

Business & Politics in the Muslim World
News Monitoring
Weekly Report
15 to 21 May 2010
Central Asia
Uzma Siraj

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Azerbaijan

Political Front

Geo Strategic Front

- Armenia Seeks PACE Clarifications On Nagorno-Karabakh Panel

Armenian President Serzh Sarkissian meets PACE President Mevlut Cavusoglu in Yerevan on May 12.

- Azerbaijan Calls Nagorno-Karabakh Elections 'Illegal'

BAKU -- Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission has denounced as illegal the upcoming parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan's breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

- European Parliament Calls For Greater EU Role In South Caucasus

European Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele said the EU will stick with its existing "good strategy" and "policy instruments," the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership project.

- Several agreements to be signed during Erdogan's visit to Azerbaijan

The program of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Azerbaijan is scheduled, said Chief of Public Policy Department of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan Ali Hasanov. "

- Organization of the Islamic Conference supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity

Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the peaceful settlement of Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the organization's secretary general Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu said at the opening of the 37th session of OIC Foreign Ministers.

- Prospects of Azerbaijan-US relations discussed in Baku

A delegation of the US National War College, consisting of senior military officers of the Pentagon, visited the Strategic Research Center under the President of Azerbaijan within their tour to the South Caucasus, the Center reported. Azerbaijani and US experts attended the round table on the Azerbaijan-US relations and priorities of domestic and foreign policy of Azerbaijan.

Economic /Energy Front

- Azerbaijani-Turkish Gas Deal Signing Postponed

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (left) and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan

BAKU -- Azerbaijan and Turkey today said they will sign a deal on Azerbaijani natural gas exports to Turkey during President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Ankara on June 7-8, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

Social Front

- Azerbaijani Rights Activists Seek International Help On Torture Cases

Dozens of Azerbaijani nongovernmental organizations have signed a petition urging international organizations to support an investigation into torture cases in Azerbaijan, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

- Azerbaijan Stops Mosque Demolition After Warning From Iranian Cleric

BAKU -- Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has ruled that the controversial Fatimeyi-Zahra Mosque on the outskirts of Baku will be subordinated to the country's leading religious authority, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

Kazakastan

Political Front

- Kazakh Opposition Activist Faces New Charges

ALMATY -- A jailed Kazakh opposition activist is facing new charges for violently resisting police, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Yermek Narymbaev, the leader of the

Arman (Dream) movement, was sentenced to 15 days in jail on May 2 for holding an unsanctioned mass gathering.

Geo Strategic Front

Economic /Energy Front

- Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan Customs Union Talks Fail

Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan have failed to reach agreement on establishing a joint customs union. In a statement from St. Petersburg, where leaders were discussing the possible union, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said the sides "couldn't agree on all the issues."

Social Front

- Kazakhstan To Establish Council Of Elders

ASTANA -- The Kazakh government says it is planning to establish a Council of Elders, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Kazakh Culture Minister Mukhtar Kul-Mukhammed told journalists on May 18 that the council will be created in accordance with the "National Unity Doctrine," the final version of which was approved by President Nursultan Nazarbaev on May 17.

Kyrgyzstan

Political Front

- OSCE Calls For Restraint After Deadly Kyrgyz Unrest

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is urging all parties in Kyrgyzstan to avoid further violence following clashes in the south of the country that left at least two people dead.

- Constitutional Crunch Time In Kyrgyzstan

Is Kyrgyzstan about to re-establish its image as the most democratic state in Central Asia, or will the interim government only worsen the spirit of discontent? This week the country faces a pivotal moment, when a special council releases a draft of the new constitution up for approval in a national referendum in late June. Kyrgyzstan's interim government has been in power for just over a month since crowds chased President Kurmanbek Bakiev from office in early April.

- Pro-Government Rally Held In Bishkek

A Kyrgyz youth group has staged a march and rally in the capital Bishkek in support of the interim government.

The group, which calls itself "Aykel," or People of Great Spirit, marched through Bishkek on May 16 carrying banners that read "We are for a unified and stable Kyrgyzstan," "North and South are our Kyrgyzstan" and "Bandits should sit in jail." An estimated 500-1,000 people participated.

- Bakiev's Former Chief Of Staff Under House Arrest In Kyrgyzstan

BISHKEK -- The chief of staff of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev has been transferred from a detention center to his home where he will be under house arrest, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. The transfer of Kanybek Joroev was made after a Bishkek court ruling.

- Kyrgyz Protesters Want Kazakhstan, Russia, U.S. To Help Extradite Bakiev

BISHKEK -- Relatives of those killed during the April 7 uprising in Kyrgyzstan are calling on the Kazakh, Russian, and U.S. governments to help extradite former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev from Belarus, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

- Calm Returns To Cities Across Kyrgyzstan

Supporters of the interim government assault the administration headquarters in Osh after it was seized by backers of ousted president on May 14.

Cities across Kyrgyzstan are calm after backers of the interim government recovered buildings occupied by supporters of ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev in the south of the country.

- Kyrgyz Communist Leader Jailed For Two Months

BISHKEK -- A Bishkek court ruled today that Communist Party leader Iskhak Masaliev should be detained for two months in connection with the takeover of government buildings in southern Kyrgyzstan last week, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz and Russian services report. Masaliev, 50, has officially been charged with organizing mass disorder on May 12-13 in the southern cities of Osh, Batken, and Jalal-Abad, where loyalists of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev briefly occupied several regional government headquarters.

- Ousted Osh Mayor, Deputy Blamed For Unrest In Kyrgyzstan

OSH, Kyrgyzstan -- A criminal case has been opened against the former mayor of the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. Sources in the Osh prosecutor's office told RFE/RL that former Mayor Mamasadyk Bakirov and his deputy, Aytmamat Kadyrbaev, are officially accused of organizing mass disorder in the city on May 13.

Geo Strategic Front

- Kazakhstan Reopens Border With Kyrgyzstan

BISHKEK -- Kazakhstan has reopened its border with Kyrgyzstan, which has been closed for more than a month.

Economic /Energy Front

Social Front

- Kyrgyz Civilian Patrols Expand Security Role

Interim government followers disrupt a rally of Bakiev supporters. Many Kyrgyz feel the police have failed to keep the peace between rival groups.

Tajikistan

Political Front

- Tajik Court Sentences 36 For Membership In Banned Islamic Group

QURGHON-TEPPA, Tajikistan -- A Tajik court has sentenced 36 people to prison for being followers of the banned Islamic group Jamaat ut-Tabligh, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Judge Ikromjon Abdulhafizov, in the southern Khatlon Province, said the court had proven the guilt of the 36 accused.

Geo Strategic Front

- Top Islamic Body Holds Foreign Minister Meeting In Dushanbe

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon (right) shakes hands with Ahmad Muhammad Ali, Islamic Development Bank chairman, in Dushanbe on May 17.

- Top Islamic Body Holds Foreign Minister Meeting In Dushanbe

DUSHANBE -- A top Islamic body is holding a meeting of foreign ministers in Dushanbe, marking the first time the Tajik capital is playing host to the annual gathering, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

- UAE foreign minister arrives in Tajikistan on official visit

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan arrived in Dushanbe today morning on an official visit, according to the Tajik MFA information department.

President Emomali Rahmon will hold talks with the UAE foreign minister today. After a meeting with President Rahmon, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan will meet with his Tajik counterpart, Hamrokhon Zarifi.

- Rahmon receives Turkish FM

DUSHANBE, May 18, 2010, Asia-Plus -- President Emomali Rahmon today received the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu who arrived in Dushanbe to attend the 37th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Member States that opened here today, according to presidential press service.

- U.S. Special Envoy to the OIC attends 37th session of OIC foreign ministers in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE, May 18, 2010, Asia-Plus -- Mr. Rashad Hussain, Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and Ms. Nasreen Badat from the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom have arrived in Dushanbe, according to the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe.

- Tajik president receives Iranian, Afghan foreign ministers

DUSHANBE, May 19, 2010, Asia-Plus /Rasoul Shodon/ -- President Emomali Rahmon yesterday held meetings with Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and the Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul. The meetings focused on Tajikistan's bilateral cooperation with Iran and Afghanistan.

Economic /Energy Front

- Tajikistan, WB sign agreement on additional financing for energy emergency recovery assistance project

DUSHANBE, May 15, 2010, Asia-Plus -- An agreement on additional financing for the Energy Emergency Recovery Assistance project was signed by the Government of Tajikistan and the World Bank in Dushanbe in May 14, according to the Ministry of Finance (MoF).

- UNODC renovates border post in Tajikistan with funds supplied by U.S. Government

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The refurbished Border Guard Post at Yol in Shuroobod District was formally reopened at a May 14 ceremony attended by representatives of the Border Guards, UNODC, and the United States Embassy in Dushanbe, press release issued by UNODC Co in Tajikistan said.

- Japan provides some US\$1.3 mln support development of human resources in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- On May 17, 2010, Mr. Yoshihiro Nakayama, Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of Japan in Dushanbe, and Mr. Hamrokhon Zarifi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan exchanged Notes concerning the Project for

Human Resource Development Scholarship (JDS) in the framework of the Japanese Grant Aid, according to the Japanese Embassy in Dushanbe.

Social Front

- Presentation of Dushanbe as Islamic Culture Capital in 2010 takes place on May 18

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- An official ceremony of presentation of Dushanbe as Capital of Islamic Culture for the year 2010 will take place in Dushanbe on May 18 in the framework of opening of the 37th Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Member States, according to the Ministry of Culture (MoC).

- US military transport aircraft airlifts humanitarian aid to Kulob

KULOB, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The U.S. military transport plane, C-17, has airlifted humanitarian aid to the city of Kulob for the disaster-hit people.

