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CONTENTS / SOMMAIRE

- p 1-2 **Summary notes**
p 2-3 **Résumés**
p 3-30 **Developping events**
 Revue de presse :
p 3-10 **Azerbaijan**
 Azerbaïdjan
p 10-14 **Armenia**
 Arménie
p 14-20 **Georgia**
 Georgie
p 20-21 **Daghestan**
 Daghestan
p 21-24 **Abkhazia**
 Abkhazie
p 24 **North Ossetia**
 Ossetie du Nord
p 24-25 **South Ossetia**
 Ossetie du Sud
p 25-27 **Chechnya**
 Tchetchénie
p 27-28 **Nagorno Karabakh**
 Haut Karabagh
p 28 **Ingushetia**
 Ingouchie
p 28-29 **Krasnodar Region**
 Région de Krasnodar
p 29-30 **Javakhk**
 Djavakhk
p 30 **Information**

SUMMARY NOTES

AZERBAIJAN

In response to criticism from deputies of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly regarding the plight of political prisoners in Azerbaijan, the president of the Azeri parliament Murtuz Aleskerov reproached the Assembly for a lack of objectivity in addressing the question of political prisoners rather than focusing on the human rights of refugees. Despite the presidential pardon granted to 116 prisoners, hailed by Western diplomats in Baku, the detention conditions of the political prisoners continued to worsen. Thus, following the visit to the Gobustan prison by the Council of Europe's rapporteur, the ex-chief of Police of Gandja, Natig Efendiev, was transferred to solitary confinement without any explanation from the prison administration. He had initiated a hunger strike along with another prisoner. According to a human rights organization official, prison conditions for political prisoners grow worse each time their plight is raised in the media.

Officials from two human rights organizations in Baku were assaulted in their offices. Eldar Zeynalov and Leyla Yunus were subjected to verbal assaults and physical threats by members of the governing party Yeni Azerbaïdjan. The attackers demanded that they be extradited from the country, claiming that they served foreign interests. Leyla Yunus denounced these claims and expressed her fear of returning to the days when those close to President Aliiev ordered

pogroms against the Armenian population of Baku.

ARMENIA

Two rounds of presidential elections caused significant turmoil in Armenia. Starting with the first round, on February 19, mass demonstrations organized by opposition groups resulted in numerous arrests; the OSCE called on the authorities to release detainees, who had been sentenced to prison, and to quickly commute their sentences primarily to fines.

The Constitutional Court rejected an appeal by National Unity Party candidate Artashes Geghamian to invalidate the first round of elections because of widespread fraud. The Court had ordered ballot recounts in 11 polling stations that had been denounced by the opposition or by international observers, and concluded that these infractions could not have affected first round election results.

During the second round, the Constitutional Court demanded that the Presidential Council for Justice inquire into the mass arrests of demonstrators, which was in violation of the European Convention for Human Rights. The Constitutional Court's verdict at the same time confirmed the election of Robert Kotcharian and called for a referendum of confidence in the President, which he rejected due to ambiguity.

ABKHAZIA

A serious political crisis erupted in Abkhazia last April following multilateral talks on a possible solution to the conflict there. The Amsakhara movement led by veterans of the 1992-1993 war called for the resignation of Prime Minister Gennadi Gagulia. Growing criticism from opposition movements along with the sudden escape of 9 prisoners, including a Georgian soldier and several Chechen fighters, intensified the political atmosphere in Abkhazia, eventually leading to the resignation of the Gagulia government and replacement by former KGB officer Raul Khadjimba.

In March, the talks between Georgian President Shevardnadze and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin led to an agreement on concrete measures concerning resettlement in Gali of 45,000 Georgian refugees, renewal of Russian peacekeeping forces until revocation by Abkhazia or Georgia, and other measures addressing communication and energy problems. The unexpected participation of Prime Minister Gagulia in the meetings with Shevardnadze and Putin was seen as a step toward an end to the conflict. However, the proposal to create a joint Georgian-Abkhazian-Russian administration and police force was rejected by the Abkhazians. These "agreements" revealed by President Shevardnadze were no more supported by the Abkhazians than were the conclusions of a working session organized in Geneva last February 19-20 by the "Friends of Georgia" under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General.

Despite these discussions and negotiations, the situation remains unchanged. The Shevardnadze-Putin discussions on Russian forces in Abkhazia are inconsistent with the Georgian President's widely known opposition to such forces, expressed through his frequent proposals to replace them with European or Azeri forces. On the other hand, the UN's Friends of Georgia (France, Germany, the United Kingdom, United States,

Russia) has renewed efforts to create working groups on three important issues: economic recovery, resettlement of refugees and political challenges. In 1997, the UN had created the Council of Coordination to resolve the conflict through three groups which were to deal with similar problems: the economy, refugees and security. Abkhazia had rejected this proposal, objecting that the UN wishes to force it to relinquish its independence.

RESUMES**AZERBAIDJAN**

Devant les critiques des députés de l'Assemblée Parlementaire du Conseil de l'Europe pour les prisonniers politiques en Azerbaïdjan, le président du Parlement de ce pays Murtuz Aleskerov a reproché à cette institution son manque d'objectivité puisqu'elle privilégie la question des prisonniers politiques au lieu de se concentrer sur le problème de droits de l'Homme des personnes déplacées. En dépit de l'amnistie présidentielle accordée à 116 prisonniers, saluée par les représentations diplomatiques occidentales à Bakou, les conditions de détention des prisonniers politiques ont continué à subir des pressions supplémentaires. Ainsi, après la visite à la prison de Gobustan du rapporteur du Conseil de l'Europe, l'ex chef de la Police de Gandja, Natig Efendiev a été transféré dans une cellule de détention solitaire sans aucune explication de l'administration de la prison. Avec un autre prisonnier il a entamé une grève de la faim. Selon une responsable des droits de l'Homme les conditions de détention des prisonniers politiques subissent des dégradations à chaque évocation de leur cas dans les médias.

Les responsables de deux organisations des droits de l'homme à Baku ont été agressés dans leurs locaux. Eldar Zeynalov et Leyla Yunus ont fait l'objet d'attaques verbales et de menaces physiques par des membres du parti

gouvernemental Yeni Azerbaïdjan. Les manifestants ont réclamé leur extradition du pays, les accusant d'être au service de l'étranger. Leyla Yunus a dénoncé l'atmosphère de ces descentes et exprimé sa crainte de voir revenir les jours où les proches du Président Aliiev ordonnaient des pogroms contre les populations arméniennes de Bakou.

ARMENIE

Les deux tours de l'élection présidentielle ont été l'occasion d'une grande agitation en Arménie. Dès le 1^{er} tour, le 19 février, des manifestations massives organisées par l'opposition ont été sanctionnées par de nombreuses arrestations; l'OSCE a fait appel aux autorités pour libérer les détenus qui avaient été condamnés à des peines de prison, rapidement commuées en grande partie en amendes.

Un appel à la Cour Constitutionnelle du candidat du parti de l'Unité Nationale Artashes Geghamian demandant d'invalidier le 1^{er} tour des élections pour fraudes massives, a été rejeté par la Cour qui a ordonné un comptage des bulletins dans 11 bureaux de vote dénoncés par l'opposition ou les observateurs internationaux; elle a finalement conclu que les infractions n'ont pu affecter les résultats du 1^{er} tour.

Saisi au second tour, la Cour Constitutionnelle a demandé au Conseil présidentiel de justice d'enquêter sur les arrestations massives des manifestants, qui contreviennent à la Convention européenne des Droits de l'Homme. Le verdict de la Cour Constitutionnelle a à la fois confirmé l'élection de Robert Kotcharian, et demandé la tenue d'un référendum de confiance envers le Président, que ce dernier a rejeté pour cause d'ambiguïté.

ABKHAZIE

Après les pourparlers multilatéraux sur une solution possible du conflit abkhaze, une grave crise politique a éclaté en

Abkhazie en avril dernier. Critiqué par le mouvement Amsakhara des anciens combattants de la guerre de 1992- 1993, le Premier Ministre Gennadi Gagulia a fait face aux appels à la démission de ladite organisation. Les critiques grandissantes des mouvements d'opposition ajoutées à l'évasion surprise de 9 prisonniers dont un milicien géorgien et quelques combattants tchéchènes ont contribué à aiguïser l'atmosphère politique abkhaze au point de provoquer à la fin la démission du gouvernement Gagulia et son remplacement par Raul Khadjimba, un ancien officier du KGB.

En mars, les pourparlers entre le président géorgien Shvardnadze avec son homologue russe Vladimir Putin ont abouti à un accord sur des dispositions concrètes concernant le rapatriement à Gali de 45000 Géorgiens déplacés, la reconduction du mandat des forces russes de maintien de la paix jusqu'à sa dénonciation par l'Abkhazie ou la Géorgie, et d'autres mesures visant à résoudre les problèmes de communications et d'énergie. La participation surprise du Premier Ministre d'alors Gagulia aux rencontres Shvardnadze et Putin a été considérée comme une avancée dans le sens d'une issue au conflit. Cependant un point particulier portant sur la création d'une administration et d'un police jointes géorgienne, abkhaze et russe a été rejeté par les abkhazes. Ces « accords » divulgués par le Président Shevardnadze n'ont donc pas eu les faveurs de la partie abkhaze, pas plus que les conclusions d'une réunion de réflexion organisée à Genève les 19-20 février dernier par les « Amis de la Géorgie » sous l'égide du Secrétaire général de l'ONU.

On peut dire qu'en dépit du mouvement apparent de discussions et de négociations la situation reste immuable. Les discussions Shevardnadze - Putin sur le mandat des forces russes en Abkhazie paraissent artificielles lorsqu'on sait l'opposition farouche du président géorgien au maintien de ces dernières, exprimée par ses propositions régulières portant sur leur remplacement par des forces européennes ou azéries

De l'autre côté le groupe des Amis de la Géorgie de l'ONU (France, Allemagne, Grande Bretagne, Etats Unis, Russie), ont repris l'idée de

créer des groupes de travail sur trois problèmes importantes, à savoir le redressement économique, le rapatriement des personnes déplacées et les problèmes politiques. En 1997 l'ONU avait créé un Conseil de Coordination pour résoudre le conflit avec trois groupes qui devaient traiter sensiblement des mêmes problèmes : l'économie, les personnes déplacées et les problèmes de sécurité. L'Abkhazie a rejeté ces proposition objectant que l'ONU veut la forcer à renoncer à son indépendance.

DEVELOPPING EVENTS / REVUE DE PRESSE

AZERBAIJAN / AZERBAIDJAN

02/09/03 - Ethnic minorities constitute 9.4 per cent of Azeri population - MPA news agency

Ethnic minorities constitute 9.4 per cent of the total number of residents of Azerbaijan. According to MPA, this information has been provided by the director of the resource centre of migration Hayat, Azar Allahverdiyev.

According to the latest population census of 1999, there are 141,000 Russians, 120,000 Armenians, 43,000 Turks, 30,000 Tatars, 26,000 Ukrainians and 14,000 Georgians in Azerbaijan, Allahverdiyev said.

02/13/03 - Azerbaijan among countries oppressing christians - PanARMENIAN.Net

"Open Doors" international organization advocating rights of Christians throughout the globe has published a list of countries, where Christianity is persecuted in various ways. As reported by "Arminfo" agency, Azerbaijan is the 15-th on the list. North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam occupy the top positions. The publication notes the regimes of these three states are especially notable for cruel oppression of Christians. Laos, Turkmenistan, Somalia, Iran, China, Qatar, Nigeria, Cuba, Egypt, Iraq,

Libya, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, as well as some regions of Russia (Chechnya, Dagestan) are also on the list.

02/13/03 - Azerbaijani President pardons 116 prisoners - RFE/RL Newsline

Heidar Aliyev signed a decree on 11 February pardoning 116 prisoners on the occasion of Kurban Bayram. The prisoners include some sentenced for their role in the purported coup attempts in October 1994 and March 1995; some participants in mass demonstrations in Sheki in November 2000 to protest the alleged falsification of the parliamentary elections; and "dozens" more sentenced when police suppressed various demonstrations. British Ambassador Andrew Tucker welcomed Aliyev's initiative, noting that the sentences handed down on the Sheki protesters "seemed disproportionate to the alleged offenses," Turan reported.

02/13/03 - Azerbaijani parliament speaker, Council of Europe disagree over political prisoners - RFE/RL Newsline

Members of a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) fact-finding mission met in Gobustan jail on 11 February with five men the PACE considers political prisoners, including former Defense Minister Rahim Gaziev and former Gyanja Police Chief Natig Efendiev, Turan reported on 12 February.

The PACE mission then met on 12 February with parliament speaker Murtuz Alesqerov, whom they told that a member state of the Council of Europe should not have political prisoners, Turan reported. Alesqerov for his part accused the PACE of lacking objectivity by focusing on political prisoners while ignoring the human rights of displaced persons. He said that he rejects the PACE's criteria for determining who is a political prisoner and that "it is up to the courts to decide who is a political prisoner and who is not."

Alesqerov further rejected a PACE proposal to conduct a parliamentary debate on the issue of political prisoners.

02/14/03 - Destruction of Armenian historical monuments in Azerbaijan should be condemned and ceased - PanArmenian News

Azeris' planned and consistent destruction of an Armenian historical monument - Jugha settlement in the district of Nakhichevan of Azerbaijan - has given cause for representatives of Armenian intelligentsia to meet in Yerevan. As noted by the meeting participants, records of Jugha cemetery can be found in the works of Armenian historian Movses Khorenatsi dating back to the 5-th century.

According to the data available, the number of khachkars (cross-stones) at the cemetery exceeded 2.5 thousand at the beginning of 1998. The first attempts to destroy them were registered the same year. The demolition of the historical monument by means of bulldozers was shot with a video still camera by member of Iranian "Architecture of Armenia" organization Arpiar Petrosian. Then, the cemetery was practically annihilated by the end of 2002. (...)

The meeting participants called all organizations, as well as Armenians of all countries to unite and to call to account those, who were implicated in the act of vandalism.

02/14/03 - New Azerbaijani first Deputy Prime Minister named - RFE/RL Newsline

President Aliyev has appointed Deputy Prime Minister Yakub Eyyubov to the post of first deputy premier. Eyyubov, who is 57, trained as a construction engineer and taught at a Baku institute until 1997, when he was named to head the State Committee on Safety in Factories and Mines. He was appointed deputy prime minister in July 1999.

