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Contents **Page #**

Summary:

Political:

- **Analysis: Bombings Unlikely to Prompt Sharp Kremlin Response.....2**
- **Putin not rule out Kizlyar, Moscow blasts carried out by same group....9**
- **One party refuses to support Bulgarian president's impeachment.....11**
- **G-8 foreign ministers support peace, stability in Afghanistan.....12**
- **America, Russia and arms control , It takes two.....12**
- **Putin to meet top U.S. foes in Venezuela.....13**
- **Putin, Chavez to discuss \$2 bln arms loan, trade, energy cooperation....15**
- **Dokka Abu Usman: Moscow metro attack is a retribution for Russian crimes in the Caucasus.....16**
- **Naomi Campbell to Join United Russia.....17**
- **Russia FM, Hamas leader discuss Middle East situation by phone.....18**
- **Two men killed, one injured in car blast in Dagestan.....19**
- **Russian Leaders Seen in "Lockstep" During START Talks.....19**
- **Russia Ships Air Defenses to China.....20**
- **Lubyanka Bombing Suspect Identified22**
- **Russian president slams lawmakers for shirking duties.....22**
- **USSR and Cuba: love at first sight23**
- **U.S. voices concern over Venezuelan arms purchases from Russia.....24**
- **Putin deepens ties with Chavez on Venezuela visit.....24**

Economic:

- **IPO bonanza on hold.....26**
- **Investors unfazed by bombings.....27**
- **State May Ease Rules For Offshore Energy.....28**
- **Henkel to build two plants for the production of mortar in Russia by 2012.....29**

- **LUKOIL to invest 480 million dollars in Uzbekistan.....30**
- **Money row holds up Belarus's first nuclear power plant.....30**
- **Russians Buy 7 Million Cell Phones in Three Months31**
- **Labour pensions are raised by 6 percent – Health Ministry.....31**
- **Russian minister urges CIS to step up mutual financial support.....32**
- **S&P says bad loans in Russia still hampering growth.....32**
- **Ukraine offers Russia role in gas pipe plan with EU.....33**

Social:

- **Twelve killed in Dagestan explosions.....34**
- **Moscow metro bombings – investigators seek trio.....34**
- **Donor campaign to help wounded in metro begins in Moscow.....36**
- **Russia Fears More Attacks by 'Black Widows'.....36**
- **What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?36**
- **Russian religious leaders condemn Moscow subway blasts.....38**
- **Husband and Wife Rape Their Daughter for Two Years39**
- **Russian Fashion Week celebrating its 10 years.....40**
- **Medvedev, patriarch congratulate Belarus Church head on 75th birthday.....40**
- **Sex and the City, Moscow-style.....41**
- **Moscow's Christians unite at Easter.....43**

Summary:

Political:

Analysis: Bombings Unlikely to Prompt Sharp Kremlin Response

The twin explosions that killed at least 39 people on Monday will not lead to a stifling of political and civil freedoms or a revamp of the law enforcement agencies — as has happened after major terrorist attacks in the past, security and political analysts said. History indicates that the authorities tend to act decisively after terrorist attacks that directly threaten their authority, such as rebel raids on Ingushetia's main city, Nazran, in

2004 and Kabardino-Balkaria's capital, Nalchik, in 2005, said Borogan of Agentura. Those attacks prompted leadership reshuffles in regional law enforcement agencies.

Putin not rule out Kizlyar, Moscow blasts carried out by same group

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin did not rule out that the explosions in Kizlyar had been carried out by the same group, which organised the terrorist act in Moscow.

“One more crime, one more terrorist act, has been carried out in Dagestan,” Putin said opening a session of the government’s presidium on Wednesday. “I do not rule out that the same group carried out this crime,” he added.

One party refuses to support Bulgarian president’s impeachment

The impeachment of Bulgaria’s President Georgi Parvanov is unlikely to be supported by the lawmakers. The Order, Law & Justice deputies have withdrawn their signatures from the impeachment bill, thus having refused to support the opposition.

G-8 foreign ministers support peace, stability in Afghanistan

Stability in Afghanistan and around it is extremely important for the suppression of global terrorism, the foreign ministers of Canada, Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Japan and Germany said in a joint statement.

America, Russia and arms control , It takes two

Arms cuts get you only so far; a safer world needs tighter anti-proliferation rules too. WHEN Barack Obama promised, in Prague a year ago, to “seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons” and won a Nobel peace prize for it, even he felt that the accolade was a bit premature. His Prague to-do list was long: reduce the role of nuclear weapons in America’s defences; cut the number of nukes, too, in a bold new treaty with Russia; win Senate ratification of the test-ban treaty; seek a United Nations ban (or “cut-off”) on making fissile material for bombs; and meanwhile secure all nuclear materials from terrorist reach.

Putin to meet top U.S. foes in Venezuela

Russia will cement energy and arms ties with Latin America when Prime Minister Vladimir Putin travels to Caracas this week to meet two of the United States' biggest foes, Venezuelan and Bolivian Presidents Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales.

Putin, Chavez to discuss \$2 bln arms loan, trade, energy cooperation

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez will discuss military and economic cooperation, including a \$2.2 billion loan to buy Russian arms,

during his first visit to the South American country, a Russian government source said Putin will visit Caracas on Friday.

Dokka Abu Usman: Moscow metro attack is a retribution for Russian crimes in the Caucasus

The Kavkaz Center editorial staff has received a video statement made by the Caucasus Emirate's Emir Dokka Abu Usman, who stressed that the attack in the Moscow subway on March 29, 2010 had been organized under his personal order.

Naomi Campbell to Join United Russia

But a source refuses to say if party head and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin or President Dmitry Medvedev knew of the supermodel's interest in Russian politics.

Russia FM, Hamas leader discuss Middle East situation by phone

During the telephone conversation the Russian foreign minister focused attention on the results of the Quartet ministerial meeting in Moscow on March 19," a diplomatic source in the Russian Foreign Ministry said. "The minister stressed the importance of restoring Palestinian unity on the Palestinian Liberation Organization platform and noted inadmissible missile strikes from the Gaza on southern districts of Israel, the diplomatic source said.

Two men killed, one injured in car blast in Dagestan

A VAZ-2199 car exploded in the Khasavyurt region of Dagestan on the outskirts of Toturbiikala overnight to Thursday. "Two men were killed, and one more was hospitalized with a grave wound after the car blast," the press service of the Dagestani Interior Ministry said.

Russian Leaders Seen in "Lockstep" During START Talks

Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama last week approved the final terms of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty's successor, which would require the United States and Russia to both lower their respective strategic arsenals to 1,550 deployed warheads. Each nation's fielded nuclear delivery vehicles -- missiles, submarines and bombers -- would be capped at 700, with another 100 allowed in reserve. The leaders are expected to sign the document in the Czech capital of Prague on April 8.

Russia Ships Air Defenses to China

Security analysts have estimated that Beijing would pay \$1.80 billion to \$2.25 billion for the weapons. "The price for one S-300 battery varies between about \$120 million and \$150 million," said Konstantin Makiyenko, a Russian defense expert. There has been no official announcement on the value of China's purchase.

Lubyanka Bombing Suspect Identified

The bombing at the Lubyanka metro station could have been carried out by Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, the 17-year-old widow of a North Caucasus rebel who was killed in a sweep operation by the Federal Security Service late last year

Russian president slams lawmakers for shirking duties

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Friday harshly criticized State Duma deputies for failing to attend parliamentary sessions and suggested they, play truant in some other place.

USSR and Cuba: love at first sight

On May 8, Russia and Cuba will mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Fidel Castro's Cuba. Genrikh Borovik, one of Russia's best known foreign correspondents, was in Cuba at that time with the blessing of the Politbureau member Anastas Mikoyan, who spearheaded Soviet contacts with Castro. In a conversation with Russia Profile Editor Andrey Zolotov, Jr., Borovik recalls those dramatic days and his first impressions.

U.S. voices concern over Venezuelan arms purchases from Russia

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez will discuss military and economic cooperation, including a \$2.2 billion loan to buy Russian arms, during his first visit to the South American country on Friday.

Putin deepens ties with Chavez on Venezuela visit

Russia has offered to help Venezuela set up its own space industry, including a satellite launch site, as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin makes his first visit to the South American country.

Economic:

IPO bonanza on hold

The shelving of two high-profile Russian IPOs has put the market on alert, not because of fears of a second crisis but because companies are holding out for better packages.

Investors unfazed by bombings

Moscow's markets shook off the bomb attacks on the city's metro to move higher on Monday, after focusing on the relief that the saga surrounding Greece's bailout appears finally to have wound down.

State May Ease Rules For Offshore Energy

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry is proposing to loosen the rules that allow just two state-controlled industry leaders, Rosneft and Gazprom, to explore and develop oil and gas riches off Russia's coasts.

Henkel to build two plants for the production of mortar in Russia by 2012

Germany's Henkel plans to build two more plants in Russia for the production of mortar by 2012, one of which will be located in Siberia, the company's executive vice president, Thomas Geitner. "We plan to build an additional two mortar plants in Russia and are now looking for suitable sites. These projects are slated for 2011-2012," he said.

LUKOIL to invest 480 million dollars in Uzbekistan

Russia's LUKOIL Company will invest 480 million dollars into the exploration and production of oil and gas in Uzbekistan over 2010, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said.

Money row holds up Belarus's first nuclear power plant

The signing of a contract between Russia and Belarus to build the ex-Soviet republic's first nuclear power plant has been delayed due to disagreements over the project's cost, the Russian ambassador to Belarus said.

Russians Buy 7 Million Cell Phones in Three Months

Russian cellular retailers have sold 24.6 percent more cell phones from January till March of the current year in comparison with 2009. In total, Russian customers have purchased seven million cell phones during this period. The average price on cell phones has dropped by 18 percent during three months of this year. One may conclude that the retail home market of cellular phones is stabilizing.

Labour pensions are raised by 6 percent – Health Ministry

An average labour pension has gained 465 roubles, and labour pensions paid to those who retire for pension age reasons, have gained 488 roubles. The ministry explains that from January 1, 2010 the basic and insurance parts of pensions have been united and indexed by the same rules, which means the government raises the total amount of a pension, not part of it contrary to the earlier procedure.