Damian Wampler, Press Attache, U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, told reporters in Kulob yesterday that the assistance included 84 tents (for 16 people each) from strategic reserves of Pentagon and the US rescue service for a total amount of 550,000 U.S. dollars.

Turkmenistan

Political Front

- Turkmen Leader Again Advocates Multiparty System

DASHOGUZ, Turkmenistan -- Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov says he has ordered parliament to draft a law on political parties, RFE/RL's Turkmen Service reports.

- Mejlis of Turkmenistan to prepare draft law on political parties

In the course of the May 14 meeting of the Council of Elders in Dashoguz, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov instructed the Mejlis (National Parliament) to prepare a draft law on political parties.

Geo Strategic Front

- Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Vladimir Putin hold telephone conversation

On May 19, President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation. The conversation was initiated by the Russian side, the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH) said.

Economic /Energy Front

- Programme for socio-economic development of Turkmenistan until 2030 signed

A meeting of the Council of Elders of Turkmenistan was held in Dashoguz on 14 May. The meeting considered the draft "National Programme for Socio-Economic Development of Turkmenistan in the period of 2011-2030," as well as a number of new laws of Turkmenistan such as "On local executive authorities", "On amendments to the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan and approval of the new edition of the Criminal Code", "On advocacy and legal practice in Turkmenistan", "On seed growing."

Social Front

- Turkmen Officials Deport RFE/RL Journalist

Turkmenistan's Migration Office in Ashgabat has banned an RFE/RL journalist from entering the country although he had a valid visa, RFE/RL's Turkmen Service reports.

Allamourad Rakhimov, a Prague-based broadcaster and native of Turkmenistan, arrived at Ashgabat airport early on May 19 with a visa that was initiated by his family.

- Days of Culture of Turkmenistan to be held in Moscow and St. Petersburg on 25-30 May

A number of events will take place in Moscow and St. Petersburg on 25-30 May 2010 as part of the Days of Turkmen Culture in Russia. As the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports from Moscow quoting the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Russia, the official delegation of the Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting of Turkmenistan as well as the delegation of artists totaling 65 people will participate in the events.

Uzbekistan

Political Front

- Uzbekistan To Reduce Sentences For Those Who Repent

TASHKENT -- Uzbek President Islam Karimov has signed an amendment to the Penal Code which cuts an offender's prison term by up to one-third in the event he/she repents, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

- Does PM's Rise, Energy Firm's Demise Shed Light On Uzbek Succession Question?

If Uzbek Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyaev is really in the running to become president one day, then he must feel his chances have improved lately. Mirziyaev has recently been given extra and significant responsibilities and made an important appearance in Moscow as a representative of Uzbekistan.

Geo Strategic Front

Economic /Energy Front

Social Front

- Controversy Over Uzbekistan Intrudes At Cannes AIDS Benefit

Liz Taylor and Giorgio Armani were among the notable guests who were expected to attend the celebrity fund-raising event Cinema Against AIDS in Cannes last night. It's become one of the big social events of the annual film festival and last year raised \$4.5 million for AIDS research.

Detailed Report

Azerbaijan

Political Front

Geo Strategic Front

- Armenia Seeks PACE Clarifications On Nagorno-Karabakh Panel

Armenian President Serzh Sarkissian meets PACE President Mevlut Cavusoglu in Yerevan on May 12.

YEREVAN -- A top Armenian lawmaker says Yerevan will not agree to renewed discussions on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict at the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) until it clarifies the talk's purpose, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reports. The talks have been championed by Mevlut Cavusoglu, a Turkish politician elected president of the Strasbourg-based assembly in January. Cavusoglu sought to revive and lead a PACE subcommittee tasked with facilitating a peaceful resolution of

the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. He has argued that the existence of such a body is envisaged by a 2005 PACE resolution. Armenia's leading pro-government and opposition forces are concerned that the subcommittee will not be impartial in its work because of the PACE chief's nationality. They argue that Turkey continues to lend strong and unconditional support to Azerbaijan and cite pro-Azerbaijani statements made by Cavusoglu in the past.

Cavusoglu dismissed these concerns during a two-day visit to Yerevan this week. David Harutiunian, a senior pro-government legislator heading the Armenian parliamentary delegation at PACE, said Armenian, Azerbaijani, and PACE officials are currently discussing the precise mission of the subcommittee in question. "The purpose of the consultations is to try to understand what we are going to do, how we can assist in the process [of the conflict's resolution] and what we should do," Harutiunian told RFE/RL. He said the subcommittee will not resume its work -- which was frozen in 2008 -- until those consultations are over. Harutiunian, who also chairs the Armenian parliament's State and Legal Affairs Committee, added that the Armenian side is trying to clarify the goals of the PACE panel and practical modalities of its work. Cavusoglu said at a news conference in Yerevan on May 13 that the decision to restart PACE discussions on the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute was taken by other Council of Europe officials months before his election. A member of Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party, Cavusoglu promised to take the Armenian concerns into consideration even if he does not agree with them. Armenians took control of most of the Azerbaijani region of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territory after a war between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces ended in 1994.

- Azerbaijan Calls Nagorno-Karabakh Elections 'Illegal'

BAKU -- Azerbaijan's Central Election Commission has denounced as illegal the upcoming parliamentary elections in Azerbaijan's breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports. The commission said in a statement that the May 23 elections violate Azerbaijan's constitution and international law. It says holding elections and referendums on the territory of Azerbaijan is the exclusive prerogative of the country's Central Election Commission. It further condemns as interference in Azerbaijan's domestic affairs the arrival of international observers in Stepanakert to monitor the voting.

The Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry has also condemned the upcoming elections. Sergei Nasibian, the head of the Nagorno-Karabakh election commission, told the Caucasian Knot website on May 19 that Karabakh's leadership attaches no importance to the statements. He said they serve only to promote solidarity among the Armenian population of Karabakh. Armenian and Azerbaijani forces fought a three-year war that ended in 1994 and left Armenian forces in control of virtually all of Nagorno-Karabakh and large parts of the surrounding territory.

- European Parliament Calls For Greater EU Role In South Caucasus

European Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele said the EU will stick with its existing "good strategy" and "policy instruments," the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership project. BRUSSELS -- The European Parliament has called for greater EU involvement in the South Caucasus, including in efforts to resolve the region's frozen conflicts, The call came in a nonbinding report adopted by the parliament,

which underscores the European Union's vast potential in advancing stability and prosperity -- as well as its own interests -- in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

But the EU enlargement and neighborhood commissioner, Stefan Fuele, addressing the EU assembly in Strasbourg today, made it clear the bloc will continue to advance cautiously and warned the three countries they must reform to merit further outreach efforts. The region, sandwiched between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, is situated on a vital geopolitical crossroads. It straddles a strategically crucial energy link for the EU.

As the European Parliament's rapporteur on the South Caucasus, Evgeni Kirilov, repeatedly stressed, multiple EU interests are at stake in the region. "The South Caucasus is not only a region in the immediate neighborhood of the European Union -- Romania and Bulgaria have a sea border with it," Kirilov said, "but a region of great strategic importance for the union in the political, economic, and security aspects." The EU, Kirilov said, needed to develop a strategy to supplement its "soft power" with a "firm approach" to the region.

More Of The Same

But Kirilov's detailed report -- which was approved by the parliament today -- will have little if any practical impact on EU policy. EU member states retain full sovereignty on foreign-policy issues and as their interests clash, the region's strategic importance has paradoxically served to stymie the bloc's ambitions there.

This was once again made clear by Enlargement and Neighborhood Commissioner Fuele. Fuele said the EU will stick with its existing "good strategy" and "policy instruments," the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership project. The ENP celebrated its fifth anniversary last week and the Eastern Partnership has stalled due to waning interest in the project both in the region and the EU itself. Fuele effectively ruled out short-term adjustment to existing policies. He said the bloc's executive, the European Commission, is carrying out consultations with the member states, as well as the European Parliament, to see if it has in place "the right tools and allocations, and if it's going in the right direction."

Based on the results of these soundings, the EU next year could tweak the ENP's package -- comprising run-of-the-mill assistance and support for reforms -- and make a better case for an increase in funds in the next budgetary cycle between 2014 and 2020. Meanwhile, the bloc will pursue association-agreement talks with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, approved by member states on May 10. These would entail no steps toward political integration, but could eventually yield the countries free-trade agreements and visa-free travel with the European Union.

Calls For Reform

EU engagement and incentives, Fuele stressed, will remain conditional on the reform commitment of the governments of the three countries. "The commitment of our South Caucasus partners to approximation with Europe needs to be translated into further progress towards democracy, market economy, and political stability on the ground," Fuele said. "I thus call on Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia to move forward in their efforts towards modern, inclusive, pluralistic, democratic, and prosperous society; at peace with their neighbors." The parliament's report urges the EU to adopt a more active posture in resolving the region's frozen conflicts, which cast a "shadow" over it. Kirilov today noted that it took the 2008 Russian-Georgia war to jolt the EU into paying more attention to the conflicts. Kirilov said the bloc must now become involved in Nagorno-

Karabakh, where it has so far deferred to the Minsk Group mediators of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe -- France, Russia, and the United States.

"There is a need for the union to lead the international efforts for rehabilitation and reconstruction in this conflict area by initiating reconciliation projects, people-to-people programs and contacts, and by sending a mission to the region once a political solution is found," Fuele said.