02/14/03 - US envoy tells Azeris Armenia is not Iraq - Azeri Lider TV

The USA's relations with Azerbaijan will become disrupted if it starts a war against Armenia to free Nagorny Karabakh, the US ambassador to Azerbaijan, Ross Wilson, has said. He said that it was inappropriate to compare

Azerbaijan with the USA and Armenia with Iraq.

The US ambassador to Azerbaijan said that despite this Baku was Washington's close ally in fighting terrorism, the USA would not support any of the sides if Azerbaijan started a war with Armenia. The USA does not want a military solution for the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and this means that it will not support any side if war breaks out for Karabakh. Washington even thinks to disrupt its relations with Azerbaijan in the event of outbreak of war.

" Washington believes that war would neither benefit Azerbaijan nor Armenia.

The launching of military operations would spoil our relations. We want this conflict to be resolved in a peaceful way. Unfortunately, these talks are still fruitless. The Azerbaijani people should themselves decide their future. I think that being aware of the negative consequences of a military solution to the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, President Heydar Aliyev continues peace talks. "

02/14/03 - Azerbaijani villagers look to continue dialogue with authorities - RFE/RL Newsline

Islamic Party of Azerbaijan Deputy Chairman Gadji-aga Nuriev told journalists they are confident of reaching agreement with the authorities during further talks next week on resolving the villagers' socioeconomic problems. But he warned that if agreement is not reached, the villagers will resume their protests. Nuriev said village representatives might also meet with Baku Mayor Hadjibala Abutalibov and President Heidar Aliyev.

02/18/03 - War prisoner handed over to Azeri side - ANS

Hamid Alakbarov, private of the Azerbaijani army was handed over to his nation today. The Armenian military forces captivated him on February 13, in the Northeastern part of Azerbaijan. The agreement on his release was reached between the Defense Ministry's of Azerbaijan and the Armenia. Hamid Alakbarov, 19 was called to the military service from Davachi region in 2002. He is now the second soldier of the National Army captivated in Aqdam

region of Azerbaijan. Previously, Elmaddin Abiyev was detained at the frontiers and released after the interference of the several governmental and world institutions to the problem.

02/21/03 - Azerbaijani prisoner placed in solitary confinement after visit from pace monitors-RFE/RL Newsline

Former Gyanja Police Chief Natig Efendiev was transferred to solitary confinement in Gobustan jail shortly after a visit last week from Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe rapporteur Andreas Gross. Efendiev has embarked on a hunger strike to protest that move, for which the prison administration has not offered any explanation. Efendiev was sentenced in 2001 to life imprisonment on charges of planning a coup d'etat with the aim of bringing exiled former parliament speaker Rasul Guliev to power.

02/24/03 - Baku Armenian and Russian cemetery in danger of elimination - The Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan

(...)

The Baku City Mayor plans to eliminate a part of old Christian cemetery in Narimanov District of Baku to construct a new wide road. Formally, the cemetery administration can eliminate a grave which is not visited during 12 years even without any construction works.

The problem is that there are buried the Armenians and Russians whose relatives emigrated from Azerbaijan after ethnic clashes and instability of 1988-1990. Many graves were vandalized in 1990s.

Now, the family members have to apply to cemetery administration until April 1 to transfer the graves to the new location. I think there is no sense to explain how problematic is a visit of emigrated Armenians (refugees!) in situation de facto war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.(...)

03/03/03 - Azerbaijani opposition appeals to constitutional court - RFE/RL

The leaders of nine Azerbaijani opposition parties have appealed to the Constitutional Court to rule on a number of questions, Turan reported on 28 February. They include why the final results of the 1998 presidential and 2000 parliamentary elections have still not been made public; whether under the constitution President Aliyev may run for a third presidential term this fall; whether Aliyev may retain the post of chairman of the Yeni Azerbaijan Party; and whether government officials must resign their posts if they are elected to parliament.

03/04/03 - UNESCO Asked to Investigate Azeri Destruction of Jugha Cemetery - ASBAREZ Online

The President of ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) Michael Petzet has applied to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) requesting it dispatch a team of experts to evaluate the destruction of the Armenian cemetery in the Jugha region (presently Julfa) in the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan that previously housed around 3000 Khachkars, and is considered to be a historical monument.

The ICOMOS Armenia office recently notified the press about illegal actions taken by Azerbaijan to destroy the Jugha monuments.

More recently, it called on Petzet to take appropriate measures in stopping continuous occurrences of vandalism, and asked that UNESCO mediate by sending experts (to include both Armenian and Azeris) to the area.

In making their case, ICOMOS-Armenia compiled documents, including photographs of the destruction taking place. Some of the photographs were taken in November 2002, when a large number of Khachkars (cross-stones) and tombstones had already either been vandalized or simply removed from the site, while the other half was taken much earlier, showing all the monuments intact.

The 2002/03 "Endangered Heritage" ICOMOS

almanac published to inform the world about historical monuments that have either been destroyed or are on the verge of destruction will provide detailed information and photographs of Old Jugha

03/04/03 - Two Prisoners Confirm Hunger Strike, Claiming Abuse - RFE/RL

Fahmin Hajiev, a former commander of the Interior Ministry's troops, and Natig Efendiev, who headed the Ganja police from 1994 to 1996, are going on hunger strikes at the hard labor prison in Gobustan.

Efendiev, who is considered a political prisoner by the Council of Europe, was arrested in 2000 on charges of attempting a coup and in 2001 was sentenced to life in prison. Hajiev, who is considered by local rights groups but not the Council of Europe to be a political prisoner, was arrested in 1994 on charges of surrendering Khojaly to Armenian armed forces in 1992 and was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

At a 28 February press conference at the office of the opposition newspaper "Azadlig," the Committee for Protection of Hajiev's Rights noted that he does not intend to stop the hunger strike, demanding an end to the pressure on him and reconsideration of his legal case. Hajiev's lawyer, Genire Isgenderova, said he told her that he was again the victim of violence and torture.

"We have had information about the prior intimidation of Hajiev but preferred to keep silent for fear that revealing such information would exacerbate the violence against him," Isgenderova said. "But the latest events caused us to change our minds." She also noted that there was a significant effort to prevent her from meeting with her client.

Isgenderova said that during her meeting she repeatedly asked Hajiev to end his hunger strike. But she said he intends to continue until all his demands are fulfilled. All documents on Hajiev's case have been sent to the European Court of Human Rights, Isgenderova said, adding that she has already received a response.

Saida Gojamanli, chairman of the Human Rights and Legislation

Protection Bureau, pointed out that the same situation is also true for Natig Efendiev. But Efendiev's wife told RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service that he has stopped a dry hunger strike and begun to take water.

03/07/03 - Issue Of Political Prisoners Spotlighted In Media - RFE/RL

The statement by a Justice Ministry official that political prisoners are manipulating events to garner media and international sympathy has sparked the ire of local rights activists.

Aidin Gasimov, chairman of the Chief Department for the Execution of Court Rulings, recently told local media that the recent statements about the difficult conditions under which convicts at the hard labor prison in Gobustan are forced to live are baseless.

"Those who consider themselves to be political prisoners face neither violations nor human rights abuses," Gasimov said. He explained that the prisoners break prison rules just before the visits of international monitors. They are punished for their violations, and then they complain to the observers that their rights are violated and they are suffering torture. Gasimov claimed. However, human rights activist Saida Gojamanli told RFE/RL's Azerbaijani service that based on the information they have, the situation in prisons is quite different. "Gasimov cannot speak otherwise. He remains true to his opinion, we to ours," she said.

Gojamanli noted that prisoners' parents have told them of incidents of bribery on behalf of prison employees. What is more, every time human rights activists appear on television and radio to talk about the situation in prisons, the attitude of the prison officials toward prisoners becomes tougher, she said.

Gojamanli pointed out that 25 political prisoners are seriously ill and need permanent medical observation. The list of sick convicts has also been submitted to the Council of Europe.

"We are not the enemy of our country. We publicize such information in order to avoid graver consequences and appeal to corresponding bodies to take appropriate measures," she said.

Lawyer Genire Isgenderli confirmed that in no prison, including the Gobustan one, are conditions acceptable.

03/07/03 - Youth: Baku Needs Posters Propagandizing Spirit of Military Patriotism - Baku Today

Posters propagandizing hatred to the enemy, spirit of military patriotism must be hung instead of the posters of the foreign firms written in foreign languages in the streets of the capital Youth Union for Karabakh Freedom held a survey recently called "Occupied territories in youth's memory" among the pupils and students. Though 82% of the respondents have information about occupied territories 18% of them are unaware of it, Olaylar reported.

Answering a question "What would you like to do for liberation of Karabakh?" 64% of the youth stated that they are ready to fight for their Motherland. 47% of them stated that there is a need for memorial posters "Everything for the Motherland!" in the streets of the city for liberation of Karabakh and propagandizing spirit of military patriotism.

As a result of unity survey an address has been sent to Baku mayor Hajibala Abutalibov. The address reads: "Posters propagandizing hatred to the enemy, spirit of military patriotism must be hung instead of the posters of the foreign firms written in foreign languages in the streets of the capital. This will form an opinion on Azerbaijan's being subjected to the terror and Karabakh occupation in the memory of the foreigner who comes firstly to our country". For the present mayor didn't express his attitude to the address.

03/10/03 - Azerbaijani opposition party demonstrates on behalf of leader -RFE/RL

Thousands of people attended a demonstration convened in Baku on 9 March by the Democratic Party of Azerbaijan (DPA), Turan reported on 10 March. Participants demanded that DPA Chairman and former parliament speaker Rasul Guliev be permitted to return to Baku from his voluntary exile in the United States and that the Azerbaijani authorities stop harassing his relatives. They also

demanded President Aliyev's resignation and the holding of free, fair, and democratic elections.

03/10/03 - BAKU: Aliyev trying to regain control of security ministry - Yeni Musavat

...The fact that the People's Front of Azerbaijan (PFA) came to power in Azerbaijan in 1992 caused the downfall of the State Security Committee SSC.

The SSC was replaced by the PFA. Intelligence work was ruined. Following this, Azerbaijan was practically left defenceless before internal and foreign enemies. Terror and sabotage acts followed each other in the country. For instance, a member of the Sadval Lezgin national movement, Oqtay Qurbanov, caused an explosion at the 20 January metro station on 19 March 1994.

Fourteen people died and 52 passengers were wounded. An investigation into the case brought it to light that the Sadval leadership had been involved in the action.

The Azerbaijani state security ministry revived, as soon as SSC employee incumbent Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev came to power in 1993. He knew how to use the National Security Ministry. The NSM solved numerous crimes between 1993 and 1996. They were terror acts, provocations, preparations for Islamic revolution etc. But the struggle against the real terrorists continued as long as they constituted a threat to Aliyev's regime. It was the turn of Aliyev's rivals once the threat to the regime had disappeared. The NSM started using methods of the Soviet period - an attempt on the president's life etc. Former President Ayaz Mutallibov, Prime Minister Surat Huseynov, servicemen and opposition members were the targets of attacks during these years. For instance, the NSM and a special presidential department started to carry out numerous actions against high-ranking officers, as soon as Heydar Aliyev decided to stop military operations in Nagorny Karabakh in 1995. Aliyev hated them because the military were against the truce with Armenia and did not see this step as advantageous for Azerbaijan.

According to the NSM's calculations, it undermined numerous efforts aimed at killing

not only Aliyev and his son Ilham, but also Russian President Vladimir Putin (the laying of an explosive device under the bridge, "stringers" as published, possibly Stingers, snipers etc). The NSM stated on 16 October 2001 that an attempt on the life of Vladimir Putin who was visiting Azerbaijan had been prevented. Rustam Kanan, who was supposed to be in contact with Chechens and Usamah Bin-Ladin, was arrested and imprisoned for 10 years.

Namiq Abbasov's role

We got in touch with the editorial office of the Versiya Internet project to clarify what is going on inside the NSM. Our questions were addressed to the former prosecutor for extremely important affairs at the NSM, Ramin Nagiyev.

After a few days, we received his answer through e-mail. "National Security Minister Namiq Abbasov silently started to clear the ministry of people close to the head of state as soon as Aliyev's health deteriorated in 1996. All of them were replaced with people loyal to Namiq Abbasov. I state with full responsibility that no-one close to the president has been left at the ministry. Today Aliyev has lost all his positions in the NSM and he has not got a reliable source there. To create such a situation was not so difficult. Because one of Namiq Abbasov's allies, head of the Azerbaijani Presidential Executive Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev, directly controls the appointment of heads of power-wielding bodies and the government's personnel policy. I know that the people who wanted to inform the president about the events at the NSM in any way possible met impenetrable barriers and later were dismissed from the ministry. Abbasov concealed his ambition when Heydar Aliyev's health deteriorated for the first time and the ministry's employees, who wanted to inform the president about this, had to share the fate of people close to Aliyev - they were sacked. Dozens of people - from deputy minister to ordinary employees - were sacked from the NSM in 1995."

Reforms

It became known that Aliyev made some structural changes in the power-wielding ministries and the special service bodies on 1 August 2002.

Under the presidential decree, the Military Counterintelligence Department has been subordinated to the NSM. Moreover, the Border Troops were removed from the NSM's subordination and the State Border Service was set up separately.

According to our information, this reconstruction by Aliyev pursued the sole aim of resuming control over the NSM.

03/12/03 - Azerbaijani parliament resumes discussion of election law - RFE/RL

The Milli Mejlis resumed on 11 March its debate begun on 7 March of a new draft election law, Turan reported. The debate degenerated into a slanging match after Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (reformist wing) Chairman Ali Kerimli demanded that the opposition's objections to the bill, in particular to the articles on the composition of the central and local election commissions, be taken into account. Kerimli accused the authorities of planning to falsify the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections in a bid to "usurp power" and warned that any such attempt could lead to civil war, according to zerkalo.az on 12 March. Pro-government deputies criticized Kerimli for "name-calling" and adopting an "unconstructive" approach.

03/17/03 - Azerbaijani opposition demands President's resignation - RFE/RL

Between 10,000 and 20,000 people attended a sanctioned march and demonstration in Baku on 16 March to demand President Aliyev's resignation, Turan, Interfax, and Reuters reported. Opposition party leaders who addressed the demonstration argued that success in combating crime and corruption, in alleviating unemployment and social problems, and in ensuring that the presidential elections due this fall are free and fair is contingent on Aliyev's departure from the political scene. They demanded

that the draft election law currently under discussion be amended to ensure that the authorities and other political parties have equal representation on the Central Election Commission and local election commissions. Numerous police were deployed to monitor the rally, but no incidents were reported.