Russian minister urges CIS to step up mutual financial support

Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin urged his colleagues from the Commonwealth of Independent States on Thursday to step up mutual financial support. "We have to step up work in the fields of trade, finance and financial support of our countries," Kudrin said

at the 4th session of the permanent conferences of CIS finance ministers which opened in the Russian capital on Thursday, "to this end, it is necessary to accumulate all the opportunities," including the support by international institutions and third countries.

S&P says bad loans in Russia still hampering growth

S&P estimates problem (including restructured) loans at almost 40 percent of the total system -- a level likely to make a recovery long and painful.

Russian banks suffered heavy losses due to snowballing provisions for overdue loans but hope to return to pre-crisis levels of profitability later this year.

Ukraine offers Russia role in gas pipe plan with EU

Ukraine's new leadership said on Friday it was inviting Russia to join the European Union in a plan to revamp Ukraine's gas pipeline network, which carries crucial supplies of Russian gas to Europe.

Social:

Twelve killed in Dagestan explosions

Two blasts rock the town of Kislyar. The first explosion happened at 8:40 am, blowing up a car carrying two Interior Ministry employees as it left the building.

Moscow metro bombings – investigators seek trio

Death toll reaches 39 as Russian capital mourns victims of terror attack.

Donor campaign to help wounded in metro begins in Moscow

A donor campaign to help wounded victims of the terrorist acts in Moscow metro has been launched in Moscow. The campaign was organized in the framework of a project initiated by the Moscow government under the motto "We have common blood" for purposes of stimulating donors.

Russia Fears More Attacks by 'Black Widows'

The Moscow subway bombing might just be the beginning of a campaign of suicide attacks—investigators say that up to 19 trained suicide bombers from the same terrorist cell as the subway attackers remain at large. The bombers likely belonged to a 30-person, all-female "martyrs' brigade" led by the late Chechen terrorist Said Buryatsky, known by the media as "the Russian Bin Laden."

What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?

Chechen suicide attackers do not fit popular stereotypes, contrary to the Russian government's efforts to pigeonhole them. For years, Moscow has routinely portrayed Chechen bombers as Islamic extremists, many of them foreign, who want to make Islam the world's dominant religion. Yet however much Russia may want to convince the West that this battle is part of a global war on terrorism, the facts about who becomes a Chechen suicide attacker — male or female — reveal otherwise.

Russian religious leaders condemn Moscow subway blasts

The heads of Russia's main religious faiths condemned on Monday the two Moscow subway blasts that killed least 37 people and injured dozens.

Husband and Wife Rape Their Daughter for Two Years

The police of St. Petersburg complete the preliminary investigation on the case of a family of pedophiles. A married couple abused their own daughter on their mutual consent for two years. The woman's husband had been raping his step daughter and offering her to other pedophiles. The woman said that she agreed for all that to preserve her family.

Russian Fashion Week celebrating its 10 years

Along with Russian designers renowned fashion designers from the UK, Latvia, Croatia and Sri Lanka will make their mark in Moscow. By tradition famous Russian designer Slava Zaitsev will unveil the event with his new collection Metamorphoses.

Medvedev, patriarch congratulate Belarus Church head on 75th birthday

Prince Vladimir baptized medieval Kievan Rus, which comprised parts of modern-day Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, in the year 988. The canonical Orthodox Churches in Belarus and Ukraine are subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Sex and the City, Moscow-style

I arrived in Moscow as someone with the highest of ethical standards. For example, I was the kind of person who turned up my nose at the idea of buying a pirated video at the Izmailovo market.

Moscow's Christians unite at Easter

The rare alignment of Orthodox and Western Easter celebration on Sunday is set to give Moscow a festive feel this weekend. While the city's Orthodox churches will be observing the tradition ritual vigils on Saturday and Sunday with a resounding peal of bells, Moscow's Protestant and Catholic communities will also mark the holy festival at the weekend.

Detailed News

Political:

Analysis: Bombings Unlikely to Prompt Sharp Kremlin Response

If the plotters of the Moscow metro bombings were hoping for a sharp Kremlin response, they will be deeply disappointed.

The twin explosions that killed at least 39 people on Monday will not lead to a stifling of political and civil freedoms or a revamp of the law enforcement agencies — as has happened after major terrorist attacks in the past, security and political analysts said Tuesday.

In addition, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who has experience leading the country through terrorist crises, is unlikely to strip decision-making powers from the more liberal-sounding President Dmitry Medvedev, who dealt with a terrorist attack alone for the first time Monday because Putin was away from the capital, the analysts said.

Putin, who flew back to Moscow from a trip to Krasnoyarsk, said Tuesday that "eliminating" terrorists was the task of the security services. But he made no additional comment about the government's response to the attack.

Medvedev, in contrast, called not only for terrorists to be "eliminated" — a mantra he shares with Putin — but also for social and economic conditions to be improved in the North Caucasus, where the terrorist threat originates.

"This is a double-pronged task. It is very difficult to create proper, modern conditions for education and business and to destroy the corruption and clannish nepotism that has formed in the Caucasus over the centuries," Medvedev said at a meeting with human rights activists.

The meeting itself could be interpreted as a signal from Medvedev that he is intent to keep doing things his way. Putin, who has rarely met with human rights activists, oversaw a crackdown on them during his eight-year presidency.

Putin so far has not shown any interest, at least publicly, in spearheading a response to the bombings, said Sergei Markov, a United Russia deputy in the State Duma and longtime Kremlin spin doctor.

After all, Markov noted, it is the president, not the prime minister, who oversees the security agencies.

Medvedev also can sound pretty hawkish himself and has no need to leave the role of "bad cop" to Putin, said Irina Borogan, an analyst with the Agentura think tank.

Meeting with top judges earlier Tuesday, Medvedev pledged to consider tougher punishments for terrorists.

The promise resonates with the anti-terrorist policies that started taking shape in the Kremlin after Chechen militants seized hundreds of hostages in Moscow's Dubrovka theater in 2002. After that crisis, Putin's Kremlin pushed legislation through the Duma that toughened penalties for terrorism.

Putin responded to the Beslan hostage tragedy in 2004 by canceling popular elections for governors and the proportional system of elections for the Duma. Also, the Duma approved Kremlin-backed amendments allowing the authorities to keep terrorist suspects in custody for 30 days without a court-issued arrest warrant. For all other crimes, suspects can only be held for two days without an arrest warrant.

Anti-terrorism legislation continued to be introduced while the country enjoyed a period of relative respite from major attacks. In 2006, the Duma adopted a law allowing security services to suspend many civil rights, including the freedom of movement and the right of public assembly, in any area where they conducted counterterrorist operations.

Later that year, the media law was amended to allow security officials overseeing anti-terrorist operations to decide how and where journalists would collect information about terrorist attacks.

In 2008, the Duma banned jury trials for suspected terrorists, arguing that jurists too often acquitted the defendants.

Throughout the past decade, Duma lawmakers have also been constantly tweaking anti-extremism laws in the name of fighting terrorism. The laws, however, have been largely used to crack down on the opposition and dissent groups not involved in terrorism.

The mountain of anti-terrorism legislation leaves Medvedev with few options.

"The screws are now tightened to the limit. Despite the terrorist attack, no measures will be taken to put further pressure on the opposition," said Maxim Agarkov, an analyst with the SK-Strategia think tank.

Several second-tier United Russia officials accused the opposition of fueling an instability that Monday's attackers had hoped to capitalize on. But no national leaders have followed suit.

Agarkov also said the Kremlin has little desire to make changes within government agencies, particularly those dealing with law enforcement.

"The Kremlin has come to realize that the state system, especially law enforcers, is degraded to such an extent that it is impossible to properly implement even existing orders," he said.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombings, unlike the Beslan school hostage taking, which united the nation in horror and had a recognizable enemy — Chechen rebels — behind it.

"The latest attacks are not shocking enough to allow authorities to push through new restrictions," Agarkov said.

The Moscow attack, however, poses no threat to the authorities and is unlikely to ignite any personnel, let alone systemic, changes in the security agencies and the Interior Ministry, Borogan said.

As a rule, terrorist attacks in themselves do not influence the Kremlin to make political and personnel decisions, said Yevgeny Satanovsky, a security analyst at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies.

"Terrorist attacks just give the ruling elite an opportunity to push through measures that would be met with loud criticism under ordinary circumstances," he said.

For example, the Beslan attack allowed the Kremlin to increase its influence over how the Russian regions are governed by scrapping gubernatorial elections, a long-time wish of federal authorities that had little to do with anti-terrorist efforts, Satanovsky said.

Any response to Monday's attack depends only on whether Medvedev and Putin had a political or legislative plan in the works beforehand, he said.

Putin not rule out Kizlyar, Moscow blasts carried out by same group

"It is not important for us where this crime was carried out and people of what nationality and confession fall victims to criminals," the prime minister said.

"We believe that this crime is aimed against Russia," Putin stressed.

Putin has instructed the government to prepare a resolution on providing aid to the victims of the terrorist act in Dagestan.

"Till the end of the day a corresponding resolution should be prepared to provide aid to the victims and the families of those who were killed in the terrorist act in Dagestan within the parameters like as it was formulated in a resolution on assistance to the victims in the Moscow metro blasts," the Russian prime minister said.

A total of 12 people were killed, 23 injured in two blasts that went off in Dagestan's Kizlyar, a source in the information department of the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry told Itar-Tass.

“The car, which was driving 300 meters away from the republican Interior Ministry, the republican Federal Security Service department and gymnasium number one, was blasted at 08.30 Moscow time on Wednesday. The second blast went off at 09.05 Moscow time. Two people were killed and five more were injured in the second blast,” the source said.

“A Niva jeep was blasted at about 08.30 Moscow time, when a road police patrol car was driving by,” a source in the Dagestani Interior Ministry noted. According to preliminary reports, “Two policemen were killed in the first blast.” “The second blast went off about 10-15 minutes later at the place, where a group of detectives and pedestrians came,” the source said.

Rescue services, firefighters, medics and detectives are working at the blast site.

One party refuses to support Bulgarian president's impeachment

The party does not take part in the ruling coalition, nor does it support the government of Borisov, which demonstrates it is powerless, deputy leader of the party, Atanas Semyonov, said on Wednesday.