There were complaints from some European Parliament members today that the report was not tough enough on Turkey in its analysis of the causes of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict involving Armenia and Azerbaijan. Kirilov also pointed to the EU's new Lisbon Treaty, which ostensibly gives the bloc greater latitude in pursuing a joint foreign policy. But as EU officials, Fuele among them, have already made plain, the so-called Lisbon foreign-policy mechanisms only amount to better coordination of the work already being done by the European Commission and the various EU special representatives who are answerable to the member states.

The report offers some comfort to Georgia, as both the center-right European People's Party and the center-left Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats -- the two largest political groups -- backed a description of the situation in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a de facto Russian "occupation."

Finally, the report takes a pronouncedly dim view of the situation of media freedom in the three countries. It criticizes Armenia for the jailing of opposition activist and journalist Nikol Pashinian, as well as Azerbaijan for the jailing of two youth activists and bloggers, Emin Milli and Adnan Hajizada. Georgia is asked to provide "clarifications" on media ownership and licensing regulations.

- Several agreements to be signed during Erdogan's visit to Azerbaijan

The program of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's visit to Azerbaijan is scheduled, said Chief of Public Policy Department of the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan Ali Hasanov. "Of course, different issues will be discussed between the two countries during this visit and different agreements will be signed. But I can not give details about these agreements", said Hasanov.

- Organization of the Islamic Conference supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity

Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the peaceful settlement of Armenian-Azerbaijani Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the organization's secretary general Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu said at the opening of the 37th session of OIC Foreign Ministers. "OIC supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the peaceful settlement of the [Nagorno-Karabakh] conflict," he said in his speech. Session of OIC Foreign Ministers, which will last three days, was opened in Dushanbe with the participation of 80 delegations of OIC member states, delegations of observer countries, international and regional organizations. The agenda of the session includes issues of escalation in Palestinian-Israeli conflict, turning the Middle East into a nuclear-free zone, as well as the situation in Iraq and Somalia. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Muallem, whose country chaired the 36th session last year, called on all OIC member states to support the initiative turning the Middle East into a zone free of nuclear weapons, but also pay attention to the situation in the Gaza Strip, which is under the humanitarian blockade of Israel over three years.

"We can't remain indifferent to what is happening in Gaza, where basic human rights are violated," Al-Muallem said.

The Syrian minister also raised the issue of Israel's joining the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in order the country to put its nuclear facilities under comprehensive guarantee of the IAEA.

- Prospects of Azerbaijan-US relations discussed in Baku

A delegation of the US National War College, consisting of senior military officers of the Pentagon, visited the Strategic Research Center under the President of Azerbaijan within their tour to the South Caucasus, the Center reported. Azerbaijani and US experts attended the round table on the Azerbaijan-US relations and priorities of domestic and foreign policy of Azerbaijan.

The current state of Azerbaijan-US relations, prospects of the political, economic, defense and humanitarian relations between the countries, as well as latest geopolitical processes in the South Caucasus, Turkey-Armenian relations, process of negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict were discussed at the meeting. The regional scientific and research projects between the two centers were also on agenda during the meeting.

Economic /Energy Front

- Azerbaijani-Turkish Gas Deal Signing Postponed

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev (left) and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan

BAKU -- Azerbaijan and Turkey today said they will sign a deal on Azerbaijani natural gas exports to Turkey during President Ilham Aliyev's visit to Ankara on June 7-8, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports. Azerbaijani officials said earlier the agreement regulating the amount and price of the exports would be signed today during Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Baku.

At a press conference with Erdogan following their talks, Aliyev said the agreement is ready to be signed. Erdogan said the two leaders also agreed on establishing a Strategic Partnership Council. He added that it will also be signed when Aliyev visits Ankara. Erdogan said Aliyev updated him on the state of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process.

Aliyev said Azerbaijan has accepted -- with minor exceptions -- the updated peace proposal from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Minsk Group, and expects Armenia to do the same. He said if Armenia withdraws from the Azerbaijani territory that it occupies, then Baku will open its border and establish relations with Armenia. During his one-day visit to Baku, Erdogan inaugurated a monument to Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk.

Social Front

- Azerbaijani Rights Activists Seek International Help On Torture Cases

Dozens of Azerbaijani nongovernmental organizations have signed a petition urging international organizations to support an investigation into torture cases in Azerbaijan, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports.

Institute for Peace and Democracy Director Leyla Yunus told RFE/RL on May 19 that the initiative is aimed at "naming and shaming" those who commit torture and to increase awareness about torture cases in Azerbaijan. The petition includes the names of high-level officials in the Interior Ministry who they allege have personally committed torture. The list includes the names of a deputy minister and chiefs of police departments. The authors of the petition claim the government has a policy of promoting torturers instead of punishing them. Interior Ministry spokesman Ehsan Zahidov said allegations about

torture at police stations or in general within the Interior Ministry are baseless. The human rights defenders claim more people were tortured in Azerbaijan in 2009 than in any previous year. According to their petition there were 136 cases of torture registered last year. They say seven people died from torture in 2009, including Novruzali Mammadov, the editor of the "Talishi Sado" newspaper, who died last summer in a hospital prison.

The signatories of the petition urge international organizations to help them establish an independent medical expertise institution, to demand that the government provide civil organizations and the media access to people detained or imprisoned, and to conduct special hearings on the punishment of people who commit torture.

- **Azerbaijan Stops Mosque Demolition After Warning From Iranian Cleric**

BAKU -- Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has ruled that the controversial Fatimeyi-Zahra Mosque on the outskirts of Baku will be subordinated to the country's leading religious authority, RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service reports. Aliyev's ruling on May 14 means control of the mosque will go to the Muslim Spiritual Board of the Caucasus, preventing its demolition. A district court ruled one year ago that the mosque was built illegally and ordered its demolition. The Supreme Court upheld that ruling.

But Azerbaijan's top Muslim cleric, Sheikh-ul-Islam Allakhshukur Pashazade, appealed to Aliyev to accede to Muslim appeals not to demolish the mosque. On May 12, Iranian Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi threatened to issue a fatwa against Azerbaijani officials if the mosque was destroyed. The "Tehran Times" quoted him as saying that a warning had been sent to the Azerbaijani leadership. Azerbaijan's State Committee for Work With Religious Structures on May 13 branded the ayatollah's statement as "slandorous" and "inconsistent with the image of a religious leader." It reaffirmed that the rulings that the mosque should be demolished were handed down by the courts and cannot be described as political. Two allegedly illegally built mosques in Baku were demolished last year and a third one was closed.

Kazakastan

Political Front

- **Kazakh Opposition Activist Faces New Charges**

ALMATY -- A jailed Kazakh opposition activist is facing new charges for violently resisting police, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Yermek Narymbaev, the leader of the Arman (Dream) movement, was sentenced to 15 days in jail on May 2 for holding an unsanctioned mass gathering. The May 1 gathering was organized by the People's Power political bloc in the Almaty offices of the unregistered opposition Alga (Forward) party.

More than 500 people representing Kazakh nongovernmental organizations, opposition movements, and the People's Power bloc took part. Narymbaev's wife, Zoya Narymbaeva, told RFE/RL that she learned on May 13 that her husband's case was transferred to the Almaty Interior Ministry branch and a criminal case was opened against him. Narymbaev is accused of violently resisting police when he was detained. Narymbaeva said her husband's lawyer told her that two police officers testified against Narymbaev, accusing him of attacking them. Witnesses deny the charges against Narymbaev, who said in a court hearing on May 14 that he would prove his innocence during the trial. Meanwhile, a hunger strike by opposition activists in Almaty was suspended on May 14. The strikers, who had been on a hunger strike for nearly two

weeks, demanded President Nursultan Nazarbaev's resignation, the holding of fair elections, an unbiased judiciary, free media, freedom of assembly, and the immediate release of all political prisoners in Kazakhstan. The hunger strike's coordinator, Zhasaral Kuanyshalin, told RFE/RL that the strike was "temporarily suspended" at the urging of the People's Power bloc. He added that the coordination group will continue operating and the protest might resume. The hunger strike was begun by five activists after police forcibly dispersed a May 1 gathering near the Alga party offices. Kuanyshalin was fined the equivalent of \$100 for organizing an unsanctioned public gathering.

Geo Strategic Front

Economic /Energy Front

- Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan Customs Union Talks Fail

Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan have failed to reach agreement on establishing a joint customs union. In a statement from St. Petersburg, where leaders were discussing the possible union, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said the sides "couldn't agree on all the issues."

He said duties within the auto and aviation industries were stumbling blocks in the talks, but that negotiations will continue. Putin's Belarusian counterpart, Sergei Sidorsky, suggested that oil duties were the major sticking point. Earlier this year, the three countries agreed to establish the union to boost trade and investment.

Social Front

- Kazakhstan To Establish Council Of Elders

ASTANA -- The Kazakh government says it is planning to establish a Council of Elders, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. Kazakh Culture Minister Mukhtar Kul-Mukhammed told journalists on May 18 that the council will be created in accordance with the "National Unity Doctrine," the final version of which was approved by President Nursultan Nazarbaev on May 17. Kul-Mukhammed did not specify what responsibilities and functions the new council would have or who would belong to it.

A Council of Elders has existed in Turkmenistan since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and plays the role of an alternative parliament. In Kazakhstan, such a role is currently held by the Assembly of Kazakhstan's Peoples, where members of all the country's ethnic groups are represented.

Nazarbaev offered a draft of the "National Unity Doctrine" at the 15th session of the Assembly of Kazakhstan's Peoples in October.

Kyrgyzstan

Political Front

- OSCE Calls For Restraint After Deadly Kyrgyz Unrest

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is urging all parties in Kyrgyzstan to avoid further violence following clashes in the south of the country that left at least two people dead.