03/18/03 - Three Azerbaijani opposition activists sentenced for attending demonstration - RFE/RL

Three members of the Sumgait branch of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (reformist wing) who, despite police harassment, traveled to Baku to attend the 16 March opposition rally and demonstration were sentenced on 17 March to between three and five days administrative arrest, Turan reported on 17 March. Also on 17 March, opposition parties aligned in the Democratic Congress positively assessed the rally as "a serious beginning" to their struggle to ensure that the presidential elections due this fall are free and fair.

03/18/03 - Journalists Create Print Media Watchdog - RFE/RL

Some 400 journalists, government representatives, and members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia and international community gathered on 15 March to create the country's first press council. The participants at the all-day event adopted the council's charter, a code of ethics and nominated and elected members of the council, composed of nine print journalists and six representatives from the public. Aflaton Amashov, chairman of the "Ruh" Committee to Protect the Rights of Journalists, was elected chairman of the council. The council, created as part of Azerbaijan's obligations to the Council of Europe, currently has no legal authority; however, the government has indicated that it may grant it official status later...

03/24/03 - Kurds make territorial claims on Azerbaijan - Baku Hurriyyat

...The Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP) has lodged a suit against Turkey, Armenia and

Azerbaijan with the European Criminal Court, the public relations officer of the London-based KHRP, Rochelle Harris, has reported.

The KHRP is operating as a branch of the Kurdish Cultural Centre in London. The centre is an organizer of numerous Kurdish protest actions against Turkey and Iraq. This organization took an active part in the campaign against the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export pipeline some months ago.

The KHRP said that "Kurds have got many problems. They are not allowed to develop their culture in their native land and are being subjected to repression".

Shortly before the statement by the London-based KHRP, the head of the US national security subcommittee located in the US town of Shelton, (?Christopher Shays), met a group of local Kurds. They said that they wanted the creation of an independent Kurdish state by the end of this year.

According to the Kurds, there are about 20-25m of them around the globe. They are mainly living in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

An organizer of the meeting, (?Asmat Ali), said: "We are not demanding the creation of the Kurdish state by the end of this year. However, we have enough people to get involved in that." Having said that they would like the creation of a Kurdish state, the US-based Kurds meant not only the north of Iraq, but also the territories of other states, including Azerbaijan.

04/04/03 - Azerbaijani officials say U.S. report on human rights is biased...- RFE/RL Newslite

The Azerbaijani leadership is not happy with a U.S. State Department report released earlier this week on the human rights situation in Azerbaijan, Turan reported on 3 April. The agency quoted Rabiya Aslanova, deputy chairwoman of the parliamentary commission for human rights, as saying the report shows "political blindness" in ignoring improvements in the human rights sphere. She also said she believes the report was compiled on the basis of erroneous and inaccurate information. The report criticized, among other

perceived shortcomings, corruption and inefficiency of the judiciary, human rights abuses committed by security forces, arbitrary arrests and detentions, the torture of suspects by police, the violent dispersal by police of demonstrations, and harassment of journalists and restrictions on media freedom.

04/04/03 - Azerbaijan denies holding Armenian hostages, POWS - RFE/RL

A spokesman for Azerbaijan's State Committee for Prisoners of War, Hostages, and Persons Missing in Action has stated that Azerbaijan is not holding a single Armenian hostage or prisoner of war, zerkalo.az reported on 4 April. That denial was made in response to a statement by Larisa Alaverdian, who heads an Armenian NGO. Alaverdian said that Azerbaijan currently holds more than 1,000 Armenian servicemen, whose whereabouts are unknown.

04/09/03 - Official Acknowledges 1,500 Tuberculosis Cases In Prisons - RFE/RL

On 2 April Aidin Gasimov, chairman of the Justice Ministry's Chief Office for the Execution of Court Rules, said in an interview with local media representatives that 1,500 prisoners in Azerbaijan suffer from tuberculosis. He did not say how the infection is spread, but added that the prisoners who have contracted TB are undergoing treatment in Penal Colony No. 3.

Human rights activist Chingiz Ganizade in an interview with RFE/RL's Azerbaijani Service disagreed with Gasimov's statement. He said that at present there are 17,000 persons in prison in Azerbaijan. "According to our information, more than 20 percent of them -- some 4,000 people -- have been infected with various forms of tuberculosis. However, the above-mentioned 1,500 detainees are suffering from serious forms of tuberculosis."

Ganizade noted that some prisoners also suffer from cancer, gastrointestinal disturbances, as well as drug addiction and venereal diseases. "The main cause of these illnesses is poor food, harsh prison conditions, non-observance of hygienic norms, and lack of sanitation," he said.

Another human rights activist, Leila Yunus, said in an interview with the opposition newspaper "Azadlig" that it is difficult to say definitively what diseases are widespread in places of detention. "So far, human rights activists have not been allowed to conduct monitoring in prisons," she added. Yunus said that she is aware that tuberculosis-infected prisoners are receiving treatment in Colony No. 3. "But only the International Committee of the Red Cross has access to this correctional institution. That organization keeps all information secret," Yunus concluded.

04/14/03 - Azerbaijani opposition stage demonstration in Baku - RFE/RL

Members and supporters of several major opposition parties staged a demonstration in Baku on 13 April, according to ANS. Demonstrators demanded the resignation of President Heidar Aliyev's government and called for free and fair elections. The action was the latest in a series of coordinated activities by the unified opposition, mainly comprising the Azerbaijan Democratic Party, the Civic Unity Party, the National Independence Party, the Musavat Party, and the reform wing of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party.

04/15/03 - West tries to coax Azerbaijan into territorial concessions - Turan news agency

It is naive to expect the USA to support Azerbaijan's position on the Karabakh conflict in exchange for Azerbaijan's support for Washington in the anti-Iraq coalition. The USA will first of all be governed by its own interests. Washington would always give preference to good relations with the Armenian lobby rather than support Azerbaijan's fair demands. The fair demands are the sovereignty over Nagorny Karabakh and Lacin [Lachin], the former state advisor on foreign policy and political analyst Vafa Quluzada has said.

He thinks it is unacceptable for Azerbaijani politicians to ignore the fact that the main interest of the USA in the region is to preserve peace and resolve all issues only peacefully, even if that contradicts

the interests of its ally in the region - Azerbaijan. (...)

04/16/03 - Azerbaijan, Russia sign border cooperation agreement - RFE/RL

Azerbaijani Border Guard Deputy Commander Major General Inayat Khalilov and his Russian counterpart Colonel General Nikolai Reznichenko signed an agreement in Baku on 15 April on measures to promote coordination between their respective services and to simplify the procedure for checking passenger identification and cargo at the two countries' shared border, ITAR-TASS and Caspian News Agency reported. The two men reached a tentative agreement under which comprehensive checks of Azerbaijani cargoes entering Russia will be abolished.

04/16/03 - USA accuses Azeri authorities of election fraud - Azadliq

Text of Emin Aliyev report by Azerbaijani newspaper Azadliq on 16 April entitled "US State Department: 'We will not let them rig the elections'. US official Beth Jones accuses the Azerbaijani authorities of election fraud" Assistant Secretary of State and Head of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs Beth Jones has commented on the latest political and economical processes in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Several processes of international significance are under way in this region, she said. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline is being built and is expected to be put into operation by 2005, Jones said. Gas from the Sahdaniz field will be exported to Europe in 2006, she added.

Jones said that she was satisfied with Azerbaijan's integration with the world economy through exporting its energy resources to Europe. However, she said that she was dissatisfied with political processes in Azerbaijan. There is a lot of evidence of human rights transgressions in Central Asia but, unfortunately, the governments of these states have yet to take any serious measures to protect human rights, Jones said.

Regarding the presidential elections in Azerbaijan, scheduled for autumn 2003, Jones said that international

standards were not met during the [presidential] elections in Armenia and two other states of the Caucasus are gearing up for elections.(...)

04/19/03 - "We need professional and strong army to release our lands", Heydar Aliyev President of Azerbaijan - ANS

Heydar Aliyev President of Republic of Azerbaijan attended ceremony on the occasion 30th anniversary of Military Lyceum named after Jamshid Nakhchivansky. The head of state delivered a speech before the cadets and called them to become deserved officers and release occupied lands. President toured the Lyceum and was satisfied of the works done. Heydar Aliyev reminded of the history of Lyceum and said he achieved opening of this Military Lyceum hardly. At that time the interest of the youth was less to military field and the first graduates was 49. It turned out that President wanted to visit the Lyceum in 2000 but he was informed of unsatisfactory condition of the building then. Since President ordered repairment, reconstruction and building of new buildings. Now Heydar Aliyev is satisfied that the Lyceum has become a military cantonment. President also visited classes and computer centers, spoke to future officers, got to know about their conditions and nutrition. President said every condition were provided to get high education in Military Lyceum named after Nakhchivansky and recommended the cadets to learn their profession thoroughly and to be strong.

04/24/03 - Police hunt down signatories of appeal to Azerbaijani President to resign... - RFE/RL Newsline

Police on 23 April began rounding up the 122 members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia who the previous day signed a six-page appeal to President Heidar Aliyev to resign "while there is still time" or risk being forcibly ousted, Turan reported on 24 April. The signatories include one general, three colonels, and dozens of lawyers. Analyzing Aliyev's policies since he was first elected in 1969 to head the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan, the

document affirms that his "dictatorial regime has brought Azerbaijan to the brink of catastrophe" and blames him for the country's economic decline and mass unemployment and out-migration. The statement was drafted by members of the Amal association representing the country's intelligentsia. Presenting the statement on 22 April, Professor Murshud Mamedli stressed that it was prepared before Aliyev's televised collapse the previous day (...). On 23 April, Aliyev did not show up for work at the presidential administration, nor did he appear on state television, Turan reported on 24 April.

04/28/03 - Mob attacks human rights activists' offices in Azerbaijan - Agence France Presse

Angry protesters briefly besieged the offices of two human rights groups in Baku, capital of Azerbaijan, Monday in what the groups claimed was part of a state-sponsored hate campaign against them. Two sets of protesters numbering about 50 people threw eggs at the offices of the two organisations and chanted slogans alleging that the leaders of the human rights groups were traitors and should leave Azerbaijan. The attacks followed media reports which branded prominent human rights activist Eldar Zeinalov a traitor after he met senior officials in the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, where Azerbaijan refuses to recognise Armenian domination. "This is being organised by the authorities," said Leyla Yunus, whose Institute for Peace and Democracy was one of the organisations targetted Monday: "A camera crew from the state television station was here before the protesters even got here. How come they knew about it before anyone else?"

Nagorno-Karabakh is a touchy subject in Azerbaijan. The country fought a war against the ethnic Armenian separatists there in the early 1990s but failed to stop them taking control of the enclave. There is no official contact between Azerbaijan and the separatists. Non-governmental groups sometimes arrange visits to Nagorno-Karabakh but are often

condemned for consorting with the enemy.

04/29/03 - Newspaper of Azerbaijani ruling party publishes racist slur on human rights campaigner - RFE/RL

Turan on 26 April quoted "Yeni Azerbaijan," the newspaper of the eponymous ruling party, as reporting that embattled human rights activist Eldar Zeynalov has changed his first name to Eduard (...). The newspaper infers from this that Zeynalov is not of pure Azerbaijani extraction, and comments that any person who is not 100 percent ethnic Azerbaijani is not capable of doing any good for the country.

04/29/03 - European official surprised at Azeri "aggressive" attitude - ANS TV

Presenter A delegation of the European Parliament is now visiting Baku. It signed a statement on cooperation in nine spheres between the European Union EU and Azerbaijan today. In an interview with journalists, the head of the delegation, Ursula Schleicher, talked mainly about the Nagorny Karabakh problem.

Correspondent, over video of round table discussion The chairwoman of the European Parliament's committee for relations with the South Caucasus, Ursula Schleicher, who is continuing her visit to Baku, said that she was surprised that, such a developed country, as Azerbaijan has an aggressive attitude towards Armenia. She said that the EU tries to resolve all conflicts, including the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, through cooperation and in a peaceful way. The European MP expressed surprise at statements made in Azerbaijan in support of resolving the Nagorny Karabakh problem by military means. Let us recall that the Milli Maclis parliament signed the nine-point statement on cooperation with the European Union.(...)

04/30/03 - Azeri authorities seeking to destabilize situation - human rights activist - Zerkalo

Excerpt from Nuri report by Azerbaijani newspaper Zerkalo on

29 April entitled "Pogroms of human rights activists' offices are a pretext to station armoured personnel vehicles in Baku, Leyla Yunus says" Three ambulances arrived at the office of the head of the Institute for Peace and Democracy, Leyla Yunus, yesterday 28 April. The vehicles brought a group of women - teachers of the Medical University and members of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party - bearing the slogans "Lolita, you have no place on this soil!" and "As long as we have the likes of Leyla, troubles will haunt us!".

Still not satisfied, the women entered the office's yard and continued the protest action there using swear words. They knocked at the office door and windows demanding that Leyla Yunus and Eldar Zeynalov another Azerbaijani human rights campaigner who recently returned from Nagornyy Karabakh leave Azerbaijan.

The demands for extradition were reflected in the resolution of this unsanctioned picket. The resolution accused the human rights activists of treason and provocation, stating that they were proteges of certain international organizations and foreign countries. They are willing to earn money by inflicting moral damage on the Azerbaijani state, the resolution said.

In her remarks with a Zerkalo newspaper correspondent, Leyla Yunus said that "all this recalls the events of 1990, when people close to Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev (in particular, Nemat Panahli formerly prominent Azerbaijani politician in early 1990s) were telling us against whom to carry our pogroms, and how. They were organizing pogroms and beating up Armenians; then the Soviet Army entered Baku and slaughtered Azerbaijanis referring to 20 January 1990 Soviet military crackdown on Baku."(...)

ARMENIA / ARMENIE

02/05/03 – Armenian presidential candidates campaign manager stabbed - RFE/RL

Parliament deputy Hayk Babukhanian, a leading member of the Union for Constitutional Rights

(SIM), was assaulted and stabbed in the back on 4 February while campaigning in the town of Artashat on behalf of presidential candidate Aram Karapetian, Noyan Tapan and RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Babukhanian's driver sustained head injuries in the attack. Babukhanian was hospitalized in Yerevan, and his life is reportedly not in danger. (...)