Besides, the party demanded Prime Minister Boiko Borisov be dismissed, because he is “starting fires everywhere instead of putting them out.”

The issue of impeaching the president emerged in early March following the scandal over a meeting of the president with the Deputy Prime Minister Simeon Dyankov. The meeting was taped secretly, and later on the president made the recording public. The impeachment bill was presented to the parliament on March 26. It was supported by 162 deputies from the CEDB, Blue Coalition, National Union Attack, and Order, Law & Justice parties.

The impeachment hearings are scheduled for Wednesday. For success a minimum of 161 deputies, or two in three, should support the impeachment motion. If that is the case, the Constitutional Court will have to announce its verdict on the impeachment within a month's time. The bill was signed by 162 deputies, but the Order, Law & Justice deputies have already withdrawn their signatures, which made the hearings useless.

G-8 foreign ministers support peace, stability in Afghanistan

G-8 foreign ministers confirmed their support to peace and stability in Afghanistan at the Tuesday meeting in Gatineau, Canada.

Afghanistan is slowly recovering from a series of conflicts, but violent extremism in certain Afghan areas is hampering the peaceful and secure life of many citizens, the ministers said.

America, Russia and arms control , It takes two

The real prize Mr Obama was after was international support for a stronger Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) at its upcoming five-yearly review in May. For North Korea, Iran and others have battered its anti-nuclear foundations.

Mr Obama will be back in Prague on April 8th to sign the promised new strategic-arms reduction treaty with Russia's Dmitry Medvedev. Even as he lifted the spirits of would-be disarmers a year ago, Mr Obama acknowledged that a world without the bomb would probably not come in his lifetime. Since then he has found that ticking off items on his "getting to zero" list is considerably harder than he imagined.

In principle, the new treaty with Russia should have been easy to bag. Both sides want the new verification rules it would bring. But negotiations dragged on. Nor is this quite the bold document Mr Obama talked of. Over ten years it will cut each side's deployed strategic warheads to 1,550 (a reduction of a third below the maximum 2,200 to be allowed by 2012 under a previous accord) and the number of deployed missiles and bombers to 700 apiece. By contrast, a joint commission backed by the Australian and Japanese governments recently called for far deeper cuts: to 2,000 warheads worldwide by 2025, with no more than 500 each, of any sort, for America and Russia.

Mr Obama will shortly make public his nuclear posture review. It may not contain the clear pledge some have lobbied for: that America will never use its nuclear weapons first in a crisis. But it will constrain thinking about such use to the direst of circumstances facing America or its allies. Contrary to his predecessor's efforts to replace older American warheads with fewer ones of simpler, safer but more modern design, Mr Obama insists there will be no new bombs on his watch.

According to the original NPT bargain, the five recognised powers, America, Russia, Britain, France and China, were to take steps towards nuclear disarmament, while other treaty members vowed not to seek nuclear weapons and to confine themselves to peaceful uses of nuclear power. Whoever leads the effort to strengthen the treaty, therefore, will need others to follow. But the mood going into next month's review is not overly optimistic. Two items high on everyone's NPT-support list, negotiation of a verifiable fissile-material cut-off treaty (FMCT, for short) and entry into force of the test-ban treaty, both seem as far away as ever.

In 2009, after years of stalemate, the UN's 65-member Conference on Disarmament was poised to start inking in a fissile-material treaty, when Pakistan balked. It was miffed at a nuclear deal that the Bush administration had struck with its rival, India. This exempted India from global restrictions on civilian nuclear trade that are meant to apply to countries outside the NPT and, like both India and Pakistan, with nuclear arsenals outside its rules. But allowing nuclear imports for civilian use also eases the bottlenecks for India's military programme. Pakistan therefore wants a similar deal.

There ought to be fat chance of that after the proliferation activities of a former top nuclear scientist, Abdul Qadeer Khan. So Pakistan has turned to China for help in making enriched uranium and plutonium to keep up with India. Neither country is keen on an FMCT, but India is happy to let Pakistan take the flak.

So Mr Obama is hoping that a special nuclear-security summit in Washington, DC, on April 12th and 13th will provide some needed momentum going into the NPT review. The idea is to bring together disparate efforts to prevent illicit trade in nuclear technologies and materials, as part of parallel efforts to encourage countries to buy in nuclear-fuel services from reputable suppliers, rather than make it themselves with technologies that can also be abused for weapons.

But will this be enough? Mr Obama wants to strengthen the NPT's rules, by getting everyone to sign up to an Additional Protocol of tougher inspections and by making it harder for a cheat simply to shrug off the treaty when caught, as North Korea did. Yet even those obvious steps run into opposition.

Iran is still a treaty member—in good standing, it claims, though others suspect a hidden military programme—and will resist moves that could cramp its nuclear style. Egypt has long refused to accept more intrusive inspections until there is progress on making the Middle East a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. This is a dig at Israel's arsenal, though others are suspected of having chemical and biological weapons too, and Syria is suspected of having been planning to produce plutonium at a secret nuclear reactor built with North Korean help, and possibly Iranian finance, that was bombed by Israel in 2007 shortly before its completion.

But the achievement that would most symbolise America's commitment to its end of the NPT bargain, and re-enthuse others about theirs, is Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT). The last time it considered the treaty, in 1999, it threw it out on a partisan vote, with Republicans calling the treaty unverifiable; they said that to ensure the safety and effectiveness of its arsenal America should keep testing options open. The same partisans on the Republican side are gunning for the ctbt again. If it is shot down a second time, with it would go whatever remaining goodwill there was for non-weapons states to accept tougher checks on their own nuclear activities.

The first task, however, will be to get the new strategic arms treaty passed by the Senate and by Russia's Duma. The cuts envisaged may not be ambitious, but the treaty does other useful things. By setting a single ceiling for warheads and delivery systems, it

allows each country to configure its forces to suit its own needs. This simpler sort of treaty allows the burden of inspection to be reduced, while setting out principles for more precise checks that will make possible deeper cuts in future.

Indeed, both countries seem keen to press on with cutting once this treaty is ratified. America and its NATO allies worry about Russia's far larger arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons; Russia frets about the larger number of strategic weapons America keeps stored away for a rainy day. But a warhead is a warhead, whatever the range for firing it. An obvious next treaty could cut both sorts down to size, though monitoring weapons dismantling would require more transparency than Russia has so far been ready to accept. Meanwhile, no treaty would be required for Russia to pick up the proposals Mr Obama has made to discuss co-operation on missile defences.

Despite all this, Mr Obama has yet to earn that peace prize—though he has made a start. Weapons cuts are steadily mounting. Will other governments at next month's review conference do their bit and strengthen the anti-nuclear rules that are the other part of the NPT bargain?

Putin to meet top U.S. foes in Venezuela

The two leftist leaders can view Putin's visit as a boost after U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said this month that Washington's critics were losing force in the region.

Kremlin watchers will be also tracking comments by Putin on ties with Washington and specifically on a landmark arms-control treaty that his handpicked successor, President Dmitry Medvedev, and U.S. leader Barack Obama have agreed to sign in April.

"It is always a good chance for Putin to show to the United States that we have a lot of friends all over the world," said Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the magazine *Russia in Global Affairs*.

Caracas and Moscow said one-day talks between Putin and Chavez would focus on energy, agriculture and defense. Putin's office also said energy would be at the center of talks with Morales, who will meet Putin in Caracas also on Friday.

Venezuela, South America's top oil exporter and a member of the oil producers cartel OPEC, is seeking funds and technology to help develop its oil deposits and is also seeking loans to buy Russian military hardware.

"We should expect a lot of big arms and energy contracts. When Putin has traveled recently to centres like India he brought back a lot," added Lukyanov.

Putin secured \$10 billion in energy, nuclear and arms deals in India this month.

Chavez traveled to Moscow in September to receive over \$2 billion in loans for weaponry, including tanks and the S-300 advanced anti-aircraft missile.

During the trip he announced Venezuela recognized two pro-Russian rebel regions of Georgia as independent states, a rare diplomatic success for Moscow, which has tried unsuccessfully to persuade its allies to do so.

Clinton expressed concern last September about Venezuelan arms purchases and their potential for triggering an arms race in the region.

ENERGY RELATIONSHIP

Venezuela wants to beef up its arsenal to resist what Chavez terms U.S. imperialism in Latin America, though tensions have also been rising with neighboring Colombia, a close U.S. ally and historic rival of Venezuela.

"Russia sees the strengthening of its positions in this region as an extremely important and a good answer to the widening U.S. influence in Central Asia," said Alexei Mukhin, who directs the Moscow-based Center for Political Information.

In February, a consortium of Russian firms and Venezuela's state-run PDVSA agreed to set up a venture to tap the Junin 6 oil field in the Orinoco oil belt, which Venezuela says has the world's largest hydrocarbon reserves.

The development will require \$20 billion in investments over 40 years to produce 450,000 barrels per day, or almost a fifth of Venezuela's current oil production, and will involve state giant Rosneft and private major LUKOIL.

Valery Nesterov, analyst at Troika Dialog brokerage, said private Russian firms were struggling to expand on home turf because of limited access to big deposits and tax uncertainty.

"In Venezuela the geology is good, reserves are great. From that point of view, the conditions are ideal there, though this does not, of course, remove concerns about political risk."

Chavez, who says the United States could attack Venezuela for its oil reserves, has also said Moscow and Tehran are helping Venezuela develop its nuclear energy production -- but not an atomic bomb -- to confront a power crisis.

Putin, Chavez to discuss \$2 bln arms loan, trade, energy cooperation

During his visit to Moscow in September, Chavez said Venezuela would buy 92 T-72 tanks and an unspecified number of Smerch multiple rocket launchers from Russia, among other military inventory.

Since 2005, Venezuela has bought \$4 billion worth of Russian weaponry, including warplanes, helicopters, and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

During his visit to Caracas, Putin will oversee the delivery of the last four Russian Mi-17 Hip helicopters out of the total of 38 under a 2006 contract.

"Thirty-four helicopters have already been delivered," the Russian government source said.

He said that in economic cooperation, "priority will be given to the fuel, energy, and mining sectors."

Other promising cooperation areas include the oil, gas, and transport infrastructures, agriculture, and the financial sphere.

