

Business & Politics in the Muslim World
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Central Asia
Uzma Siraj

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- Kyrgyz Minister Says Suspect In Journalist's Killing Arrested In Tajikistan

Kyrgyz Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev has repeated a report that a suspect in the killing of independent Kyrgyz journalist Alisher Saipov was detained in Tajikistan, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Parliament endorses Constitutional amendments

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- Azerbaijan's admission to Council of Europe to be marked Roundtable meeting on the theme "Azerbaijan and Council of Europe: cooperation in the field of human rights" to mark the anniversary of the Azerbaijan's admission to the Council of Europe will be held on January 25th at the Ombudsman office.

- Azerbaijan to send protest note to to Egypt's Foreign Ministry
Azerbaijan's Embassy in Cairo will send a note of protest to Egypt's Foreign Ministry, as well as the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Communications and Technologies due to publication of a map at the Egyptian news website.

- Azerbaijani FM to attend London conference on Afghanistan
Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov will leave for London to attend the International Conference on Assistance to Afghanistan, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Elkhan Polukhov said.

Economic /Energy Front

- Nabucco Will Not Be Built If Demand Is Too Low, OMV Says
VIENNA (Reuters) -- The Nabucco gas pipeline will not be built if an open season bidding process for capacity this year shows demand is too low, an executive of Austria's OMV said today, adding that demand looked strong.

- Kazakh President advises to follow Azerbaijan's example in gas operations
Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev advised to study Azerbaijan's experience in associated gas revenues.

- Azerbaijan expects inflation to move up this year
Inflation is expected to reach 5-7 percent in Azerbaijan at the end of 2010, compared to 1.5 percent in 2009, said Arif Veliev, chairman of the State Statistical Committee.

- Azerbaijani president: Many questions remain over Nabucco project
Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said a lot of questions that are not answered for quite a lot of time remain over the Nabucco gas pipeline project.

- Azerbaijan's national oil company to double gas exports to Russia
Gazprom and the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) have agreed that in 2009 Russia will acquire 1 billion cubic meters of the Azerbaijani gas instead of 500 million and in 2011 the volume of supply will be doubled and reach about 2 billion cubic meters.

Social Front

Kazakastan

Political Front

- Jailed Kazakh Journalist Loses Appeal For Parole
Ramazan Esergepov, editor of 'Alma-Ata Info'
A prison appeals commission today rejected a request for early parole by jailed "Alma-Ata Info" editor Ramazan Esergepov, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

- Kazakh Party Proposes Abolishing Prime Minister Post

ALMATY -- The pro-presidential Adilet (Justice) party has proposed abolishing the post of prime minister and giving most of its powers to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Adilet Chairman Maksut Narikbaev said today at a press conference that "our 18-year experience shows that our people are committed to one ruler, one man."

Geo Strategic Front

- Kazakhstan Threatens Chinese Land-Lease Speculators

ASTANA -- The Kazakh Prosecutor-General's Office has said it will prosecute speculators who try to exploit a possible land lease to China for agricultural purposes, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

- NATO Finalizes Afghan Transit Deal With Kazakhstan

BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- NATO said it had finalized an agreement with Kazakhstan on the transit of supplies to Afghanistan, hoping it will reduce its reliance on a route through Pakistan that has been attacked by the Taliban.

- Deadly Collapse At Kazakh Radar Site Sparks Safety Concerns

BALKHASH, Kazakhstan -- A deadly accident at a Soviet-era military base in central Kazakhstan has sparked concerns about people's exposure to toxic materials, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

Economic /Energy Front

- Kazakhstan threatens to alter Western oil deals

ASTANA, Jan 26 (Reuters) - Kazakhstan threatened on Tuesday to rewrite key Western-run energy projects to implement new tax rules, in a move likely to send jitters among foreign investors operating in the Central Asian state.

- Kazakhstan-China pipeline transports reach 20.4 million tons

(SRI) - The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, running from western Kazakhstan to western China, has shipped 20.39 million tons of crude oil to China since 2006.

Social Front

- NGO Says 14 Websites Being Blocked In Kazakhstan

The Kazakh nongovernmental organization For The Free Internet announced today that at least 14 websites have been blocked by the Kazakh government in the last several weeks, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

- Ethnic Kazakh Writer In China Nominated For Prize In Kazakhstan

ALMATY -- Kazakhstan's Institute for Cultural Politics and Culture Studies has nominated Qazhyghumar Shabdanuly, an ethnic Kazakh writer in China's Xinjiang Province, for a Kazakh state literature award, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

- Kazakh Flash-Mob Participant Fined For Illegal Rally

An Almaty court today ordered Rozlana Taukina, the head of the nongovernmental organization Journalists in Trouble, to pay a fine of some \$500 for violating the law on holding rallies, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Taukina told RFE/RL that the prosecutor demanded a five-day jail term, but the judge decreased the penalty.

- Kazakhs Mark 50th Anniversary Of Gulag's Official Closure

Ar/Rukh/Khak Chairwoman Bakhyt Toregozhina (left) said the gathering was devoted to the poets and human rights activists who were killed in the gulag.

Kyrgyzstan

Political Front

- Kyrgyz Minister Reprimanded For Police Chief Appointment

Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev was reprimanded for his choice of deputy police chief.

BISHKEK -- Kyrgyz Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov reprimanded Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev today and cancelled his appointment of a controversial figure as a deputy police chief, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Kyrgyz President's Office, Son Reject Claim Of Seized Assets

President Kurmanbek Bakiev's youngest son, Maksim Bakiev

BISHKEK -- A Kyrgyz Presidential Secretariat official says the administration is very skeptical of comments made by a political analyst that Russia has frozen the bank accounts of businesses related to Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev's son, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Kyrgyz Minister Says Suspect In Journalist's Killing Arrested In Tajikistan

Kyrgyz Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev has repeated a report that a suspect in the killing of independent Kyrgyz journalist Alisher Saipov was detained in Tajikistan, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Parliament endorses Constitutional amendments

Constitutional Legislation, State Structure and Human Rights Committee of the Kyrgyz Parliament has endorsed amendments to the Fundamental law, initiated by the President previously. The decision was made on January 26 at a session of the committee.

Geo Strategic Front

- Political expert: I doubt soonest establishment of Russian air base in South Kyrgyzstan

"I doubt that documents on establishment of a Russian air base in south Kyrgyzstan will be signed in the nearest future," Alexander Knyazev, Director of the Regional Branch of CIS Countries Institute told a press conference at the news agency 24.kg Tuesday.

- Kyrgyzstan discusses Afghanistan situation at international summits

Kyrgyz delegation headed by Kadyrbek Sarbaev, the Kyrgyz Foreign Minister, takes part in international summits and conferences on handling situation in Afghanistan, press service of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Kyrgyzstan reported.

Economic /Energy Front

- Number of Bishkek jobless increases by 8.5 percent in 2009

Number of officially registered jobless has risen by 8.5 percent and reached 9,651 people in Bishkek in 2009, final report of the Bishkek city administration said.

Increase in unemployment rate is reportedly the result of industrial production and services decline. Therewith, over 18 thousand working places, including 7,808 informal sector jobs, have been created for the period.

- Chinese citizen prosecuted for illegal business in Kyrgyzstan

A citizen of China was prosecuted for illegal business activity in Kyrgyzstan, Financial Police Service of Kyrgyzstan said.

A batch of DVDs and DVD boxes at a total of 9,000 soms was confiscated from the man at Dordoi market. The foreigner kept the goods in a storage room on the territory of the market complex, where later the inspectors revealed 190,800 thousand DVDs and 136 thousand DVD boxes at 1,358 million soms.

- PM: Investments to Kyrgyz economy to grow in 2010

“Investments to Kyrgyz economy are expected to grow significantly in 2010,” the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Daniar Usenov said at a collegium of the State Tax Administration Tuesday

- Kyrgyz market should be well aware of fresh economic trends

“Kyrgyz market should receive truthful information about new trends of economic development,” Daniar Usenov, the Kyrgyz Premier said at a Financial Ministry’s collegium in Bishkek Tuesday.

Social Front

- Kyrgyz Hunger Strike 'To Continue' Until High Court Ruling

BISHKEK -- A Kyrgyz opposition leader says a hunger strike in support of jailed former Kyrgyz Defense Minister Ismail Isakov will continue until the military's high court hears an appeal of the case, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Kyrgyz Official Says Coverage Of Isakov Protests Biased

Protesters gather earlier this month in the Alai district to support opposition leader Ismail Isakov.

OSH, Kyrgyzstan -- The governor of the southern Kyrgyz region of Osh says media coverage of protests in support of jailed former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov is biased and "instigating hysteria," RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

Tajikistan

Political Front

- Tajik Court Upholds Verdict Against Independent Weekly

DUSHANBE -- A Dushanbe court today upheld the verdict against the independent weekly newspaper "Paykon" (Arrowhead), RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. In October, Dushanbe's Firdausi district court found the weekly guilty of libel and ordered it to pay 300,000 somoni (\$40,000) to the state corporation Tajikstandart, which monitors the quality of imported goods.