02/15/03 – WGD to focus on housing rights of refugees in Armenia in 2003 - ARKA News Agency

On 16 January 2003, the International Working Group on Displacement (WGD) met to discuss its common achievements of 2002 and priorities for 2003, according to information provided by press service of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. In 2002, WGD supported an UNHCR-led effort to assist the Government and the National Assembly to amend the Law on Refugees to include the temporary asylum status in accordance with international standards. This set of amendments will grant a legal status to persons who fled conflict in Abkhazia (Georgia) and similar conflicts in the former Soviet Union as well as other individuals who may not fall under the scope of the definition of refugees but are in need of international protection. A similar effort has been made by the WGD for the adoption of the Law on Transfer of Ownership Right of Apartments Constructed for Refugees Forcibly Displaced from Azerbaijan in 1988 - 1992 to Refugees, paving a way to the privatisation of refugee shelters constructed by funding from international organisations. The WGD also bolstered the efforts of NRC to seek funding and assist in the implementation of the IDP mapping project jointly and in close collaboration with the Department for Migration and Refugees (DMR). The project is designed to have a better picture on conflict-induced IDPs in Armenia so as to assist the Government to formulate an appropriate policy to resolve this particular type of displacement.

02/19/03 – Many Armenian voters fight for right to cast ballots - RFE/RL

Thousands of people were constrained to apply to local courts on 19 February for authorization to vote after discovering that their names had been omitted from official voter lists, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported.

As of late afternoon, over 7,000 such authorizations had been issued. ITAR-TASS quoted CEC Chairman Artak Sahradian as admitting that inaccurate voter lists are "a chronic problem."

02/20/03 – Russel Johnston : gross violations do not allow estimating election process as positive - Noyan Tapan

"The fact that the day of the elections passed comparatively well is encouraging, but the existence of gross violations does not allow us to consider the process as a positive one on the whole," Head of the PACE observation mission Lord Russell Johnston said during the February 20 news conference devoted to the results of the elections.

He pointed out that the mission of the delegation headed by him was limited, contrary to the OSCE mission and his impressions are for the most part positive. He appreciated the process of organization of the elections. But the people who have the opportunity to participate in the process of calculating the votes were more critically disposed.(...)

02/20/03 - Partakers in opposition rally clash with police in Yerevan - Reuters

Partakers in the opposition rally clashed with the police in Yerevan on Thursday afternoon.

The opposition was dissatisfied with the preliminary results of the presidential elections held on February 19 (the victory of incumbent president Robert Kocharian) and decided to hold a rally. It said about 10,000 joined the protest.

The protesters wanted to march towards the building of the Central Electoral Commission, but the police blocked their way. "The Armenian opposition is ready to

take extreme measures to defend the victory in the presidential election," opposition leaders said at the rally, organized to support Stepan Demirchian, the candidate from the People's Party.

The rally organizers said that it was Demirchian, not Kocharian, who had won the presidential election.

02/21/03 - Turkish authorities must eliminate the "misunderstanding" - AZG Armenian Daily

There were reports in both Turkish and Armenian media that the Armenia Patriarch of Turkey Archbishop Mesrob Mutafian had sent a letter to Turkish interior minister demanding his intervention to invalidate a decision which said that the new passports of Armenians in Turkey must carry a note 'other Christian' in a column indicating their religious belonging. Mutafian's letter said that the old passports of Turkish Armenians carried the note 'Christian'. He said the change would be discriminative against Armenians adding that the decision had caused their deep concern. Patriarch's letter was followed by another one from his advisor with warnings that they would seek invalidation of the decision in the European Human Rights Court if it was not cancelled.(...)

Now classifying Armenians as 'other Christians' would mean equating them with religious group void of the 'national minority' status and making them minority among other Christians in a country in which 90 percent of population are Muslims.

02/24/03 - Armenian President, foreign Minister, Army warn against destabilization...

Speaking on Armenian National Television on 22 February, President Kocharian warned that the Armenian authorities will react "in the severest and most serious manner" to any further attempts to "violate public order," AFP and RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Kocharian said he considers internal political stability one of his greatest accomplishments and will not allow it to be endangered. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian, speaking on state television the same day, similarly accused the opposition of

casting a shadow on all the positive achievements of the past five years, according to Arminfo, as cited by Groong. Oskanian warned the opposition not to jeopardize political stability. (...)

...But protesters defy ban on demonstrations

Despite those official warnings, thousands of Demirchian supporters marched in Yerevan on 23 February to protest the alleged falsification of the 19 February vote and to demand the release of Demirchian supporters arrested following the 21 February demonstration, Reuters and RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Reuters estimated participation as less than the 25,000 who attended the 21 February rally. Dpa, however, said there were 40,000 demonstrators and Arminfo, as cited by Groong, reported 50,000-60,000. Demirchian condemned the arrests of his supporters as "illegal" and branded Kocharian's government illegitimate, but as on 21 February insisted on acting within the framework of the law.

Sargsian and Bazeyan called on Kocharian to resign and on the police to apprehend those believed to be responsible for falsifying the 19 February vote, including two government ministers, according to Med.

02/27/03 - OSCE criticises arrests among Armenian opposition after polls - Deutsche Presse-Agentur

The two-week jailing of some 100 members of the opposition in Armenia came under fire Thursday from international observers of the presidential elections in the Caucasus republic.

Opponents of incumbent president Robert Kocharyan were sentenced in closed courts without legal defence, Peter Eicher, the head of the mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), said in the capital Yerevan. "Violence and persecution have no place in democratic elections," Interfax news agency quoted Eicher as saying.

Around 40,000 people demonstrated in the city last weekend after the inconclusive first round of the February 19 polls. Claiming election fraud by the authorities, they demanded that opposition leader Stepan

Demirchyan be recognised as the legitimate winner.

03/03/03 - Tens of thousands of Armenians demonstrate to support presidential candidates - Associated Press Worldstream

Tens of thousands of Armenians took to the streets of the capital in rival demonstrations Monday to support the incumbent president and his challenger in this week's run-off election.

Police estimated the size of the crowd at a rally in favor of President Robert Kocharian at close to 100,000. The opposition, which has been staging daily protests since the first round of voting Feb.

19, attracted around 20,000 supporters, police said.

"We can be sure that we will prevail and will take upon ourselves the responsibility for the country and its people," Kocharian told cheering supporters. Several thousand marched through central Yerevan with the president, chanting "Kocharian! Kocharian!"

Kocharian fell just short of the simple majority he needed to win the election outright, receiving 49.48 percent of the votes, according to official results. His challenger in Wednesday's run-off, People's Party leader Stepan Demirchian, received 28.22 percent. Demirchian's supporters and other opposition leaders allege authorities rigged the balloting in Kocharian's favor. The opposition threatened to pull out of the run-off to protest the alleged fraud and the arrest of more than 100 activists, but officials in Demirchian's campaign said Monday that he would not withdraw.(...)

03/03/03 - 75 detainees for opposition rallies set free - Arminfo

75 people detained during the recent opposition rallies in Yerevan have been set free by 6:00 pm. local time today.

According to the press secretary of Armenia's Justice Minister Ara Saghatelian, the chairman of Armenia's Court of Appeal for Criminal and Military Cases Tigran Sahakyan reconsidered today the verdicts of first instance courts. As a result, the people who were earlier sentenced to 15 days in prison will now have to pay fines.

The court will consider all the further appeals by the remaining detainees. To remind, 158 people were detained during rallies, of whom 86 were made administratively liable.

03/05/03 - Armenian elections : Council of Europe secretary general insists on respect of democratic rules in second round - Arminfo

On the eve of the second round of the presidential elections in Armenia, Walter Schwimmer, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, called on the authorities and on the opposition forces to bear in mind that what the country needs now are free elections, accepted by all sides as fair and legitimate. "A repetition of the incidents that took place during and after the first round would mean a lost election for everybody, regardless of the outcome", Mr Schwimmer said. (...)

03/06/03 - Armenian President re-elected... - RFE/RL

Incumbent Robert Kocharian was re-elected president of Armenia on 5 March, defeating People's Party of Armenia Chairman Stepan Demirchian in a runoff, international news agencies reported. With 99 percent of all polling stations reporting, Kocharian received 67.5 percent of the vote, compared with 32.5 percent for Demirchian, Reuters quoted Central Election Commission (CEC) Deputy Chairman Hamlet Abrahamian as saying on Armenian National Television. Voter turnout was 65.73 percent, according to the CEC's website (<http://www.elections.am>). This figure is slightly higher than during the first round of voting on 19 February, in which Kocharian narrowly failed to poll the 50 percent plus one of all votes cast required for a first-round victory. Demirchian's campaign staff, however, rejected the official turnout figures as inflated, saying that according to their estimates only 1.1 million of Armenia's 2.3 million registered voters cast their ballots, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported.

03/06/03 - ...As opposition again alleges massive fraud... - RFE/RL

"We have registered unprecedented falsifications today. The elections

are proceeding with numerous violations of the law," Demirchian's campaign manager Grigor Harutiunian told an emergency news conference in Yerevan one hour before polling stations closed at 8 p.m. local time on 5 March, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. To substantiate that statement, Harutiunian showed journalists hundreds of ballot papers marked in Kocharian's favor that, he said, had been either intercepted by opposition activists or surrendered by Kocharian's campaign staff. Ashot Sargsian, a lawyer for Demirchian, said those pre-marked ballot papers "prove that the fraud was planned in advance" by the CEC.(...)

08/03/03 - L'Arménie et le Karabagh ont commémoré à la veille du week end dernier les pogroms de Soumgait - AYPFM

En présence du chef de l'état et de l'ensemble de la classe politique, qui avait mis la campagne électorale entre parenthèse pendant quelques heures, quelques 10 000 personnes se sont rendues au mémorial de Dzidzernagapert où une stèle a été érigée en mémoire des victimes de ces pogroms anti arméniens qui avaient débuté le 27 février 1988, suivis de ce ux de Bakou puis de Kirovabad : dans leurs interventions, les personnalités présentes, parmi lesquelles, le directeur du musée du génocide, Laurent Barséghian, et l'écrivain Zori Balayan ont souligné que les exactions perpétrés en Azerbaïdjan il y a 15 ans correspondaient à la définition internationale du génocide. Les orateurs ont indiqué qu'une motion demandant que les pogroms de Soumgait soient clairement qualifiés d'acte de génocide sera remise aux Nations Unies, aux conseil de l'europe, aux présidents russe, américain et français. Les pogroms de soumgait ont également été commémoré à Stepanakert, om quelques milliers de personnes se sont recueillis devant le mémorial dédié aux victimes.

03/09/03 - Armenian opposition to picket Central Electoral Commission - ITAR-TASS News Agency

The Armenian opposition launches round-the-clock picketing of the

Central Electoral Commission building.

The pickets will not go away until the Commission announces invalid results of the president election, whose second round took place on March 5, member of the Republic opposition party administration, former prime minister Aram Sarkisyan said at a rally on Sunday. The police said that up to 2,500 people had attended the rally.

"A tent camp will be placed" in front of the Central Electoral Commission building, and everyone wishing can join it, Sarkisyan said. "An all-Armenia rally of the opposition" is scheduled for March 11, and meanwhile the headquarters of three opposition parties are receiving eyewitnesses to violations during the ballot.

03/19/03 - Armen Sargssian's arrest caused additional tension - Arminfo

The arrest of Armen Sargssian, who is charged with being involved in the assassination of Director of the Armenian Public Television Tigran Sargssian, has caused an additional tension in the country, which is not beneficial to the authorities, Armenian President Robert Kocharian stated at his meeting with journalists, commenting on the opposition's statement of the authorities' using the case for political purposes and neutralizing their political opponents.

According to him, it is the reason why on receiving a report on sufficient evidence being available, he asked the Prosecutor's Office of Armenia to arrest Armen Sargssian only after any other legal steps are excluded. "In this case, evidence was not only sufficient, it was so convincing that the Prosecutor's Office could not make another decision. Another decision would mean concealing the crime, which is a violation of the law," Kocharian said, adding that this decision was made by the Prosecutor's Office, and all the complaints must be addressed there(...)

03/19/03 - Armenian police halt opposition protest - RFE/RL

Police and Interior Ministry troops armed with rubber truncheons and backed by water cannons prevented several thousand opposition protesters from approaching the

presidential palace in Yerevan on 18 March, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. The demonstrators were protesting the 15 March arrest, which they consider politically motivated, of businessman Armen Sargsian on suspicion of having commissioned the 28 December slaying of Armenian National Television and Radio head Tigran Naghdalian. Sargsian's lawyer, Robert Grigorian, told RFE/RL that the charges against Sargsian should be dropped because of a lack of evidence. Sargsian's mother, Greta, who picketed the presidential palace on 17 and 18 March, said her son is innocent and should be released on bail.

03/25/03 - Armenian constitutional court rejects election appeal - RFE/RL

The Armenian Constitutional Court rejected on 24 March an appeal by defeated presidential candidate and National Unity Party Chairman Artashes Geghamian to invalidate the 19 February vote on the grounds of widespread falsifications, and to annul the Central Election Commission (CEC) decision to schedule a runoff vote for 5 March, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. According to official returns, Geghamian placed third of nine candidates in the first round with 17.7 percent of the vote. The Constitutional Court ordered the CEC to recount ballots cast at 11 polling stations where opposition activists and international observers alleged fraud. But on the basis of the recount, the court ruled that the infractions could not have affected the outcome of the first round. The court did, however, criticize the CEC for decisions that ran counter to election legislation and thus contributed to "an atmosphere of mistrust."

03/26/03 - Armenian Parliament Debates Controversial Media Bill - RFE/RL

By Ruzanna Khachatryan and Karine Kalantarian

The Armenian parliament began on Wednesday debates on a controversial government bill on mass media harshly criticized by many local journalists. About 30 of them picketed the National Assembly building in

Yerevan, protesting what they see as a threat to press freedom. The draft law submitted to lawmakers underwent major changes last year after facing strong domestic and international criticism. The Justice Ministry, its main author, removed several controversial provisions which would create a special government agency empowered to issue and revoke licenses for media organizations. The amended version of the proposed law also spares them the need to register with the ministry.

Nevertheless, several Armenian media associations insist that it remains deeply flawed and should be scrapped altogether. One such group, the National Press Club (NPC), rallied its members, many of whom work for pro-opposition publications, outside the parliament.