Relations between Russia and Venezuela have strengthened considerably over the past 10 years. The two countries have signed large-scale economic and energy cooperation agreements. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev visited Venezuela in November 2008.

Later on Friday, Putin will also meet with Bolivian President Evo Morales in Caracas.

Dokka Abu Usman: Moscow metro attack is a retribution for Russian crimes in the Caucasus

In his video statement, reordered on March 29, 2010, Dokka Abu Usman said that the attack had been a retaliation and a retribution for the massacre by Russian invaders of the poorest residents of Chechnya and Ingushetia, who were picking wild garlic in the Arshty village on February 11, 2010, to feed their families.

He stressed that the killing of the most poor part of local residents had been deliberate, because the criminal FSB special forces finished off innocent civilians with knives, and then mocked on their corpses.

Dokka Abu Usman indicated to all his accusers that the Moscow attack was a legitimate act of retaliation for continued killings of civilians in the Caucasus.

The head of the Caucasus Emirate said "he treats with a grin" all those accusations of terrorism, including those made by politicians and journalists, because none of them accused Putin of the massacre of civilians in Arshty, which was carried out under Putin's orders.

Dokka Abu Usman also said that attacks on Russian territory would continue. He promised new retaliations to the Russians, "who send their gangs to the Caucasus and support their security services, who carry out massacres".

In conclusion, Dokka Abu Usman reminded that he had earlier promised to the people of Russia that they would no more "idly watch the war in the Caucasus on their TV sets, watch it quietly, with no reaction to excesses and crimes committed by their gangs, which are being sent to the Caucasus under the leadership of Putin".

"Therefore the war will come to your streets, and you will feel it with your own lives and skins", the Caucasus Emirate's Emir Dokka Abu Usman warned.

Naomi Campbell to Join United Russia

Supermodel Naomi Campbell is set to become a member of United Russia, a source in the party said Thursday, adding that the party saw her as an asset who could become the faction's new poster girl.

"She is a young, sexy, intelligent woman who has shown how the new Russia can attract the best in the world," said the source, who asked for his name not to be used because he was not authorized to speak to the press despite working in the United Russia press office.

"Once she modernized the fashion world, now she is part of the modernization of Russia," the source said.

The British model, who is engaged to real estate mogul Vladislav Doronin, currently spends much of her time in Moscow and recently guest edited the Russian edition of *Vogue*, where she appeared clothed in only a big snake.

The source's use of the term "modernization" is a deliberate echo of President Dmitry Medvedev's call for the modernization of the country.

The source refused to say if party head and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin or Medvedev knew of Campbell's interest in United Russia.

"Miss Campbell takes an active interest in all aspects of life in Russia," said a spokesperson for the model when asked about possible membership.

Analysts said that the recruitment was unlikely to have taken place without the Kremlin's knowledge. Doronin, whose company has built a number of skyscrapers in Moscow, was among the invited audience when Putin became head of the party.

Duma deputy and political pundit Sergei Markov said that he had seen Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov speaking to Campbell behind the scenes at a recent show during Russian Fashion Week.

“I have no knowledge of any membership offer,” said Markov, “But [rhythmic and athletic] gymnasts Kabayeva and Svetlana Khorkina have shown that women with a strong presence in previous nonpolitical spheres can become capable members of United Russia.”

Markov refused to say at which show the pair were seen together or why he was at the show.

United Russia regularly uses celebrities to boost the recognition factor of its party list at elections, and in recent years a number of sports and celebrity figures have become United Russia deputies.

Apart from Kabayeva and Khorkina, Nikolai Rastorguyev, the lead singer of Lube, Putin’s favorite band, recently became a State Duma deputy.

“Let’s get her to be a member first, “ the party source said, joking that “If she is ever more popular than Lube, we’ll see about the Duma.”

If Campbell becomes a member, most likely honorary because of her British citizenship, said the source, she would be the highest-profile black member of the party. She will be the second or third black member, he said, “I think.”

Two United Russia deputies confirmed the story, but asked not to be named, saying the 38-year-old model was a “wonderful girl” and “not as tall as she looks in the magazines.”

Russia FM, Hamas leader discuss Middle East situation by phone

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and chairman of the political bureau of the Palestinian Islamic resistance movement Hamas Khaled Mashaal discussed the current situation in the Middle East by phone on Thursday.

“For his part, Khaled Mashaal estimated positively the provisions in the statement adopted at the Quartet meeting in Moscow,” the source said. Mashaal also pledged that “ Hamas is not interested in the escalation of tensions and is taking corresponding measures to prevent missile strikes from the Gaza.”

The Hamas leader condemned resolutely the terrorist acts in the Moscow metro and asked to convey condolences to the families of the blast victims and the sympathy to injured people.

Two men killed, one injured in car blast in Dagestan

"It is not ruled out that the car was carrying a homemade explosive device," the press service said.

The Zhiguli driver and the passengers were identified. The killed men are residents from the Botlikh region of the republic, the injured man is from Khasavyurt.

The type and the power of the explosive device are under investigation.

Suicide bombers committed the blasts in the Dagestani city of Kizlyar on Wednesday. Ten people, including nine policemen, were killed, the republican disaster medicine center said. Some 23 people were hospitalized with various injuries after the Kizlyar blasts.

Russian Leaders Seen in "Lockstep" During START Talks

As Russia negotiated a new nuclear arms control treaty with the United States over the past year, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin worked closely to eliminate any gap between their positions on the pending deal, *Foreign Policy* magazine reported yesterday (see *GSN*, March 31).

The START negotiations transformed Washington's ideas about Russia's leadership, two high-level Obama administration officials said.

In public, Putin appeared far more outspoken than Medvedev -- his successor as president -- in his criticism of U.S. plans for missile defenses in Europe. That led some in Washington to suspect that Putin was working against the new deal.

However, "what we learned through this negotiation was that the policy coordination on their side between President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin was very closely done and in perfect lockstep every step of the way," one official said. "He was saying exactly what President Medvedev was saying to us in private. There was not daylight between them; they did things pretty closely coordinated."

The U.S. and Russian presidents discussed the talks during several telephone conversations, which proved crucial in finalizing a deal, the officials said.

"The chief negotiator and the person who really got this treaty done was President Obama," an official said. "The big moves in the negotiation were always done by the two of them" (see *GSN*, March 29).

As the leaders wrapped up talks on the deal last Friday, Medvedev said in English, "If you want to get something done right, do it yourself." The U.S. president responded, "Yeah, we were the ones who did it."

The agreement is expected to contain only one line in its opening statement noting a link between offensive and defensive missile systems, the Obama administration officials

said. Moscow had long pressed Washington to link arms reductions in the treaty to binding limitations on the planned U.S. missile shield in Europe.

Each power "could" include a statement with the treaty articulating its position on the missile defense issue, the Obama administration officials said.

"If they were done, what would happen is the Russians would recognize that if the United States missile defense capabilities grew to such an extent that it would undermine strategic stability, they would have the right to withdraw from the treaty," one of the officials said.

"If they did release such a unilateral statement, we would issue our unilateral statement that would say our missile defenses aren't aimed against Russia and are not intended to undermine strategic stability, but we are going to do them in cooperation with our allies irrespective of what the Russian unilateral statement says," the official said (Josh Rogin, *Foreign Policy*, March 31).

One expert suggested that Senate Republicans could press the administration to develop a new generation of nuclear warheads as a condition for supporting the START successor's ratification, the Xinhua News Agency reported yesterday. The pact must receive support from two-thirds of the Senate.

Still, U.S. budget concerns would rule out an overhaul of the nation's nuclear arsenal, Brookings Institution analyst Darrell West said.

"Military hawks will be the toughest obstacle in the Senate because they are very suspicious of anything involving Russia," he said. "They will be reluctant to support any kind of treaty."

Some GOP lawmakers have expressed support for the document, including Senator Richard Lugar (Ind.), ranking Republican on the the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The position that Lugar takes on the agreement "will carry a lot of weight with his colleagues," West said (Matthew Rusling, Xinhua News Agency, April 1).

Meanwhile, Russia called on the United States to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, Interfax reported (see *GSN*, Feb. 18).

The United Nations adopted the treaty in 1996. The pact, however, must be ratified by the United States and eight other nations before entering into force. The Senate previously rejected the treaty in 1998.

"The earliest possible enforcement of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty must become an important stage in the nuclear disarmament process. Ample conditions are in place for this, given the positive signals coming from the United States and indicating

that the attitude to this treaty has changed," Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vitaly Churkin said.

"We are insistently urging all nations, primarily those on which the treaty's enforcement depends, to sign and ratify it without delay. The observance of the voluntary moratorium on nuclear tests, however important, cannot replace legally binding obligations in this area," Churkin said.

"We think all countries possessing nuclear weapons must eventually join the Russian-American efforts to cut strategic nuclear arsenals in the foreseeable future," he added. "A tangible contribution by non-nuclear states to the effort to create a favorable environment for real nuclear disarmament, is of no small importance" (Interfax, March 31).

Russia Ships Air Defenses to China

China has received 15 Russian S-300 air-defense batteries that could be used against cruise missiles and airplanes, Reuters reported today (see *GSN*, Jan. 10).

"We have implemented a contract to deliver to China the newest system S-300," said Igor Ashurbeili, head of system manufacturer Almaz Antei, according to Interfax.

Each defense system would involve four missiles loaded into metal tubing on trucks. The missiles have a flight range of up to 90 miles.

Iran is also waiting on delivery of its own order of S-300 air-defense systems, which could be used to secure the Middle Eastern nation's nuclear facilities from air attacks. The purchase has caused concern within Israel and the United States and has strained Israeli--Russian relations.

Ashurbeili said his firm intended to deliver a third battery of the more-sophisticated S-400 to the Russian military "any day now."

Moscow has also said it is preparing the S-500 system, which could provide air and space defenses and have the capability to eliminate ballistic weapons flying 3 miles per second

Putin deepens ties with Chavez on Venezuela visit

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez announced Russia's offer before Putin arrived Friday, saying officials would discuss the possibility of setting up a "satellite launcher and a factory." Chavez didn't give details or say how much that might cost.

The two countries are also discussing weapons deals, some of which are new, Chavez said Thursday night in televised remarks, without giving details.

