation of the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's recent visit to Moscow. Together, these initiatives illustrate Russia's Eurasian approach to foreign policy – seeking to form alliances that make Russia a pole in the new world order equal to the United States by fostering relations with China, India, Iran, and other the Islamic countries. In this context, Russia recently applied for membership in the Organization of the Islamic Conference. This rapprochement with the Islamic World is coupled with attempts to improve Russia's image in the Islamic World, especially given general solidarity with the Chechen resistance and opposition to the brutal war that Russia is waging in Chechnya. According to sources, Kadyrov delivered a letter to the Saudi government from Vladimir Putin in which he said, "Moscow promotes a joint understanding of the Chechen matter with the Islamic World".

The presence of 20 million Muslims in Russia is one reason for this policy of fostering relations with the Islamic World, a policy based on finding Muslim representatives from the core of the Russian State to use for foreign policy purposes. Incidentally, this same policy was used by the Soviet Union through "Official Islam", represented by Muslim clergymen appointed by the State.

A look at the names in Kadyrov's delegation make this attempt clear: The Chief Chechen Mufti, Ahmad-Khadzhi Shamayev; the Mufti of the Republic of Dagestan, Ahmad-Khadzhi

Abdullayev; the Mufti of Ingushetia, Mohammad-Khadzhi Albogachiev; Chairman of the Coordination Center of North Caucasus Muslims, Ismail Berdyev; and the Dean of the Islamic institute in the Chechen Republic, Mohammad Khaskhanov. Kadyrov explicitly stressed his approval and support for Russia's application to the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

As for Saudi Arabia, this rapprochement comes as a part of its efforts to deny accusations leveled against the Kingdom since September 11, 2001, accusing it of funding terrorism. Saudi Arabia wants to be seen as dealing with the "official Islam", and denying any relations with other Islamic parties.

Apart from being a step in the policy of Russian rapprochement with the Islamic World, the visit represents an effort by the Official Muslim clergy in both countries to prepare Islamic clergymen to counter radical Islamic movements. During his visit to Saudi Arabia, Kadyrov presented a proposal to establish an international Islamic center to interpret Islam, to be responsible of issuing fatwas in matters relevant to Islam and Muslims, and to be recognized by all Islamic countries.

CONCLUSIONS: Kadyrov succeeded in playing the international state of affairs to his benefit, including the global war on terrorism, and the ambiguity in the case of the Chechen resistance and its right to self-determination. He succeeded in getting his authority recognized by an Islamic country as significant as Saudi Arabia, which proves the advances in Russian foreign policy. The problem is that recognizing Kadyrov's authority will fulfill Russia's intention of alienating the legitimate Chechen resistance and authority represented by Aslan Maskhadov. It will also drive other countries to recognize this authority without referring to the fact that few international or humanitarian organizations recognized the elections that led Kadyrov to authority. This might lead to isolating the few remaining voices that call for a solution to the tragedy of the Chechen people, which is in its tenth year.

AUTHOR BIO: Murad B. Al-Shishani is a Jordanian-Chechen writer, author of the book "the Islamic Movements in Chechnya and Chechen-Russian Conflict 1991-2000" (Amman 2001, in Arabic.)

RUSSIA SECURES ITS Foothold IN KAZAKHSTAN

The visit of the Russian president Putin to Kazakhstan on January 9, an event widely trumpeted by government media, marked the official opening of the Year of Russia in Kazakhstan. As soon as the guest stepped on the tarmac at the Astana airport, presidents of both countries rushed into each others arms and posed for a few seconds, broadly smiling, before the cameras. No outside observer could tell how sincere those friendly gestures were.

The economic and political relations between the neighboring countries sharing a three thousand mile border, despite their constant protestations of friendship, are overstrained by a host of unsettled issues. The announcement of 2004 as the Year of Russia in Kazakhstan, which implies something more than a cultural achievement in both countries, was in this sense ill-timed. The trade turnover between Kazakhstan and Russia is still on the decline, although Russia remains the dominant trade partner of Kazakhstan. In its total trade turnover, imports from Russia make up 38%.

On the other hand, Russia's share in Kazakhstan's total export volume does not exceed 15%. Most of the 260 agreements signed between the neighbors since their independence actually remain only on paper. On a political level, border delimitation talks, held some time ago alternately in contiguous Russian and Kazakh cities, have come to a deadlock. "We have settled most of the border questions. But the remaining 2 or 3 percent of the border sector are the most disputed ones", according to Vladimir Putin. Although Kazakhstan has never tired of confirming its allegiance to the Russian-favored Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Eurasian Economic Community, it has also to come to terms with Western organizations.

It is only natural, that Kazakhstan has in recent years adopted a more independent stance on political issues and moved closer to NATO. But there are too many

economic issues which make Russia and Kazakhstan interdependent. The northern regions of Kazakhstan largely depend on relatively cheap Russian gas supply, while the Omsk and Kurgan oblasts of Russia are major importers of electricity from North Kazakhstan.

The most complicated problem is railway communication between Kazakhstan and Russia. More than 800 kilometers of Russian railway line passes through Kazakhstan. Since Russia has introduced its own tariffs and rules for transporting goods along these stretches of railway, which is much higher than that adopted in Kazakhstan, the railway has become an irritant for trade partners in both countries. During Putin's two-day visit, an agreement was reached that the prime ministers of Russia and Kazakhstan would meet in January in Moscow to discuss railway transportation problems.

The agreements on revising railway tariff regulations would be important to landlocked Kazakhstan in order to get its oil to markets further afield. New transit opportunities were offered by the Russian side during the talks between Kazakh Prime Minister Danyal Akhmetov, a figure reputed to have close links to the business elite in Moscow, and deputy prime minister of Russia Viktor Khristenko. The long term transit project extending into the year 2020 envisages the shipment of Kazakh oil to European countries via Russia.

Among other things, the two sides discussed the possibility of processing Kazakh gas in Russia. This may sound paradoxical, since Kazakhstan, which has over 70 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, failed to create its own gas processing facilities.

Kazakhstan's prime minister also initiated important talks between the Russian oil-giant "Lukoil", the world's second largest private company which accounts for the 20 of oil produced in Russia, and the Kazakh national oil company "Kazmunaygas". After the talks with the president of "Lukoil" Vaghip Alikperov prime

minister Akhmetov commented very briefly: "This was, I think, one of the first most significant Russian-Kazakh projects on Caspian". According to the contracts signed between "Lukoil" and "Kazmunaygas", both sides will jointly develop the Tyub Karagan and Atashskaya fields in the Kazakhstan sector of the Caspian shelf. But these fields are not sufficiently explored for their gas reserves.