In a written statement, they urged the deputies to vote against the bill. One activist warned that the protesting journalists will campaign against the reelection of those deputies who will back the government initiative.

The parliament's opposition minority voiced its support for the journalists. Two of the parliament's standing committees, headed by opposition lawmakers, refused to endorse the draft law. People fighting against the media always lose, warned Victor Dallakian, chairman of the parliament committee on legal affairs.

Dallakian proposed more than 30 amendments which he said will address media concerns.

Meanwhile, the Justice Ministry appeared to cave in to the pressure, withdrawing a parallel proposal that would facilitate libel suits against reporters. Its proposed amendment to Armenia's Civil Code would force the media to pay material compensation for reports causing moral damage to readers, viewers or listeners. The NPC said the clause, if approved by the parliament, would result in government censorship.

The government, on the other hand, kept intact a provision in the media bill that obligates news organizations to disclose their sources of funding. Also causing

controversy is another clause that allows courts to demand the disclosure of journalists' sources of information for the protection of public interests.

The deputy parliament speaker, Tigran Torosian, agreed with some of the criticism but urged the deputies to vote for the bill in the first reading on Monday. He said final debates on it will be held by the next National Assembly to be elected on May 25.

04/17/03 - President Robert Kocharian is not going to accept CC's proposal on referendum of confidence - Armenian News Network

Answering the question of NT's correspondent about President Robert Kocharian's attitude towards the proposal about holding a referendum of confidence contained in the April 16 verdict of the Constitutional Court, the press service of the president reported the following: "By its verdict the Constitutional Court upheld the decision of the Central Electoral Commission about the president's election of March 11, 2003. At the same time, the CC decision clearly divides the provision confirming the result of the elections and the proposal in which the importance of public confidence is pointed out. (...)"

04/28/03 - Armenian presidential body rejects court's calls to address arrests of opposition supporters - RFE/RL

A special presidential judicial oversight body rejected on 25 April the recommendations of Armenia's highest court to investigate the judicial sanctioning of the mass arrests of opposition activists and supporters in recent months (...). The Constitutional Court's recommendations stem from its recent ruling on a court challenge brought by failed opposition presidential candidate Stepan Demirchian, and call on the presidential Justice Council to investigate the mass arrests of opposition supporters, which the court said "contravene the European Convention on Human Rights." The ruling also asks the council to "consider punishing the judges who

handed down rulings denounced as illegal by human rights groups." (...) The Justice Council added that it is not subject to orders or recommendations from the Constitutional Court. The defiance follows a similar incident last week when state prosecutors publicly rejected a Constitutional Court order to investigate reported instances of ballot-box stuffing and other voting irregularities.

GEORGIA / GEORGIE

02/03/03 – Georgia solicits Russia's cooperation in preventing Chechen gunmen's return to Pankisi - RFE/RL

Speaking in Washington on 31 January, Georgian National Security Minister Valeri Khaburzanias said Tbilisi is counting on help from Russia to ensure that Chechen fighters do not return to their former bases in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Caucasus Press reported. He said Russia must ensure that its borders with Georgia are sealed. On 1 February, U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard Miles said that while 90 percent of the Chechen gunmen have left Pankisi, some Chechens and "international terrorists" are still there and that Georgia must take steps to expel them, Caucasus Press reported. Georgian officials said in December and January that all but a handful of the estimated 800 Chechens left Pankisi last summer.

On 2 February, ITAR-TASS quoted Georgian Defense Minister Lieutenant General David Tevzadze as saying Georgia will deploy an unspecified number of national guardsmen near its border with Ingushetia beginning in mid-February.

02/03/03 – Georgia accuses Russia of violating CFE treaty - Caucasus Press and ITAR-TASS

In a 3 February statement cited by Caucasus Press and ITAR-TASS, the Georgian Foreign Ministry accused Russia of deploying in the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia arms and military vehicles in excess of what Russia is permitted in the North Caucasus under the revised version of the

Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). The statement demanded an explanation of why the equipment was brought to South Ossetia and its immediate removal. On 30 January, Georgian media reported that Russia had provided South Ossetia with large quantities of arms and military hardware, including four tanks, 20 armored personnel carriers, several dozen grenade launchers, and a large number of submachine guns. South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoyty and Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin both denied those reports later that day. Interfax on 3 February quoted President Shevardnadze as saying that the buildup does not pose a threat to Georgian security and that Tbilisi will do everything possible to find a common language with the Ossetians." On 4 February, ITAR-TASS quoted Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Nikolai Kormiltsev as saying, "There is not a single piece of military hardware in the zone of the South Ossetian conflict."

02/04/03 – Premises of Georgian moderate opposition party attacked - RFE/RL Newsline

Some 20-25 heavily armed men forced their way into and ransacked the Tbilisi offices of the New Rightists party on 3 February, physically assaulting party leader David Gamkrelidze and other party members, Caucasus Press and Interfax reported. According to an eyewitness report posted on 4 February by Eurasia View, the gunmen were prevented from opening fire on Gamkrelidze only by the arrival of Parliament Defense and Security Committee Chairman Irakli Batiashvili. Batiashvili joined the New Rightists in October 2001, but quit at the request of other party members after voting for the government's draft 2003 budget in its third reading against the wishes of other members of the party's parliamentary faction. Other opposition parties issued a statement the same day condemning the assault as "a terrorist attack" and demanding the Georgian authorities apprehend those responsible within 24 hours.

02/05/03 – Georgian "force" ministers accused of preparing "velvet coup" - RFE/RL Newsline

Caucasus Press on 5 February quoted Georgian Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili as saying he will not deign to respond to what he termed Tbilisi City Council Chairman Mikhail Saakashvili's "absurd" allegations that the interior and national security ministers have discussed the possibility of staging a "velvet" coup to oust President Eduard Shevardnadze before the parliamentary elections due this fall. Saakashvili made those allegations in a 4 February interview with the independent television station Rustavi-2.

Narchemashvili commented that he believes they were intended to discredit him and his colleagues.

02/06/03 – More details emerge of alleged Georgian coup plans - RFE/RL Newsline

At a press conference in Tbilisi on 5 January, leading members of the New Rightists party disclosed what they claimed were new details of an alleged planned coup to oust President Eduard Shevardnadze, BS-Press and Caucasus Press reported. National Movement leader Mikhail Saakashvili claimed in a television interview on 4 February that the "power" ministries were preparing a "velvet coup. Levan Gachechiladze claimed that Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili and Vitalli Khazaradze, who heads the former majority Union of Citizens of Georgia parliament faction that supports Shevardnadze, met with Minister of State Avtandil Djorbenadze at the latter's apartment to discuss the coup plans. New Rightist Pikria Chikhradze said that Djorbenadze was to replace Shevardnadze as president, while Narchemashvili was to succeed Djorbenadze as minister of state.

02/06/03 – Georgian remanded for attack on opposition party headquarters - Caucasus Press reported

Although an estimated two dozen men participated in the 3 February attack on the Tbilisi headquarters of the moderate opposition New

Rightists party, only one alleged participant has been remanded in pretrial custody for three months, Caucasus Press reported on 6 February. He is Koba Kvachantiradze, a supporter of parliament Defense and Security Committee Chairman Irakli Batiashvili, who quit the New Rightists earlier this month. Some 20 supporters of Kvachantiradze traveled to Tbilisi on 6 February from Akhaltsikhe to stage a demonstration of solidarity with him, Caucasus Press reported.

02/07/03 - Georgian foreign Ministry again accuses Russia of violating CFE treaty - RFE/RL Newsline

The Georgian Foreign Ministry has issued a further statement rejecting Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Nikolai Kormiltsev's rebuttal of its 31 January statement accusing Russia of deploying armor and weaponry in South Ossetia in excess of the amount to which it is entitled under the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), Caucasus Press reported on 6 February. The second statement claims that on 19 December 2002 Russia deployed in South Ossetia's Djava Raion 19 T-55 and T-62 tanks and that on 23 January Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers found a 122-millimeter howitzer at a new Russian post in the village of Grubeda, 10 kilometers from Tskhinvali.

02/10/03 - Georgian-Russian talks end without agreement - RFE/RL Newsline

Georgian and Russian government officials failed during talks in Moscow on 6-8 February to reach agreement on the terms for extending the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone, Caucasus Press reported on 8 February, citing the Georgian Foreign Ministry. That mandate expired on 31 December, and the Georgian National Security Council on 26 January set specific conditions for prolonging it. Interfax on 8 February quoted Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksandr Yakovenko as saying that the Georgian side "expressed interest" in having the mandate

prolonged. On 30 January, the UN Security Council set a deadline of 15 February for Russia and Georgia to reach agreement over the mandate. If they fail to do so, the unarmed UN observers in Abkhazia -- who rely for security on the Russian peacekeeping force -- might be withdrawn. Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze said on 10 February during his regular Monday radio interview that the talks will be resumed, but did not specify where or when, Caucasus Press reported.

02/11/03 - Georgian politician denies maintaining private army - Caucasus Press reported

Tamaz Nadareishvili, chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz parliament-in-exile, rejected on 11 February as lies and intrigues a letter read to parliament by Djemal Gogitidze of the Revival faction, Caucasus Press reported. The letter, addressed to State Security Minister Valeri Khaburzanian from his counterpart in the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz government-in-exile, claimed Nadareishvili has an illegal private armed formation codenamed Jupiter that exerts pressure on any political organizations that do not support the positions of the parliament-in-exile. Nadareishvili and Gogitidze were prevented from coming to blows only by the intervention of Georgian Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili. An anticipated retaliatory assault by Nadareishvili's supporters on the Tbilisi headquarters of the Batumi-based Revival faction failed to take place.

02/11/03 - Georgian parliament deputies searched for weapons - Caucasus Press reported

Georgian parliament speaker Burdjanadze formally reminded deputies on 11 February that according to Article 201 of the parliamentary statutes, weapons are not permitted in the parliament chamber, Caucasus Press reported. She added that her warning was prompted by a talk with State Security Minister Khaburzanian and the head of the State Guard Service, Sultan Papashvili. Guards searched all deputies entering the parliament building on 12 February, to the

indignation of many, Caucasus Press reported.

02/13/03 - And demand quid pro quo ? - Caucasus Press reported

Reporting Tbilisi's alleged offer to the United States of the use of its military infrastructure in the event of a war against Iraq, Georgian news agencies quoted the BBC as saying that Shevardnadze conditioned that offer on a pledge from Washington to pressure Russia to close its remaining military bases in Georgia. Georgian parliament Defense and Security Committee Chairman Irakli Batiashvili declined on 13 February to comment on that report, saying that "the president is not obliged to inform me" about his decisions, Caucasus Press reported.

02/14/03 - Georgian opposition slams president for backing US war on Iraq - Prime-News news agency

Opposition representatives roundly criticized President Eduard Shevardnadze on Friday 14 February for expressing Georgia's readiness to allow the USA and its allies to use Georgian airfields in the event of a war against Iraq. The Mkhedrioni paramilitary organization leader, Jaba Ioseliani, told Prime-News that "Eduard Shevardnadze should not take such a fateful decision behind the back of the whole nation". "Georgia is in great danger as it is the least protected country in the anti-Iraq coalition," he noted. He said that Iraq could launch missile strikes on Georgia. "Terrorists might be sent to carry out acts of sabotage here," Jaba Ioseliani said.

He said that "it will take the same USA many months to help Georgia with anti-aircraft systems, but the war on Iraq is not far off".

"It is inadmissible for Georgia to offer its bases. Shevardnadze hopes in vain that the USA will help return Abkhazia in exchange," he believes.(...)

The Western media reported on Thursday that Georgia had offered the USA its military airfield in Vaziani in the event of military operations against Iraq.

02/20/03 – Georgia, Russia continue to disagree on closure of bases - RFE/RL Newsline

No progress was made in Moscow on 19 February during the eighth round of Russian-Georgian talks on the optimum timeframe for the closure of the two remaining Russian military bases in Georgia, Caucasus Press and Russian news agencies reported. ITAR-TASS quoted Russian Deputy Defense Minister Aleksandr Kosovan as describing the talks as "extremely difficult." He said Georgia still insists the bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki be closed within 3 1/2 years, while Russia needs 11 years to do so, given that it cannot afford the 11 billion rubles (\$348.9 million) needed to build accommodation in Russia for the military personnel that will be withdrawn from Georgia. Caucasus Press on 20 February quoted Russian Industry and Science Minister Ilya Klebanov, who headed the Russian delegation, as saying that Moscow is already seeking "sponsors" to help finance those facilities and that Georgia is interested in aiding that search. A second major bone of contention, according to Kosovan, is the former Russian military base at Gudauta. Klebanov insisted that all Russian military personnel and hardware have been withdrawn from Gudauta, leaving only 260 servicemen to guard that facility until it is handed over to the Russian peacekeepers deployed in Abkhazia, Caucasus Press reported.

Georgian officials believe the number of Russians at Gudauta is far higher and want the base inspected by OSCE experts.

02/24/03 – Georgia proposes alternative time frame for closure of Russia military bases - RFE/RL Newsline

Georgia has come up with two alternative proposals for the timing of the closure of the Russian military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki, Caucasus Press and Interfax reported on 21 February, quoting Foreign Ministry official Revaz Beshidze. Beshidze said that if Moscow agrees to withdraw all military hardware from those two bases within one year, Georgia would be prepared to extend the three-year deadline it previously insisted on for the total closure of the two bases. Alternatively, if

Russia closes the Batumi base within three years, Tbilisi will extend the deadline for closing the Akhalkalaki base. The Russian forces in Batumi are part of the support base of Adjara Supreme Council Chairman Aslan Abashidze, whom many observers believe will contest the 2005 presidential elections in which incumbent Eduard Shevardnadze is barred by the constitution from seeking a third term. Interfax on 23 February also quoted Beshidze as saying that Tbilisi insists on dismantling the concrete runway at the Gudauta military base in Abkhazia from which Russia has already withdrawn military hardware and most of its personnel.

02/24/03 – Georgian security Council approves request to UN for peace-enforcement operation in Abkhazia - Caucasus Press

Tamaz Nadareishvili, who is chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz parliament-in-exile comprising Georgian deputies to the Abkhaz parliament elected in 1991, told journalists in Tbilisi on 24 February that the parliament-in-exile has asked the UN Security Council to mount a peace-enforcement operation to bring Abkhazia back under the control of the central Georgian government, Caucasus Press reported. Nadareishvili added that the Georgian National Security Council has approved that initiative. Nadareishvili claimed the Abkhaz authorities are so alarmed by his campaign to persuade the United Nations to mount such an operation that they have sent hit men to Tbilisi to murder him, Caucasus Press reported. At the same press conference, Nadareishvili also said that a deputy security minister of the Abkhaz government-in-exile and two of his subordinates have been fired for leaking to parliament a document falsely alleging that Nadareishvili has at his command an illegal armed formation code-named Jupiter.