- Kyrgyz Minister Says Suspect In Journalist's Killing Arrested In Tajikistan

Kyrgyz Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev has repeated a report that a suspect in the killing of independent Kyrgyz journalist Alisher Saipov was detained in Tajikistan, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Bukharan Jews To Observe Tajik Parliamentary Elections

DUSHANBE -- Representatives of the Congress of Bukharan Jews of the United States and Canada will be observers at Tajikistan's upcoming parliamentary elections, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

- Tajik Official Says 'Most' Inmates Bribed Way To Amnesty

Tajik Anticorruption Agency head Fattoh Saidov

January 27, 2010

A Tajik official has claimed that many prisoners convicted of drug offenses paid bribes in order to be released in a recent amnesty, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

Geo Strategic Front

Economic /Energy Front

Social Front

- Nine Religious Groups In Tajikistan Declared Illegal

Nine religious groups in Tajikistan failed to file documents for reregistration by the January 1 deadline and have been declared illegal, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Saidbek Mahmaddulloev, of the Tajik Culture Ministry's Department for Religions, told RFE/RL that the new law on religions adopted in March 2009 required all religious groups and organizations to reregister by the beginning of 2010.

Turkmenistan

Political Front

- Three constituencies of Turkmenistan to hold elections to Mejlis

In accordance with the Resolution of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan, on 24 January constituency N 21 of Akhal province, N 37 of Balkan province and N 44 of Dashoguz provinces will hold elections of deputies of the Mejlis to replace the outgoing parliamentarians.

Geo Strategic Front

- Turkmen President to pay official visit to Belarus

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov will soon pay an official visit the Republic of Belarus at the head of the governmental delegation of Turkmenistan. The preparations and a program of the forthcoming visit were discussed yesterday at a regular meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan.

- Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan to attend international conference on Afghanistan

On the instructions of President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Vice Premier, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov will attend an international conference on Afghanistan in the city of London (United Kingdom) on 28-29 January 2010, the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports referring to the press service of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry.

- Italian Foreign Ministry's special envoy for Central Asia visits Turkmenistan

The delegation of Italy headed by Minister Plenipotentiary, Coordinator and Special Envoy for Central Asia of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Paolo Serpi visited Ashgabat.

Economic /Energy Front

- Ukrainian "Altcom" to start construction of bridge across Amu Darya in Turkmenistan

The financial-industrial group "Altcom" (Donetsk, Ukraine) will begin construction of a road bridge, Atamurat-Kerkichi, across the Amu Darya river in Turkmenistan before April of this year. This was reported by the company's deputy general director Mikhail Kovalev in an interview with the internet portal "Trans-Port."

- Ashgabat to host international conference on alternative energy

On 24-25 February 2010, the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan (AST) will hold an international scientific conference in Ashgabat on the use of alternative energy sources in Turkmenistan. The conference aims to establish mutually beneficial cooperation and involvement of partners in implementing efficient projects on the use of alternative energy sources in Turkmenistan, to synthesis national and international experience, to promote new technologies, and to obtain economic benefits from their use, the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent was told in the in AST.

- Presidents of Turkmenistan and France to identify new areas of cooperation

"The forthcoming Turkmen-French negotiations in Paris will give a new powerful impetus to the inter-state relations in political, economic and cultural spheres that are growing stronger year by year," Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov said receiving yesterday Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to Turkmenistan Pierre Lebovich.

Social Front

- Banned Turkmen Students To Attend U.S. University In Bulgaria (RFE/RL) -- Turkmen students banned from studying at universities abroad are being allowed by the government to resume their studies at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), RFE/RL's Turkmen Service reports

Uzbekistan

Political Front

- Uzbek President's Daughter Appointed Ambassador To Spain
The Spanish Foreign Ministry says Gulnara Karimova, the eldest daughter of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, has been named Uzbek ambassador to Spain, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

- Prominent Uzbek Sports Journalist Arrested
TASHKENT -- Prominent Uzbek sports journalist Khairulla Khamidov has been arrested, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports. One of Khamidov's relatives told RFE/RL that Khamidov has officially been accused of "creating an illegal religious group and participation in its activities."

- Uzbekistan: Old Speaker in the new parliament
Once again the new structure of Oliy Mazhlis (parliament) of Uzbekistan is headed by Dilorom Tashmukhamedova that has been serving as the Speaker of legislative house since 2008, UZA reports.

Geo Strategic Front

- Uzbek Sent From Gitmo To Switzerland
WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- An Uzbek detainee held at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba has been sent to Switzerland, the U.S. Justice Department has said. The transfer was the latest prisoner removed from the facility as the Obama administration seeks to close the controversial prison for foreign terrorism suspects.

- US grants political asylum to Uzbek dissident Tashpulat Yuldashev
Ferghana.Ru learned from personal sources that on January 26, 2010 Tashpulat Yuldashev, prominent Uzbek political scientist and dissident, left for United States of America, whose government offered him the refugee status after considering his case by UN office of High Commissioner.

- Karimov's plan: Uzbekistan to strengthen bilateral cooperation with USA
The President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov approved the Action Plan on strengthening bilateral cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the United States of America for 2010, Gazeta.Uz reports. It has to be mentioned that the Uzbek leader signed the appropriate decree on January 11; nonetheless, only today many local mass media reported this fact. Full text of the decree is available here (Russian language only).

Economic /Energy Front

- Uzbekistan's economy to grow by 6.5% next two years – World Bank
Gross domestic product (GDP) of Uzbekistan will grow by 6.5% in 2010 and 2011, the World Bank said in its Global Economic Prospects 2010, released on 21 January 2010.

Social Front

- Pro-Kremlin Activists Demand Uzbek Envoy Restore 'Soviet Soldier'

PRAGUE -- The pro-Kremlin Nashi youth movement is demanding that the Uzbek ambassador to Russia keep a pledge and reinstall a Soviet-era war monument that was removed from downtown Tashkent last year, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

- Uzbekistan Renames Capital's Soviet-Era Streets, Places

TASHKENT -- Authorities in the Uzbek capital have begun renaming some 150 streets and residential areas to deemphasize the city's Soviet heritage, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports. The Tashkent city's toponymic commission stated that its decision to rename streets in 10 of the city's 11 districts is aimed at "simplification, elimination of duplication, and a return of old historical names."

- Uzbekistan: Drop Slander Charge Against Photographer Umida Akhmedova

The Uzbek authorities should immediately drop the baseless slander and insult charges against the prominent photographer and videographer Umida Ahmedova and allow her to carry out her work and exercise her right to freedom of expression without government interference, Human Rights Watch said today.

Azerbaijan

Political Front

Geo Strategic Front

- Azerbaijan's admission to Council of Europe to be marked

Roundtable meeting on the theme "Azerbaijan and Council of Europe: cooperation in the field of human rights" to mark the anniversary of the Azerbaijan's admission to the Council of Europe will be held on January 25th at the Ombudsman office.

The meeting will bring together Veronika Kotek, Special Representative in Azerbaijan of the Council of Europe Secretary General, representatives of state and non-governmental organizations.

The meeting will focus on human rights observance in Azerbaijan, key trends in cooperation between Azerbaijan's Ombudsman and the Council of Europe and other issues.

Azerbaijan became a member of the Council of Europe on 25th January, 2001 and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights on December 25th, 2001.

- Azerbaijan to send protest note to to Egypt's Foreign Ministry

Azerbaijan's Embassy in Cairo will send a note of protest to Egypt's Foreign Ministry, as well as the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Communications and Technologies due to publication of a map at the Egyptian news website.

The territories of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic are indicated as Armenian territory on this map, Azerbaijani ambassador to Egypt Faig Bagirov said.

The territories of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan have been indicated as Armenian ones in the article posted on Moheet.com.

"A corresponding letter will be sent to this company [Moheet.com] as well", Bagirov said.

- Azerbaijani FM to attend London conference on Afghanistan

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov will leave for London to attend the International Conference on Assistance to Afghanistan, spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Elkhan Polukhov said.

The conference will take place on Jan. 28.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown will attend the conference.

Economic /Energy Front

- Nabucco Will Not Be Built If Demand Is Too Low, OMV Says

VIENNA (Reuters) -- The Nabucco gas pipeline will not be built if an open season bidding process for capacity this year shows demand is too low, an executive of Austria's OMV said today, adding that demand looked strong. Besides OMV, Bulgaria's Bulgargaz, Turkey's Botas, Germany's RWE, Hungary's MOL, and Romania's Transgaz are partners in the EU-backed project, which would reduce Europe's reliance on Russian gas. The Vienna-based Nabucco consortium has been very upbeat on demand for the pipeline, but Werner Auli, OMV's head of oil and gas, said it was up to the market to decide whether the project was commercially viable and if it should go ahead.

"We will start the open season process this year, then we will get enough demand or not," Auli told an Energy Exchange gas conference in Vienna. "If not, Nabucco will not be built, this is very simple. We are a commercial company, we are not an institution. If the demand is not there, we will not build the pipeline," he said. Auli said he expected that the open season process, where companies make bids for the pipeline's capacity, would show good results. The process should take place from around July to October this year with a final decision on investment by the end of 2010.

"We still have good indication that there is a lot of demand there," Auli later told reporters. The pipeline, skirting Russian soil, would bring gas from the Middle East and the Caspian region to Europe. Russian gas pipeline export monopoly Gazprom has a rival project, South Stream.

Supply And Demand

A Nabucco survey of potential customers in 2008 showed demand for capacity was expected to be two to three times the planned 31 billion cubic meters (bcm). "I think the survey is still valid. There is a lot of interest from possible customers," Auli said.