Nevertheless, Russia intends to expand its presence in the oil and gas sector of Kazakhstan, and to work together with Kazakh companies at Kurmangazy, Khvalynskoye and Tsentralnoye fields this year. Apparently, Russia will spare neither money nor political effort to regain its weakening position in the economy of Kazakhstan. According to Viktor Khristenko, Russia is ready to invest a total of US\$3 billion in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector.

Kazakh nationalists, on the other hand, are not at all enthusiastic over the intensifying Russian-Kazakh rapprochement. They suspect that the more than four million ethnic Russians of Kazakhstan are used by Russia as a means of leverage to gain additional concessions from Kazakhstan. They impetuously reacted to the handover of the Ogyneupornoye village in Kostanay border region to Russia, a fact which was made public not by government, but by opposition press. Another source of resentment for nationalists was the agreement to prolong the term of control over the Baikonur space center by Russia for 50 years for an annual rent of \$150 million.

The year 2003 passed under the sign of the Year of Kazakhstan in Russia. Economic experts say it did not change much in the essence of relations between the two countries. So they cannot expect more from the year of Russia in Kazakhstan.

Karim Sayid

KAZAKHSTAN'S PEACEKEEPING SUPPORT IN IRAQ

Roger N. McDermott & Col. Igor Mukhamedov

Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev's May 2003 decision to send peacekeepers to Iraq, enabling their participation in the post-war reconstruction of the country, was indeed a bold step: for the first time in the short history of the former Soviet Republic, a peacekeeping unit was being deployed beyond the region in support of on-going stabilization and humanitarian operations. Kazakhstan was the first in the region to do so. The deployment can so far be termed a success.

BACKGROUND: Defense Minister Altynbayev at the time of the deployment made sure to note that Kazakhstan had received a message from the U.S. administration, explicitly requesting a Kazakhstani contingent as a part of coalition stabilization forces within the framework of operation Iraqi Freedom. The participation of Kazakhstan in peacekeeping and reconstruction process of Iraq, he argued, is part of 'the state activity plan to ensure and consolidate regional and international security.' Distinguishing the decision from the possibility of deploying peacekeepers to Afghanistan, Altynbayev presented the case that Kazakhstan responded to a clear and unambiguous request from the U.S. No doubt recollecting the concerns over sending peacekeepers abroad in 2002, he made clear that the servicemen would be experts in the area and that only volunteers would go to Iraq. It was likely, in his view, to include 3 interpreters, 8 officers and 14 (enlisted or NCOs) soldiers from Kazakhstan's peacekeeping battalion (KAZBAT). Members of KAZBAT were tasked with humanitarian duties, including mine clearance and water purification, as part of the international division placed under Polish command. KAZBAT has conducted itself in a professional manner, proving itself capable of carrying out its designated tasks of water purification and military engineering activities. Four months into the first six-month deployment, sustaining no fatalities or injuries, KAZBAT has also established good relations with locals. Its success can be attested to in gaining sufficient trust amongst locals to receive information on the location of ordnance left over from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). The total cost of the deployment is expected to reach \$98,000 in the first six months. The unit has cleared away more than 400,000 explosives and continues fulfilling successfully its missions. As Altynbayev once noted, in addition, the Detachment helps in solving another important problem: achieving interoperability.

Kazakhstan's peacekeeping battalion was created on 31 January 2000. The battalion is an extremely complex organism, which continues to evolve as training, exercises and equipment improve in line with the officially stated policy of achieving NATO interoperability. Its development has been rapid and will continue to progress towards that goal.

The battalion itself is placed under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Zhanibek Sharipov and is located at Kapshagai, 70 km north of Almaty. KAZBAT is 100% staffed with professional personnel serving on contracts. These are drawn from the 35th air assault brigade (DShBr) based in Almaty. It has access to good

quality training facilities, including airdrop ranges, firing ranges and an MOD linguistic centre. Within its structure, emphasis has been placed upon the formation of an NCO corps, providing enhanced leadership skills for the management of the battalion.

The United States has solidly supported the creation and professional development of Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities, reflected in its prioritizing KAZBAT in its five-year military cooperation plan signed with Kazakhstan in September 2003 and its ongoing estimation of the assistance to KAZBAT as a key foreign policy objective in the region. It is not surprising that the US has also been the lead provider of assistance and training for KAZBAT, sending its Special Forces (SF) 12 man A-teams to train the battalion. U.S. assistance has taken varied forms, through military-to-military training and assessment, exchange visits and joint exercises. As a result of an assessment of KAZBAT and its needs, Kazakhstan responded by developing the Enhanced International Peacekeeping Cooperation (EIPC) program, through which the U.S. will provide an anticipated \$1 million in 2003. Two key U.S. assistance programs have played a critical part in supporting KAZBAT. The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program. Approximately 25-30 percent of IMET funding to Kazakhstan in 2002-2003 was orientated towards training specialists for KAZBAT. US military personnel were sent to Almaty in November 2003, training NCO members of KAZBAT. More officers serving in KAZBAT in future will have received training in NATO countries.

Bilateral programs between Kazakhstan and Turkey and the United Kingdom have broadly supported American-led engagement activities. Turkey has engaged in joint tactical exercises, and assigned a team of instructors to KAZBAT for several months and supplied equipment. The UK established the Self-Access Language Centre (SAC) in Kapshagai and has taken part in joint exercises, such as 'Steppe Eagle' in July 2003.

IMPLICATIONS: The battalion also suffers from top-heavy management, which can present its own unique problems. The percentage of officers to soldiers in KAZBAT currently stands at around 40 per cent—which does not facilitate individual initiative.

In order to remedy these issues, the overall numbers of officers will have to be reduced, with continued focus on developing the NCOs, thus maximizing the efficient management of the battalion. A key challenge in improving the managerial efficiency

of KAZBAT will be the acceptance of NCOs as leaders and junior managers.

KAZBAT, despite its obvious success, will require continued systemic support and international assistance in order to help Kazakhstan realize its goal in making the battalion interoperable with NATO. NATO standardized equipment, including communications equipment, munitions and Highly Mobile Multi Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs), will be an essential part of KAZBAT's future development. Kazakhstan is currently working with U.S. CENTCOM to get their first eight HMMWVs in January or February, in order to send them to Iraq. International support could be widened to include France and Germany: the former has a bilateral military cooperation agreement with Kazakhstan, while the latter needs to develop further its security relationship with the country.