02/25/03 – Georgian security Minister admits contacts with Chechen field commander - RFE/RL Newsline

State Security Minister Valeri Khaburzanina said in Tbilisi on 24

February that his ministry maintained contact with Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev when Gelaev and his men were based in the Pankisi Gorge, Caucasus Press reported on 25 February.

Khaburzanina added that all such contacts ceased after Gelaev and his followers left Pankisi in August 2002. He said Gelaev might try to reenter Georgia this spring once mountain passes are clear of snow. In his regular Monday radio address on 24 February, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze said that an upcoming operation in Pankisi by army, Interior Ministry, and special troops is aimed at preventing any armed groups from entering the gorge and using it as a base camp, Caucasus Press and Russian news agencies reported.

02/28/03 – Did former Georgian interior Minister help Chechen warlord? - RFE/RL Newsline

Emzar Kvitsiani, who is governor of the Georgian-controlled upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge, alleged in an interview with the newspaper "24 saati" that former Interior Minister Kakha Targamadze helped transport Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev and his men from the Pankisi Gorge to the Kodori Gorge in the summer of 2001 on orders from Russian Security Council Secretary Vladimir Rushailo, Caucasus Press reported on 28 February. Many observers questioned at the time how Gelaev's men could have traveled the length of Georgia undetected. Meanwhile, "Akhali taoba" on 26 February and "Alia" on 27 February reported that President Shevardnadze is considering dismissing Targamadze's successor, Koba Narchemashvili, and either reappointing Targamadze as interior minister or naming one of Targamadze's close associates to that post. Shevardnadze's rationale, both papers suggest, is to ensure that the ministry is headed by a man capable of ensuring that Shevardnadze's embattled Union of Citizens of Georgia polls the required number of votes in the parliamentary elections due this fall.

03/03/03 – Interior Ministry patrol fired up on in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge - RFE/RL

Unidentified gunmen opened fire on 28 February on a patrol of three police vehicles in the Pankisi Gorge, but did not inflict any casualties, Caucasus Press reported. Also on 28 February, Georgia's National Security Council discussed, and President Eduard Shevardnadze approved, plans to launch a new operation in the Pankisi Gorge to preclude the return of Chechen militants or suspected terrorists who used the gorge as a base camp in 2001-02.

03/03/03 – Did U.S. spy plane overfly Georgia? - RFE/RL

Georgian officials on 28 February and 1 March failed to clarify whether a U.S. spy plane overflew Georgia on 27 February, as Interfax reported on 28 February. The original Interfax report quoted a Georgian Defense Ministry source as saying that Georgia gave its permission for such flights two months ago. On 1 March, Georgian Civil Aviation Administration official Zurab Chankotadze told Caucasus Press that several U.S. aircraft overfly Georgia each day en route to Afghanistan. But on 28 February, Georgian National Security Council official Tedo Djaparidze declined either to confirm or deny the original Interfax report, while Defense Minister Lieutenant General David Tevzadze and an unnamed Frontier Department official both denied that any U.S. aircraft had violated Georgian airspace, Caucasus Press reported.

03/04/03 – Georgian President disappointed by rejection of law on military cooperation with U.S. - RFE/RL

In his regular Monday radio address, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze criticized on 3 March parliament's failure on 27 February to ratify a defense-cooperation agreement signed with the United States late last year, Caucasus Press and Russian news agencies reported. Shevardnadze pointed out that the United States has contributed more over the past decade to strengthening Georgia's

defensive potential than any other country. He said he hopes parliament will soon ratify the agreement.

03/07/03 – Georgian, Russian Presidents begin talks in Sochi - RFE/RL

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze traveled to Sochi on 6 March and held a first round of talks there that evening with Russian President Putin, Caucasus Press and Russian news agencies reported. Georgian officials said the talks would focus on the Abkhaz conflict, the situation in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, the future of the two Russian military bases in Georgia, and the framework agreement between the two countries that is currently under discussion. A second meeting between the two presidents is scheduled on 7 March. Also on 7 March, an Abkhaz delegation headed by Prime Minister Gennadii Gagulia arrived in Sochi, and Gagulia met "briefly" with Putin, Caucasus Press reported.

Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Kakha Sikharulidze denied on 4 March that either Gagulia or Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba would attend the Putin-Shevardnadze talks.

03/07/03 – Former Georgian ruling party, socialists agree to form election bloc - RFE/RL

Socialist Party leader Vakhtang Rcheulishvili told journalists in Tbilisi on 7 March that his party will align to contest the parliamentary elections this fall with the former ruling Union of Citizens of Georgia (SMK), Caucasus Press reported. The new alliance will be named For a New Georgia, Rcheulishvili said. The two parties concluded a cooperation agreement last year to preserve political stability. Rcheulishvili said the bloc will work to improve Georgia's strained relations with Russia. He harshly criticized former parliament speaker Zurab Zhvania and other so-called young reformers who made their careers within, but have now quit, the SMK.

03/10/03 - Opponents of Georgian breakaway republic go to The Hague - Ekho Moskvy radio

[...] The current leaders of the unrecognized republic have carried out an act of genocide against the Georgian population in Abkhazia, the leaders-in-exile believe. Interfax reports that Tamaz Nadereishvili, the leader of the authorities-in-exile, has said that the prosecutor's office has prepared 35 volumes of material about the genocide and ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia.

According to the prosecutor-general's office, during the conflict at the beginning of the 1990s more than 5,000 local ethnic-Georgian residents were killed in Abkhazia. Around 300,000 became refugees. Incidentally, Tbilisi has often said that the Georgian population in the republic was subjected to genocide and ethnic cleansing. Thus far, however, the official leaders of the state have not raised the issue of appealing to the court in The Hague, the agency says.

At the same time, Sukhumi seat of the incumbent Abkhaz government regards these moves by the authorities-in-exile as absolutely unwarranted. Abkhazia's deputy plenipotentiary representative in Russia, Tatyana Gulya, told us there had been no genocide of Georgians on Abkhaz territory. It was war, she explained. Gulya pointed out that it wasn't just the Abkhaz people who suffered during the conflict in 1992-1993 but residents of the whole of multi-ethnic Abkhazia. Armenian and Greek villages were affected, as were Russians living in the republic, the deputy representative recalled.

03/14/03 – Georgian interior Ministry announces plan for local ethnic Chechens to help police Pankisi - RFE/RL

Georgian Interior Ministry Kakheti Regional Chief Zurab Tushuri announced on 13 March that ethnic Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge -- who are known locally as "Kists" -- will assist Interior Ministry troops in an effort to secure villages in the gorge, the "Georgian Times" reported. The joint patrols are part of a broader campaign to police the volatile Pankisi Gorge, near the Georgian border with Chechnya, which has served as a base for

armed groups of Chechen rebels. The Interior Ministry has been under pressure in recent weeks from Russia to complete its earlier attempt to secure the region and forestall any threat of further cross-border attacks.

03/17/03 - Georgian national security council concludes that coup rumors were unfounded - RFE/RL

After hearing a report by Prosecutor-General Nugzar Gabrichidze into his agency's investigations of opposition parliament deputies' allegations that senior officials were plotting to oust President Shevardnadze in a velvet coup, Georgia's National Security Council concluded on 14 March that those allegations were without foundation, Caucasus Press reported. Intelligence department head Lieutenant General Avtandil Ioseliani told journalists after the council session that such rumors are likely to resurface unless Article 52 of the Georgian Constitution, which absolves parliament deputies from divulging the sources on which their statements are based, is amended, Caucasus Press reported.

03/18/03 - Georgian court rules on Chechen extraditions - RFE/RL

A Tbilisi District Court ruled on 13 March that two Chechens can be extradited to Russia in compliance with a ruling by the Georgian Prosecutor-General's Office, ITAR-TASS and Caucasus Press reported. But the court ruled that a third Chechen, who has been granted refugee status in Georgia, should not be extradited. The three Chechens were among eight armed fighters detained last August after crossing the Russian-Chechen border illegally. The remaining five were extradited to Russia last fall. Speaking in Moscow on 17 March, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Aleksandr Yakovenko said he hopes the men will soon be sent back to Russia, where they face charges of involvement in acts of terrorism, ITAR-TASS reported.

03/21/03 - Georgia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine agree to coordinate on joining NATO - Prime-News news agency

The Georgian, Azerbaijani and Ukrainian parliamentary delegations to NATO have signed an agreement on coordination in joining the North Atlantic alliance, the leader of the United Democrats parliamentary faction and head of the Georgian delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Giorgi Baramidze, told a news conference on Friday [21 March].

He said that the agreement envisaged coordinated actions between the three countries towards joining NATO. The MP said that the process was similar to the "Vilnius 10" which brings together 10 countries, seven of whom have already become NATO members. Giorgi Baramidze expressed the hope that Macedonia and Yugoslavia would join the agreement and, later, Armenia and Moldova.

Georgia officially announced its intention to become a NATO member at the North Atlantic alliance's summit in November last year in Prague.

Russian officer killed at military base in southern Georgia - Armenian report

03/24/03 - Georgian parliament ratifies military agreement with U.S. - RFE/RL

Deputies voted at a special session of parliament on 21 March by 138 in favor with one vote against to ratify the military cooperation agreement with the United States signed in December 2002, Caucasus Press reported. The agreement exempts U.S. military personnel from visa requirements and grants them privileges and immunities comparable to those extended to U.S. diplomats. Parliament speaker Nino Burdjanadze expressed reservations that the agreement had been drafted and signed without parliament being consulted and warned that it might prove necessary in the future to amend it. Parliament failed to ratify the agreement in a vote in late February.

03/27/03 - Georgia, Russia agree on military wage payments - RFE/RL

Georgian National Bank Chairman Irakli Managadze and Russian Deputy Central Bank Chairman Oleg Mozhaitskii signed an agreement in Tbilisi on 24 March under which personnel at the Russian military bases in Akhalkalaki and Batumi will receive their salaries in Georgian laris, rather than Russian rubles beginning next month, Caucasus Press reported. The total sum involved is some 15 million laris (\$6.89 million).

Parliament speaker Nino Burdjanadze hailed the agreement on 26 March, expressing the hope that it will contribute to an improvement in bilateral relations. Also on 26 March, Georgian Defense Minister Lieutenant General David Tevzadze traveled to Akhaltsikhe Raion, which borders on Akhalkalaki, for talks with regional Governor Teimuraz Mosiashvili. The predominantly Armenian population of Akhalkalaki, many of whom are employed at the Russian base, has for years used the ruble as the local currency.

03/28/03 - Georgia's ethnic Armenian party leader fears Turkish invasion - Prime-News news agency

The leader of the Virk Party operating in Georgia's predominantly Armenian-populated Samtskhe-Javakheti region, David Rstkyan, believes that the Russian military base deployed in Akhalkalaki is currently the only factor which is holding back the invasion of this region by Turkish troops.

David Rstkyan told Prime News that the recent events in Iraq showed how fragile the world is, and "as the Turkish troops have entered the territory where Iraqi Kurds live, no-one will be able to give guarantees that they will not do the same to Akhalkalaki' Armenians as well".

He said that "such fears can be explained by history, when thousands of Armenians were killed by the Turkish army in Akhalkalaki in 1918, and the Georgian army was not able to defend them then". Under decisions of the OSCE Istanbul summit in 1999, the Russian military base No 62

deployed in Akhalkalaki must be withdrawn from the territory of Georgia.

The timetable for the withdrawal of this base is to be discussed at Russian-Georgian military talks.

Moscow sets the period of withdrawal of 11 years, and Tbilisi insists on three.

03/28/03 - Azerbaijanis in Georgia complain of harassment, discrimination - RFE/RL

Members of Georgia's 500,000-strong Azerbaijani minority blocked a major highway for five hours earlier this week to protest discrimination by local Georgian officials and the imposition by Georgian customs officials of an unauthorized 34 percent tax on agricultural produce being transported to Azerbaijan for sale, zerkalo.az reported on 28 March. The Internet publication also quoted Zumrud Gurbanly, one of six Azerbaijani deputies in the Georgian parliament, as saying that Azerbaijani applicants work on construction of, or to serve in units formed to guard, the planned Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil export pipeline are routinely rejected.

03/28/03 - Georgian interior ministry denies engaging in reprisals in Pankisi - RFE/RL

Major General Giorgi Shervashidze, who commands Georgia's Interior Ministry troops, has denied accusations by Chechen refugees settled in the Pankisi Gorge that his troops engage in reprisals in Pankisi comparable to those perpetrated by Russian forces against the civilian population in Chechnya, according to "Mtavari gazeti" on 28 March, as cited by Caucasus Press. Shervashidze said no complaints have been received about his forces' actions in Pankisi.

04/01/03 - Georgian opposition party accuses authorities of oppression - RFE/RL

Members of the opposition Revival Union parliament faction told a press conference in Tbilisi on 29 March that faction members and rank-and-file party members have repeatedly been attacked over the previous three weeks, Caucasus Press reported. The assailants

reportedly told their victims they are being targeted because of their membership of the union. Faction leader Djemal Gogitidze said that if the reprisals continue, the faction will begin collecting signatures in a bid to impeach President Shevardnadze and ministers responsible for maintaining law and order.

04/01/03 - Georgian penitentiary system crippled by debt- RFE/RL

Paata Mkheidze, who is the Georgian Justice Ministry official responsible for administering the country's prisons, was quoted by Caucasus Press on 28 March as saying that water supplies to prisons might soon be cut off because of debts for previous supplies amounting to 2.2 million laris (\$1.01 million). The prison system's annual budget for 2003 is 9.4 million laris, according to "Mtavari gazeti" on 31 March. Other debts reportedly include 520,000 laris for electricity, 55,000 laris for fuel, and 879,000 laris in unpaid wages to prison personnel. Telephone connections with some prisons have been disconnected because of outstanding bills.

04/04/03 - Georgia's minorities demand representation in Parliament - RFE/RL

At a meeting with parliament speaker Nino Burdjanadze, representatives of Georgia's ethnic minorities asked that each minority be allocated a specific quota of parliament deputies, Caucasus Press reported on 3 April. They also complained about the lack of Georgian-language teachers in schools in districts where the population is predominantly non-Georgian. Agreement was reached on creating a consultative group to address the problems of ethnic minorities in Georgia.