But analysts have questioned whether future gas demand will be high enough to make the 7.9 billion euro (\$11 billion) project worthwhile. The International Energy Agency said in November that the global gas market is likely to remain oversupplied until 2015 and rise by an average of 1.5 percent per year in the period to 2030. Analysts have also voiced doubts about whether supplies for Nabucco will be secured in time, but Auli said this was not an issue thanks to the potential of countries such as Iraq. Auli said 8-10 bcm of gas from Iraq's Kurdistan region should be ready to fill the first phase of the pipeline from 2015, the first full year the pipeline is operational. Nabucco said in October it expects a further 8 bcm from Azerbaijan starting from 2015 or 2016. The rest of the gas in the later stages of the project is also likely to come from these sources.

Nabucco's manager for Austria, Johann Gallistl, said a tender for some 2 million tons of steel to build the pipeline would open around May and that there had already been a lot of interest from major steel companies.

- Kazakh President advises to follow Azerbaijan's example in gas operations

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev advised to study Azerbaijan's experience in associated gas revenues.

"Why the associated gas must belong to oil-producing company? This is not mentioned in the contract. They say Azerbaijan has solved this issue," Nazarbayev said in his speech at the meeting in Ak-Orde. According to the Kazakh President, the associated gas is public property.

"The associated gas is worth nothing. Owner does not spend money to produce it," Nazarbayev said. The Kazakh president instructed Prime Minister Karim Masimov to go into the issue, especially while concluding new contracts.

According to PSA contract signed 1994, Azerbaijan receives associated gas from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli field free of charge. In 2009, Azerbaijan received about four billion cubic meters of associated gas compared to nearly 2 billion cubic meters in 2008 from International Operating Company (AIOC) which deals with development of the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli field.

- Azerbaijan expects inflation to move up this year

Inflation is expected to reach 5-7 percent in Azerbaijan at the end of 2010, compared to 1.5 percent in 2009, said Arif Veliyev, chairman of the State Statistical Committee.

"As last year, inflation will be one-digit at this year-end, but higher than 2009. It may vary between 5-7 percent. Mainly, prices of foodstuffs are expected to rise this year," he noted. He also admitted that higher inflation is caused by monopoly, as well as artificial price hikes.

- Azerbaijani president: Many questions remain over Nabucco project

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said a lot of questions that are not answered for quite a lot of time remain over the Nabucco gas pipeline project.

"So far we do not know who is that leader, who will move this process forward," Aliyev said in an interview with Bloomberg Television today in Davos, which is hosting the World Economic Forum meeting, Switzerland.

"Who will engage itself in negotiations with gas producers, transitters? Who will do the marketing for this gas? What will be the pricing?"

Regarding gas export to the EU countries, the president said the issues of transit are unresolved. "The price for our gas from Turkey is unsatisfactory so we cannot move forward under these circumstances," Aliyev added.

Nabucco gas pipeline project is worth ? 7.9 billion. Participants of the project are Austrian OMV, Hungarian MOL, Bulgarian Bulgargaz, Romanian Transgaz, Turkish Botas and German RWE companies. Each of participants has equal share to the amount of 16.67 percent. Construction of gas pipeline is planned to be launched in 2011, the first supplies - in 2014. Maximal capacity of the pipeline will hit 31 billion cubic meters per year. Nabucco Gas Pipeline International shareholders will invest 30 percent of total cost of the project, the rest 70 percent will be paid owing to loans.

- Azerbaijan's national oil company to double gas exports to Russia

Gazprom and the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) have agreed that in 2009 Russia will acquire 1 billion cubic meters of the Azerbaijani gas instead of 500 million and in 2011 the volume of supply will be doubled and reach about 2 billion cubic meters.

Today Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller and SOCAR President Rovnag Abdullayev hold working meeting in Moscow, Gazprom said.

Parties appraised successfully implemented agreements, noting that Gazprom and SOCAR will continue to consistently develop the energy dialogue between Russia and Azerbaijan. Alexei Miller reiterated feature of the current contract - no upper ceiling of the volume of purchases of gas in Azerbaijan and reaffirmed the readiness of Gazprom to buy as much gas as SOCAR will be able to deliver.

The medium-term contract on purchase-sale of Azerbaijani gas to Russia (with the possibility of extension) was signed between SOCAR and Gazprom in Baku Oct. 14. It covers 2010-2014. Under the contract, the Azerbaijani side will annually supply gas amounting to no less than 500 million cubic meters to Russia. The contract did not specify a limit to the gas supply volume. SOCAR will notify the opposite side of the amount which the company can deliver for the next six months.

Social Front

Kazakastan

Political Front

- Jailed Kazakh Journalist Loses Appeal For Parole

Ramazan Esergepov, editor of 'Alma-Ata Info'

A prison appeals commission today rejected a request for early parole by jailed "Alma-Ata Info" editor Ramazan Esergepov, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

Esergepov's wife, Raushan Esergepova, told RFE/RL she thinks the commission, in the southern Kazakh city of Taraz, made the decision under pressure "from above." Esergepova said the prison commission ruled on January 12 to parole Esergepov, who has served one year of his three-year sentence. But she added that the same commission held a second meeting on January 23 and ruled to keep Esergepov in jail. Taraz prison officials refused to comment on the decisions and told RFE/RL to send a formal inquiry.

Esergepova said she received a letter from Deputy Prosecutor-General Askar Sekishev in December that said Esergepov has the right to be paroled after having served one-third of his prison term. Esergepova said she will appeal the commission's negative decision to the Prosecutor-General's Office. Rozlana Taukina, the head of the Kazakh nongovernmental organization Journalists in Trouble, told RFE/RL that it will protest against the commission decision, which she called "another subjective and prejudiced decision against a journalist who criticized the security services." Esergepov was found guilty of revealing state secrets and sentenced to three years in prison one year ago. His supporters and rights organizations say the case against him is politically motivated because of his independent newspaper, which has stopped publishing since his arrest.

- Kazakh Party Proposes Abolishing Prime Minister Post

ALMATY -- The pro-presidential Adilet (Justice) party has proposed abolishing the post of prime minister and giving most of its powers to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Adilet Chairman Maksut Narikbaev said today at a press conference that "our 18-year experience shows that our people are committed to one ruler, one man." He said that after "deep constitutional reform," Nazarbaev should transfer most of the prime minister's powers to the president and abolish the position. Narikbaev added that the some presidential powers should be redistributed between the Kazakh government and parliament.

In September, the idea of making Nazarbaev president-for-life was discussed extensively in Kazakhstan following a report that a professor in western Kazakhstan had suggested it. Nazarbaev has been president of Kazakhstan since it gained independence in 1991. He was reelected to a seven-year term on December 4, 2005, in an election that was deemed by international observers to be neither free nor fair. Kazakhstan assumed the annual chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe on January 1.

Geo Strategic Front

- **Kazakhstan Threatens Chinese Land-Lease Speculators**

ASTANA -- The Kazakh Prosecutor-General's Office has said it will prosecute speculators who try to exploit a possible land lease to China for agricultural purposes, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The prosecutor's office said in a statement today that people found speculating on the topic will be prosecuted to the full extent possible under the "Kazakh Constitution and corresponding laws." President Nursultan Nazarbaev stated at a December session of the Foreign Investors' Council that China is interested in renting 1 million hectares of land in Kazakhstan for farming purposes.

The announcement sparked protests among opposition activists and nationalist groups in Kazakhstan.

On January 19, fugitive Kazakh businessman and politician Mukhtar Ablyazov called Nazarbaev's statement "the second stage of a long-term deal between China and Kazakhstan." He said Nazarbaev's second son-in-law, Timur Kulibaev, had received a significant bribe from China's State Petroleum Corporation officials several years ago in exchange for control of part of Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector.

Ablyazov says the possibility of Chinese farmers renting Kazakh land was discussed then as well. The Kazakh opposition is planning a protest regarding the issue on January 30.

- **NATO Finalizes Afghan Transit Deal With Kazakhstan**

BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- NATO said it had finalized an agreement with Kazakhstan on the transit of supplies to Afghanistan, hoping it will reduce its reliance on a route through Pakistan that has been attacked by the Taliban. The agreement should allow NATO to implement a deal with Russia for the transit of nonlethal supplies to the forces of the Western military alliance and its partners fighting a Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

"This allows supplies for our forces to start moving from Europe to Afghanistan, beginning in the coming days, complementing the very important transit route through Pakistan," NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen said.

In the same statement, Rasmussen welcomed Germany's announcement of plans to send up to 850 more soldiers to Afghanistan and what he called "a very substantial contribution" to NATO's training mission for Afghan security forces. He also hailed Romania's announcement of 600 more soldiers for Afghanistan and said other new contributions were likely to be announced in the coming days. "Taken together, the announcement of new forces, and a new supply route, helps to further strengthen the NATO-ISAF [International Security Assistance Force]," he said. The announcements were made on the eve of an international conference in London which is expected to agree on a framework for the Afghan government to begin taking charge of security in line with a 2011 timetable set by U.S. President Barack Obama to start drawing down U.S. troops.

- **Deadly Collapse At Kazakh Radar Site Sparks Safety Concerns**

BALKHASH, Kazakhstan -- A deadly accident at a Soviet-era military base in central Kazakhstan has sparked concerns about people's exposure to toxic materials, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The accident, which killed at least four people, occurred on January 22 when a building at the former Soviet radar station of Dariyal-U near the city of Balkhash collapsed while a group of people were looting it. The exact number of casualties is unknown since the dismantling of the building was being done illegally and all those at the site, including the injured, fled the scene to avoid arrest.