Any assistance given towards enhancing Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities will undoubtedly help, particularly if it promotes further training for members of KAZBAT. It also needs greater participation in international exercises, such as 'Steppe Eagle', that these become the norm rather than the result of singular and painstaking efforts. Key individuals within Kazakhstan's MOD, such as Major-General Bulat Sembinov, have played an important role in furthering international

cooperation aimed at supporting the advancement of Kazakhstan's peacekeeping capabilities and will also do so in future. Such individuals will demonstrate the determination currently existing in the country to achieve genuine progress in these areas.

CONCLUSIONS: Kazakhstan is also willing to expand KAZBAT in the near future, possibly to a brigade level. As it faces the challenge of seeking necessary UN involvement and enhancing the capabilities of its peacekeeping forces Kazakhstan will require deepened commitment from its friends abroad in the form of security assistance. Thus, as it makes its first tentative steps into the sphere of international peacekeeping, the challenge of promoting such activities in future will depend on the extent to which the western powers can help Kazakhstan meet these challenges.

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BAKU TURNS INTO A SILK ROAD ANTI-NARCOTICS CENTER

On January 22, Azerbaijan's capital Baku hosted an international conference on the "Struggle against the illegal drug trade in the Great Silk Road states." The conference was organized by the World Customs Organization (WCO) and the State Customs Committee of Azerbaijan and attended by the customs officials of CIS countries, the U.S., France, Turkey, the UK, Belgium, Japan, Italy and many other countries, as well as representatives of the EU, UN and UNDP. Ilham Aliyev, the President of Azerbaijan, also sent a congratulatory letter to the participants of the conference, who are aiming to develop a common strategy to fight the drug trade in the region.

"Considering the geographic location of Azerbaijan between Asia and Europe, criminal groups attempt to turn our country into a transit corridor with the help of air and land transports. But Azerbaijan will not allow this and will conduct an active fight with illegal drug trafficking," said deputy Prime Minister Ali Hasanov, opening the conference. Hasanov serves as the chairman of the state commission on the fight against drugs and drug trafficking. He also noted that the effective struggle against drug trafficking is only possible with the common activity of all countries and international organizations.

In the past few years, Azerbaijan indeed witnessed an increase in both the usage and illegal transit of drugs, with Iran and Afghanistan being the main suppliers. Drug-addicted people have been reported in 40 regions of Azerbaijan, as compared

to 11 regions in 1996. Azerbaijani authorities have also been claiming that the occupied territories in Nagorno-Karabakh are used for the growth and illegal transit of drugs and that the non-transparent area with uncontrolled borders allows drug business to boom. "We possess credible information that there are mini-labs in Nagorno-Karabakh that produce heavy drugs. These drugs are then transported through Iran and Azerbaijan into Russia, the Balkans and Turkey", said Madat Guliyev, the head of anti-narcotics department. On several occasions, Azerbaijani authorities have raised this issue in the UN and Council of Europe, but it has not found a solution yet.

One of the ways to transport drugs along the Silk Road region is the Caspian Sea. Local analysts believe that the Caspian sea is used not only for drug but also human trafficking. Local political scientist Rovshan Novruzoglu told Zerkalo that in 1998-2001, the volume of drug transit from Central Asia to Europe through the Caucasus was 369 tons, including 92 tons of opium, 170 tons of heroin, 105 tons of hashish and marijuana. Zerkalo also quoted the analytical center of the Security Council of Russia, stating that income from the drug business in the Caspian sea is \$800 million annually. He transit of drugs through the Caspian sea is also comfortable, because in case of a police chase, the criminals easily get rid of the drugs by throwing them into the water.

Guliyev also added that in 2003, crimes related to drugs decreased by 113, yet the cases of drug

confiscation have increased. He noted that the decrease in drug-related criminal cases has been due to the effective work of the department, which opened branches in the north (2001) and the south (2002) of the country. Among the arrested criminals, 36 were foreign citizens. Each year, there is a police operation in Azerbaijan, called "Khash-Khash," aimed at destroying cannabis plants. As a result of this, each year 300 tons of drugs are confiscated and destroyed.

"Azerbaijan will develop a national program on the fight against the drug trade, part of which will be the creation of an information system, the conduct of training and seminars for customs officials," according to Kamaleddin Heydarov, the chairman of Azerbaijani State Customs Committee.

In his turn, Michel Dane, the head of the World Customs Organization said: "The increase in drug trade networks around the world worries Europe. At this conference, we need to know what is needed for an improved struggle against drugs, and the WCO can provide equipment for the struggle against this evil."

Azerbaijani authorities state that 78% of the drug-addicted people in Azerbaijan use marijuana because other types of drugs are expensive. For example, 1 gram of heroin costs 70-100 US dollars in black market, according to independent daily Zerkalo.

Fariz Ismailzade

NEWS BITES

INFORMATION CENTER FOR LABOR MIGRANTS OPENS IN TAJIKISTAN

15 January

An information and resource center for Tajik citizens wanting to obtain jobs abroad opened in Dushanbe on 14 January. The center is an initiative of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which seeks to prevent many of the problems that have been encountered by Tajiks working abroad because they are unfamiliar with the immigration rules of the countries in which they seek work. The IOM center – located near the Dushanbe railway station from which labor migrants leave for Russia, the favored destination for job seekers -- will provide free consultations, including a 24-hour telephone hotline. An estimated 800,000 Tajiks go abroad to work every year. (Asia Plus-Blitz)

ARMENIAN PARLIAMENT SPEAKER MEETS IN PARIS WITH FRENCH DEPUTIES

15 January

Parliament speaker Artur Baghdasarian met with a delegation of French deputies led by Jean-Louis Debre, the president of the French National Assembly, on 15 January during a visit to Paris to discuss measures to expand relations between the two parliaments. Deputies of the 54-member French-Armenian Parliamentary Friendship Group pledge their support for Armenian efforts to seek regional stability and the normalization of relations between all countries of the South Caucasus. Baghdasarian expressed Armenia's concern over the situation in Georgia, noting the need for stability to ensure reliable transport links and to safeguard the sizable Armenian minority in Georgia. (Armenpress)