04/07/03 - Georgia schedules Parliamentary elections... - RFE/RL

The Georgian Foreign Ministry has invited international organizations, including the OSCE and the Council of Europe, to send observers to monitor parliamentary elections that have been tentatively scheduled for 2 November, Caucasus Press

reported on 4 April. President Eduard

Shevardnadze's representative to parliament Mariam Tsatsanashvili told a government session on 2 April that the Interior Ministry will complete the process of verifying and updating voter lists by 1 June, Caucasus Press reported. The New Rightists, meanwhile, have independently compiled lists of voters in 48 raions in a bid to preclude voter fraud, Caucasus Press reported on 4 April.

04/07/03- ... As new pro-presidential bloc emerges - RFE/RL

The leaders of a new pro-presidential election bloc, to be called "For a New Georgia," held their first meeting in Tbilisi on 6 April, Russian media reported. The bloc comprises the former majority Union of Citizens of Georgia (SMK), which Shevardnadze founded in 1993 as his personal power base; the Socialist Party headed by parliament deputy speaker Vakhtang Rcheulishvili; and the newly-created Silk Road Party headed by Georgian Railways director and long-time Shevardnadze associate Akaki Chkhaidze. The SMK and the Socialist Party announced their intention last month to align in an election bloc.

04/08/03 - Shevardnadze not to run for third term - AZG Daily

Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze said today he was not going to run for a third presidential term. Speaking to the nation during his traditional Monday radio address, Shevardnadze said he would never agree to changing an article in the constitutional that bans running for presidency for the third time. Next presidential election in Georgia is scheduled for 2005.

The 75-year-old Shevardnadze was first elected president in 1995 and was reelected in 2000. He had been running the country since 1992 holding the position of parliament chairman-head of state from 1992 to 1995.

04/15/03 - US-Georgian defence deal a headache for Russian air defence - ex-commander - ITAR-TASS news agency

An agreement in the field of defence between Georgia and the United States could pose an additional threat to Russia's military security in the Caucasus region, ITAR-TASS was told by Anatoliy Kornukov, a former air force commander, commenting on the ratification of the agreement by the Georgian parliament.

The possibility that the United States might use Georgian aerodromes in the framework of the agreement will considerably worsen the situation on Russia's southern borders, Kornukov said. Deployment of US combat planes on Georgian aerodromes will inevitably cause a headache for Russian air defence troops, in particular, the 4th Air Force and Air Defence Army stationed in the North Caucasus Military District, the Russian radar station in Qabala (Azerbaijan) and the 102nd military base in Gyumri (Armenia).(...)

04/17/03 - Russian Duma condemns planned Georgian military cooperation with U.S.- RFE/RL

The Russian State Duma on 16 April overwhelmingly approved, by a vote of 351 to three with one abstention, a statement condemning as "an exceptionally unfriendly and even hostile act" the bilateral Georgian-U.S. agreement on military cooperation ratified by the Georgian parliament last month, Russian agencies reported. The statement claimed that agreement creates a serious imbalance of forces in the South Caucasus and thus poses a threat to international security. It expressed concern that U.S. forces stationed in Georgia might be deployed against the populations of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

04/23/03 - Russia to hand over military facilities to Georgia, general says - Prime-News news agency

Russia is ready to hand over to Georgia some of the facilities of the Group of Russian Troops in the

Transcaucasus, the chief of the General Staff of the Georgian armed forces, Lt-Gen Joni Pirtskhalaishvili, said on Wednesday 23 April after meeting the commander of the North Caucasus Military District, Col-Gen Vladimir Boldyrev. Boldyrev is currently inspecting Russian military bases deployed in Georgia and Armenia.

The chief of staff said that the Russian side was ready to hand them over on time. Joni Pirtskhalaishvili said that there were "enough" such facilities.

They also discussed scrapping ammunition at the engineer depot of the Group of Russian Troops in the Transcaucasus in Sagarejo.

Vladimir Boldyrev visited the 62nd Russian military base in Akhalkalaki on Tuesday. Boldyrev is expected to visit Batumi, where the 12th Russian military base is stationed. The units of the Group of Russian Troops in the Transcaucasus are subordinate to the North Caucasus Military District.

04/24/03 - Georgian parliament speaker accused of "provoking" ethnic confrontation - Kavkasia-Press news agency

A member of the Alliance for New Georgia parliamentary faction Idayat Huseynov demanded that Chairwoman of the Georgian Parliament Nino Burjanadze be brought to account for an incident which stirred up a controversy between the ethnic Armenian and Azeri members of parliament. The ethnic Azeri members of parliament strongly protested against a request by an ethnic Armenian member of parliament Hamlet Movsesyan to observe a minute of silence in the memory of victims of the genocide of ethnic Armenians.

Huseynov said that people who are eager to provoke ethnic confrontation in Georgia were behind that move...

The leader of the Alliance for New Georgia, Irakli Gogava, confronted Nino Burjanadze at today's sitting of the Georgian Parliament. The incident that occurred in parliament today is intended to harm Georgia and it is a part of a Russian plan which is managed by special tested mechanisms, Gogava said.

According to Gogava, the objective of the plan is to provoke an ethnic

confrontation and to lead Georgia to the state of anarchy eventually. In Gogava's opinion, the speaker of the Georgian Parliament has set up a precedent which will create a momentum for the implementation of the Russian plan in parliament and in society as a whole...

**DAGHESTAN /
DAGHESTAN**

03/18/03 - Daghestan elects new legislature - RFE/RL

Daghestan held elections to a new parliament on 16 March. Deputies were elected in 97 districts, and a runoff will be held in 23 others. Repeat elections will be scheduled in Kizlyar after all but one candidate pulled out at the last minute. In contrast to the previous ballot, in which three police officers were killed and two candidates wounded, no casualties were reported, although there were disturbances at polling stations in Baba-Yurt and Kachaloi, and several persons fired guns into the air at a polling station in Makhachkala.

04/01/03 - Duma deputy from Daghestan survives assassination attempt - RFE/RL

Hadzhi Makhachev (People's Deputy) who represents Daghestan in the State Duma, was wounded in the arm when an unidentified assailant opened fire on him in Makhachkala on 28 March, Russian media reported. Police say the weapon used was an army sniper's rifle. Makhachev, who once headed a now disbanded organization that represented the Avars (the largest ethnic group in Daghestan), told journalists he cannot fathom why anyone should want to kill him. But People's Deputy Duma faction head Gennadii Raikin said in Moscow he believes the attack was connected with Makhachev's activities as a member of that faction and of the People's Party of Russia.

04/03/03 – Medecins sans frontieres demands release of its employee - ArmenPress

The Heads of Missions of Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) in Armenia have presented today the copy of a petition with more than 300,000 signatures to the Russian Embassy to Armenia. In the seven months since the kidnapping, the Russian federal authorities, who are supervising the investigations in Dagestan, have failed to provide MSF with any information as to why or by whom Arjan was abducted and as to ways to move forward on solving the case. Moreover, MSF's request to meet with the Presidential office have so far been denied. 'The lack of progress whatsoever points to the obstruction of Arjan's release. To date, the Russian authorities have not demonstrated the necessary political will to solve the case. We therefore call on them to secure the immediate release of Arjan and to live up to their responsibility to ensure the security of civilians and humanitarian workers on their territory', says Dr Morten Rostrop, International President of Medecins Sans Frontieres. The petition, that found more than 300,000 signatures in only a few weeks, is currently being handed over to Russian representations around the world.

ABKHAZIA / ABKHAZIE

02/04/03 – Georgian President proposes mixed or EU force to replace CIS peacekeepers in Abkhazia - RFE/RL Newslite

In his regular Monday radio address, Eduard Shevardnadze suggested on 3 February that the Russian peacekeeping force currently deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone be replaced by a force modeled on that currently deployed in the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, Interfax reported. That force comprises Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian service personnel. Shevardnadze also suggested that the EU might send troops from its rapid-reaction force to Abkhazia, Caucasus Press reported. At a

press conference later on 3 February, Shevardnadze told journalists he will raise with Azerbaijan's President Aliiev the possibility of Azerbaijani troops serving in such an EU force, BS-Press reported. He said Azerbaijan has "a strong interest" in resolving the Abkhaz conflict.

... But Abkhaz, Azerbaijanis, Russians say « no »

Astamur Tania, who is an aide to Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba, ruled out Abkhazia's consent to the deployment in the Abkhaz conflict zone of a mixed peacekeeping force that includes Georgian troops, Caucasus Press reported on 4 February. Tania said only Abkhaz police should patrol Gali Raion. But at the same time, Tania signaled that Abkhazia might agree to extending the zone controlled by the CIS peacekeepers. Georgian officials have said they will agree to prolong the CIS peacekeepers' mandate, which expired on 31 December, only if the conflict zone is expanded to encompass the entire Gali Raion. Also on 4 February, Azerbaijan's Ambassador to Georgia Gadjan Gadjeiev denied that Azerbaijan has agreed to send peacekeepers to Abkhazia, Caucasus Press reported. Meanwhile in Moscow, Russian Federation Council Constitutional Legislation Committee Chairman Yurii Sharandin told Interfax on 3 February that the council is "perplexed" by Tbilisi's efforts to involve the EU in mediating a solution to the Abkhaz conflict.

02/05/03 - Some 60,000 Georgian refugees returned to Abkhazia – Interfax

About 60,000 Georgian refugees have returned to the Gal region of Abkhazia, Abkhaz Prime Minister Gennady Gagulia told Interfax on Wednesday.

"In spite of economic problems, the administration of Abkhazia is working on accommodating the refugees that have returned to the Gal region. Right now it is necessary to register those who have returned, and Georgia should propose economic measures to help them," he said.

"Unfortunately, the international community on the territory of

Georgia is using lists which far exceed the actual numbers of Georgian refugees in Abkhazia. It would be expedient to send humanitarian aid to the Gal region, too," Gagulia said.

He also said that "it is necessary to consider the refugee issue in a much broader sense." "We favor the creation of economic conditions to enable Greeks, Armenians, Russians and Jews who left the republic during the war in 1992 to return to Abkhazia," he said.

02/12/03 – Georgian security council discusses Abkhazia - RFE/RL Newslite

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze convened a meeting of the National Security Council late on 11 February, Caucasus Press reported. Participants discussed possible courses of action following the failure of Russian and Georgian officials to reach agreement at talks in Moscow last week on the extension of the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone. The force's mandate expired on 31 December, and the Security Council ruled on 26 January that Georgia will approve its renewal only on condition that the conflict zone is expanded to encompass all of Gali Raion and that Russia halt the commuter-train service between Sochi and the Abkhaz capital, Sukhum, and the granting of Russian citizenship to residents of Abkhazia. No final decision was made at the 11 February meeting, but Foreign Minister Irakli Menagharshvili and Minister for Special Assignments Malkhaz Kakabadze were charged with renewing talks with the Russian side. Caucasus Press quoted Georgian parliament speaker Nino Burdjanadze as saying Moscow has already suspended granting Russian citizenship to the Abkhaz, which she described as "a positive step." She predicted that Russia would also agree to Georgia's remaining conditions.

02/14/03 - U.S. recommends extending mandate of CIS peacekeepers in Abkhazia - RFE/RL Newsline

Caucasus Press and ITAR-TASS on 13 February quoted U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher as saying that Washington supports prolonging for a further six months the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone. That mandate expired on 31 December, and Tbilisi has imposed specific conditions for extending it. Boucher said Washington "fully understands" Tbilisi's concern over unilateral Russian actions, including the renewal of the commuter-train service between Sochi and the Abkhaz capital, but advises against any actions that would make the process of negotiating a settlement to the conflict more difficult. He also urged Georgia and Abkhazia to begin talks on the UN-drafted document "Basic Principles for the Division of Competencies Between Tbilisi and Sukhumi."

02/21/03 - Abkhazia lays claim to Russian military base - RFE/RL Newsline

Abkhazia intends to take over the former Russian military base at Gudauta after the Russian peacekeeping force currently deployed in the Abkhaz conflict zone is withdrawn, Caucasus Press and Interfax quoted Abkhaz Deputy Defense Minister Garri Kupalba as saying on 20 February. He said the infrastructure of the base "is vital for the development of the Abkhaz army." Russian officials have repeatedly said, most recently at talks with a Georgian delegation in Moscow on 19 February, that all regular troops and weaponry have been withdrawn from Gudauta and that they are ready to sign an agreement with Tbilisi on the use of Gudauta as a logistical and recreation center for the peacekeeping force.

02/28/03 - UN envoy briefs Abkhaz, Georgian leaders on Geneva talks - RFE/RL Newsline

Heidi Tagliavini, who is UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's envoy for the Abkhaz conflict, met in Sukhum on 27 February with

Abkhaz Prime Minister Gennadii Gagulia and Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba, and in Tbilisi with President Shevardnadze, to inform them about the 19-20 February "brainstorming session" in Geneva of representatives of the UN Secretary-General's Friends of Georgia group, Caucasus Press reported. That session was intended to generate new approaches to resolving the Abkhaz conflict.

Tagliavini reportedly said that participants agreed on the need to create three bodies to focus, respectively, on economic problems, the repatriation of displaced persons, and political issues. In 1997, a Coordinating Council for resolving the conflict was established under the UN's aegis. That body has three working groups to address security issues, including maintaining the existing cease-fire, assisting displaced persons, and coping with economic issues.

03/05/03 - Abkhaz leaders reject new UN proposal - RFE/RL

During recent talks in Sukhum, the ambassadors in Tbilisi of the five member countries of the Friends of the UN Secretary-General group tasked with mediating a solution to the Abkhaz conflict -- France, Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and Russia -- have apparently failed to persuade the Abkhaz leadership of the merits of a new proposal drafted by the "friends" last month, Caucasus Press reported on 4 March. Astamur Tania, who is an aide to Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba, objected that the new proposals duplicate the existing UN-sponsored Coordinating Council. Abkhaz Prime Minister Gennadii Gagulia told journalists in Sukhum that the "friends" are trying to force Abkhazia to renounce its independence and revert to being an integral part of Georgia. In an interview published in "Vremya novosti" on 21 January, Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin, who is Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy for the Abkhaz conflict, commented that the Abkhaz negotiating position has hardened since Gagulia replaced Anri Djergenia as Abkhaz premier late last year.