Chavez has built close ties with Russia in recent years and has bought more than \$4 billion in Russian weapons since 2005, including helicopters, fighter jets and 100,000 Kalashnikov rifles.

Russian and Venezuelan officials also planned to sign new agreements for energy projects in Venezuela, as well as industrial, commercial and agriculture projects.

Chavez also reiterated that Russia will help Venezuela develop nuclear energy — a plan he has mentioned previously that has yet to take shape.

"We aren't going to make an atomic bomb, but we are going to develop atomic energy with peaceful aims," he said. Chavez, whose country is a major oil exporter and OPEC member, says "we have to prepare ourselves for the post-oil era."

After welcoming Putin at the airport, Chavez accompanied the Russian leader on a tour of a Russian Navy ship that is paying a port call in Venezuela.

Russian president slams lawmakers for shirking duties

This is not a part of my remit, this is an issue for the State Duma, the internal workings of the State Duma, the president said. "But as the guarantor of the constitution, I cannot help but say that I am surprised by pictures of the State Duma chamber when there sits only 10-15% of the listed members."

"We need to do something about this. It ultimately insults the people who voted for the party," Medvedev said.

The president suggested changing the regulations to force lawmakers with poor attendance records to leave parliament.

"I am not imposing anything on you, you are an independent authority, but I cannot ignore this," Medvedev said. "It is a question of discipline and, ultimately, the quality of decisions taken, including bills."

The lower house of Russia's parliament is dominated by the United Russia party, which is led by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Medvedev was a senior party member until he became president.

USSR and Cuba: love at first sight

On May 8, Russia and Cuba will mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Fidel Castro's Cuba. Genrikh Borovik, one of Russia's best known foreign correspondents, was in Cuba at that time with the blessing of the Politbureau member Anastas Mikoyan, who spearheaded Soviet contacts

with Castro. In a conversation with Russia Profile Editor Andrey Zolotov, Jr., Borovik recalls those dramatic days and his first impressions.

U.S. voices concern over Venezuelan arms purchases from Russia

The U.S. has reiterated its concerns over Venezuelan arms purchases from Russia, a U.S. State Department official has said.

During his visit to Caracas, Putin will also oversee the delivery of the last four Russian Mi-17 Hip helicopters out of the total of 38 under a 2006 contract.

"I think we've voiced our concerns, if you will, but our opinions about Venezuela's need for these kinds of defense systems previously from the podium," Acting Deputy Department Spokesman Mark Toner said.

"Beyond that, Venezuela, Bolivia, any country, is entitled to pursue its own bilateral relationship with any other country, clearly. So - but just beyond, kind of, questioning the need for Venezuela to have such a robust defense system, no comment," he added.

During his visit to Moscow in September, Chavez said Venezuela would buy 92 T-72 tanks and an unspecified number of Smerch multiple rocket launchers from Russia, among other military inventory.

Since 2005, Venezuela has bought \$4 billion worth of Russian weaponry, including warplanes, helicopters, and Kalashnikov assault rifles.

Lubyanka Bombing Suspect Identified

Law enforcement officials have identified one of the two suspected suicide bombers who killed 40 people and injured about 90 others in twin attacks on Moscow's metro on March 29.

The bombing at the Lubyanka metro station could have been carried out by Dzhennet Abdurakhmanova, the young widow of a North Caucasus rebel who was killed in a sweep operation by the Federal Security Service late last year.

Abdurakhmanova, also identified as Abdullayeva, is the 17-year-old widow of Dagestani rebel leader Umalat Magomedov, also identified as Al Bar, who was killed on Dec. 31, a source in the National Anti-Terrorism Committee told Interfax Friday.

The other suspected suicide bomber is Markha Ustarkhanova, the 20-year-old widow of Chechen rebel leader Said-Emin Khizriyev, who was killed in October after law enforcement agencies received a tip that he was preparing to assassinate Chechen

President Ramzan Kadyrov, Kommersant reported Thursday, citing a source in the Chechen Interior Ministry.

However, a Chechen law enforcement source told RIA-Novosti Thursday that Ustarkhanova was not one of the two suicide bombers.

Ustarkhanova, who is on a list of missing persons, wanted to become a suicide bomber to avenge her husband's death, a Chechen Interior Ministry source told Kommersant.

Meanwhile, authorities have drafted a color-coded system for warning the population about terrorism threats that would be similar to systems used in the United States and Britain, Anatoly Safonov, a special presidential envoy for international cooperation in fighting terrorism, told Interfax Thursday.

The population prevention system would include terms such as "dangerous," "high" and "threatening," coded by green, orange and red, to define the level of a terrorist threat, Interfax reported Thursday, citing a 2008 interview with a senior official at the National Anti-Corruption Committee, Yevgeny Ilyin.

The committee has drafted law amendments to introduce the system, Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev told Interfax last week.

President Dmitry Medvedev on Wednesday ordered the government to draft a program within the next four months that would spell out complex safety measures for the country's transportation system.

Medvedev ordered the government to equip public transport before next April with technical devices that would make it "invulnerable to the acts of illegal intrusion" and to enforce the program introducing safety measures on transport before January 2014, said an order published on the Kremlin's web site.

Medvedev's order didn't say what kind of devices the transport could be equipped with or what kind of safety measures could be introduced.

The death toll in March 29 bombing reached 40 people, after a 51-year-old man died in a hospital Friday morning, while 87 people injured in the bombings remained hospitalized Friday, Interfax reported.

Moscow law enforcement officials have sent screenshots of the two suspected suicide bombers and their suspected male associate taken from video cameras in the Moscow metro to their colleagues in the North Caucasus, a source in the law enforcement agencies of the North Caucasus told RIA-Novosti Friday.

The suspected associate of the suicide bombers could be Pavel Kosolapov, a native of the southern city of Volgograd, whom authorities suspect of masterminding a series of deadly bombings, including the one between the Avtozavodskaya and Paveletskaya

metro stations in February 2004, the one outside the Rizhaskaya metro station in August 2004 and the Nevsky Express train bombings in 2007 and 2009, a source in the law enforcement agencies of the North Caucasus told Gazeta.ru Friday.

Economic:

IPO bonanza on hold

Cash-hungry Russian firms were looking to the stock market to raise capital with a wave of listings expected in 2010 but analysts say they are still undervalued by investors. And amidst lower interest rates, companies will be looking to banks to fill their coffers with cash, as was the case with Vladimir Potanin's Profmedia.

His investment vehicle Interros has postponed a listing of 20-30 per cent of its Cyprus-registered media arm that could have raised up to \$1 billion, with one source close to the company saying it felt the market was unfavourable - and analysts agreed.

"The fact that the company cancelled its IPO has something to do with the current state of the IPO market," said Yaroslav Lissovlik, chief economist at Deutsche Bank. "Another reason could be that company perspectives don't look rosy."

Instead, Profmedia has secured a seven-billion-rouble (\$235.6 million), seven-year credit line by state-run Sberbank in order to help settle its debts with VTB.

Metals and mining giant Metalloinvest, is also reconsidering its 10-20 per cent placement in London or Hong Kong, which could have valued the company at \$20 billion.

Experts believe that 2010 will still be a bonanza year for listings but that many are just waiting for the market to be suitable for their firm.

"We should see a series of IPOs soon, including Gazprombank, Megafon, SUEK and some others," said Troika Dialog chief strategist Kingsmill Bond. "It's unwise to avoid (placements) now. Companies should take advantage of the relatively stable market."

Most of the offerings planned for 2010 had been held over since before the crisis, when the RTS crashed from 2,500 to 500. Since then, it has risen back to 1,500 making the total capitalisation of Russian companies \$900 billion according to Konstantin Chernyshev, head of analytics at Uralsib, who considers the will-they, won't-they state of IPOs "a reflection of the current state of the market."

"The market takes all risks into consideration, which are higher than two years ago, and asks for a premium," said Chernyshev. "Russia is considered as a risky market because the crisis is not over yet."

Analysts say that it is only a matter of time before companies do start holding IPOs as they seek to raise funds for cash or pay off foreign debt, which mounted during the boom. "I don't think that we can talk about a trend, and postponed IPOs will sooner or later reach the market," said Alexander Goldin, head of the Russian Association of Investor Relations Professionals.

Heavy industry still continues to lead the way in the offering stakes, in particular metals and mining, which has been boosted by higher prices and good results. "When I look at companies, lined up for IPOs, I can't say that there is any trend to cancel placements," said Lissovlik, of Deutsche Bank. "There will be more placements quite soon among well-known companies in such sectors as metallurgy and transport, including sea ports."

Easier bank credit is also behind the apparent fall from fashion of IPOs according to Natalya Orlova, chief economist at Alfa Bank, adding that companies would have sold equity if they expected their business to deteriorate.

But despite Profmedia securing the Sberbank loan at an interest rate of 12 per cent, some analysts say that this will not provide the same opportunities as an IPO. "You cannot attract a lot with the help of credit, because a bank loan measures your company's current value, while an IPO evaluates its perspectives," said Metropol's Sergei Vasin.

Investors unfazed by bombings

The dollar-denominated RTS was 1.2 per cent higher by 1pm on Monday following a 0.3 per cent rise on Friday as risk appetite increased due to the Eurozone bailout of Athens.

Oil moved higher to \$81 a barrel, though fluctuated after contradictory statements from the President of the European Central Bank, Jean Claude Trichet, who first criticised IMF aid before going on to say he was "entirely content" with the package.

Investors were expecting fluctuations and a run to safety in the wake of the two blasts that hit the Moscow metro early Monday morning but the rouble denominated MICEX was also 1 per cent up.

"Despite a relatively benign global backdrop this morning, this news is clearly going to inject a lot of volatility into Russian equities today, with risk premiums likely to expand on the news," Tom Mundy, a strategist at Renaissance Capital, wrote in a note to investors.

As Muscovites tried to come to terms with the unfolding events, investors focused on driving the market higher before the end of the first quarter on Wednesday.

"It's sad commentary on modern society but unless there are more bombs or a continuation of the story I don't think the market is going to be affected," said Scott Semet, head of research at IFD Kapital. "Right now everything is plus."