EXXONMOBIL REPORTS ON INVESTMENTS IN AZERBAIJAN

15 January

Exxon Azerbaijan Operating Company, a subsidiary of the U.S. company ExxonMobil, invested more than \$1.5 billion in oil projects in Azerbaijan between 1995 and 2003, according to a corporate report on the company's investment activities in Azerbaijan released on 15 January. The ExxonMobil report revealed that its ongoing exploration of the offshore Zafar-Mashal oil field is the subsidiary's priority project. ExxonMobil holds a 30 percent share in that field, with drilling of the first well having begun in November. The company also holds shares in the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli, Nakhchivan, and Lerik-Deniz fields, although only the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli fields are currently producing oil. Despite this sizable investment, there have been significant obstacles, however, as exploration at the Oguz field was halted in November when the project failed to become commercially viable and work at the Alov structure was halted in mid-2002 due to Iranian objections. The company has also been frustrated by the continuing dispute over the legal

status of the Caspian Sea, which has also suspended exploration of the Lerik-Deniz offshore fields. (Interfax)

CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION RELEASES FINAL RESULTS FROM SPECIAL PRESIDENTIAL BALLOT

16 January

The Central Election Commission (CEC) released the final results on 15 January of the 4 January special presidential ballot, according to the Rustavi-2 website. With more than 1.9 million of the country's 2.2 million registered voters casting ballots, the official results show President-elect Saakashvili with 96.27 percent of the vote, followed by Temur Shashiashvili with 1.85 percent, Roin Liparteliani with 0.26 percent, and Zaza Sikharulidze with 0.24 percent. Opposition Labor Party CEC member Badri Niauri refused to sign the final protocol of tally, protesting that the voter lists had been improperly compiled. (RFE/RL)

GEORGIAN DEFENSE MINISTER LEAVES FOR IRAQ

16 January

Defense Minister Davit Tevzadze left Tbilisi on 15 January to visit Iraq to inspect a Georgian peacekeeping detachment currently deployed in the town of Tikrit. The Georgian detachment, deployed in Iraq since August, includes mine-clearing specialists and doctors. It is to be replaced by another group of 200 Georgian soldiers, and the country is also planning to dispatch an entire 500-soldier battalion to Iraq sometime this summer. (RFE/RL)

KYRGYZ PARLIAMENTARY BUGGING SCANDAL GROWS

16 January

As of the beginning of the Kyrgyz Legislative Assembly's 16 January session, listening devices had been found in the offices of seven parliamentarians. The scandal erupted two days earlier when General Ismail Isakov, head of the parliamentary State Security Committee and a former security official, announced he had found a bug in his office. Other parliamentarians made similar discoveries and, in a special session on 15 January, accused the National Security Service of planting the devices. National Security Service chief Karlyk Imankulov denied the charge, pointing out that the devices were homemade. The Prosecutor-General's Office has launched an investigation. (kabar.kg)

IRANIAN DIPLOMAT VISITS AZERBAIJAN

16 January

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohsen Aminzadeh met in Baku on 16 January with Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Vilayat Guliev, Economic Development Minister Farkhad Aliyev, and President Ilham Aliyev.

Topics discussed included the North-South Transport Corridor linking the two countries with Russia and the Persian Gulf; the still unresolved legal status of the Caspian Sea; regional-security issues, including the Karabakh conflict; and planned visits scheduled for 2004 by Aliyev to Iran and Iranian President Mohammed Khatami to Azerbaijan. Aminzadeh told journalists after the talks that Tehran sees no need either for U.S. assistance to Azerbaijan in protecting its Caspian oil fields or for the creation of a NATO base in Azerbaijan. Asked when Tehran will finally give the green light for opening an Azerbaijani consulate in Tabriz, Aminzadeh declined to answer. (Interfax)

FINAL STAGE OF U.S. TRAINING PROGRAM FOR GEORGIAN MILITARY GETS UNDER WAY

17 January

The final, four-month phase of the Train and Equip program launched in the early summer of 2002 was formally inaugurated on 17 January. Thirty U.S. instructors will train 267 Georgian servicemen of the 11th Motorized Brigade in the use of Russian tanks and light armored personnel carriers. U.S. Ambassador Richard Miles said that the United States will continue training for the Georgian armed forces after the initial Train and Equip program ends. (Interfax)

UZBEK JOB SEEKERS SQUEEZING LOCALS OUT OF WEST KAZAKH JOB MARKET

19 January

Job seekers from Uzbekistan are squeezing local labor out of the job market in western Kazakhstan's Atyrau Oblast. Atyrau trade union official Kazym Batyrkhanov was quoted as warning that the oblast could face social tensions as a result. According to official figures, more than 33,000 Uzbek citizens are working in the city of Atyrau, but local authorities say that most job seekers from neighboring countries do not bother to register, so the actual number is probably much higher. The population of the city is about 160,000. Atyrau Oblast is the site of several major oil-field projects. (tribune-uz.info)

KYRGYZ PARLIAMENTARIAN SEES BUGGING SCANDAL AS EFFORT TO SET SOUTH AGAINST NORTH

19 January

General Ismail Isakov, chairman of the Kyrgyz lower house's State Security Committee, has told his parliamentary colleagues that, with one exception, the parliamentarians who discovered listening devices in their offices were all oppositionists from southern Kyrgyzstan. In Isakov's interpretation, the devices were planted on the instruction of President Aksar Akaev's closest supporters -- all northerners -- in order to destroy their political opponents from the south. Isakov, a former deputy defense minister, also called on parliament to cut the National Security Service's budget by half on the grounds that taxpayers' money should not be used to spy on their elected representatives. Anti-Akaev forces in parliament are calling on the president to resign for failing in his duty as protector of the constitution. Prominent opposition parliamentarian Azimbek Beknazarov noted that a similar bugging scandal occurred in 2000 and was used by the authorities to discredit former National Security Service chief Feliks Kulov, who had joined the opposition. (Deutsche Welle)

UZBEK AMNESTY FREES MOST WOMEN SENTENCED FOR RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM

20 January

An amnesty declared by Uzbek President Islam Karimov at the beginning of December 2003 to mark the 11th anniversary of the Uzbek Constitution has freed 21 of the 24 Muslim women known to have been convicted of religious extremism between 1997 and 2001, according to the Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan. All 21 -- who had been sentenced to from three to 16 years' imprisonment -- were all reportedly released by 17 January. According to the human rights group, it remains unclear why the three women who are still imprisoned were not freed. (RFE/RL)

AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT PLEDGES TO ENCOURAGE INVESTMENT, RAISE SALARIES

20 January

Speaking to journalists in Baku on 20 January during a ceremony to commemorate the 14th anniversary of the Soviet military intervention in that city, Ilham Aliyev said he will expedite implementation of his November 2003 decree streamlining procedures for foreign investors. He stressed that economic development will make it possible to raise public-sector salaries and welfare payments. Aliyev singled out the Karabakh conflict as the most important problem facing Azerbaijan, stressing that the OSCE Minsk Group should draft new proposals to resolve it. He said that if a negotiated solution proves elusive, Azerbaijan has the right to use force to bring the region back under its control. He said he has no plans for a sweeping government reshuffle. (Turan)