The call came as thousands of people rallied again today in Jalal-Abad. The Kyrgyz interim government declared a state of emergency and imposed a night curfew in the southern city of Jalal-Abad following the May 19 violence. The state of emergency began on May 19 and will run through June 1 and sets a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. The violence included shots being fired as protesters tried to storm a university in Jalal-Abad that serves as a focal point for the local ethnic Uzbek minority. It was not clear who

opened fire. The incident has prompted fears of possible ethnic tensions in the Kyrgyz city, which has a sizeable community of ethnic Uzbeks. In a statement, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabaev, who currently chairs the OSCE, said "conflicts on ethnic grounds are especially unacceptable" and that overcoming the crisis in Kyrgyzstan will require that "public safety, rule of law, peace, and stability be ensured." Saudabaev said he had spoken by telephone with Kyrgyzstan's interim government head Roza Otunbaeva and expressed concern about the continued unrest that has followed last month's ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiev in violent protests.

Protesters storm the university building in Jalal-Abad.

The interim government announced on May 19 that Otunbaeva has been named interim president of the country. Officials in Bishkek said that Otunbaeva, who has headed the government since Bakiev was forced from power, would remain head of state until December 2011. Otunbaeva condemned what she termed attempts to "sow the seeds of discord among our people, especially between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz."

"I want to assure you that we are monitoring the situation and we have engaged all the necessary forces," she said. The interim government has accused Bakiev supporters of trying to stir up ethnic violence in the country.

'No One Here Came To Support Bakiev'

But at least one demonstrator, Bolot Jooshaev, told RFE/RL that the protesters were not marching in support of Bakiev, but against a local Uzbek minority leader, Kadyrzhan Batyrov. "No one here came to support Bakiev. We are just demanding that Kadyrzhan Batyrov be brought here, or acting Governor Bektur Asanov, or some chief of security forces," he said. "But so far, nobody has come out to talk to us." An RFE/RL correspondent at the scene, Rysbai Abdraimov, said the latest protest started peacefully at the local horse-racing track. Demonstrators chanted slogans against Batyrov, accusing him of provoking tensions in the area. They also accused Batyrov supporters of setting fire to Bakiev's family home in the nearby village of Teyyit in recent days.

Then protesters marched toward the Friendship of Nations University, which is funded by Batyrov.

Ethnic Uzbeks repel those who attacked the university building.

Batyrov, a wealthy businessman and former lawmaker, enjoys support among Jalal-Abad's Uzbek community. He has officially backed the interim government in the south, where Bakiev has his strongest support. Special police forces stationed around the university building shot into the air trying to disperse the crowd, which was throwing stones toward the building, smashing windows. Abdraimov says some protesters were also throwing stones toward police officers.

Special troops are also stationed around the provincial government office, which was the scene of violent protests last week, when Bakiev supporters took over the government building. Our correspondent said it was not clear who the organizers of the latest protests were. Ergash Khuja, an ethnic Uzbek in Jalal-Abad, told RFE/RL that the Uzbek community was "anxious" about the latest events. However, he said, "It seems government forces are capable of preventing" any possible attacks. "Uzbeks live in this city in large numbers," Khuja said. "Now they are gathering in small groups in their neighborhoods, watchful of anyone who would try to enter their neighborhoods." Officials in Bishkek say they see a link between the events in Jalal-Abad and last week's

violent protests in the south. On May 12-14, Bakiev supporters staged demonstrations in Batken, Jalal-Abad, and Osh, briefly occupying provincial government buildings in all three places. Bakiev was toppled in the aftermath of antigovernment protests that killed at least 85 people in the capital, Bishkek, in April.

- Constitutional Crunch Time In Kyrgyzstan

Is Kyrgyzstan about to re-establish its image as the most democratic state in Central Asia, or will the interim government only worsen the spirit of discontent? This week the country faces a pivotal moment, when a special council releases a draft of the new constitution up for approval in a national referendum in late June. Kyrgyzstan's interim government has been in power for just over a month since crowds chased President Kurmanbek Bakiev from office in early April. The new leadership said from the start that Kyrgyzstan needed a new constitution, suggesting it should stray from previous constitutions that centered on a dominant executive branch by specifying a parliamentary system of government. A parliamentary system, if implemented, would reduce the role of the president to a figurehead, a new condition not only for Kyrgyzstan but for Central Asia in general. Other alternative ideas are flourishing as well. More than 20 different constitutional variations have been sent to the council drafting the document.

As recently as May 16, council member Daniyar Narymbaev said work was proceeding and the body would meet a deadline later this week to make the draft public. "We have been working hard for the last 10 days -- day in and day out -- on this constitutional project," Narymbaev said. "And just today we gave its versions in Kyrgyz and Russian to our linguists. On Monday [May 17] we will gather again with lawyers, and talk once again about some really difficult parts of the constitution. On May 18, we will give the final version to the interim government, and on May 20 the last version will be published." Narymbaev strongly indicated the council is drafting a constitution that forms a parliamentary system of government. "We will have a new parliament with a new authority -- parliament will form a government," he said. "Then we will have a new president, who will be playing the role of an arbiter. He will play an active role in foreign policy."

In Favor Of A Strong President

Many in Kyrgyzstan seem to think the idea of a parliamentary system has merit, although there are plenty of others who feel the country is not yet at the stage where such a system is possible. One skeptic is acting Defense Minister Ismail Isakov, who tells RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service he prefers a system that combines a presidential and a parliamentary system.

That system, Isakov said, should keep the president as the chief executive authority, abolish the post of prime minister, and reintroduce the vice presidential position that existed for two years after the country's 1991 independence. Isakov's plan also would make parliament responsible for naming key ministers and defining economic policy, including approval of the annual budget.

Interim government leader Roza Otunbaeva commented on Isakov's proposal, noting that Azimbek Beknazarov, another influential person in the interim government, also favors keeping a strong executive branch of government.

"Even last summer, when Ismail Isakov was going to run for the president's post, he expressed his opinion on it. They are both strong persons [and] experienced politicians.

They have their own views," Otunbaeva said. "But I still strongly believe that all members of the interim government will support this current constitutional project" with a strong parliamentary role.

Beknazarov, a veteran politician who has been a member of parliament and prosecutor-general, said the country should readopt the constitution it had in 1993, which better balanced the executive and legislative branches but still tilted toward the executive.

"The interim government has to issue a decree that Kyrgyzstan recognizes the very first constitution of independent Kyrgyzstan from May 5, 1993, which was accepted after two years of discussions. If it did so, we would automatically enter into the legal framework, and we wouldn't have so much noise about legitimacy," Beknazarov said.

That constitution was scrapped by President Askar Akaev after he dissolved the parliament in late 1994. Subsequent constitutions and amendments gradually increased the powers of the executive branch. Many feel this led to the abuses committed by presidents Akaev and Bakiev and their respective inner circles.

Adakhan Madumarov, a former secretary of state in the Bakiev administration, opposes a parliamentary system.

"Just imagine, [the constitutional council] says that a parliament will determine domestic and foreign policy of the country," Madumarov said. "And the president will be just an arbiter, like an aksakal [village elder]. Then the CIS presidents will not want to sit around the same table with our head of state."

100 Parties

With more than 100 registered political parties and movements, there is certain to be opposition to the draft constitution. Otunbaeva addressed this, saying the opposition would have a place in the new government. "The opposition will be represented in committees and [given the post of] deputy speaker of parliament. This is our uncompromising position," she said.

All the meetings of the constitutional council were aired nationwide on Kyrgyz television's first channel, so there has been plenty of input from the public during the process. Nongovernmental organizations and youth groups have great influence in Kyrgyzstan and were major drivers of the Tulip Revolution, also called the People's Revolution, of March 2005. They are keeping a close eye on the drafting of the new constitution -- close enough to have already noted what they consider an important omission. On May 13, NGO and youth-group activists rallied in Bishkek to insist the constitution identify Kyrgyzstan as a "secular state." Some of the activists claimed they were told by some of the people working on the draft that "secular" does not translate easily into the Kyrgyz language.

Youth groups have been active in organizing and promoting their interests while the new constitution is being drafted. On May 1, a council of youth groups was formed, comprising some 40 of the country's youth groups. The council tasked itself and its members with forming groups to study and come up with recommendations on what should be in the new constitution, regarding not only the promotion of young peoples' interests but also the support of culture, economics, and other spheres.

On May 11 in the southern city of Osh, a forum of youth organizations agreed that youth groups should participate in outlining and implementing the government's policies and that there should be a special Youth Ministry to address their concerns in the future.

The council drafting the constitution is looking at constitutions in other countries. A delegation of international experts from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe met with representatives of Kyrgyzstan's interim government on May 13 in Bishkek to discuss constitutional changes. Interim government leader Otunbaeva was quoted at the time as saying, "The constitution will only be a success if it instills checks and balances and prevents violent revolutions by ensuring all forces may resolve deadlocks in a peaceful manner."

According to Denis Petit, the acting head of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights' democratization department, "The ultimate test...is how a constitution is implemented in practice and whether it gains public confidence."

- Pro-Government Rally Held In Bishkek

A Kyrgyz youth group has staged a march and rally in the capital Bishkek in support of the interim government.

The group, which calls itself "Aykel," or People of Great Spirit, marched through Bishkek on May 16 carrying banners that read "We are for a unified and stable Kyrgyzstan," "North and South are our Kyrgyzstan" and "Bandits should sit in jail." An estimated 500-1,000 people participated. Interim leader Roza Otunbaeva met with the group when they reached the capital's central square and thanked them for their support.