Former Environment Minister Nurlan Iskakov, several of his deputies, and a representative of the private company Mercury Plus, Adilbek Zhailghanov, were sentenced by an Astana court to long jail terms in October for corruption and other crimes linked to Dariyal-U.

Sergei Pokhodyaev, the former director of Mercury Plus who fled to Moscow after Dariyal-U was investigated, told RFE/RL that he sent letters last year to Kazakh officials urging them to secure the toxic materials at the site and prevent people from looting the site of metals and other valuables.

He said parts of the buildings at the former military base were illegally dismantled by local businessmen and others and used as construction materials or sold as scrap metal.

"All the bricks and other materials in the old buildings are contaminated with a highly toxic substance and should not be reused," Pokhodyaev said. "When I tried to stop the dismantling of the [buildings] and referred the issue to officials, I was threatened and later left Kazakhstan." Kazakh Environment Minister Nurghali Ashimov said on December 11 that he would declare Dariyal-U an emergency environmental situation by December 31 due to the dangerous toxic materials. But the declaration was not made.

Economic /Energy Front

- Kazakhstan threatens to alter Western oil deals

ASTANA, Jan 26 (Reuters) - Kazakhstan threatened on Tuesday to rewrite key Western-run energy projects to implement new tax rules, in a move likely to send jitters among foreign investors operating in the Central Asian state.

The oil-rich Caspian nation has sought to raise its weight in the strategic energy sector dominated by Western majors, and raise fresh budget revenues through taxes and export duties. Emboldened by its growing role as a leading regional energy supplier, Kazakhstan has long threatened to boost its role in the sector. Addressing the lower house of parliament, Energy Minister Sauat Mynbayev said projects such as the Chevron-led (CVX.N: Quote, Profile, Research) Tengiz oilfield, as well as Karachaganak and Kashagan would be affected as a result. "If we abandon tax exemptions for these three or four projects ... then of course that means only annulling them because it's quite a radical review," he said, without naming the fourth project.

Under current rules, most Western energy majors working in Kazakhstan under production-sharing agreements are not liable to changes in the Central Asian country's tax legislation. President Nursultan Nazarbayev said this month that foreign projects in industries such as oil and gas should lose their immunity from changes in tax legislation.

"It's not an easy question. Of course there is an order so we will (implement) it," Mynbayev told members of parliament.

"Abandoning tax exemptions is a big question. We will separately discuss ... how we will implement it through concrete steps, taking into account the (president's) order."

The three Western-led groups declined immediate comment. Boosting state influence in the strategic sector has political connotations in a former Soviet country where ordinary people have long accused the government for selling out its natural resources to Western multinationals. Its grip on power shaken by the economic crisis and a tide of public frustration with falling incomes and stalling economy, the government is keen to showcase its resolve to put key industries under firm state control.

"For the first time the government has shown a very clear political will to review contracts, and look for new investors if (the current ones) do not implement our programmes," said Kenzhegali Sagadiyev, a member of parliament.

- Kazakhstan-China pipeline transports reach 20.4 million tons

(SRI) - The Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline, running from western Kazakhstan to western China, has shipped 20.39 million tons of crude oil to China since 2006.

The 1,200 kilometer-pipeline, which began operations in July 2006, transmitted 1.76 million tons of crude oil in the same year. The transports increased to 4.77 million tons in 2007 and 6 million tons in 2008. Last year, the pipeline transmitted record 7.73 million tons.

Social Front

- NGO Says 14 Websites Being Blocked In Kazakhstan

The Kazakh nongovernmental organization For The Free Internet announced today that at least 14 websites have been blocked by the Kazakh government in the last several weeks, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

The organization placed statement on its website (kaznet-freedom.org) saying that several opposition media outlets' websites and some social networks have been inaccessible to Internet users in Kazakhstan. The websites below were cited by For The Free Internet as having been blocked by KazTeleCom, Kazakhstan's major Internet provider.

According to the NGO, queries were sent to KazTeleCom regarding the blockage of the websites.

inkar.info (Inkar Radio)

kub.info (Kazakh Universal Blog)

kplus-tv.net (K+ TV)

geokz.tv (news resource)

eurasia.org.ru (opposition news resource)

kahar.biz (opposition Kakhar movement)

livejournal.com (LiveJournal blog)

wordpress.com (Wordpress blog)

chromebagsstore.com (Google site for developers of Chrome browser)

dev.chromium.org (Google site for developers of Chrome and Chromium browsers)

googlerussiablog.blogspot.com (Google blog platform in Russian)

blogger.com (Google blog platform)

distance.msu.ru (Moscow State University distance education)

solarcycle24.com (site about solar activity)

- Ethnic Kazakh Writer In China Nominated For Prize In Kazakhstan

ALMATY -- Kazakhstan's Institute for Cultural Politics and Culture Studies has nominated Qazhyghumar Shabdanuly, an ethnic Kazakh writer in China's Xinjiang Province, for a Kazakh state literature award, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports.

Institute Director Yerlan Sairov told journalists in Almaty today that Shabdanuly deserves the award for his six-volume novel "Qylmys" (Crime).

"The novel can be described as a literary work on the national scale...It is a book about the colonization of the Kazakh territories, which gives a clear picture of what Kazakhs went through under the imperial pressure of China and the Soviet Union," Sairov said.

Shabdanuly, 85, has been officially designated a criminal in China. He spent 40 years in Chinese jails for his activism and for writing the first volume of the book. He is currently under house arrest in Xinjiang.

His novel chronicles the fate of an ethnic minority in western China and the difficult life of a political prisoner. A handwritten copy of the book was secretly smuggled to Kazakhstan and 2,000 copies printed by the Atazhurt publishing house in Almaty in November.

There are at least 2 million ethnic Kazakhs living in Xinjiang.

- **Kazakh Flash-Mob Participant Fined For Illegal Rally**

An Almaty court today ordered Rozlana Taukina, the head of the nongovernmental organization Journalists in Trouble, to pay a fine of some \$500 for violating the law on holding rallies, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Taukina told RFE/RL that the prosecutor demanded a five-day jail term, but the judge decreased the penalty.

On January 6, Taukina, Raushan Esergepova, and Alga opposition group leader Vladimir Kozlov participated in a flash-mob protest in central Almaty under the banner "Freedom for journalists convicted for their professional activities." The rally was in support of jailed journalists, including Esergepova's husband Ramazan Esergepov, the editor of "Alma-Ata Info" newspaper; "Vremya" newspaper correspondent Tohniyaz Kuchukov; writer Alpamys Bekturganov; and "Law and Justice" editor in chief Tokbergen Abiev.

Kozlov was earlier ordered by the court to pay a fine of about \$50.

- **Kazakhs Mark 50th Anniversary Of Gulag's Official Closure**

Ar/Rukh/Khak Chairwoman Bakhyt Toregozhina (left) said the gathering was devoted to the poets and human rights activists who were killed in the gulag.

ALMATY -- Kazakh activists gathered in Almaty today to mark the 50th anniversary of the Soviet gulag's official closure, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The meeting was led by activists from the Ar/Rukh/Khak (Conscience/Spirit/Truth) organization, who gathered at the Alley of National Heroes in Almaty and read poems written by and about inmates of the Soviet Union's General Department of Correctional Labor Camps (GULAG). On this day in 1960 the gulag -- where at least 14 million people were imprisoned and an estimated 1 million died in some 476 different camps -- was officially dissolved and the Soviet penitentiary system reportedly underwent some degree of reform.

Ar/Rukh/Khak Chairwoman Bakhyt Toregozhina said the gathering was devoted to the poets and human rights activists who were killed in the gulag. She added that young Kazakhs should remember their prominent ancestors who died in the Soviet prisons but whose names are often forgotten. Young Kazakh poet Rinat Kibraev compared the Soviet regime with the current Kazakh government, saying that even these days human rights activists are jailed in Kazakhstan.

Kazakh police monitored today's event but did not disrupt the unsanctioned gathering.

Kyrgyzstan

Political Front

- **Kyrgyz Minister Reprimanded For Police Chief Appointment**

Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev was reprimanded for his choice of deputy police chief.

BISHKEK -- Kyrgyz Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov reprimanded Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev today and cancelled his appointment of a controversial figure as a deputy police chief, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. Usenov took the action against Kongantiev due to his January 15 appointment of Zhenish Jorobekov as deputy head of Bishkek's police department. Jorobekov was dismissed in April 2009 from his post as chief of a nearby police department after unrest in the town of Petrovka, outside of Bishkek, where an ethnic Kurd was accused of raping a 4-year-old ethnic Russian girl on April 6. The girl's grandmother later killed herself as a result of the incident.

Beknazarov said Jorobekov did not open a criminal case, which led many to believe he was connected to the alleged rapist. On April 26, some 2,000 outraged villagers demanded that all ethnic Kurds leave Petrovka. Jorobekov today told RFE/RL he might have played a part in the unrest in Petrovka, but added that a court ruled opposition party members were ultimately responsible for stoking the unrest.