RUSSIA DECRIES RISE IN INTRA-GEORGIAN TENSIONS

20 January

The Russian Foreign Ministry released a statement on 20 January expressing concern at the escalation of tensions between the central Georgian authorities and the leadership of the Adjar Republic, Russian media reported. The statement specifically condemned "extremist-minded forces" such as the youth movement Kmara (Enough!), whose "dangerous" activities the ministry claimed pose a threat to stability throughout Georgia. It called for a "political dialogue" to resolve outstanding problems between Tbilisi and Batumi. Also on 20 January, several thousand supporters of Adjar leader Aslan Abashidze staged a march from Kobuleti to Batumi. The creation was announced the same day of a new moderate movement named Our Adjara, whose unidentified founders listed their aims as preserving peace and stability. At the same time, they condemned the activities of Kmara activists, arguing that "children of this age should not engage in politics." (Caucasus Press)

KAZAKH PRESIDENT'S DAUGHTER PROPOSES OWN PARTY AS PARLIAMENTARY LOBBY FOR JOURNALISTS

20 January

Darigha Nazarbaeva, head of the Congress of Journalists of Kazakhstan and of the state television channel and the official news agency Khabar, told a session of the congress in Karaganda on 20 January that the country's journalists need their own lobby in the lower house of parliament. Further, she

proposed her own political party, Asar, which was formed last year, as the basis for such a lobby following parliamentary elections later this year. Questioned about her attitude toward the controversial media law that was adopted by the Kazakh lower house in late December and has since been submitted to the Senate, Nazarbaeva told journalists that the current version is more liberal than the initial version drafted by the government, but it still has shortcomings because the changes sought by professional journalists have not been included. (Interfax)

U.S. 'DISAPPOINTED' BY ARMENIAN ABSENCE FROM BAKU NATO PLANNING CONFERENCE

21 January

In a statement released on 20 January by the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, the State Department expressed "disappointment" that an Armenian Defense Ministry delegation was unable to travel last week to Azerbaijan to attend a planning conference for military exercises to be held in Azerbaijan later this year within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace program, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. The statement noted that Washington does not yet have full information about why the Armenian officers were prevented from flying from Istanbul to Baku. (RFE/RL)

SOME AZERBAIJANI DETAINEES SENTENCED, OTHERS RELEASED

21 January

A Baku district court passed sentence on 21 January on five members of the opposition Musavat party convicted of participating in clashes with police in Baku in the wake of the 15 October presidential election. The five were sentenced to between 12 and 18 months' imprisonment for obstructing the work of electoral commissions. Also on 21 January, 10 other people apprehended during or after the 16 October clashes were released. A joint statement issued by the Interior Ministry and the Prosecutor-General's Office said the 10 did not participate in organizing the clashes, and had repented of their actions and petitioned President Aliyev for clemency. Some 90 people remain in custody either awaiting trial or having their alleged roles in the disorders investigated. Speaking in Washington on 21 January, U.S. State Department deputy spokesman Adam Ereli said the Azerbaijani authorities should either make public immediately the details of the investigation and ensuing charges brought against the detainees, or release them, Turan reported on 22 January. (Turan)

INGUSHETIAN PRESIDENT AGAIN RULES OUT REMERGER WITH CHECHNYA

21 January

Speaking on 21 January at a press conference in Moscow, Murat Zyazikov rejected once again the idea of reuniting Chechnya and Ingushetia as a single federation subject. Zyazikov acknowledged that the Chechen and Ingush peoples are ethnically closely related, and stressed that "I grew up in Grozny and care about everything that is happening there." But he argued that reunification is inappropriate at present. Zyazikov recalled that he and his Chechen counterpart Kadyrov signed an agreement last year formalizing the administrative border between the two neighboring republics. Zyazikov added that those interest groups

lobbying for reunification "should find other things to do." (Interfax)

ARMENIA REJECTS AZERBAIJAN'S CALL FOR NEW KARABAKH PEACE PLAN

22 January

Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian rejected on 21 January Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev's statement the previous day that the OSCE Minsk Group is not doing enough to resolve the Karabakh conflict and should come up with a new peace proposal, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. Oskanian argued that talks should continue on the basis of agreements reached between the two sides during talks in Paris and the U.S. state of Florida in the spring of 2001. Oskanian said it would be "an unfortunate loss of time if all of a sudden the process were to be rolled back and relaunched from scratch." He added that he hopes French President Jacques Chirac, who mediated the Paris talks in 2001, will remind Aliyev when the two men meet in Paris later this week of the details of the provisional agreement arrived at during those talks. (RFE/RL)

UZBEKS BUILDING DAM TO CONTAIN OVERFLOW FROM KAZAKH RESERVOIR

22 January

The Uzbek daily "Pravda vostoka" reported on 21 January that a 2.4-kilometer dam is being built in Navoi Oblast to contain water that has been released from the Chardara Reservoir on the Kazakh-Uzbek border. The water was released to prevent the Syrdarya River from destroying the Chardara Dam in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan agreed on 4 January to undertake a series of measures to prevent the Syrdarya from flooding southern Kazakhstan, but Uzbekistan in particular has been slow -- according to the Kazakh authorities -- to implement the promised measures. According to "Pravda vostoka," the Kazakhs have been diverting water into Navoi Oblast's Lake Aidarkul, which is overflowing into nearby pastures and threatening settlements in two raions. (RFE/RL)

U.S. GIVES HELICOPTERS TO KYRGYZSTAN TO HELP SECURE BORDER

22 January

Two Russian-made Mi-8 MTV helicopters were presented to Kyrgyzstan by the United States on 22 January at a ceremony at the Frunze-1 military airfield outside Bishkek. The helicopters are to be used to combat smuggling. The Mi-8s and their accompanying spare-parts packages were described by U.S. Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Stephen Young and Kyrgyz National Security Council Secretary Misir Ashirkulov as the largest single aid package given to Kyrgyzstan by the United States to date. Young said a decision has been made to buy and refurbish Soviet-type helicopters rather than U.S. machines, because Kyrgyz pilots are familiar with them and will not have to be retrained. In addition, the Mi-8 is well adapted to Kyrgyzstan's mountainous conditions. (akipress.org)