Despite France and Germany finally agreeing on a bailout bringing some stability to the Eurozone, analysts say the underlying problems still remain on the cards and will deal a blow to recovery hopes later this year.

"I don't think Greece's problems are over just yet, and there are going to be more in Italy, Spain or Portugal," said Semet. "The market is just ignoring it and in the short term we are going to rally."

While Semet remains "tactically bullish" over the short term, other analysts see more long term upsides, looking at good price to earnings ratios if the recovery continues.

"Despite the strong market performance over the past year, Russian equities still offer significant upside to their long-term value," Chris Weafer, chief strategist at Uralsib, wrote in a Friday note to investors.

State May Ease Rules For Offshore Energy

the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry is proposing to loosen the rules that allow just two state-controlled industry leaders, Rosneft and Gazprom, to explore and develop oil and gas riches off Russia's coasts, deputy minister Sergei Donskoi said Tuesday.

The proposal, intended to boost investment in the technologically challenging sea shelf areas, will likely win cheers from Russian and foreign energy companies that have complained about increased difficulty in getting access to new reserves.

"By and large, the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, as before, believes that the resources of only two companies — Gazprom and Rosneft — are insufficient to develop sea shelf," Donskoi said at a government meeting dedicated to Russia's marine policy, RIA-Novosti reported.

If the plan gets government approval, Gazprom would share access to the fields with its subsidiaries, Donskoi was quoted as saying in a ministry statement. Any of them could also join forces with foreign partners, giving them up to 50 percent ownership.

In the oil industry, the proposed changes would allow Rosneft's subsidiaries and other Russian companies, provided that they have adequate money and technology, to work offshore alone or in international partnerships.

In addition, Donskoi suggested lifting the ban for foreign companies to explore offshore areas, saying the government must guarantee that companies — domestic and foreign alike — will have the option to become junior partners of the two state-run industry champions in developing any newfound reserves.

"It's necessary to help our state companies share the risk of offshore operations," Donskoi said, according to the ministry's statement.

It remained unclear Tuesday, however, whether the ministry had officially submitted the proposal to the Cabinet. Calls to the ministry's press office went unanswered Tuesday afternoon.

Gazprom said it did not mind the part of the idea that would expand the list of authorized offshore operators to cover its subsidiaries.

“At the same time, the issue of including foreign companies on that list appears untimely,” Gazprom said in an e-mailed statement.

A Rosneft spokesman said the country's biggest oil producer did not comment on proposals by government agencies.

Jim Mulva, chairman and CEO of ConocoPhillips, suggested last week that the privileged position of Russia's state-controlled firms might have been the reason why the U.S. company didn't grow as fast as it hoped after buying a 20 percent stake in LUKoil, Russia's biggest private oil producer. ConocoPhillips recently decided to sell half of the stake.

Rosneft and Gazprom exclusively meet the requirements of the 2008 legislation that reserved the right to work at offshore fields for Russian-registered companies in which the government owns more than 50 percent. Eligible companies must also have at least a five-year record of operating at such fields.

The most promising fields lie off the Arctic and Pacific coasts, officials said.

At the rate the two companies spend on offshore exploration and development, they will take 165 years to meet the ministry's targets, instead of the 30 years that ministry officials believe is necessary, the ministry said in a statement.

Rosneft and Gazprom cumulatively invested 56.4 billion rubles in offshore work in 2008, the year when energy companies reaped some of their highest profits on the back of a prices surge before the global economy collapsed into a crisis, the statement said.

Henkel to build two plants for the production of mortar in Russia by 2012

The company's development strategy foresees the set-up of production sites in all of Russia's regions.

Henkel KgaA owns 140 enterprises in various countries. The company's subsidiary, Henkel Bautechnik (in Russia OOO Henkel Bautechnik) is one of the leading producers of building and home repair materials.

In Russia, production of Ceresit building mortar takes place at OOO Henkel Bautechnik in the Moscow region and in the Chelyabinsk region. In addition, the plants produce industrial glues and materials for surface finishing, as well as household glues for repairs at OJSC Henkel ERA in Engels.

In July 2010, Henkel plans to launch production of dry mortar in the Ulyanovsk region with capacity of around 100,000 tonnes a year. Investment in this production comes to 11.5 million euro.

LUKOIL to invest 480 million dollars in Uzbekistan

Russia's Gazprom, LUKOIL and Soyuzneftegas companies are present in Uzbekistan's market, he said.

"We are actively cooperating in fuel and energy," Ivanov said. "Analysts say that over the past few years only LUKOIL has invested several billion dollars in Uzbekistan."

The investments planned for the current year "is big money," the deputy prime minister said.

Money row holds up Belarus's first nuclear power plant

The ex-Soviet country, which was one of the most affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, plans to build the plant in its western Grodno region, with the first reactor expected to be put into service in 2016 and the second in 2018. The Russian nuclear equipment export monopoly, Atomstroyexport, is to implement the project.

"We are at the stage of signing an inter-governmental agreement on the construction of the nuclear power plant. There are differences only on one issue - the cost," Alexander Surikov said.

The Belarusians wanted Russia to cover the project's risks, which Russia was not willing to do, he said, adding "if the Belarusian government takes upon itself the risks, the issue of financing and constructing the plant is settled."

Nikolai Grusha, head of the nuclear energy department at the Belarusian Energy Ministry, earlier said estimates for the construction were based on Atomstroyexport's overseas experience, according to which the contractor financed 85% of construction works and the client 15%.

Belarus, which earlier intended to announce a tender for the construction of its first nuclear power plant, then selected Russia without holding a tender as Moscow pledged to provide Minsk with a loan for the construction.

In May 2009, Belarus asked Russia for a \$9 billion loan. In February 2010, Surikov said Russia was ready to provide a loan to its western neighbor, but did not specify the sum, saying the loan would cover only part of the construction works.

Last week, during a meeting with Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping in Minsk, Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko invited China to participate in the project and Beijing pledged to invest some \$10 billion in the Belarusian economy.

Commenting on Lukashenko's move, Surikov said Russia was likely to withdraw from the project if China was involved.

"We have our own secrets and we do not want to share them with young Chinese firms," he said.

Russians Buy 7 Million Cell Phones in Three Months

Russia 's largest cell phone retailer, Euroset, said that the turnover of the domestic market of cell phones made up 31.6 billion rubles in the first quarter of 2010, which marked a 2.1% increase in comparison with 2009 and a 25% decrease vs. the pre-crisis first quarter of 2008.

The retail market of cell phones hit the bottom line in Russia in May-June 2009 when it went 40% down vs. May 2008. The average price of a cell phone sold in Russian retail networks made up \$157, which was 24% lower than in 2008.

It is obvious that the market has not recovered after the crisis, experts believe. They say that the increase of sales volume is connected with the period when people begin to replace their old phones, which they purchased before the economic crisis. A cell phone usually lasts for 30-36 months.

Russians mostly prefer Nokia phones. The phones of this renowned company made up 40 percent of all the phones sold. Samsung follows the Finnish maker with 36 percent.

Analysts say that Nokia mostly produces cell phones which women prefer to buy as gifts for their men. Samsung released several successful models of cell phones which can be popular with both men and women.

LG follows the two most popular makers with 13 percent of sold mobile phones. Sony Ericsson continued to lose its positions on the Russian market and hit the level of only three percent. Experts say that this company prefers not to produce cheap devices and concentrates on relatively expensive phones.

In the USA, the market of cell phones has been dominated by smartphones recently. The sales of smartphones in the United States have increased by 29 percent during the recent six months and will continue to grow in the foreseeable future. People prefer to buy either cheap simple phones or highly functional multimedia smartphones. All intermediate devices do not enjoy any demand.

In Russia, people mostly prefer cheaper cell phones due to the crisis. However, the popularity of smartphones among Russian customers has been growing recently and hit the level of 13-15 percent as of the end of 2009.

Labour pensions are raised by 6 percent – Health Ministry

Russia's labour pensions have been raised by 6.3 percent from Thursday. The state-financed social pensions have been raised by 8.8 percent, Russia's Ministry of Healthcare and Social Development said. An average labour pension makes up almost 7,800 roubles and a labour pension for age retirees – 8,180. An average social pension reaches 4,600 roubles. Following the valorisation effected in January and the latest April raise, labour pensions have grown by 46 percent.

Those who enjoy 'social surplus' payments are advised to remember that these payments will be reduced accordingly. This change is effective for the benefits covering the gaps between pensions and regional living wages. The state-financed social benefit is not a part of pensions.

Russian minister urges CIS to step up mutual financial support

He reminded that in 2009, the CIS states experienced "an unprecedented slump in the Gross Domestic Product, which plummeted 7.5 percent on the average. Prior to the crisis, the GDP was growing 5.5 percent a year, on the average. Our countries' exports plunged 46 percent and imports - 43.5 percent."

Kudrin also noted the different reactions by CIS economies. For example, the largest downturns hit the economies of Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia, whereas Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan posted a certain growth. "The situations in CIS states are different," Kudrin said.

Sergei Lebedev, chairman of the CIS Executive Committee noted that CIS trade turnover fell 38 percent in 2009.

According to the CIS Statistics Committee, CIS unemployment in January 2010 increased by 5 percent from the same period in 2009.

The prognosis for the future trend is discouraging: the jobless rate is expected to increase to 8 percent by the end of this year, versus 7.5 percent in December 2009.

Despite the fact that Russia's economic indicators did not show the stability posted by other CIS states, Russia did not borrow money on the international markets during the crisis, Kudrin said.

"We haven't placed loans since 1998," he said.

The CIS Statistics Committee reported that in January 2010, the Gross Domestic Product grew 9.2 percent in Azerbaijan, 2.4 percent in Armenia, 1.3 percent in Belarus, and 4.2 percent in Tajikistan, while CIS industrial production was up 8 percent on the average.

S&P says bad loans in Russia still hampering growth

Russian banks have put the worst of the bad loans crisis behind them but still face a lengthy and painstaking recovery to full financial health, Standard & Poor's ratings agency said on Wednesday.

S&P revised its outlook to stable from negative on 14 Russian financial institutions including the Russian unit of Societe Generale SGN.PA, and UniCredit bank's (CRDI.MI) local unit, both ranked among the country's top ten lenders. [ID:nSPW6ZKfBw]

"The operating conditions for financial institutions in Russia are gradually stabilizing," S&P said in a statement.