The rally follows a difficult week for Kyrgyzstan's interim government. Supporters of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev, who was ousted last month, staged protests in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, and at one point seized administration buildings in all three southern provinces before being chased out by pro-government police and supporters.

At least one person was killed and 60 others injured in the clashes.

- Bakiev's Former Chief Of Staff Under House Arrest In Kyrgyzstan

BISHKEK -- The chief of staff of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev has been transferred from a detention center to his home where he will be under house arrest, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. The transfer of Kanybek Joroev was made after a Bishkek court ruling. Joroev was chief of staff for Bakiev from October 2009 until April 7 when Bakiev and the Kyrgyz government were ousted amid clashes between thousands of antigovernment protesters and security forces in Bishkek that killed 86 people and injured hundreds. Joroev was arrested and placed in the National Security Service's detention center on April 29. He has been officially charged with abuse of power while in office. On May 17 the former head of Bakiev's presidential secretariat, Oksana Malevannaya, was also released from the detention center and sent home to live under house arrest.

- Kyrgyz Protesters Want Kazakhstan, Russia, U.S. To Help Extradite Bakiev

BISHKEK -- Relatives of those killed during the April 7 uprising in Kyrgyzstan are calling on the Kazakh, Russian, and U.S. governments to help extradite former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev from Belarus, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports.

Dozens of protesters picketed the embassies of Kazakhstan, Russia, and the United States in the Kyrgyz capital today to solicit their help in bringing Bakiev back to Kyrgyzstan.

Bakiev fled the capital on April 7 when thousands of antigovernment protesters battled security forces in Bishkek and other Kyrgyz cities. More than 80 people were killed and hundreds of others injured during the clashes. The leaders of Russia, Kazakhstan, the United States, and the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe helped

mediate talks that led to Bakiev flying to Belarus in mid-April. Kyrgyzstan's interim government, which came to power after the uprising, has officially requested Bakiev's extradition. It claims that he may be responsible for giving the order for security forces to open fire on the demonstrators. Relatives of the victims of the clashes established the nongovernmental organization Martyrs of the Land to honor those who died.

Martyrs of the Land leader Arstanbek Sagyndykov told RFE/RL that the demonstrators handed letters with their demands to representatives at the three embassies.

- **Calm Returns To Cities Across Kyrgyzstan**

Supporters of the interim government assault the administration headquarters in Osh after it was seized by backers of ousted president on May 14.

Cities across Kyrgyzstan are calm after backers of the interim government recovered buildings occupied by supporters of ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev in the south of the country. The clashes in at least three southern cities, Jalal-Abad, Osh, and Batken, where pro-Bakiev supporters took over local government buildings on May 14, left one dead and at least 60 wounded.

The United Nations, European Union, United States, and Russia have appealed for calm in the wake of Friday's violence. The head of Kyrgyzstan's interim government, Roza Otunbaeva, said those responsible for the violence would be punished. "Our tactics will be the following: to capture them alive, all of them who are there," she said. "In that building, all those who decide to turn against the people, who shoot at people, these people will definitely be brought to justice." RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports that Bakiev's former chief of staff, Usen Sydykov, and the leader of the country's Communist Party, Iskhak Masaliev, have been arrested in Bishkek on suspicion of organizing uprisings in the south of the country.

NEWS / FROM OUR BUREAUS

- **Kyrgyz Communist Leader Jailed For Two Months**

BISHKEK -- A Bishkek court ruled today that Communist Party leader Iskhak Masaliev should be detained for two months in connection with the takeover of government buildings in southern Kyrgyzstan last week, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz and Russian services report. Masaliev, 50, has officially been charged with organizing mass disorder on May 12-13 in the southern cities of Osh, Batken, and Jalal-Abad, where loyalists of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev briefly occupied several regional government headquarters. Masaliev was arrested on May 14 with Usen Sydykov, a former adviser to Bakiev, after alleged recordings of the two were made public by the interim government in which two people were heard planning the takeover of the administration buildings in those three cities.

On May 16, people supporting Masaliev and a group opposed to him verbally confronted each other near the National Security Service building in Bishkek. Kyrgyz authorities say the situation in the south -- where Bakiev loyalists and supporters of the interim government clashed last week -- has stabilized. Meanwhile, Russian Consul-General in Osh Mukhamadzhan Ziganshin died of reported heart failure on May 16. He was 59 years old. In Bishkek, the former head of Bakiev's presidential secretariat, Oksana Malevannaya, was transferred today from a detention center to her home where she will be under house arrest. Her father, Aleksandr Malevanny, told RFE/RL that his daughter would stay at home until the completion of an investigation into charges that she abused

her power while in office. Malevannaya began a hunger strike in jail last week to protest her May 4 arrest. Bakiev and his government were ousted in the wake of clashes between antigovernment protesters and security forces in Bishkek on April 7 in which 86 people died and hundreds were injured.

- **Ousted Osh Mayor, Deputy Blamed For Unrest In Kyrgyzstan**

OSH, Kyrgyzstan -- A criminal case has been opened against the former mayor of the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports. Sources in the Osh prosecutor's office told RFE/RL that former Mayor Mamasadyk Bakirov and his deputy, Aytmamat Kadyrbaev, are officially accused of organizing mass disorder in the city on May 13. Supporters of ousted President Kurmanbek Bakiev took over the local government building and declared Bakirov the city's "legitimate head" of the region's government on May 13. They also demanded Bakiev's return as the country's "legitimate president." Similar actions took place in the southern cities of Batken and Jalal-Abad, Bakiev's hometown.

But supporters of Kyrgyzstan's interim government later regained control of the government headquarters in the three cities the following day.

Bakiev was toppled by mass protests in Bishkek on April 7. He eventually resigned and found refuge in Belarus. It is not clear whether Bakirov and Kadyrbaev have been detained.

Geo Strategic Front

- **Kazakhstan Reopens Border With Kyrgyzstan**

BISHKEK -- Kazakhstan has reopened its border with Kyrgyzstan, which has been closed for more than a month.

RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service reports that three border crossing points reopened today and that people and goods were moving across the border without restrictions. Kazakhstan closed the border on April 7 when clashes between security forces and antigovernment demonstrators toppled Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev. The closure of the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border, the main import-export route for Kyrgyzstan, exacerbated the country's economic problems. Kyrgyz interim government deputy head Omurbek Tekebaev said Astana's decision had created an "economic blockade."

Economic /Energy Front

Social Front

- **Kyrgyz Civilian Patrols Expand Security Role**

Interim government followers disrupt a rally of Bakiev supporters. Many Kyrgyz feel the police have failed to keep the peace between rival groups.

Less than two months ago, Daniyar Terbeshaliev was a private entrepreneur running a small business not far from downtown Bishkek. He had no idea how the events that were about to unfold would change the direction of his life. Terbeshaliev now heads Patriot, a civilian patrol group that guards government buildings, businesses, and residential neighborhoods to ensure security amid the chaos that has reigned in Kyrgyzstan since early April. Patriot was initially set up by ordinary Bishkek residents the night after riots broke out in the capital on April 7, chasing President Kurmanbek Bakiev from office and leaving some 85 people dead. Disappointed by what they call the police's inability to

protect citizens during the upheaval, locals organized their own neighborhood forces to defend themselves and their property. But now, their goals have expanded considerably.

"Initially, our goal was to protect our own houses," says Terbeshaliev. "Now we are patrolling the area around the parliament and central government buildings; the Bishkek mayor's office; several banks and shopping centers; all major bazaars; and the main bus stations, among other places."

Other cities followed suit, and now there are thousands of civilian patrol members all over the country that have taken charge of security in their neighborhoods, working alongside police. In a country where the security situation is still fragile and the new government's authority is being challenged by supporters of the previous regime, many ordinary Kyrgyz say the civilian patrols play an important role in maintaining order.

Patriot played an active role in restoring calm after a group of men attacked landowners in the village of Maevka outside Bishkek on April 19, prompting fears of ethnic tensions in the area. "We work alongside Interior Ministry forces -- we help them," Terbeshaliev says. "In fact, the civilian patrol is a helper of the police. We have men, women, youngsters, and elderly among us -- people who call themselves patriots. They come and join us. They take part in safeguarding security and stability."

Public Trust

Civilian patrols operate in many different areas, from Tokmok and Kant in the north to Jalal-Abad and Osh in the south.

"People trust civilian patrols, while the police don't enjoy such trust," says Janarbek Akaev, an RFE/RL correspondent in the southern city of Osh. "Their presence is important for people to feel safe. They don't let anyone take advantage of current circumstances to loot people's homes, to attack or disturb others.

"During last week's protests in the region, police forces just stood there and watched," Akaev says.

Two people were killed during recent unrest in southern areas, when supporters of ousted President Bakiev briefly took control of government buildings in the cities of Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken.

Perceived police indifference to public security during the protests may have been the last straw for citizens, many of whom have expressed frustration at years of corruption and bribery by the police. Many accuse the police of serving political leaders' interests instead of protecting citizens. The interim government has promised to reform the police structure and fight corruption within the system.

According to the interim chief of staff, Emil Kaptagaev, the interim government does not finance civilian patrols but supports them and acknowledges their importance. "There are some spontaneous outbreaks of aggression and hatred against police and other law-enforcement forces from the local citizens after what happened on April 7. And there is no doubt that such patrols are necessary," Kaptagaev says.

'Not Taking Sides'

Civilian patrols say they are financed by ordinary people and private businessmen. Terbeshaliev maintains they are not involved in politics and do not take sides during political struggles.

Not everyone in Kyrgyzstan is happy with having unofficial forces being in charge of security, however.