UZBEKISTAN AMNESTIES ABOUT 3,500

22 January

The office of Uzbekistan's prosecutor-general announced on 22 January that an amnesty decreed in December by President Islam Karimov to commemorate the 11th anniversary of the

country's constitution has freed about 3,500 convicts. Of the 3,381 people covered by the amnesty, 391 were sentenced for crimes against the constitutional order and public safety, charges often filed against alleged Islamist extremists. (Interfax)

UZBEKISTAN TIGHTENS CONTROLS ON GROUPS

22 January

The Uzbek government is seeking to tighten control over international human rights and democracy organizations out of fear that some are promoting a Georgian-style revolution, officials with the groups say. Authorities have adopted a new requirement for international groups to register with the Justice Ministry by March 1. The organizations previously registered only with the Foreign Ministry. U.S. diplomats, fearing that some groups may be denied registration and driven from the country, have threatened sanctions if the new policy is not reversed, a Western official said on condition of anonymity. The Americans argue that the new requirement violates a 1994 bilateral agreement concerning groups supported by the U.S. government in Uzbekistan. The targeted organizations — including George Soros' Open Society Institute and the U.S. government-backed National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute — worked with Georgian opposition groups before President Eduard Shevardnadze's ouster in November following weeks of opposition protests. The institutes have temporarily halted work with Uzbek opposition parties pending resolution of the situation. Following the events in Georgia, the Uzbek government "realized the presence of international organizations could be an undermining presence from within — working with young people and changing their minds," said Alisher Ilkhamov, who heads the Open Society Institute in Uzbekistan. During a discussion of the new registration procedure, at least one U.S. government-funded organization was accused by an Uzbek official of interfering with the country's domestic politics and teaching opposition groups to follow the Georgian example, the Western official said. The group denied the claims. Uzbek Foreign Ministry spokesman Ilkhom Zakirov said the registration was a procedural matter that would not prevent any groups from working. He denied Uzbek authorities were concerned that Georgian events could be replayed here. But organizations are worried about the Justice Ministry, which is less accustomed to dealing with international organizations. Ilkhamov said the new procedure allows any other ministry to veto a group's registration. (AP)

U.S. INCREASES FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE TO ARMENIA

23 January

The omnibus budget bill passed by the U.S. Senate on 22 January allocates not less than \$75 million in direct aid to Armenia and a further \$5 million in humanitarian assistance to the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. The bill calls for \$2.5 million for military aid to Armenia, which is to be used to upgrade communications facilities, and \$900,000 for international military training. (Noyan Tapan)

KYRGYZ PRESIDENT PROMISES ETHNIC UZBEKS MORE ATTENTION TO LANGUAGE, CULTURE

23 January

Meeting with representatives of the ethnic Uzbek communities of southern Kyrgyzstan on 23 January, Askar Akaev promised that Uzbek language and culture will be given great significance in the future, as will the languages and cultures of all the country's other nationalities. Akaev was promoting the Assembly of the Peoples of Kyrgyzstan and touted the importance of interethnic harmony for the country's economic development. In an apparent reference to frictions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2003 over border issues, Akaev noted that one of the tasks of the current Year of Social Mobilization is to promote good relations with all neighboring countries through public diplomacy. On 26 January, Akaev met with representatives of the ethnic Tajiks of Batken Oblast to bring a similar message and to discuss the functioning of the Tajik cultural center. (kabar.kg)

FRENCH FM SAYS "OPEN WAR" STILL RAGING IN RUSSIA'S CHECHNYA

23 January

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin contradicted the official Kremlin line that the Chechen war was over and won but reaffirmed France's desire to work with Moscow to create a "new international order." "Chechnya is in a state of open war, with its daily quota of dramas and its risks of destabilisation for neighbouring countries, from Turkey to Iran," de Villepin said, addressing a group of students in Moscow where he also met his Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov. Moscow has consistently referred to the fighting in Chechnya, where it poured in troops to put down a separatist insurgency in October 1999, as an "anti-terrorist operation" and not a war, and has for several months insisted that the situation in the southern republic has been "normalized." De Villepin noted that "terrorism must be condemned and fought with the greatest firmness, and Russia's territorial integrity respected, but there cannot be a durable solution on the sole basis of a security strategy." Answering questions alongside Ivanov after their talks, de Villepin said that "everything must be done to find a solution, (but) there can be no security-based solution in any crisis." His comments on Chechnya were the strongest by a French official for at least two years. While praising Russia's "original vision of the world" and its "vocation of becoming a major pillar of the new world order," he also stressed the "urgent need of a solution that will put an end to the years of suffering" in Chechnya. Ivanov for his part insisted that there was "no war in Chechnya, but a struggle against international terrorism." (AFP)

NEW LEADER VOWS TO RESTORE UNITY TO GEORGIA

24 January

President-elect Mikhail Saakashvili vowed on Saturday to restore unity to Georgia as he prepared to take power in the small Caucasus nation riven by corruption, poverty and separatist tensions. Saakashvili, a 36-year-old U.S.-educated lawyer, won a huge mandate to reform the former Soviet state in a landslide election victory this month after leading a bloodless people's revolution in November. He will be sworn in on Sunday. "Some people do not want Georgia to exist on the world's map but they won't achieve their goal," Saakashvili told a crowd of thousands at a monastery 160 miles west of the capital Tbilisi. "We should unite, this is my life's goal," he said at the tomb of a king who

heralded Georgia's medieval golden age. Secretary of State Colin Powell, who will attend Saakashvili's inauguration before visiting Moscow, said he would urge Russia to remove its military bases from Georgia, where the United States also has a small military presence. And Saakashvili said he wanted to balance warm ties with Washington with a better relationship with the Kremlin. "We are a very small country and we need to survive in a very complicated geo-political environment. I don't want to turn this country into a battlefield between different superpowers," Saakashvili told foreign reporters in Tbilisi. "I am not pro-American or pro-Russian, I am pro-Georgian." Saakashvili received the blessing of Georgian church head Patriarch Ilya II in the Gelati's Georgian Orthodox church. The site was chosen for its symbolism. It was built by King David IV in the 12th century, known by Georgians as "The Builder" for unifying the country and constructing cities, roads and bridges. "Standing at David's tomb we must say Georgia will unite, Georgia will become strong and will restore its integrity," Saakashvili said. "I want all of us to do it together and I promise not to become a source of shame for you." He has acknowledged he faces a huge task in a country of 4.5 million where, under his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank curtailed their programs because of widespread corruption. "Government officials should tighten their belts, just like ordinary people do," Saakashvili said. He has already said the police will "not spare bullets" pursuing criminals and promised a crackdown on corruption in public life. (Reuters)