"While we anticipate no further material increase in the share of the banking system's problem loans, asset quality is unlikely to recover back to pre-2008 levels for at least a couple of years," it added.

Mounting bad debt increased Russian banks' vulnerability to adverse developments and constrained their growth for at least the next couple of years.

Russia's biggest lender, state-controlled Sberbank (SBER03.MM), has already said it remains conservative on this year's earnings and credit growth. [ID:nLDE62H157]

Ukraine offers Russia role in gas pipe plan with EU

The announcement by Prime Minister Mykola Azarov effectively reversed a March 2009 agreement, signed by former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, for the EU to overhaul its pipeline system -- a move that had angered Moscow.

"The declaration, signed in March last year in Brussels, was not fulfilled by the Ukrainian side as required and the European Commission did not undertake realistic steps for it to be carried out," Azarov told journalists.

"Now we envisage a three-sided approach to modernisation: the participation of Russia, the EC and the Ukrainian side," he added.

The question of which partner Ukraine would choose to help it modernise its pipeline network is politically sensitive since European consumers rely on Russian natural gas piped across Ukraine for about a fifth of their supplies.

The move by the new leadership of President Viktor Yanukovich, which says it wants to pursue a more balanced policy between Russia and the West, appeared to be a concession to Moscow, which had bristled at being shut out of discussions on the issue last year.

At the time, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin threatened to review ties with the EU and officials said the risk of gas supply disruptions would rise if Russian interests were ignored.

The spat revived fears of a repeat of a January 2009 gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine, when major EU customers were left without gas for nearly two weeks in the dead of winter.

Azarov, who met Putin in Moscow last month, said on Friday that a meeting of officials from concerned governments was planned for April 22 and Ukraine would go to Moscow with updated proposals on the issue. [ID:nLDE62O2H1]

Azarov said modernisation would cost "billions of dollars" but much would depend on the volumes of gas Russia intended to export over the next 10-15 years and the volumes the EU was prepared to buy.

Currently, Ukraine's pipeline system is capable of handling 140 billion cubic metres of gas per year. In 2009, the EU received 96 billion cubic metres of gas through the Ukrainian pipeline system.

Social:

Twelve killed in Dagestan explosions

A double terrorist attack on the police HQ in Kislyar has killed 12 people and injured 29, RIA Novosti reports.

Within 20 minutes a suicide bomber wearing a police jacket joined rescue workers and set off a second blast.

The investigative committee of the Prosecutor's Office thinks that the strength of the first blast could be up to 200 kg in TNT equivalent.

The dead and injured included police officers, local residents and local Interior Ministry staff.

Wednesday morning's attack comes just two days after suicide bombers killed 39 people on the Moscow Metro in a pair of explosions at Lubyanka and Park Kultury stations.

Moscow metro bombings – investigators seek trio

The official death toll from Monday's attacks on the Moscow metro has risen to 39 - with more than 60 still in hospital, many in a serious condition.

Meanwhile as the city marks an official day of mourning with commuters leaving flowers at the scenes of yesterday's double blast, investigators are stepping up the search for three accomplices to the suicide bombers.

The trio were filmed by security cameras as they helped the bombers get into the network at Yugo-Zapadnaya, the southernmost station on the Sokolnicheskaya line where both explosions took place. Officers are searching flats where the terrorists may have stayed near Yugo-Zapadnaya and in Moscow Region.

Police are looking for two women of Slavic appearance, one aged about 25, the other around 40. They are also seeking a 30-year-old man, 180 cm tall, with a small beard and a dark baseball cap. His surname is believed to be Matayev.

Some reports suggest that the Federal Security Service (FSB) was aware of the planned attacks, but had been unable to prevent them. RBC Daily said that last week police patrols were stepped up at all metro stations and emergency drills were carried out on the Sokolnicheskaya line at the weekend, while a roadblock was set up near Yugo-Zapadnaya.

The newspaper also heard from a source in the prosecutor's office that the second blast was intended not for Park Kultury, but either Oktyabrskaya - near the interior ministry HQ - or Arbatskaya, close to the Army headquarters.

FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov told president Dmitry Medvedev that the most likely theory is that extremists from the North Caucasus were responsible. The law-enforcement agencies have recently killed several leading extremists in the volatile region and some see the acts as revenge.

It is thought that the terrorists may have been driven to Moscow on buses from Grozny, Makhachkala or Nalchik. Unlike air and rail routes there are no official ticket sales and no registration or ID checks for passengers, who simply hand the fare to the driver.

After the attacks President Medvedev said that those responsible for them will be found and destroyed. Prime Minister Putin also expressed certainty that the law enforcement agencies will do everything to find and punish the perpetrators.

In Moscow, officials are working with mobile phone operators to establish whether the bombs were detonated using phone signals. Communications companies are providing details of all calls in the area of the attacks in a bid to identify those responsible.

Forensic examinations of the bodies of the suspected bombers suggest they were women from the Caucasus, aged 18-20. Interfax reported that the train blown up at Lubyanka was fitted with video cameras and investigators are analysing images of the bombers.

Explosives experts believe that hexogen was used to make the bombs, which were stuffed with metal fragments and other shrapnel to maximise the damage.

In the aftermath of the attacks, rumours swept the city of other bombs. A metro worker told RBC of explosives found at Begovaya and Komsomolskaya, while reports of a second unexploded device at Park Kultury were denied by the authorities.

Tighter security measures have been announced in the city and in airports, train stations and on the metro. These measures will also be in place for the Easter celebrations on April 4 and Victory Day on May 9.

A full list of all the victims should be confirmed by lunchtime, according to the head of Moscow's healthcare department.

Donor campaign to help wounded in metro begins in Moscow

Our campaign is aimed at replenishing the reserve of donor blood used in aid to victims of terrorism, “ a representative of the Moscow government in charge of the project Anna Kostikova declared. The campaign will continue for three days at least and will involve 110 donors. But we expect the number of donors to be even higher, Kostikova said.

Many people learned about the campaign from Internet sites and immediately joined the campaign. Around 80 people came to the blood transfusion center in Polikarpova street by 9.00 am Wednesday, Kostikova said.

The number of donors registered on Tuesday and Wednesday was 20-30 percent more than usual. There are many young people and students among the donors, said Deputy Head doctor of the blood transfusion center Vladimir Potapsky. There is a sufficient reserve of donor blood now for the assistance to the victims wounded in the metro explosions, Potapsky said.

Most of the donors who give their blood during these days are volunteers giving their blood gratis. Nonetheless, they will be given an obligatory compensation worth 500 roubles for lunch, Kostikova said. As a rule, donors are paid 1,676 roubles in compensation for plasma and around 1,000 roubles in donor's fee

Russia Fears More Attacks by 'Black Widows'

19 members of female 'martyrs' brigade' remain at large

Buryatsky was killed by Russian forces earlier this month. Of the original 30, 11 bombers have carried out their missions, leaving 19—all likely filled with thoughts of revenge after the killing of their boss. The terrorists are called "black widows" because they often have lost husbands, fathers, or brothers in violence with Russian forces, the *Telegraph* reports.

What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?

ALMOST every month for the past two years, Chechen suicide bombers have struck. Their targets can be anything from Russian soldiers to Chechen police officers to the

innocent civilians who were killed on the subway in Moscow this week. We all know the horror that people willing to kill themselves can inflict. But do we really understand what drives young women and men to strap explosives on their bodies and deliberately kill themselves in order to murder dozens of people going about their daily lives?

The three of us, in our work for the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, have analyzed every Chechen suicide attack since they began in 2000, 42 separate incidents involving 63 people who killed themselves. Many Chechen separatists are Muslim, but few of the suicide bombers profess religious motives. The majority are male, but a huge fraction — over 40 percent — are women. Although foreign suicide attackers are not unheard of in Chechnya, of the 42 for whom we can determine place of birth, 38 were from the Caucasus. Something is driving Chechen suicide bombers, but it is hardly global jihad.

As we have discovered in our research on Lebanon, the West Bank, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and elsewhere, suicide terrorist campaigns are almost always a last resort against foreign military occupation. Chechnya is a powerful demonstration of this phenomenon at work.

In the 1990s, the rebels kicked out tens of thousands of Russian troops who had been sent to the region to prevent Chechnya, a republic within the Russian Federation, from declaring independence. In 1999, the Russians came back — this time with more than 90,000 troops — and waged a well-documented scorched-earth campaign, killing an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 civilians out of a population of about 1 million. Ordinary guerrilla tactics and hostage-taking — the keys to ousting the Russians the first time — now got the rebels nowhere. New tactics were employed and women were central from the start.

On June 7, 2000, two Chechen women, Khava Barayeva and Luiza Magomadova, drove a truck laden with explosives into a Russian special forces building in Alkhan-Yurt, Chechnya; while the Russians insist only two soldiers were killed, the Chechen rebel claim of more than two dozen fatalities seems more likely.

This was the first Chechen suicide attack and showed the many advantages of female suicide bombers. They were deadly, as Chechen female attackers generally are, killing an average of 21 people per attack compared to 13 for males. Perhaps far more important, they could inspire others to follow in their footsteps, women and men alike.

Ms. Barayeva made a martyr video, as many suicide bombers do before their attacks. While warning Russia that she was attacking for Chechen independence, she also directed a powerful message clearly meant to provoke men to make similar sacrifices out of a sense of honor. She pleaded for Chechen men to “not take the woman’s role by staying at home”; so far, 32 men have answered her call.

Just as important, Ms. Barayeva is considered responsible for inspiring a movement of “black widows” — women who have lost a husband, child or close relative to the

“occupation” and killed themselves on missions to even the score. In total, 24 Chechen females ranging in age from 15 to 37 have carried out suicide attacks, including the most deadly — the coordinated bombings of two passenger flights in August 2004 that caused 90 deaths and (according to Russian authorities) the subway blasts on Monday that killed nearly 40.

The bombers’ motives spring directly from their experiences with Russian troops, according to Abu al-Walid, a rebel leader who was killed in 2004. “These women, particularly the wives of the mujahedeen who were martyred, are being threatened in their homes, their honor [is] being threatened,” he explained in a video that appeared on Al Jazeera. “They do not accept being humiliated and living under occupation.”