- **Kyrgyz President's Office, Son Reject Claim Of Seized Assets**

President Kurmanbek Bakiev's youngest son, Maksim Bakiev

BISHKEK -- A Kyrgyz Presidential Secretariat official says the administration is very skeptical of comments made by a political analyst that Russia has frozen the bank accounts of businesses related to Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev's son, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

Aleksandr Knyazev, the director of the Bishkek branch of the Commonwealth of Independent States Institute, said at a press conference on January 26 that some funds of companies linked to Maksim Bakev -- son of the president and recently appointed head of the Kyrgyz Central Development Agency -- were frozen and the firms' activities suspended. Knyazev said 18 criminal cases have been opened in Russia against Kyrgyz businesses, including the Altyn holding company. He added that the investigation is being controlled by the Russian presidential administration.

But Maksim Kaganer, the deputy chief of the Kyrgyz Presidential Secretariat, told RFE/RL that Knyazev should first present evidence that the companies and bank accounts in question belong to Maksim Bakiev. For his part, Maksim Bakiev told Kyrgyz news agency 24.kg that he has no bank accounts or company shares in Russia. He added that he is not listed as an owner of the Altyn holding company -- which has had its offices raided and employees arrested in Russia.

Maksim Bakiev said that if he had any ties to the frozen bank accounts or suspended businesses, the Russian media would have written extensively about it but has not yet done so. Knyazev said that his sources for the information are Russian media outlets, but when asked to specify which ones he replied "search the Internet." Knyazev was beaten and robbed in Bishkek on December 9. Four assailants attacked him near his apartment and took his briefcase and laptop. Knyazev is as a well-known political analyst who has often criticized the foreign policy of the Kyrgyz government.

- **Kyrgyz Minister Says Suspect In Journalist's Killing Arrested In Tajikistan**

Kyrgyz Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev has repeated a report that a suspect in the killing of independent Kyrgyz journalist Alisher Saipov was detained in Tajikistan, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

Kongantiev told RFE/RL on January 26 that Kyrgyz and Tajik officials are discussing the suspect's extradition to Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, Tajik officials told RFE/RL's Tajik Service the same day that they have no information about such a suspect being detained in Tajikistan. Kyrgyz officials first reported the arrest of the suspect on January 16, and Tajik officials also denied the claim at that time.

Saipov, a Kyrgyz citizen of Uzbek origin who was chief editor of the "Siyosat" (Politics) newspaper, was shot dead near his office in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh on October 24, 2007. He often wrote about the political and social affairs in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. His colleagues and human rights activists say he was killed for his critical articles about Uzbek officials. Meanwhile, an Osh city court ruled on January 26 that Saipov's case will not be the subject of an additional investigation.

Saipov's father, Avaz Saipov, had asked the court to have the case reinvestigated. He said the investigations done thus far had been unprofessional and that he believes Uzbek secret agents -- with assistance from their Kyrgyz colleagues -- had killed his son.

He also said he believes that Abdulfarid Rasulov, the detained suspect, is innocent.

- Parliament endorses Constitutional amendments

Constitutional Legislation, State Structure and Human Rights Committee of the Kyrgyz Parliament has endorsed amendments to the Fundamental law, initiated by the President previously. The decision was made on January 26 at a session of the committee.

As the news agency 24.kg earlier reported, the amendments deprive the president of a right to appoint Secretary of State. The post has been abolished as a part of the state administration reforms in the country. The draft bill also provides for abolishment of the president's executive office, the Security Council, the National Guard and the leader's powers on their forming. The document also proposes to delegate powers on establishment of Presidential Council and other consultative and coordinating bodies to the head of the state. Representatives of the civil society will be expectedly involved in the bodies' activity to work out recommendations on the most essential, socially important issues and problems.

The council will include representatives of the President's Institute, Parliament, government and other bodies and organizations. The draft bill was submitted to the Kyrgyz Parliament for consideration at the end of 2009, however the lawmakers decided to postpone discussion of the document and hand it over to the Kyrgyz Constitutional Court. In general, the court has endorsed the amendments but with a reservation that the President's Council would not be entitled to propose a person for execution of president's authority. Deputies of the relevant committee completed the draft bill with regulation about the State Council which will be entitled to elect acting president. The council will be supposedly convened in three days and will include parliament speaker and the head of the government. Only Roza Otunbaeva, Chief of Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan, harshly criticized the amendments, while majority of her colleagues voted for the draft bill.

Geo Strategic Front

- Political expert: I doubt soonest establishment of Russian air base in South Kyrgyzstan

“I doubt that documents on establishment of a Russian air base in south Kyrgyzstan will be signed in the nearest future,” Alexander Knyazev, Director of the Regional Branch of CIS Countries Institute told a press conference at the news agency 24.kg Tuesday.

Signing of the agreement was reportedly scheduled for the end of January 2010. “Russian landing battalion has to deploy in the town of Kyzyl-Kiya, on the basis of which Russia planned to establish anti-terrorist center of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. It was Bishkek’s initiative. Nobody agreed it with Uzbekistan and Tashkent harshly argued against deployment of new military objects nearby its borders,” the director said.

The expert believes, Russia does not need an evil-wisher on the part of Uzbekistan. “Nobody will develop bilateral relations in the region without Tashkent’s participation. Exactly Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-Russia triangle will be the main direction of the republic’s foreign policy in 2010,” he added.

- Kyrgyzstan discusses Afghanistan situation at international summits

Kyrgyz delegation headed by Kadyrbek Sarbaev, the Kyrgyz Foreign Minister, takes part in international summits and conferences on handling situation in Afghanistan, press service of the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Kyrgyzstan reported.

The delegation reportedly participated in the Summit on Friendship and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia, held in Istanbul (Turkey) on January 26, 2010. The meeting was held at the initiative of the Turkish President. The Heads of Afghanistan and Pakistan, representatives of government and Foreign Ministries of Great Britain, Iran, China, United Arab Emirates, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Tajikistan and other countries took part in the conference. The sides have discussed strengthening of regional cooperation, required for stabilizing situation in Afghanistan.

The head of Kyrgyz delegation reminded participants about the Bishkek initiative. Sarbaev pointed that the republic attaches great importance to security in the region and stands for consolidation of the international community for peace and stability in Afghanistan. Besides, the Foreign Minister has met with the President of Turkey, Foreign Ministers of China and Tajikistan and the U.S. deputy special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Later on the delegation headed for London to partake in an international conference on Afghanistan situation to run on January 28, 2010.

Economic /Energy Front

- Number of Bishkek jobless increases by 8.5 percent in 2009

Number of officially registered jobless has risen by 8.5 percent and reached 9,651 people in Bishkek in 2009, final report of the Bishkek city administration said.

Increase in unemployment rate is reportedly the result of industrial production and services decline. Therewith, over 18 thousand working places, including 7,808 informal sector jobs, have been created for the period.

In 2009 the migration and employment service placed in jobs about 10 thousand city residents. Therewith, about two thousands unemployed were reportedly sent to professional training and about three thousands were involved in public works for the period. Moreover, 132 communities have obtained microcredit loans at 15.7 million soms.

- Chinese citizen prosecuted for illegal business in Kyrgyzstan

A citizen of China was prosecuted for illegal business activity in Kyrgyzstan, Financial Police Service of Kyrgyzstan said.

A batch of DVDs and DVD boxes at a total of 9,000 soms was confiscated from the man at Dordoi market. The foreigner kept the goods in a storage room on the territory of the market complex, where later the inspectors revealed 190,800 thousand DVDs and 136 thousand DVD boxes at 1,358 million soms.

The Chinese had no certificates, registration and permit for business activity on the territory of Kyrgyzstan.

Criminal case was initiated, investigation is ongoing.

- PM: Investments to Kyrgyz economy to grow in 2010

“Investments to Kyrgyz economy are expected to grow significantly in 2010,” the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Daniar Usenov said at a collegium of the State Tax Administration Tuesday.

The progress will be reached through effective liberal fiscal policy of the government. “Establishment of the Central Agency for Development, Investments and Innovations gives way to a real growth of investors in our country,” the premier said.

Kyrgyzstan was predicted to collapse during the global financial recession, but we survived and even managed to grow our revenues by 457 million soms and GDP by 2.3 percent. “Economic crisis sets new tasks in front of us, which requires strong efforts from the government. We plan a number of legal amendments in 2010 to facilitate economic growth,” Usenov said.

- Kyrgyz market should be well aware of fresh economic trends

“Kyrgyz market should receive truthful information about new trends of economic development,” Daniar Usenov, the Kyrgyz Premier said at a Financial Ministry’s collegium in Bishkek Tuesday.

The premier believes retaining stable and fixed macroeconomic indicators is one of the government’s central tasks for 2010, along with the trade balance analysis. “Kyrgyzstan does not produce tea or coffee and can import it. But we also bring in coal, salt, soft drinks, which we can produce. We should closely monitor this aspect and concentrate on import substitution and creation of export-oriented industry,” Usenov said

Social Front

- Kyrgyz Hunger Strike 'To Continue' Until High Court Ruling

BISHKEK -- A Kyrgyz opposition leader says a hunger strike in support of jailed former Kyrgyz Defense Minister Ismail Isakov will continue until the military's high court hears an appeal of the case, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

Topchubek Turgunaliyev, leader of the hunger strike and head of the United Popular Movement (UPM), told RFE/RL today that the strike, which involves 21 people total in Bishkek and in the southern Osh region's Alay district, which is Isakov's hometown. It is unclear when the military Supreme Court will review the case. Anipa Mamatisaeva, Isakov's 85-year-old mother, joined the hunger strike on January 24. Isakov, a lieutenant general who served as Kyrgyzstan's defense minister from 2005-08, was found guilty by a military court of corruption and sentenced to eight years in jail on January 11.