TURKMENISTAN SIGNS COOPERATION AGREEMENT WITH WHO

25 January

The Turkmen government has signed an agreement with the European Bureau of the World Health Organization (WHO) on cooperation in 2004-05. According to the Turkmen Health Ministry, the agreement focuses on maternal and children's health, reproductive health, monitoring infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, the manufacture of pharmaceuticals, financing of health systems, and environmental influences on health. The project budget is set at \$190,000. Turkmenistan is in the process of dismissing some 15,000 health-care professionals, mostly lower-level health workers who provide most basic health services throughout the country. (RIA-Novosti)

UZBEKISTAN PERMITS MORE FOREIGNERS TO VISIT PRISONS

26 January

In 2003, the Uzbek government allowed delegations from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to make 30 visits to penal establishments in the country, in some cases visiting the same facility more than once, Tribune-uz.info reported on 26 January. In 2002, the ICRC was allowed five prison visits, and in 2001 four. In the late 1990s the Uzbek authorities rejected all requests for prison visits. The report further noted that in 2003 the European Union's Cooperation Commission with Uzbekistan was allowed to visit a prison in Tashkent Oblast, and a number of European Union ambassadors in Tashkent were allowed in October to visit Jaslyk Prison, which is notorious for the high number of deaths among inmates. (tribune-uz.info)

AZERBAIJANI PRESIDENT VISITS FRANCE

26 January

Ilham Aliyev visited France on 22-23 January on his first official state visit as president of Azerbaijan. Aliyev met in Paris on 23 January with French President Jacques Chirac to discuss bilateral relations and the prospects for resolving the Karabakh conflict, and also with Senate Chairman Francois Poncelet and Defense Minister Michelle Alliot-Marie. Aliyev expressed regret that the OSCE Minsk Group, of which France is one of the three co-chairs, has not succeeded in mediating a solution to the Karabakh conflict. He urged the international community to abandon what he termed its policy of double standards and to increase its efforts toward finding an acceptable solution. Aliyev also called for an increase in French investment in Azerbaijan; France is Azerbaijan's third-most-important trading partner. (ITAR-TASS)

KEY US-RUSSIA DISPUTES FASTER DESPITE SMILES AND PROGRESS ON GEORGIA

26 January

Critical differences between the United States and Russia went unresolved despite smiles and diplomatic niceties as Secretary of State Colin Powell presented a laundry list of US concerns to Russian President Vladimir Putin. While professing satisfaction at the current state of relations, pledging cooperation in numerous matters including space exploration and finding apparent common ground on Georgia, profound differences lingered. But both men took pains to stress that it was the closeness of ties that allowed them to speak frankly and openly with each other about disputes. "Although there are differences concerning foreign policy issues and defending our national interests, we have built a common ground that is strong enough to overcome these disagreements," Putin told Powell at the Kremlin. Powell, who began the day with a scathing critique of Russian backsliding on democracy and human rights and questions about Putin's intentions in former Soviet republics like Georgia, echoed the president's comments. "We do have areas of disagreement or areas of dispute but the strength of the relationship allows to discuss these areas with candor and openness," he said. In an opinion piece published in Moscow's influential Izvestia newspaper before his talks, Powell delivered some of the most critical comments about Russia that a senior US official has offered since Washington and Moscow became partners in the "war on terror" following the September 11, 2001 attacks. "Certain developments in Russian politics and foreign policy in recent months have given us pause...Russia's democratic system seems not yet to have found the essential balance among the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government," Powell wrote, adding that "political power is not yet fully tethered to the law." With Putin up for re-election in March, Washington has taken a dim view of his sidelining potential rivals. "Certain aspects of internal Russian policy in Chechnya, and toward neighbors that emerged from the former Soviet Union have concerned us, too," Powell wrote. He said the United States would always respect Russia's territorial integrity and its interest in adjoining countries, but that Moscow would have to recognize the rights of these nations as well. (AFP)

CHECHNYA ATTACK KILLS FOUR RUSSIAN SERVICEMEN

26 January

A rebel attack on a Russian military convoy killed four servicemen and injured a further four on Monday as a U.N. envoy began new talks on conditions in and around the turbulent region. Local officials said the convoy was halted by a roadside explosion outside a village in the Sharoi district in western Chechnya. The soldiers died in a subsequent shootout. The attack was typical of the daily harassment to which Russia's estimated 60,000 servicemen are subjected despite Moscow's assurances that Chechnya is under its control and the "fight against international terrorism" is nearly complete. The Kremlin has responded to Western criticism of excesses in its campaign to crush separatists with a plan to end a decade of conflict based on a referendum entrenching Chechnya within Russia and the election of a loyal regional president. The U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator Jan Egeland was due to launch talks in Moscow on Monday with Russia's Minister for Chechnya Stanislav Ilyasov. He is to visit refugee camps in regions bordering Chechnya later this week. Moscow has refused talks with any of the separatists and armed rebels reject the Kremlin peace plan. Extreme separatists have promised to press on with a campaign of bombings, many conducted in other Russian regions by suicide attackers, which killed more than 250 people last year. (Reuters)

NO AZERI GAS EXPORTS BEYOND TURKEY UNTIL 2010 -STATOIL**26 January 2004**

Gas exports from Azerbaijan are unlikely to reach continental Europe before 2010, according to Statoil, the Norwegian company that is developing a major Azeri gas deposit for export. Peter Mellbye, Statoil vice-president, told reporters on Friday (23 January) that the company does not believe that Azeri gas supplies will be exported beyond Turkey before the end of the decade, despite Greece's hopes to start importing Azeri gas by 2008 (see Global: 23 January 2004: Greece-Turkey Gas Pipeline Will Open Europe Up to Iranian and Caspian Exports). Statoil and BP are leading the development of Azerbaijan's offshore Shah Deniz gas field, which has reserves estimated at 1 Tcm. Turkey's economic recession and weakening gas demand has already caused the consortium developing Shah Deniz to postpone the supply of the first Azeri gas to Turkey by one year until 2006. As a result, Greece, which has agreed to build a pipeline link to Turkey as both countries seek to become gas transit hubs for Caspian region gas exports to Europe, was forced to push back imports of Azeri gas until 2008. Statoil believes, however, that Azeri gas will not be able to penetrate Europe beyond Turkey until 2010, since the second phase of development of Shah Deniz will not begin until then. (WMRC Daily Analysis)