And female suicide attackers have one more advantage: They can often travel inconspicuously to their targets. A July 2003 investigative report by the Russian news magazine *Kommersant-Vlast* found that a potential female suicide bomber could easily avoid public suspicion. Just days after a Chechen suicide bomber, Zarema Muzhakhoyeva, tried but failed to blow up a Moscow cafe in 2003, one of the magazine’s journalists — wearing a niqab, tightly clutching a black satchel to her chest, and behaving in a nervous manner — was able to get a table at the same cafe without ever being questioned. Perhaps not surprisingly, Chechen women have carried out 8 of the 10 suicide attacks in Moscow.

Russian religious leaders condemn Moscow subway blasts

The heads of Russia's main religious faiths condemned on Monday the two Moscow subway blasts that killed least 37 people and injured dozens.

The Council of Muftis said "extremism and terrorism have no basis in the Holy Quran."

It said "a terrorist cannot be a Muslim while a Muslim cannot be a terrorist."

Russia's chief rabbi, Berl Lazar, said he was sure the masterminds of the terrorist attack would get the punishment they deserved.

Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia, who heads the Russian Orthodox Church, called for solidarity in the face of the tragedy and condemned not only the terrorists but people who have tried to cash in on human grief.

"I've just been told that taxi drivers have raised their prices several times just because people are unable to use the metro," he said, warning that "this money will do you no good."

The first attack took place at 7:52 a.m. (03:52 GMT) at the Lubyanka station, located a short distance from the FSB headquarters. The second bomb detonated some 40 minutes later at the nearby Park Kultury station, within walking distance of the Kremlin.

Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov said in both cases the bombs were packed with metal nuts and bolts meant to increase the destructive nature of the blast.

A police source earlier told RIA Novosti that the bomb was detonated at a height of 100-200 cm and was apparently attached to the waist of a female suicide bomber.

Bortnikov, said terrorists from Russia's volatile North Caucasus may have been responsible for the blasts. He said the bodies of "two female suicide bombers who were residing in the North Caucasus had been found at the explosion sites."

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has called for tightened security across the country in the light of the attacks.

Husband and Wife Rape Their Daughter for Two Years

The man, a 44-year-old driver Nikolai Yeroshevich, and his common-law 36-year-old wife, named only as Natalia, had been abusing their daughter for two years after the girl turned 15, Fontanka.ru reports.

The man started having an intimate relationship with the woman's daughter Olesya after the girl's mother split with her father and came to live with Nikolai Yeroshevich. One day the woman found a nude picture of her daughter in Nikolai's cell phone and asked him for an explanation. The family scandal had a bizarre ending: the man said that he wanted to sleep with both of them, otherwise he would leave.

When interrogated, the woman told the police that she had fallen in love with Nikolai and did not want to lose him. She talked to her daughter in an attempt to make the girl keep their new family alive. The woman told the girl that many families live like that, and the girl eventually agreed to have sexual contacts with her step-father.

Olesya started sleeping with Nikolai on a regular basis. Her mother joined them afterwards. The pervert told the woman that he had to touch a young body to be able to fulfill his bedroom duties. The intimate family relationship developed into sex orgies: the family couple took explicit pictures of each other and uploaded them on the internet.

The pervert parents made a whole gallery of their daughter's pictures. Afterwards, they decided to offer the girl to someone else. Investigators found a lot of pornographic pictures and videos in their apartment.

Olesya realized the insanity of her situation in 2008. The girl tried to refuse from sex with her step-father, but she was forced to have sexual intercourses with the man again. The girl started drinking to escape from her terrible reality.

One day she came home drunk and said that she did not want to continue living like that. When the man came back home he said that she would have to sleep with him if she

wanted to stay alive. The frightened girl grabbed a knife and stabbed herself in the stomach.

The wound was not serious: the girl was hospitalized but recovered in a week. When she returned home, Nikolai began to rape her again. Afterwards, the girl's mother brought another man home and said that Olesya would have to sleep with him for money.

Russian Fashion Week celebrating its 10 years

Russian Fashion Week, the biggest fashion event in Eastern Europe, is celebrating its 20th season/10 years in Moscow's Congress-Hall of World Trade Centre on April 1-6.

"For us every season is already a holiday. The number of Russian designers grows from year to year. The halls are overfilled with buyers and clients of the Fashion Houses. The brand Russian Fashion Week made a noise in the world of fashion. This is a good result of a decade's work," the general producer of Russian Fashion Week, Alexander Shumsky, said in an interview with Itar-Tass.

Catwalk show from South Korean fashion designer Lie Sang Bong will be devoted to the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Russia and South Korea. Organizers of the show disclosed some secrets - models will wear creations containing letters in Cyrillic and Hangul from verses of famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin and Korean poet Kim So-wol.

A large-scale business program is expected and the Fashion Film Festival will gather not only fashion lovers, but also cinema buffs.

"It's natural that we do not forget that beauty not only is what's on the outside but is what is on the inside," Shumsky said.

"Therefore on April 6 we will organize a catwalk for charity. We've been holding such shows for many seasons. This time it will attract attention to women's health," he said.

Russian Fashion Week's program includes "Extending the Runway: Tatiana Sorokko Style" exhibition by famous Russian top model Tatiana Sorokko.

Russian Fashion Week is held in Moscow twice per year, in April and October, and turns the Russian capital into the hottest fashion destination.

Medvedev, patriarch congratulate Belarus Church head on 75th birthday

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia on Sunday congratulated the head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church on his 75th birthday.

"You have been fulfilling your pastoral duty in Belarus for over 30 years and have won deep respect from the country's nationals by your efforts," Medvedev's telegram to

Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk, the Patriarchal Exarch of All Belarus, said as quoted by the Kremlin.

"The time of your service is marked with a rise in Orthodox Christianity's authority in Belarusian society and by revival of spiritual values that are common for our brotherly nations. Your efforts to maintain civil peace and accord and develop broad interchurch dialogue have received a high assessment and recognition," the telegram said.

Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, personally congratulated Filaret during Sunday morning's liturgy in central Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral.

The patriarch said Filaret had always testified to "eternal Gospel truth," adding that he called on people to "live according to Christ's commandments."

Kirill wished Filaret "strong spiritual and bodily force, success and God's help" in his work.

Belarus' main religion is Orthodox Christianity.

Sex and the City, Moscow-style

"It's against the law," I remember intoning haughtily to my mate as she purchased an illegal copy of *Sex and the City*, a movie we were simply dying to see. For about two days, I resisted the urge to watch the movie with her, feeling that if I did, I would be condoning her illegal activity.

And then I broke down.

I note that two years later, all that's changed. Today, I dabble in the black market pretty much on a daily basis. And I blame that initial viewing of *Sex and the City*.

The black market in Moscow, my friend, is a slippery slope indeed. And you can't resist its Siren's lure as you slide further and further down.

Recently, my date, a European man who has lived here for 10 years, was driving me home from dinner in his all-tinted-windows-and-leather-interior Lamborghini.

We were driving near Patriarshy Ponds and I asked him to stop at the European Medical Centre so I could pick up my AIDS test results for my visa.

"You actually get the test done?" he asked me in surprise.

"Yeah, don't you?"

"God, no. I buy a certificate off the black market," he said carelessly.

From that exchange, I gather it takes about 10 years to slip to the very bottom of the slope. After all, getting the certificate from the EMC is not the hard yards - it takes about 10 minutes and probably costs less than the black market certificate does.

The guy just couldn't be bothered. It was far less burdensome, he explained, to have his driver simply purchase a phony one for him.

After *Sex and the City* came what I now think of as *The Lost Temptation*.

I am one of those people who is highly addicted to the American television series *Lost*, and when the new season started in the States in 2008, I was jonesing bad. My mate P. noticed my agony and turned me on to *The Illegal Download*.

I started small: just *Lost*. Then a little *Grey's Anatomy*. Now, I watch movies recorded by a handheld video camera on opening night.

I have heard that the reason we in Moscow don't get the American blockbuster movies as early as every other country is because Hollywood fears that the Russians would immediately bootleg them for mass distribution.

They must really think that Russian bootleggers are stupid if they think that works. The Russians merely go pirate the movies somewhere else. And thank God for that.

If it wasn't for my beloved Russian pirates, I'd be waiting a long time to watch *Chloe*, the new Liam Neeson thriller, which was released back home today.

Instead, I'm watching it tonight. Fifteen men on a dead man's chest; Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum!

Once I started living outside the law due to the necessities of entertainment, I found it morally easy to expand my forays into the black market. These days I buy all my gin there.

Bootleggers give you really great deals on booze. All you have to do is say the magic word, and a bottle marked "Only for Sale in UK Duty Free" is produced from underneath a chair for one-third the price you'd have to pay at *Azbuka Vkusa*.

"Everything's for sale in Moscow," my European date continued when I got back into the Lamborghini with my HIV Negative stamp of approval from the EMC and a big bottle of black market Gordon's Gin.

"Except for one thing," I smiled.

"Please don't say love," he pleaded. "That's the easiest thing to buy here."

I shook my head. "I wasn't going to. I was going to say: Me."

"Is that true?"

I ran my hand lovingly across the Lamborghini's plush leather car seat, took a swig of gin and laughed. "It's Russia baby, of course that's not tr

Moscow's Christians unite at Easter

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, on Tosnensky Pereulok just off Tverskaya, holds its Good Friday liturgy at 7 pm, an Easter vigil on Saturday from 7 pm, and Easter Sunday masses at 8:30 am ,and 11 am.

At the Catholic cathedral on Malaya Gruzinskaya Ulitsa, the seven stations of the cross are marked at 6 pm on Friday, prior to the liturgy of the Passion at 7:30. Saturday's vigil starts at 7:30 pm, and Easter Sunday services at 10 am and 5:30. The Russian-language masses are followed by a performance of an Easter mystery play performed by young worshippers.

Motorists are warned of traffic restrictions around Moscow's major ceremonies on April 4 and April 11 as police try to ease congestion caused by large numbers of people visiting the graves of their relatives.

On April 3 metro stations will stay open until 2:30 am, while bus operator Mosgortrans is planning to run extra services and free shuttle buses to cemeteries.