Dinara Oshurahunova, a human rights activist in Bishkek, says some complain that "criminal elements" have joined the civilian patrols and that people are suspicious about their agendas.

Others question how long thousands of patrol members -- most of them young men in their 20s -- can be expected to continue volunteering their time.

"We have stepped in because there was a need for us to protect people," says Maksat Joldoshbekov, a member of a civilian patrol in Bishkek. "We will leave as soon as the government is capable of handling the job and takes responsibility into its own hands."

Tajikistan

Political Front

- Tajik Court Sentences 36 For Membership In Banned Islamic Group

QURGHON-TEPPA, Tajikistan -- A Tajik court has sentenced 36 people to prison for being followers of the banned Islamic group Jamaat ut-Tabligh, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. Judge Ikromjon Abdulhafizov, in the southern Khatlon Province, said the court had proven the guilt of the 36 accused. He said 17 of them who were kept in detention since their arrest last fall received sentences of between five and 6 and 1/2 years. Nineteen others who were released on bail after their arrest will be jailed for three years.

The trial was held behind closed doors.

Faridoon Boboev, who was 17-years old when he allegedly joined the banned group, was released after he paid a fine of 2,500 somoni (\$570).

Abdulhafizov noted that three other alleged followers of Jamaat ut-Tabligh received suspended sentences because they agreed to pay a 25,000 somoni (\$5,700) fine.

The youngest person sentenced is 18 and the oldest is 63-years old.

Saivali Navruzov, the lawyer for 12 of the defendants, said their guilt was not proven and that he will appeal the sentences. Janob Ashurov, who represented Nosir Rahimov, said he will not appeal Rahimov's 6 and 1/2 year prison term. Ashurov said the prosecution did not produce any witnesses and the prosecution's case was based on statements by the accused, who he said were forced to incriminate each other.

Rahimov's relative, Ibrohim Boev, said Rahimov pleaded guilty because he hoped if he did the court would only fine and release him.

Khatlon Province Prosecutor Abdurahim Rahimov said that anyone who acts outside the principles enshrined in Tajikistan's Constitution is an extremist.

But the leader of the Islamic Renaissance Party in Khatlon, Qalandar Sadriddinov, said that Jamaat ut-Tabligh has not done anything that violates the constitution and the accused were only were promoting Islamic values.

This was the second collective trial of members of Jamaat ut-Tabligh in Tajikistan. Last year 56 alleged members of the banned group were sentenced either to varying terms of imprisonment or a milder administrative punishment.

Jamaat ut-Tabligh was banned in Tajikistan in 2006.

Geo Strategic Front

- Top Islamic Body Holds Foreign Minister Meeting In Dushanbe

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon (right) shakes hands with Ahmad Muhammad Ali, Islamic Development Bank chairman, in Dushanbe on May 17.

DUSHANBE -- A top Islamic body is holding a meeting of foreign ministers in Dushanbe, the first time the Tajik capital is playing host to the annual gathering,

RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports. The three-day meeting brings together delegations from the 56 member countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

In an opening address today, President Emomali Rahmon said the OIC could play a significant role in ensuring peace and stability in the Islamic world. He also criticized what he said was the misuse of Islam toward political or violent ends.

"Terrorism, terrorists, have no nation, no country, no religion," he said. "Using the name 'Islamic terrorism' only discredits Islam and dishonors the clean and harmless religion of Islam." Participants at the Council of Foreign Ministers gathering are due to discuss how to tackle Islamophobia and defamation of Islam. They are also expected to discuss women's development in member states, as well as Central Asia's contribution in building Islamic culture and civilization. The session is expected to approve draft rules governing observer status in the OIC. The OIC groups 56 member countries and the Palestinian Authority.

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DUSHANBE -- A top Islamic body is holding a meeting of foreign ministers in Dushanbe, marking the first time the Tajik capital is playing host to the annual gathering, RFE/RL's Tajik Service reports.

The three-day meeting brings together delegations from the 56-member Organization of the Islamic Conference. In an opening address today, President Emomali Rahmon said the OIC could play a significant role in ensuring peace and stability in the Islamic world. Among other issues, participants at the Dushanbe gathering are due to discuss how to tackle Islamophobia and defamation of Islam.

- UAE foreign minister arrives in Tajikistan on official visit

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan arrived in Dushanbe today morning on an official visit, according to the Tajik MFA information department.

President Emomali Rahmon will hold talks with the UAE foreign minister today. After a meeting with President Rahmon, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan will meet with his Tajik counterpart, Hamrokhon Zarifi.

In the afternoon, the UAE foreign minister is expected to hold talks with the Majlisi Namoyandagon (Tajikistan's lower chamber of parliament) Shukurjon Zuhurov.

During his stay in Dushanbe, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan will also attend the 37th two-day Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Member States that is opening here tomorrow. Delegations to participate at the 37th CFM of the OIC member nations are continuing to arrive in Dushanbe. Delegations of Albania, Cameroon, Algeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Malaysia, Uganda, Côte d'Ivoire, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Niger, the Central African Republic arrived in Dushanbe today morning. Delegations of the Islamic Development Bank, the League of Arab States and a number of the OIC member nations arrived in Tajikistan on May 15 and 16.

President Emomali Rahmon is expected to hold bilateral meetings with heads of some of the delegations today, the MFA information department said.

- Rahmon receives Turkish FM

DUSHANBE, May 18, 2010, Asia-Plus -- President Emomali Rahmon today received the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu who arrived in Dushanbe to attend the 37th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organization of

the Islamic Conference (OIC) Member States that opened here today, according to presidential press service. President Rahmon noted that Turkey was the strategic partner of Tajikistan and expressed satisfaction with the level of bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

Mr. Davutoglu said that his country was ready to support Tajikistan's joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) and assist it in creating free economic zones (FZEs), the press service said.

- U.S. Special Envoy to the OIC attends 37th session of OIC foreign ministers in Dushanbe

DUSHANBE, May 18, 2010, Asia-Plus -- Mr. Rashad Hussain, Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), and Ms. Nasreen Badat from the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom have arrived in Dushanbe, according to the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe.

President Barack Obama appointed Mr. Hussain as Special Envoy to the OIC on February 13, 2010. Mr. Rashad Hussain is attending the 37th session of the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) that is opening here today.

As Special Envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, Mr. Hussain seeks to deepen and expand the partnerships the United States has with Muslims around the world. Mr. Hussain played a key role in developing and pursuing the "New Beginning" that President Obama outlined in his June 2009 address in Cairo, Egypt. During his visit to Tajikistan, Mr. Hussain will meet with government officials, leaders of Muslim and other religious groups, and political leaders to discuss ways to strengthen mutual understanding between the United States and the Muslim world.

Ms. Nasreen Badat, from the U.S. Office of International Religious Freedom, is also attending the OIC Conference. During her visit to Dushanbe, she will discuss religious freedom issues with government officials, Muslim leaders, and minority religious communities.

- Tajik president receives Iranian, Afghan foreign ministers

DUSHANBE, May 19, 2010, Asia-Plus /Rasoul Shodon/ -- President Emomali Rahmon yesterday held meetings with Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and the Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul. The meetings focused on Tajikistan's bilateral cooperation with Iran and Afghanistan.

Speaking to reporters after the meeting with President Rahmon, Manouchehr Mottaki said that they had discussed implementation of Iran-sponsored projects in Tajikistan. "We have agreed to speed up the implementation of this projects," said the Iranian foreign minister, "Besides, Iran plans to increase a two-way trade with Tajikistan."

He said that he had congratulated President Rahmon on hosting for the first ever in Central Asia the meeting of foreign ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). "It indicates the important role that Tajikistan and the Central Asian region as a whole, as major part of the world of Islam, can play in upgrading cooperation among Muslim states," he added.

In the meantime, Iran's news agency reports that speaking to reporters, Mottaki said he had briefed his host on problems Iranian companies have with regards to transportation of materials, including cement, through countries to Tajikistan and the ways to solve the problems. Mottaki said Tajik president vowed to take measures to remove the problems as best as he could so that Iranians will have growing presence in the Tajik market. He

stressed, “The projects Iranian companies implement in Tajikistan serve public needs and interests based on demand by government of the republic.”

Dr. Zalmay Rassoul, for his part, noted that he and President Rahmon had discussed state and prospects of further expansion of bilateral cooperation between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, particularly in the energy sector and the social sphere.

On the OIC foreign ministers’ meeting, the Afghan foreign minister noted that the meeting gave an opportunity to thoroughly discuss threats posed by terrorism and drug trafficking and Muslim countries could assist in addressing those threats.

He added that expansion of economic cooperation among Muslim states would be of benefit to all the OIC member nations.

Economic /Energy Front

- Tajikistan, WB sign agreement on additional financing for energy emergency recovery assistance project

DUSHANBE, May 15, 2010, Asia-Plus -- An agreement on additional financing for the Energy Emergency Recovery Assistance project was signed by the Government of Tajikistan and the World Bank in Dushanbe in May 14, according to the Ministry of Finance (MoF).

This additional financing is allocated to support to meet energy shortages in winter seasons and mitigate the heavy social costs and humanitarian crises that result from the Tajikistan network disconnection from the Central Asia Power System. More specifically, the additional financing aims to ensure basic access to electricity for about 250,000 people in northern Tajikistan, and increase heat and power supply to the entire country, without overdrawing or depleting hydro resources in winter.

As it had been reported earlier, the Executive Board of the World Bank approved US \$15 million as an additional grant for the mentioned project from International Development Association (IDA) funds on May 6.

These funds were approved by the Executive Board of the World Bank in response to the Government of Tajikistan request to address the energy shortages in the country.