He was a close associate of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev and became defense minister shortly after the 2005 Tulip Revolution that brought Bakiev to power.

Isakov was appointed secretary of the National Security Council in May 2008. He left the post in October 2008 and joined Kyrgyzstan's political opposition. Isakov's supporters and human rights groups say the case against him is in retaliation for his opposition activities.

- **Kyrgyz Official Says Coverage Of Isakov Protests Biased**

Protesters gather earlier this month in the Alai district to support opposition leader Ismail Isakov.

OSH, Kyrgyzstan -- The governor of the southern Kyrgyz region of Osh says media coverage of protests in support of jailed former Defense Minister Ismail Isakov is biased and "instigating hysteria," RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. Mamasadyk Bakirov denied today media reports that protester demands in Isakov's home district of Alai are supported in other regions. Bakirov said, "nobody -- neither citizens nor state officials -- have the right to impose their will on the court." He added that those who are unhappy with the court verdict have legal means to challenge it by appealing to higher courts. Bakirov said the organizers of "illegal protest actions" should be prosecuted. Meanwhile, a hunger strike in support of Ismailov continues in Bishkek and the Alai district, where a total of 13 people are on strike. On January 24 Anipa Mamatisaeva, Isakov's 85-year-old mother, joined the strike to demand the release of her son. Isakov, a lieutenant general who served as defense minister from 2005-08 and secretary of the National Security Council in 2008, was found guilty on January 11 of issuing an apartment to someone based on false documents. Isakov was an ally of President Kurmanbek Bakiev after he came to power following the 2005 Tulip Revolution. Isakov left his post in October 2008 and joined the political opposition. Isakov's supporters and human rights groups say the case against him is in retaliation for his opposition activity.

Tajikistan

Political Front

- **Tajik Court Upholds Verdict Against Independent Weekly**

DUSHANBE -- A Dushanbe court today upheld the verdict against the independent weekly newspaper "Paykon" (Arrowhead), RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. In October, Dushanbe's Firdausi district court found the weekly guilty of libel and ordered it to pay 300,000 somoni (\$40,000) to the state corporation Tajikstandart, which monitors the quality of imported goods. Last summer, "Paykon" printed an open letter from a group of Tajik businessmen to President Emomali Rahmon in which they accused Tajikstandart of corruption and hindering the development of trade in Tajikistan. Tajikstandart's management then filed the libel lawsuit against the weekly. "Paykon" editor in chief Jumaboy Tolibov told RFE/RL that the court's decision is politically motivated. Nuriddin Qarshiboev, the chairman of Tajikistan's Association of Independent Media, called the verdict against "Paykon" an attack on press freedom. He predicted other papers might be targeted in the runup to the parliamentary elections scheduled for February 28.

Several independent periodicals were shut down on the eve of the last parliamentary elections in 2004.

- **Kyrgyz Minister Says Suspect In Journalist's Killing Arrested In Tajikistan**

Kyrgyz Interior Minister Moldomusa Kongantiev has repeated a report that a suspect in the killing of independent Kyrgyz journalist Alisher Saipov was detained in Tajikistan, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. Kongantiev told RFE/RL on January 26 that Kyrgyz and Tajik officials are discussing the suspect's extradition to Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, Tajik officials told RFE/RL's Tajik Service the same day that they have no information about such a suspect being detained in Tajikistan. Kyrgyz officials first reported the arrest of the suspect on January 16, and Tajik officials also denied the claim at that time.

Saipov, a Kyrgyz citizen of Uzbek origin who was chief editor of the "Siyosat" (Politics) newspaper, was shot dead near his office in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh on October 24, 2007. He often wrote about the political and social affairs in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. His colleagues and human rights activists say he was killed for his critical articles about Uzbek officials. Meanwhile, an Osh city court ruled on January 26 that Saipov's case will not be the subject of an additional investigation. Saipov's father, Avaz Saipov, had asked the court to have the case reinvestigated. He said the investigations done thus far had been unprofessional and that he believes Uzbek secret agents -- with assistance from their Kyrgyz colleagues -- had killed his son. He also said he believes that Abdulfarid Rasulov, the detained suspect, is innocent.

- **Bukharan Jews To Observe Tajik Parliamentary Elections**

DUSHANBE -- Representatives of the Congress of Bukharan Jews of the United States and Canada will be observers at Tajikistan's upcoming parliamentary elections, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Tajik Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairman Mirzoali Boltuev told RFE/RL that the organization officially requested that it be allowed to send officials to observe the February 28 elections. The term Bukharan Jews comes from the former Central Asian emirate of Bukhara, which once had a large Jewish community. Bukharan Jews speak a Persian dialect and used to live mainly in what today is Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the vast majority of Bukharan Jews have immigrated to Australia, Europe, Canada, Israel, and the United States.

The CEC said about 500 international observers -- including from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Commonwealth of Independent States -- will be in Tajikistan to monitor the elections. Some 250 candidates are running for the 63 seats in the Majlisi Namoyandagon, the lower chamber of parliament. The overwhelming majority of seats in parliament are currently occupied by the ruling People's Democratic Party led by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon.

- **Tajik Official Says 'Most' Inmates Bribed Way To Amnesty**

Tajik Anticorruption Agency head Fattoh Saidov

January 27, 2010

A Tajik official has claimed that many prisoners convicted of drug offenses paid bribes in order to be released in a recent amnesty, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Fattoh Saidov, the head of Tajikistan's Anticorruption Agency, said in Dushanbe that two regional prosecutors and a judge were recently arrested on suspicion of involvement in a scheme to collect bribes from prisoners seeking to be released in the November amnesty. He said the majority of prisoners released under that act of clemency paid bribes. Overall, more than 5,000 convicts were either released or had their prison terms reduced. The Tajik Anticorruption Agency was founded three years at the request of international financial institutions. Its officers are constantly at odds with the General-Prosecutor's Office over jurisdiction and the arrest of people on corruption charges.

Geo Strategic Front

Economic /Energy Front

Social Front

- **Nine Religious Groups In Tajikistan Declared Illegal**

Nine religious groups in Tajikistan failed to file documents for reregistration by the January 1 deadline and have been declared illegal, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Saidbek Mahmaddulloev, of the Tajik Culture Ministry's Department for Religions, told RFE/RL that the new law on religions adopted in March 2009 required all religious groups and organizations to reregister by the beginning of 2010. The Jewish congregation in Dushanbe, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon church), several Baptist churches, and the International Preaching House failed to file papers by January 1. Mikhail Abdurahmonov, the rabbi of the Dushanbe synagogue, told RFE/RL that his congregation was unable to reregister because the new synagogue still lacks an official address. Dushanbe authorities demolished the building that housed the city's old synagogue in 2008. Hasan Assadullozoda, President Emomali Rahmon's brother-in-law who is also the head of Orion Bank, offered the small Jewish congregation his large house as a new synagogue after the old one's destruction. Abdurahmonov said the new synagogue cannot be legally registered because the building is still owned by Assadullozoda. There were 81 non-Muslim religious groups registered in Tajikistan before the new law was adopted and all of them except for the nine were able to reregister by January 1. According to official statistics, there were 247 grand mosques and 2,969 daily-prayer mosques registered in Tajikistan by January 1.

Turkmenistan Political Front

- Three constituencies of Turkmenistan to hold elections to Mejlis

In accordance with the Resolution of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan, on 24 January constituency N 21 of Akhal province, N 37 of Balkan province and N 44 of Dashoguz provinces will hold elections of deputies of the Mejlis to replace the outgoing parliamentarians. The elections are held in connection with the appointment of some members of the National Parliament to high state posts and discontinuation of their mandates. According to the Central Commission for Elections and Referendums in Turkmenistan, these constituencies are fully prepared for elections. Each constituency has two candidates running for a seat in the National Parliament. The nomination of candidates was carried out by the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan and public organizations forming the National Movement "Galkynysh."

Elections on the ground will be monitored by national observers, personally assigned to each polling station. Voting will take place on 24 January from 8 am to 7 pm. The results of elections in these constituencies will be published in the press, the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH) said.

Geo Strategic Front

- Turkmen President to pay official visit to Belarus

President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov will soon pay an official visit the Republic of Belarus at the head of the governmental delegation of Turkmenistan. The preparations and a program of the forthcoming visit were discussed yesterday at a regular meeting of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan.

As the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports from Ashgabat quoting the press service of the head of state, the date of the visit will coincide with the meeting of the Intergovernmental Belarusian-Turkmen Commission on economic cooperation in Minsk. "The program of this visit is very rich, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov said. This highlights the importance attached to strengthening relations and expanding the

comprehensive cooperation between our country and the Republic of Belarus." According to him, the Turkmen-Belarusian partnership has a wealth of positive experience of joint work accumulated over recent years, and the profound potential that needs to be fully utilized.

The head of state instructed relevant officials to ensure the efficiency of the forthcoming visit and the summit talks "designed to give the traditional intergovernmental dialogue new dynamics of development that meet mutual interests.

- Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan to attend international conference on Afghanistan

On the instructions of President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Vice Premier, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan Rashid Meredov will attend an international conference on Afghanistan in the city of London (United Kingdom) on 28-29 January 2010, the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports referring to the press service of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry.

"Turkmenistan attaches great importance to the revival of Afghanistan, establishment of a lasting peace on the Afghan soil, the Foreign Ministry said. Turkmenistan supplies liquefied gas and electricity to Afghanistan at a discounted price, provides humanitarian assistance on a regular basis, and implements a number of important projects in various fields at its own expense."