GEORGIA'S NEW PRESIDENT PUSHES UNITY BID**26 January**

President Mikhail Saakashvili pushed ahead with efforts to unify Georgia on Monday, the day after his inauguration, signing a declaration on reconciliation in a church ceremony. Saakashvili has made the consolidation of a country riven by separatism and political disputes a key goal after the November ouster of longtime President Eduard Shevardnadze, and he said he intends to "put an end to disunity in our society." The declaration is to

be followed by the amnesty of 30 prisoners arrested after post-Soviet Georgia's first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, made an armed attempt to regain power from Shevardnadze in 1993, said lawmaker Eldar Shengelaia. Gamsakhurdia, who died in mysterious circumstances after the takeover bid failed late in 1993, was buried in Grozny, the capital of the neighboring Russian region of Chechnya. Saakashvili, who had strong support from former backers of Gamsakhurdia when he led opposition protests that prompted Shevardnadze's resignation in November, called for Gamsakhurdia to be reburied in Georgia. "Gamsakhurdia was a big patriot of Georgia and should be reburied in his homeland," Saakashvili said. Saakashvili signed the declaration in the presence of the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, in a church across the street from parliament, where he took the presidential oath on Sunday. The euphoria that followed Shevardnadze's ouster was on display during the inauguration, which was attended by thousands of people on a warm, sunny day in the capital. Saakashvili was elected with more than 96 percent of the vote Jan. 4. But reality set in on his first full day as president, with a power outage that municipal electric company officials said left about 30 percent of the city without electricity for hours. Georgia is plagued by energy problems, and outages and unheated homes are common signs of persistent economic troubles. (AP)

SIX SAID KILLED IN GEORGIA VILLAGE ARMED ATTACK**27 January**

Six people were killed early on Tuesday when an armed gang attacked a Georgian village near the border with the breakaway region of Abkhazia, a senior police officer said. The attack was the first such serious incident since President Mikhail Saakashvili was sworn into office in the volatile Caucasus state Sunday. The armed group, numbering six or seven men, carried out their raid on the village of Lia after crossing the internal border from Abkhazia region which has had de facto independence from the central government since the early 1990s. (Reuters)

UZBEK GROUP BLAMES CREW IN PLANE CRASH**27 January**

Pilot error caused an airliner to crash Jan. 13, killing all 37 people on board, including the head of the U.N. mission in Uzbekistan, the government commission investigating the accident said Tuesday. The crew aboard the Uzbekistan Airways Yak-40 jet failed to follow proper landing procedures, even though heavy fog limited visibility at Tashkent's international airport at the time. The three-engine jet, bound from the town of Termez on the Afghan border, overshot the runway and crashed near the airport. Among those killed was the head of the U.N. mission in Uzbekistan, Richard Conroy. The crew didn't actually see the runway at the minimum height required but continued landing anyway, "overestimating its professional skills," the commission said. Apparently realizing their mistake, the pilots tried to climb again. The plane crashed into a concrete wall surrounding the airport. The commission said the plane was in good technical condition and the crew had been properly trained. Prosecutors have opened a criminal probe, the commission said. Uzbekistan Airways has suspended all flights of Yak-40s since the crash, a measure that remained in effect Tuesday. (AP)

U.S. LAWMAKERS QUESTION AFGHANISTAN PROGRESS

27 January

U.S. senators on Tuesday criticized NATO members for failing to provide enough troops and resources to help stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan, and worried that U.S.-led operations there were losing momentum. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar said NATO members "must back up" commitments to providing security in Afghanistan "with sufficient resources, troops, organization and political will." Gen. James Jones, the top U.S. commander in Europe, voiced reservations that members of the alliance would match their statements with troops and resources to help stabilize Afghanistan. "We have had, it must be said, some difficulty in generating the military forces that support the political level of ambition," Jones told the committee. He said his optimism on a successful operation in Afghanistan "would be genuine with one caveat ... that the military component of the level of ambition must be resourced and supported." The committee hearing came hours after a Canadian soldier with a NATO peacekeeping force and an Afghanistan civilian were killed in a suicide bomb attack near Kabul that the Taliban, said it organized. The casualties were the first among the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) since two Canadian peacekeepers were killed in October when their car hit a mine near Kabul. Jones said NATO members' agreements to provide troops or equipment in some cases have become "mired in administrative details," and said NATO's ability to expand its role in Afghanistan "will be a defining moment" in its post Cold War transformation. (Reuters)

FOUR BRITISH TROOPS HURT IN KABUL ATTACK, WITNESSES SAY

28 January

At least four British soldiers from the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Afghanistan were wounded Wednesday when their car was hit by a blast in Kabul, witnesses said. "I saw four wounded soldiers and one of their Afghan translators being carried away

from the car that exploded," a witness close to the scene said. Police confirmed the incident, but gave no further details. The explosion happened a day after a suicide bomber killed a Canadian soldier and an Afghan civilian elsewhere in the city. (Reuters)

LOYA JIRGA DELEGATES DISPUTE AFGHANISTAN'S NEW CONSTITUTION

28 January

A group of delegates to Afghanistan's historic loya jirga is set to claim the constitution they approved earlier this month was altered by the government ahead of its signing into law. The group of about 20 delegates from the capital Kabul is headed by Abdul Hafiz Mansoor, a former anti-Soviet mujahedin fighter and head of the opposition bloc at the loya jirga (grand assembly) that opposed many of the arguments put forward by the government of President Hamid Karzai. "I myself have discovered more than 15 changes that the government does not have the authority to make," Mansoor told AFP. The new constitution was approved unanimously by the 502 delegates to the loya jirga on January 4 after three weeks of intense debate and finally signed into law by Karzai Monday. It enshrines a presidential system of government backed up by a strong bicameral parliament and paves the way for Afghanistan's first democratic elections later this year. The opposition bloc, which also includes loya jirga delegates from Kabul's surrounding provinces, intends to voice its opposition at a press conference in the capital on Wednesday. "The constitution which was signed by President Karzai, if it is carefully read... compared to the constitution approved and ratified by delegates to the loya jirga has changes," Mansoor told AFP Tuesday. "After the end of the loya jirga nobody has the authority to change what is in the constitution, but now in the constitution after the loya jirga there has been lots of changes. Mansoor says changes were made to the wording in sections that covered official languages, presidential powers and duties and the administration. Mansoor has previously said that his bloc would have a candidate ready to contest the presidential elections, scheduled for June. (AFP)