- UNODC renovates border post in Tajikistan with funds supplied by U.S. Government

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The refurbished Border Guard Post at Yol in Shuroobod District was formally reopened at a May 14 ceremony attended by representatives of the Border Guards, UNODC, and the United States Embassy in Dushanbe, press release issued by UNODC Co in Tajikistan said.

This remote Border Post is strategically located on the Panj River which separates the two countries of Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This new post will enhance border security between the two counties by providing improved facilities to house both Border Guards and specialized anti-drug officers with the aim of disrupting trafficking organizations and seizing illicit drugs. U.S. Embassy INL Officer Anne Carson commented that, “a cooperative effort is needed to stop the threat from the trans-national drug trafficking organizations operating here in Tajikistan and across the border in Afghanistan. This new facility will help the Border Guards control this section of the border.”

UNODC implemented the USG-funded refurbishment at the Yol border outpost: Improvements included: reconstruction and refurbishment of soldier’s barracks and officers family quarters; construction of auxiliary kitchen and storage rooms; construction

of new showers and washrooms; improved water supply system and external sewerage system; installation of heating system with 3 boilers on solid fuel with natural water circulation and ventilation system; enhanced perimeter security; and refurbished classroom, armory, and offices.

The U.S government paid the total cost of the refurbishment and equipment to the outpost which was \$450,361(US). UNODC supervised the work which was contracted through a Dushanbe based contractor. In addition to the construction at the Yol facility the Border Guard outpost was supplied with a Kamaz truck, UAZ jeep, and technical equipment for drug detection.

UNODC E-24 project-“Strengthening Control along the Tajik/Afghan Border” has operated with funding from the Embassy of the United States of America since 1999. Tajikistan’s shares a 1344-km border with Afghanistan which is difficult to guard because of extremely high mountains that are connected by remote mountain passes.

Gary W. O’Hara the UNODC law enforcement advisor who coordinates the border project stated, “heroin that crosses the river here at Yol ends up in Russia and Europe. This is the very beginning of what we call the ‘Northern Route.’ We have a long way to go but this new post should help the Border Guards disrupt the flow of drugs moving through this district.”

- Japan provides some US\$1.3 mln support development of human resources in Tajikistan

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- On May 17, 2010, Mr. Yoshihiro Nakayama, Chargé d’Affaires of the Embassy of Japan in Dushanbe, and Mr. Hamrokhon Zarifi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan exchanged Notes concerning the Project for Human Resource Development Scholarship (JDS) in the framework of the Japanese Grant Aid, according to the Japanese Embassy in Dushanbe.

The Human Resource Development Scholarship Program (JDS) is designed to support the developing countries that have a high demand for human resource development in legislation, economy, management and international relations. The Project in the Republic of Tajikistan is designed for 4 years starting in 2009. It will significantly contribute to the efforts of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan in human resource development allowing young government officials to develop professional skills in the concerned field.

This year the Government of Japan has allocated a total amount of 119,000,000 Japanese Yen (about US1.3 million) for the Project implementation. The candidates are selected among the officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Economic Development and Trade of Tajikistan to earn Master’s Degree in international relations or institutional building for transition to market economy and economic development. Up to 5 Tajik trainees get an opportunity to study at the International University of Japan and Ritsumeikan Asia-Pacific University.

In 1993 - 2008, the Government of Japan extended over 14.9 billion Japanese Yen, which makes approximately US160 million in grants and technical assistance for the development of diverse sectors of economy, agriculture, education, healthcare, culture, as well as human resource development in Tajikistan.

Social Front

- Presentation of Dushanbe as Islamic Culture Capital in 2010 takes place on May 18

DUSHANBE, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- An official ceremony of presentation of Dushanbe as Capital of Islamic Culture for the year 2010 will take place in Dushanbe on May 18 in the framework of opening of the 37th Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Member States, according to the Ministry of Culture (MoC).

After the ceremony of the opening of the 37th CFM, its participants will visit the Dushanbe Botanical Gardens, where an exhibition of handicrafts and cultural relics, calligraphy, national costumes, and national dishes has been organized, the source at a MoC said.

We will recall that the Executive Committee of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) designated Dushanbe as Capital of Islamic Culture for the year 2010 at its session in June 2009.

ISESCO was established by the OIC in May 1979. ISESCO is one of the largest international Islamic organizations and specializes in the fields of education, science, and culture. Its headquarters are in Rabat, Morocco.

According to the ISESCO website, its objectives include strengthening and promoting and consolidating cooperation among Member States (OIC) in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, developing applied sciences and use of advanced technology within the framework of Islamic values and ideals, consolidating understanding among Muslim peoples, and contributing to the achievement of world peace and security, particularly through education, science, culture and communication.

- US military transport aircraft airlifts humanitarian aid to Kulob

KULOB, May 17, 2010, Asia-Plus -- The U.S. military transport plane, C-17, has airlifted humanitarian aid to the city of Kulob for the disaster-hit people.

Damian Wampler, Press Attache, U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe, told reporters in Kulob yesterday that the assistance included 84 tents (for 16 people each) from strategic reserves of Pentagon and the US rescue service for a total amount of 550,000 U.S. dollars.

Mr. Wampler noted that it was not the only aid provided to the disaster-hit population in Kulob. According to him, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) transported food products for 50,000 U.S. dollars to Kulob.

Turkmenistan

Political Front

- Turkmen Leader Again Advocates Multiparty System

DASHOGUZ, Turkmenistan -- Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov says he has ordered parliament to draft a law on political parties, RFE/RL's Turkmen Service reports.

Addressing a meeting of the Council of Elders in the northern town of Dashoguz, close to Uzbekistan, Berdymukhammedov said on May 14 Turkmenistan is ready for a multiparty system. He said the second party that should be created in the country should be an agrarian party. The former Communist Party, now known as the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, has been the only one effectively permitted to operate in Turkmenistan since it gained independence in 1991.

Political gatherings are illegal unless sanctioned by the government. Analysts say an agrarian party would technically create a multiparty democracy, but its members would presumably not be entitled to demand changes to the way the country is governed.

Also at the Council of Elders meeting, Berdymukhammedov praised the new Criminal Code approved by parliament earlier this week, which reduces from 25 to 15 years the maximum jail term for serious crimes. "I believe that the new Criminal Code will meet the demands of the time and help to make punishment for crimes humane in accordance with the international agreements [that] Turkmenistan [has signed] and universal norms of international law," he said. Berdymukhammedov signed the new Criminal Code into law later on May 14.

- Mejlis of Turkmenistan to prepare draft law on political parties

In the course of the May 14 meeting of the Council of Elders in Dashoguz, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov instructed the Mejlis (National Parliament) to prepare a draft law on political parties.

"Turkmenistan has laid a solid foundation for a democratic, legal and secular state," the Turkmen leader said, noting that the time has come to "gradually create a multi-party socio-political system that does not need artificial acceleration of the ongoing transformation processes in Turkmenistan, taking into account all the factors."

In particular, the president of Turkmenistan said the establishment of the Agrarian Party meets the requirements of today which is to explain and fulfill the agricultural policy of the state. "This will allow us to join forces of our society in fulfilling our agricultural policy, to ensure from the ideological point of view the transformations that govern land-water relations in the village, as well as further improve social conditions of rural people," the head of state said.

The main requirement for the new party will be strict adherence to the constitutional order of Turkmenistan and active participation in the work of the Nationwide Movement Galkynysh. "We have one goal, but the means and methods of achieving it may be very different," the Turkmen leader noted.

The full speech by the President of Turkmenistan was published today in the central print media of the country.

Geo Strategic Front

- Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Vladimir Putin hold telephone conversation

On May 19, President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Chairman of the Government of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation. The conversation was initiated by the Russian side, the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH) said.

During the talks, the sides exchanged views on major areas of interstate cooperation of mutual interest. In particular, they discussed current issues of bilateral trade and economic relations. Particular emphasis was placed on cooperation in energy sector, where the synergies can be the most effective.

Economic /Energy Front

- Programme for socio-economic development of Turkmenistan until 2030 signed

A meeting of the Council of Elders of Turkmenistan was held in Dashoguz on 14 May. The meeting considered the draft "National Programme for Socio-Economic Development of Turkmenistan in the period of 2011-2030," as well as a number of new

laws of Turkmenistan such as "On local executive authorities", "On amendments to the Criminal Code of Turkmenistan and approval of the new edition of the Criminal Code", "On advocacy and legal practice in Turkmenistan", "On seed growing."

At the end of debates, to the applause of the audience, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov signed the documents submitted to the Council of Elders, which were unanimously approved by the forum delegates. According to the State News Agency of Turkmenistan (TDH), full texts of these laws will be published in the coming issues of newspapers.

The next meeting of the Council of Elders will be held in Ashgabat in mid October 2011 to coincide with the 20th anniversary of independence of Turkmenistan.

Social Front

- Turkmen Officials Deport RFE/RL Journalist

Turkmenistan's Migration Office in Ashgabat has banned an RFE/RL journalist from entering the country although he had a valid visa, RFE/RL's Turkmen Service reports.

Allamourad Rakhimov, a Prague-based broadcaster and native of Turkmenistan, arrived at Ashgabat airport early on May 19 with a visa that was initiated by his family.

Rakhimov, a Canadian citizen, was planning to vacation in his home village in the southeast Mary Province. He had not been to Turkmenistan in 11 years and has been unable to see his immediate family in that time.

But he was refused entry at the airport and was almost immediately put back on a plane to Prague, where RFE/RL has its broadcast headquarters. The reason for his ban is unclear. Rakhimov was given a letter from the Migration Office stating that "he is banned from entering Turkmenistan." He believes the reason he was not allowed to enter is due to his work as a journalist at RFE/RL.