- Italian Foreign Ministry's special envoy for Central Asia visits Turkmenistan

The delegation of Italy headed by Minister Plenipotentiary, Coordinator and Special Envoy for Central Asia of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Paolo Serpi visited Ashgabat.

As the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports quoting the press service of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry, the delegation held talks with the Government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan. The distinguished guests also held meetings at the Ministry of Economy and Development, Ministry of Communications and the Chamber of Commerce of Turkmenistan, where they discussed progress in implementing the agreements reached during the official visit of Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to the Republic of Italy in November last year.

"Representatives of Turkmenistan and Italy noted the great interest of the two friendly countries in the further intensification of mutually beneficial cooperation and establishment of full-scale cooperation of mutual interest," the press-service said.

Economic /Energy Front

- Ukrainian "Altcom" to start construction of bridge across Amu Darya in Turkmenistan

The financial-industrial group "Altcom" (Donetsk, Ukraine) will begin construction of a road bridge, Atamurat-Kerkichi, across the Amu Darya river in Turkmenistan before April of this year. This was reported by the company's deputy general director Mikhail Kovalev in an interview with the internet portal "Trans-Port."

According to Kovalev, "a camp for the company's builders is currently being erected on the bank of the Amu Darya river, the design of the bridge has been completed, and actual construction will begin any day." "We will start for sure in the first quarter," he said. At the same time, the deputy general director of the company noted that the commissioning of the bridge will not be delayed and is scheduled for October 2012 as planned.

Kovalev also said that the cost of the project is US \$ 159 million. The total length of the road bridge with coastal fortifications will be 1415 meters, and the width - 11.5 meters. It should be recalled that according to the decree of Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov of 17 September 2009, Turkmenavtoyollary State Concern (Turkmen roads) entered into a contract with "Altcom", who won an international tender for the construction of the bridge.

- Ashgabat to host international conference on alternative energy

On 24-25 February 2010, the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan (AST) will hold an international scientific conference in Ashgabat on the use of alternative energy sources in Turkmenistan. The conference aims to establish mutually beneficial cooperation and involvement of partners in implementing efficient projects on the use of alternative energy sources in Turkmenistan, to synthesis national and international experience, to promote new technologies, and to obtain economic benefits from their use, the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent was told in the in AST.

The conference will focus on the following topics - current state and scientific-technical, environmental and economic aspects of development and use of alternative energy sources; achievements of fundamental scientific researches in the field of power generation using alternative energy sources; new technologies and equipment for the use of alternative energy sources; ensuring reliability of work of the system of alternative energy sources and ensuring quality of energy.

- Presidents of Turkmenistan and France to identify new areas of cooperation

"The forthcoming Turkmen-French negotiations in Paris will give a new powerful impetus to the inter-state relations in political, economic and cultural spheres that are growing stronger year by year," Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov said receiving yesterday Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the French Republic to Turkmenistan Pierre Lebovich.

As the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports from Ashgabat quoting the press service of the head of state, the President of Turkmenistan and the French diplomat noted with satisfaction the existing mutual interest in expanding the fruitful partnership in several key areas, including in the format of Turkmenistans dialogue with EU member countries. "France is looking forward to your visit, which is associated with great hopes for the further successful development of productive cooperation between the two countries," Pierre Lebovich said. The diplomat expressed confidence that in the near future the French business community will considerably expand its presence in the promising Turkmen market through participation in new joint projects.

Social Front

- Banned Turkmen Students To Attend U.S. University In Bulgaria

(RFE/RL) -- Turkmen students banned from studying at universities abroad are being allowed by the government to resume their studies at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), RFE/RL's Turkmen Service reports.

An official at the U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan, who asked to remain anonymous, told RFE/RL that three Turkmen students went to Bulgaria on January 24, seven more the next day, and 39 students flew to Sofia today. Another student is due to leave Ashgabat for Bulgaria soon.

In August, Turkmen authorities abruptly prevented the 50 students returning from their summer vacations to go to the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) in Bishkek to continue their studies. Turkmen officials said the AUCA curriculum does not correspond to Turkmen standards. The students then tried to transfer to the AUBG, but were prevented from boarding flights to Bulgaria on October 2 and 3.

The lifting of the ban on students came one day after a session of Turkmenistan's Security Council in which President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov harshly criticized the head of the State Migration Service and ordered him to "urgently improve the shortcomings" in the agency's work.

Classes for the spring semester at AUBG, located in the southwestern city of Blagoevgrad, began on January 18.

Uzbekistan

Political Front

- Uzbek President's Daughter Appointed Ambassador To Spain

The Spanish Foreign Ministry says Gulnara Karimova, the eldest daughter of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, has been named Uzbek ambassador to Spain, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

A Foreign Ministry press spokesman told RFE/RL that Karimova, who has served as Uzbek ambassador to the UN in Geneva since 2008, presented her credentials to the ministry in Madrid on January 18. An official announcement of the appointment will be made after Karimova submits her credentials to the King Juan Carlos. Jos Boonstra, a senior researcher with the Madrid-based FRIDE think tank and a co-chair of the EU Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) project, told RFE/RL that he is surprised by the appointment. He said the decision was likely made because of long-term bilateral economic interests and not due to Spain's holding of the EU Presidency from January 1-June 30. Karimova, 37, served as a deputy foreign minister and was listed as an adviser to the Uzbek ambassador to Russia from 2003-05.

Karimova is the founder and manager of the Culture and Art Forum of Uzbekistan foundation, which has several offices abroad. The Swiss magazine "Bilan" reported in December that Karimova has assets in Switzerland of between \$570 million-\$655 million and is the ninth-richest woman in the country.

- Prominent Uzbek Sports Journalist Arrested

TASHKENT -- Prominent Uzbek sports journalist Khairulla Khamidov has been arrested, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports. One of Khamidov's relatives told RFE/RL that Khamidov has officially been accused of "creating an illegal religious group and participation in its activities."

Khamidov's wife, Dilnoza, told RFE/RL that police came to their apartment at about 5 a.m. with arrest and search warrants. She said Khamidov's computer, several books, and CDs were confiscated. Khamidov was arrested and taken to Tashkent's Lunacharsky Interior Ministry jail. Khamidov, who is among the most famous sports reporters in Uzbekistan, used to work for Uzbek television as a soccer commentator. He gained great popularity after he anchored a series of radio programs called "Among People," which explained the role of Islam in the life of ordinary citizens. That program became so popular that many Uzbeks were regularly downloading the program on their mobile phones.

- Uzbekistan: Old Speaker in the new parliament

Once again the new structure of Oliy Mazhlis (parliament) of Uzbekistan is headed by Dilrom Tashmukhamedova that has been serving as the Speaker of legislative house since 2008, UZA reports. On January 22 the first session of legislative house approved new deputy Speakers: Bakhtier Yakubov – the head of Entrepreneurs and businessmen Movement and Liberal democratic party, Ulugbek Vafoev – the head of National democratic party, Ulugbek Mukhamadiev – the head of Milliy tiklanish democratic party, Ismail Saifnazarov – the head of Adolat Social-democratic party and Boriv Alikhanov – the head of deputies group from Environmental movement of Uzbekistan.

The political parties and deputies group from Environmental movement of Uzbekistan were also registered at the session. Central Election Committee of Uzbekistan also appointed the date of the first session of new Senate, the Oliy Mazhlis upper chamber; it will be held on January 25-26, 2010. The first session agenda includes organizational issues, related to the election of house Chairman and his deputies, formation of senate committees and election of their chairmen. It has to be mentioned that parliamentary elections in Uzbekistan were held on December 27, 2009 while the repeat voting took place on January 10, 2010. As a result, 150 deputies, representing four political parties and Environmental movement of Uzbekistan, were elected in 39 election districts.

Overall, 84 people were elected in the senate and 16 others were appointed by the decree of Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

Geo Strategic Front

- Uzbek Sent From Gitmo To Switzerland

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- An Uzbek detainee held at the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba has been sent to Switzerland, the U.S. Justice Department has said. The transfer was the latest prisoner removed from the facility as the Obama administration seeks to close the controversial prison for foreign terrorism suspects.

But there are still 192 prisoners at the facility, which opened in 2002 and has long been criticized by human rights activists and foreign governments.

Some critics say the facility has served as a recruiting symbol for anti-American militants

- US grants political asylum to Uzbek dissident Tashpulat Yuldashev

Ferghana.Ru learned from personal sources that on January 26, 2010 Tashpulat Yuldashev, prominent Uzbek political scientist and dissident, left for United States of America, whose government offered him the refugee status after considering his case by UN office of High Commissioner.