Rakhimov has worked for RFE/RL's Turkmen Service since 2003.

- Days of Culture of Turkmenistan to be held in Moscow and St. Petersburg on 25-30 May

A number of events will take place in Moscow and St. Petersburg on 25-30 May 2010 as part of the Days of Turkmen Culture in Russia. As the Turkmenistan.ru correspondent reports from Moscow quoting the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Russia, the official delegation of the Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting of Turkmenistan as well as the delegation of artists totaling 65 people will participate in the events.

The cultural action has been organized by the Ministry of Culture and Broadcasting of Turkmenistan, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, the Embassy of Turkmenistan in Russia, and the Russian State Concert Company "Commonwealth".

The Days of Turkmen Culture will start on May 25 at 3 p.m. with the exhibition of decorative and applied arts of Turkmenistan at the State Museum of Oriental Arts located at Nikitsky Boulevard, 12-a. On the same day, the Concert Hall named after Tchaikovsky will host a gala concert of masters of arts of Turkmenistan. The concert starts at 7 p.m.

On May 27, the festive program will continue with the concert of masters of arts of Turkmenistan on the stage of the District Officers' Club in St. Petersburg (start at 7 p.m.), and a similar event will be held at the Naval Officers' Club in Kronstadt (beginning at 12 am). As part of the Days of Culture the official delegations of Turkmenistan will hold meetings at the Ministry of Culture of Russia and a press conference.

Uzbekistan

Political Front

- Uzbekistan To Reduce Sentences For Those Who Repent

TASHKENT -- Uzbek President Islam Karimov has signed an amendment to the Penal Code which cuts an offender's prison term by up to one-third in the event he/she repents, RFE/RL's Uzbek Service reports.

Svetlana Ortiqova, the head of the parliament's legislative and judiciary reform committee, told RFE/RL that the amendment was adopted to uphold the human rights and dignity of prisoners and was developed in cooperation with organizations that seek to defend prisoners' rights. The law, which was signed by Karimov on May 18, was adopted by the Legislative Chamber in November and approved by the Senate earlier this month.

Ortiqova said a convict may have his sentence reduced under such mitigating circumstances as voluntary surrender, actively cooperating with the investigation, sincere repentance, and the absence of aggravating circumstances.

She added that the law does not apply to persons serving life imprisonment for such crimes as terrorism or premeditated murder with aggravating circumstances.

Mutabar Tojiboeva, a human rights activist in exile who was imprisoned after the 2005 killings in Andijon, told RFE/RL that two months after she was sentenced she was invited to address an official letter of repentance to Karimov and to admit that her organization was extremist.

Tojiboeva added that following her refusal to do so, she was charged under a further article of the Penal Code that extended her prison sentence.

Ruhiddin Komilov, a former attorney in Uzbekistan, told RFE/RL that the new law provides for broad interpretation and will remain subject to decisions by the judiciary because of its ambiguity and lack of precision.

- Does PM's Rise, Energy Firm's Demise Shed Light On Uzbek Succession Question?

If Uzbek Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyaev is really in the running to become president one day, then he must feel his chances have improved lately. Mirziyaev has recently been given extra and significant responsibilities and made an important appearance in Moscow as a representative of Uzbekistan.

Mirziyaev has been Uzbekistan's prime minister since 2003, prior to which he served for five years as governor of Jizzakh Province, which neighbors President Islam Karimov's native Samarkand Province.

Karimov turned 72 at the end of January, a reminder that his time in office is probably approaching an end after two decades. Mirziyaev's name comes up often in discussions of succession in Uzbekistan, but in these discussions another big name -- Gulnara Karimova, the president's eldest daughter -- always figures prominently.

Earlier this year, Karimov chose Mirziyaev, known for his ability to get the job done by any means necessary, to spearhead an investigation of leading business figures in Uzbekistan. The president said there were no oligarchs in Uzbekistan and Mirziyaev's task was to ensure that remained the case. The prime minister's investigations eventually lead him to Zeromax.

President's Heir

Karimova was widely seen as her father's likely successor as president.

Zeromax is a Swiss-based company that has enjoyed amazing success in Uzbekistan since being formed in 2001. It's a rather opaque company, but when it is reported on, it is

widely tied to Gulnara Karimova. Her former husband, Mansur Maksudi, amid a custody battle for the couple's two children, filed a court case against Gulnara that alleged she was the part-owner of Zeromax and that the company had deposited \$1 million in one of her accounts in a Latvian bank.

The Spanish newspaper "El Pais" earlier this month published an article about Karimova that called her the "owner of an Uzbek conglomerate called Zeromax." Other reports and articles have also drawn a connection between the president's daughter and the company. No clear link between Karimova and Zeromax has ever been established and she denies having any direct role in the company. But in December 2009, the Swiss magazine "Bilan" included Karimova in its list of the 300 richest people in Switzerland, reporting she has assets in Switzerland of \$570 million-\$655 million.

Where all that money came from is not entirely clear but shortly after that report was published Karimova, who represents Uzbekistan at the United Nations office in Geneva, was given another post -- Uzbekistan's ambassador to Spain -- and she left Switzerland for Madrid.

Zeromax head Miradil Jalolov was among those questioned by Mirziyayev's investigators, although only as a "witness" according to officials. Then Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov visited Uzbekistan in late March. Ivanov complained about the role of "intermediaries" in Russian-Uzbek gas deals, a role Zeromax subsidiaries have played.

Assets Frozen

At the beginning of May the Tashkent city economic court ordered Zeromax to halt its operations in Uzbekistan and for financial authorities to seize the company's assets and property in Uzbekistan. RFE/RL has been unable to contact anyone at Zeromax offices in Uzbekistan since then.

Zeromax chief Miradil Jalolov

One employee of the company, who spoke under condition of anonymity, confirmed the closure to RFE/RL's Uzbek Service, adding that the company's bank accounts were frozen on May 7. "We are hoping the accounts will be unfrozen, but if not we will have to shut down operations."

Another employee of a Zeromax subsidiary indicated that even sites being developed at the request of the president's oldest daughter were affected.

"At the moment all of the construction sites are closed. There were some construction sites near Tashkent's Alaiski Bazaar and they were all closed," the employee said. "All the construction material was confiscated and locks were put on the gates. There was a special building being constructed for Gulnara Karimova and that work was stopped also."

Company head Jalolov -- who has been referred to as Karimova's "gray cardinal," or as her "straw man" in some reports -- was questioned by the financial police prior to the government's announcement that the company's operations in Uzbekistan were suspended.

At the end of April, Jalolov briefly left Uzbekistan. The Zeromax construction company employee said he was rumored to have gone to Spain, to meet with Karimova. The source said it was possible Jalolov went to watch a soccer match, since the Zeromax head is an enthusiastic soccer fan and owner of one of Uzbekistan's most successful teams.

A Zeromax investor profile from October 2009 says that the company conducts "its business mainly in Uzbekistan." Zeromax is the only Western company involved in

Uzbekistan's oil and gas industry and by some accounts was responsible for some 80 percent of construction projects in the sector. The company clearly had some link to the state oil and gas company Uzbekneftegaz, which over the last five years has signed contracts only with Russian and Asian companies.

This recent bad news for Zeromax, and potentially Karimova, contrasts sharply with Prime Minister Mirziyayev's good fortune. President Karimov handed over responsibility for the gas and oil sector to Mirziyayev as Zeromax was being nudged out. Karimov also chose to stay in Uzbekistan rather than accept Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's invitation to come to Moscow for celebrations marking the end of World War II. Mirziyayev went in Karimov's place.

Geo Strategic Front

Economic /Energy Front

Social Front

- Controversy Over Uzbekistan Intrudes At Cannes AIDS Benefit

Liz Taylor and Giorgio Armani were among the notable guests who were expected to attend the celebrity fund-raising event Cinema Against AIDS in Cannes last night. It's become one of the big social events of the annual film festival and last year raised \$4.5 million for AIDS research.

But the thought of one guest walking the red carpet at the Hotel du Cap Eden-Roc had an international media freedom organization raising red flags.

Gulnara Karimova

The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) wrote an open letter to the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AmfAR), the sponsor of the event, saying it was "astonished" that an invitation had been given to Gulnara Karimova, the daughter of authoritarian Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

In the letter, RSF points out that 27-year-old Uzbek activist Maksim Popov had recently been "sentenced to seven years in prison for distributing information about the fight against AIDS, a virus that is wreaking havoc in Uzbekistan, as it is elsewhere."

Popov's leaflets about how to stem the spread of HIV-AIDS were, according to RSF, deemed by an Uzbek court as being "contrary to the mentality and moral basis of the Uzbek people's society, religion, culture, and traditions." RSF points out that homosexuality is a crime in Uzbekistan, as is discussing condoms with anyone underage.

RSF reminded AmfAR about Uzbekistan's bleak human rights record and said, "As ambassador to Spain and Switzerland, Gulnara Karimova is therefore her country's...spokesperson for the harsh policies carried out by her father."

RSF called on the sponsors of Cinema Against AIDS to demand that Karimova "publicly support the release of Maksim Popov and all human rights defenders, including journalists, who are in detention."

RSF asked, "Are Sharon Stone, Giorgio Armani, and Elizabeth Taylor, to name a few, aware of the Uzbek political context? Do they approve of the policy towards human rights defenders and the repression of AIDS prevention?"

In response, Kevin Frost, AmfAR's chief executive officer, said the foundation held a meeting with Karimova "who has agreed to take steps to clarify the situation and to work with AmfAR on the matter."

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