The political scientist Tashpulat Yuldashev. Photo © Ferghana.Ru

Tashpulat Yuldashev had to flee Uzbekistan in the summer of 2008. He is a former diplomat that worked 15 years for Uzbek Foreign Ministry in Middle East. Yuldashev lost his job in 1992 when he participated in the preparation of Erk opposition party program. Mr. Yuldashev shared with Ferghana.Ru that "the regime of Islam Karimov deprived me and my children of the opportunity to work not only in governmental bodies, but also private enterprises. I have been keeping silence for 10 years and distanced away from any political activity; nevertheless, the authorities put me in their black list. Since 2003 I have been involved in political journalism. I prepared various statements, documents, second program and charter of Erk party; besides, I posted the number of articles in the Internet. The special services were chasing me; after one of the protests I

was detained for five days. Several times secret service agents broke in my apartment, searching for soft data, manuscripts and money". The last argument to leave the country was the campaign, launched against Ozodlik Radio journalists. Being concerned about possible charges on "supporting hostile radio stations" and undermining constitutional system through critical comments in Internet" Yuldashev flee the country. Ferghana.Ru source informed that "ordinarily UN High Commissioner for refugees supports the relocation of people, looking for asylum, in third country if there are relative ties. The children of Yuldashev live in Germany and Germany agreed to provide asylum. At the same time, so did the United States. Mr. Yuldashev preferred to choose the United States". Ferghana.Ru posted several articles by Tashpulat Yuldashev: «On the future of relations between West and Uzbekistan», «What is going on in Uzbekistan?» and others.

- Karimov's plan: Uzbekistan to strengthen bilateral cooperation with USA

The President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov approved the Action Plan on strengthening bilateral cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the United States of America for 2010, Gazeta.Uz reports. It has to be mentioned that the Uzbek leader signed the appropriate decree on January 11; nonetheless, only today many local mass media reported this fact. Full text of the decree is available here (Russian language only).

The plan is based on the results of the first round of Uzbek-American political consultations that took place in Washington DC on December 17-18, 2009. The wide documents cover politics, security, economy and development, human dimensions, assurance of peace and stability in Afghanistan.

According to the plan, in the second half of 2010 Tashkent will host second round of Uzbek-American political consultations while until summer of the current year Uzbekistan is going to host US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and congressmen, representing Caucus members (informal union of Congress members), focusing on Central Asia.

In the field of economy both parties are planning to organize consultations, dedicated to abolition of Jackson-Vanik amendment against Uzbekistan, and expedite the signing of state procedures by American side that legally launch the agreement on mutual protection of foreign investment, signed in December of 1994.

In the first half of the year Washington DC is planning to organize "round table" on the attraction of American investment and newest technologies in Uzbekistan, including Navoi free industrial-economic zone. Moreover, the representatives of Uzbek business community are planning to visit USA under SABIT (Special American Business Internship Training) program with the purpose to learn the experience in food industry and renewable energy sources.

USA is going to expand assistance to Uzbekistan in modernization of irrigation systems, ameliorative development and recovery of degraded soil, as well as to attract new technologies for raising the productivity in agriculture. The parties are also planning to organize the joint Forum for the farmers of Uzbekistan and USA in order to exchange know-how achievements in the agriculture business.

On human dimension side in the first quarter the countries are going to finish the approval and initial the intergovernmental agreements on cooperation in the field of science and technology. The parties have planned to organize the meeting of experts on

developing the connections between the research institutions and attraction of grant money for the preparation of the priority field researches in Uzbekistan.

The cooperation plan also includes the implementation of joint academic and educational programs, opening of US university branch in Tashkent, promotion of historical and cultural heritage of Uzbekistan and USA and cooperation development in healthcare and mass media.

The security partnership assumes the training and retraining of Uzbek militaries in leading military education schools of USA, including International Military Education and Training program.

The parties will collaborate in border security, nonproliferation and counteraction to terrorism, as well as in Foreign Military Financing and Excess Defense Articles programs.

Under peace and stability in Afghanistan program, Uzbekistan and USA will exchange information about threats and preventive measures, related to the transit of non-military cargo through Northern Distribution Network to Afghanistan, including the implementation of Hairaton-Mazari-i-Sharif construction project.

Richard Holbrooke, US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, is going to visit Tashkent in February of 2009. In the second half of the year in cooperation with Atlantic Council the parties are planning to conduct special event that will support Uzbekistan's initiative in the field of regional security and establishment UN-supported "6+3" Contact group with the focus on Afghanistan.

Economic /Energy Front

- Uzbekistan's economy to grow by 6.5% next two years – World Bank

Gross domestic product (GDP) of Uzbekistan will grow by 6.5% in 2010 and 2011, the World Bank said in its Global Economic Prospects 2010, released on 21 January 2010.

The report said estimated GDP growth in Uzbekistan made up 5.5% in 2009. Meanwhile, Uzbek President Islam Karimov said that the economy of Uzbekistan rose by 8.1% in 2009. As earlier reported, Uzbekistan expects that GDP of the country will increase by 8.3% in 2010. Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) forecasted that economy of Uzbekistan will grow by 8.1% in 2010, which will be one of the highest growths in the world.

The World Bank estimated current account balance of Uzbekistan at 16.9% to GDP in 2009. The bank forecasted that current account balance will rise to 20.4% to GDP in 2010 and decrease to 19.2% in 2011.

Social Front

- Pro-Kremlin Activists Demand Uzbek Envoy Restore 'Soviet Soldier'

PRAGUE -- The pro-Kremlin Nashi youth movement is demanding that the Uzbek ambassador to Russia keep a pledge and reinstall a Soviet-era war monument that was removed from downtown Tashkent last year, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

Oleg Sokolov of the Nashi movement, who has held several solo rallies in front of the embassy, told RFE/RL that Nematov, as Uzbekistan's official representative in Russia, "should either restore the Soviet soldier monument or publicly admit he was telling lies."

Some 20 Nashi activists held a rally near the Uzbek Embassy building in Moscow on January 21 with the slogan: "Ambassador [Ilkhom] Nematov, tell us the date of the monument's return."

In November, all the monuments in Tashkent's 1973 Park of Military Glory -- including the Defender of the Motherland that is devoted to Soviet soldiers -- as well as Soviet

planes, rockets, tanks, and other weapons, were removed. Nematov was quoted by ITAR-TASS on November 25 as saying "all monuments will be restored and returned to their original place." But on January 13, a new monument called "Oath to the Motherland" -- featuring a gold-plated statue of an Uzbek soldier kneeling to kiss the national flag and a praying soldier's mother in the background -- was unveiled at the place where the Soviet war memorial had stood.

An Uzbek Defense Ministry official told RFE/RL earlier that the new monument ends the "contradiction" that existed between the old Soviet monuments and a modern reading of Uzbek history and the nearby Uzbek Armed Forces Museum.

- Uzbekistan Renames Capital's Soviet-Era Streets, Places

TASHKENT -- Authorities in the Uzbek capital have begun renaming some 150 streets and residential areas to deemphasize the city's Soviet heritage, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports. The Tashkent city's toponymic commission stated that its decision to rename streets in 10 of the city's 11 districts is aimed at "simplification, elimination of duplication, and a return of old historical names."

In some cases, streets named after Uzbek scientists and professors who were renowned during the Soviet era were changed to numbers instead. And Aleksei Tolstoy Street, named after the famous Russian writer, was changed into Oloy, the name of a nearby outdoor food market. The street named after Shoakhmed Shamakhmudov -- an Uzbek blacksmith who adopted 15 orphans of various nationalities during World War II -- was restored to its historical name Toshkucha, which means "stone street."

The residential area known as "40 Years of Victory" was renamed Tuzel (flat area).

Marat Zahidov, chairman of the Individual Rights Committee (IRC), told RFE/RL that the street named in 1983 after his father, Tesha Zakhidov -- one of the first zoologists to write in Uzbek and an author of the zoological encyclopedia -- was renamed Yunusota.

Zahidov said he does not understand the reason for changing the name of his father's street and thinks it might be connected to his activity with the IRC, his human rights organization. The renaming of streets in Uzbekistan has proceeded in waves, but began in 1991 as part of a de-Russification policy by the Uzbek government. In November, all the monuments that formed part of the 1973 Park of Military Glory in Tashkent -- including the monument to Soviet soldiers and samples of Soviet planes, rockets, tanks, and other weapons -- were removed. The same week the Aleksandr Nevsky Russian Orthodox Church -- built in Tashkent by renowned St. Petersburg architect Aleksei Benua in 1898 -- was also demolished by Uzbek officials.

- Uzbekistan: Drop Slander Charge Against Photographer Umida Akhmedova

The Uzbek authorities should immediately drop the baseless slander and insult charges against the prominent photographer and videographer Umida Ahmedova and allow her to carry out her work and exercise her right to freedom of expression without government interference, Human Rights Watch said today. The charges were brought on January 13, 2010, under articles 139 and 140 of the Uzbek Criminal Code. On January 23, investigators informed Ahmedova that the investigation had been completed and that the trial is expected to begin soon. The charges, specifically slander and insulting the Uzbek people, are based on a book of Ahmedova's photographs published in 2007 and a documentary film produced in 2008. If convicted, Ahmedova could face up to three years in prison (see details here).

"The charges against Umida Ahmedova reveal the absurd lengths the government will go to silence independent expression," said Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "The case sets a dangerous precedent and is a threat to all Uzbek artists." Ahmedova's book, "Women and Men: From Dawn till Dusk," portrays rural Uzbekistan and Uzbek traditions, focusing on gender inequality. The film, "The Burden of Virginity," explores the social consequences for brides who are suspected of not being virgins. Both projects were funded by the Swiss Embassy in Tashkent. Human Rights Watch has received information that other artists whose projects were funded by the Swiss Embassy Gender Program have also come under investigation by the authorities.

As part of the investigation, the prosecutor ordered a review of Ahmedova's book and film by an expert panel, consisting of six specialists in the fields of religious affairs, spirituality, and psychology. The panel concluded that Ahmedova's work was insulting to the people of Uzbekistan and portrayed Uzbekistan in a negative light to Western audiences.

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