03/10/03 - Georgian, Russian Presidents seek to resolve Abkhaz conflict... - RFE/RL

During talks in Sochi on 6 and 7 March, Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to specific proposals by his Georgian counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze intended to facilitate a solution to the Abkhaz conflict, Caucasus Press and Russian news agencies reported. In a joint statement issued on 7 March, the two presidents agreed to expedite the return, first to Abkhazia's southernmost Gali Raion and then to other districts, of Georgian displaced persons who fled their homes during the 1992-93 war. After the repatriation is complete, railway communication will be restored between Sochi via Abkhazia to Tbilisi, and modernization will begin at the Inguri Hydroelectric Power Station. They also agreed that the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone shall be extended indefinitely until either Georgia or Abkhazia demands the peacekeepers' withdrawal. It is not clear whether Putin agreed to Shevardnadze's proposal to set up a joint Georgian-Abkhaz administration and police force in Gali.

...With input, approval of Abkhaz Premier.

Abkhaz Prime Minister Gennadii Gagulia, who traveled unexpectedly to Sochi on 7 March to join the Putin-Shevardnadze talks, characterized them as "very positive," according to Interfax on 7 March. He said the meeting showed "that Russia remains...the only force that can bring peace and stability to the region." Gagulia also told Interfax that he raised with Shevardnadze the need to put a halt to the activities of Georgian guerrilla formations who, Gagulia said, are "destabilizing the situation" in the conflict zone. Gagulia also pointed out the need to develop Abkhazia's economy and provide employment for the thousands of returning Georgian displaced persons.

03/11/03 – More details of Georgian repatriation to Abkhazia divulged - RFE/RL

In his regular Monday radio address on 10 March, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze provided new details of the agreement he reached during talks in Sochi with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Abkhaz Prime Minister Gennadii Gagulia on the return of Georgian displaced persons to Abkhazia's southernmost Gali Raion, Caucasus Press reported.

Shevardnadze estimated that some 45,000 displaced persons will return to Gali but did not specify within what time frame. Nor is it clear whether rail communication between Sochi and Tbilisi will be resumed as soon as the repatriation process begins or only after it is successfully completed.

Shevardnadze also divulged that he and Putin agreed on the creation of a joint Georgian-Abkhaz-Russian police force and administration for Gali, which the Abkhaz side has hitherto rejected. Shevardnadze told journalists later on 10 March that Georgian and Russian working groups will be established within the next 10 days to oversee implementation of the agreements reached in Sochi.

03/19/03 – Abkhaz Parliament ratifies appeal for "associate membership" of Russian Federation - RFE/RL

The parliament of the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia on 18 March ratified an appeal to the Russian government to grant Abkhazia "associate membership" of the Russian Federation, Caucasus Press reported. The leaders of both Abkhazia and the similarly unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia formally requested such status for their respective republics a year ago, and the Russian State Duma responded with a statement reserving the right to consider granting such status. "Associate status" of the Russian Federation would oblige Abkhazia to coordinate with Russia its defense, foreign, and economic policies and formally to adopt the Russian ruble as its currency.

Hinting at possible public opposition to such close ties with Russia, parliamentary Defense and National Security Committee Chairman Harri

Samanba argued that the Abkhaz leadership should undertake a survey of popular attitudes to joining Russia, Caucasus Press reported on 18 March. In Tbilisi, Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagharishvili predicted that Moscow will persuade the Abkhaz leadership that its aspirations to associate membership of the Russian Federation are totally unrealistic, Caucasus Press reported.

04/01/03 – Abkhaz Premier admits to internal crisis - RFE/RL

Abkhaz Prime Minister Gagulia has issued a statement acknowledging that "the country is in crisis" and affirming his government's readiness for "active dialogue with all political parties and organizations that are interested in the democratic development of the republic," Caucasus Press reported on 1 April. But Gagulia again rejected calls by Amsakhara, a public political movement uniting veterans of the 1992-93 war with Georgia, that his government resign. On 29 March, Amsakhara members convened in Sukhum to discuss tactics following talks with ailing Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba, Caucasus Press reported. Amsakhara co-Chairman Vladimir Nachach-ogly said after the 29 March meeting that the movement is ready for constructive dialogue with the government, and for cooperation with all political parties and movements. He added that Amsakhara has drafted programs for economic development and constitutional reform.

But at the same time, he stressed that the organization's demand for the government's resignation remains in force.

04/04/03 – Abkhazia warns Georgia and Americans - YERKIR weekly online

Russian sources say that after the operation in Iraq, some of the American troops will be positioned in Georgia.

However, Georgian officials keep denying this information, claiming that the only way of cooperation discussed so far has been the providing of the Georgian airports for coalition aircraft.

But this denial does not dismiss the doubts; many local experts point to

Bush's letter to Shevardnadze, promising to deal with the Abkhazian conflict "closer" if Georgia provides assistance in the war on Iraq.

Abkhazia did not remain indifferent in this situation; it is concerned that the US involvement in the Caucasus problems would become one of the consequences of the war in Iraq and new geopolitical developments.

Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba thinks that recently Georgia has been getting more assistance from the US.

"We believe that Moscow can prevent the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation," the Abkhazian leader has told the ITAR-TASS. "We see Russia as the main guarantor of the stability in the region and hope it would take all the necessary measures to prevent such developments in the region."

04/08/03 – Guerrillas escape from jail in Sukhum - YERKIR weekly online

Nine men, all of them sentenced to death, escaped on 7 April from Sukhum Prison after allegedly bribing guards, Caucasus Press reported. They include one Georgian guerrilla and four Chechen fighters from field commander Ruslan Gelaev's detachment captured during the abortive October 2001 incursion into the Kodori Gorge. The remaining four were convicted in connection with the September 1995 murder of Abkhaz Deputy Premier Yurii Voronov, according to chechenpress.com. The men are reportedly not armed. Prime Minister Gagulia commented at a cabinet meeting that "somebody was bribed and somebody betrayed us" in a move he claimed was intended to compound instability in Abkhazia, Caucasus Press reported on 8 April.

04/09/03 – Abkhaz President accepts government's resignation - RFE/RL

Vladislav Ardzinba accepted on 8 April the resignation, offered the previous day, of the government headed by Gennadii Gagulia, Caucasus Press reported.

Ardzinba's spokesman Ruslan Khashig said that the change of government will not result in any

revision of Abkhazia's policies toward either Russia or the central Georgian government. Ardzinba also reportedly issued a statement condemning the issuing of ultimatums as a means of addressing national problems, an allusion to the announcement by the opposition movement Aitaira of its intention to hold a mass demonstration on 10 April. Also on 8 April, the Abkhaz parliament issued a statement acknowledging that opposition movements' criticisms of the outgoing government are justified, but appealing to them to cancel the planned 10 April demonstration, Caucasus Press reported.

04/22/03 - Explosion damages Abkhaz opposition headquarters - RFE/RL

The office in Sukhum of Amtsakhara, the union of veterans of the 1992-93 war with Georgia, was damaged late on 18 April by an explosion that injured several people, Caucasus Press reported. Givi Agrba, who heads the Abkhaz State Security Service, blamed the blast on unnamed persons who, he said, are trying to take advantage of the domestic political tensions in Abkhazia to reimpose the central Georgian government's control over the unrecognized breakaway republic. Amtsakhara, which has some 10,000 registered members, advocates independence for Abkhazia and the closest possible ties with Russia.

04/23/03 - New Abkhaz Prime Minister named - RFE/RL

Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba on 22 April named Defense Minister Raul Khadjimba to head the new Abkhaz government, Caucasus Press reported. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting said in its most recent bulletin that Khadjimba had already been offered the post but had rejected it. Khadjimba, 44, studied history at the Abkhaz State University and then studied at the KGB Higher School in Minsk from 1984-86. He was an active participant in the 1992-93 war with Georgia. He then served from 1993-95 in the Abkhaz security service, before being transferred to the State Customs Committee.

>From 1999-2001, he served as head of the security service. He was named first deputy prime minister in 2001 and defense minister in May 2002. Tamaz Nadareishvili, who is chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz parliament-in-exile and a former high-ranking KGB officer, was quoted by the Georgian paper "Tribuna" on 23 April as claiming that Khadjimba has contacts with former Abkhaz Prime Minister Anri Djergenia and enjoys the support of senior Russian military officers.

NORTH OSSETIA / OSSETIE DU NORD

02/01/2003 - North Ossetian head suggests holding Caucasian four meeting devoted to post-conflict construction in caucasus - PanARMENIAN.Net

North Ossetian president Alexander Dzasokhov has initiated the holding of a special meeting of "the Caucasian four," devoted to the issues of post-conflict construction in the Caucasus. Dzasokhov noted that a joint position of Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan on the issues of Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia could be worked out. In Dzasokhov's opinion, "Turkey, Iran and other states adjoining the Caucasus or working for forming the prospects of the Caucasian policy" should be notified of the position.

04/02/03 - Russian, North Ossetian Presidents discuss South Ossetia- RFE/RL

Aleksandr Dzasokhov, president of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, has met in Moscow with Russian President Putin to discuss the situation in Georgia's breakaway Republic of South Ossetia, Caucasus Press reported on 2 April. The two presidents focused specifically on economic incentives for Tbilisi and the breakaway republic's leadership to reach agreement, and the possibility of encouraging conditions for Russian businessmen seeking investment opportunities in South Ossetia.

04/29/03 - South ossetia backs Russian Duma's condemnation of Georgian-U.S military accord - RFE/RL

Political parties, nongovernmental organizations, trade unions and other associations in the unrecognized republic of South Ossetia have issued a statement affirming their support for the condemnation by the Russian State Duma of a U.S.-Georgian military-cooperation agreement that was ratified last month by the Georgian parliament. On 16 April, Duma deputies criticized that accord as "an exceptionally unfriendly and even hostile act" that creates a serious imbalance of forces in the South Caucasus and thus poses a threat to international security. It expressed concern that U.S. forces stationed in Georgia might be deployed against the population of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

SOUTH OSSETIA / OSSETIE DU SUD

01/30/03 - Russian envoy heads for South Ossetia - RFE/RL

Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin traveled to Tskhinvali on 30 January to discuss with Eduard Kokoyty, the president of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, the recent increase in tensions in the region, ITAR-TASS reported. Meanwhile, Caucasus Press reported the same day that Russia has provided the South Ossetian leadership with large quantities of arms and military hardware, including four tanks, 20 armored personnel carriers, several dozen grenade-launchers, and a large number of submachine guns. Kokoyty, for his part, denied on 30 January that any heavy artillery has been deployed in the conflict zone. Georgian media expressed concern that the reported military buildup might presage new fighting between Georgians and Ossetians. President Shevardnadze's envoy for the South Ossetian conflict, Vakhtang

Rcheulishvili, said on 31 January that police in South Ossetia have indeed been issued weapons. But Rcheulishvili claimed the mobilization is part of a "war" Kokoyty has recently declared against the drug mafia. Rcheulishvili met with Kokoyty on 18 January, after which the two men pledged that this year is to be one of confidence-building measures between the Georgian and Ossetian peoples.

02/06/2003 - Former South Ossetian president's son released on bail - RFE/RL

Aleksei Chibirov, the son of the former president of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, has been released from detention in Tskhinvali (...). He was arrested last month on suspicion of preparing to overthrow the current president of the republic, Eduard Kokoyty, who defeated Aleksei's father, Lyudvig, in the November 2001 South Ossetian presidential ballot.

02/11/03 - South Ossetian president signals readiness for cooperation with Georgian police - RFE/RL

At a meeting in Tskhinvali on 9 February with representatives from the OSCE, the UN, Georgia, North Ossetia, and the Russian peacekeeping force in South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoyty, president of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, said he is prepared to consider a joint operation between Georgian and South Ossetian police to halt the smuggling of stolen cars from Georgia via South Ossetia to the Russian Federation, Caucasus Press reported on 10 February. Kokoyty rejected as untrue reports that Russia has deployed large quantities of armor and heavy weaponry in South Ossetia.

02/14/03 - Ossetians flee Georgia's Pankisi Gorge - RFE/RL Newline

Residents of five predominantly Ossetian-inhabited villages in the Pankisi Gorge have solicited help in leaving Georgia to settle in North Ossetia, according to the Georgian newspaper "Tribuna" on 13

February, as quoted by Caucasus Press. The villagers cite increasing crime, the influx of Chechen refugees, and appalling socioeconomic conditions as their reasons for wishing to leave Georgia.

03/17/03 - South Ossetia appeals to OSCE over Georgian weapons allegations - RFE/RL

The leadership of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia has appealed to the head of the OSCE mission in Georgia to reject as untrue Georgian claims that the OSCE has registered the presence in South Ossetia of Russian heavy weaponry in excess of what Russia is allowed to deploy in the region under the limits imposed by the revised Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), Interfax and Caucasus Press reported on 14 and 15 March, respectively. South Ossetian Foreign Minister Murad Dzhioev said that an OSCE inspection found no weaponry that would substantiate the Georgian allegations. Meanwhile, Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin said in Moscow on 14 March following talks with Georgian deputy parliament speaker Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, who is Shevardnadze's special envoy for the South Ossetian conflict, that Moscow is ready to assist in any way to help resolve that conflict, ITAR-TASS reported. But Loshchinin added that progress will be possible only if Georgia and South Ossetia restore mutual trust and implement the agreements reached during earlier talks.

CHECHNYA / TCHETCHENIE

02/11/03 - New Prime Minister of Chechnya named - RFE/RL

Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov appointed Anatolii Popov as Chechnya's new prime minister on 10 February (...). Popov, 42, has worked for the Menatep Bank and as finance director of the arms-export monopoly Rosvooruzhenie (...).

Most recently he headed the Russian government directorate for reconstruction in Chechnya. Popov said he plans no sweeping personnel changes, and praised Chechen Finance Minister Eli Isaev, whose appointment led to the resignation of Popov's predecessor Mikhail Babich (...), as "competent" and "one of the best workers in this field,". Popov declined to comment on reports that his candidacy was backed by President Putin. (...)

02/19/03 - Moscow again invites international organizations to monitor Chechen referendum - RFE/RL

Speaking on Radio Rossii on 18 February, Russian presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembskii said Russia would welcome monitoring by international observers of the 23 March referendum on a new draft Chechen constitution and election legislation, Russian news agencies reported. He said that only those Russian servicemen permanently stationed in Chechnya are eligible to vote in the referendum, adding that they account for less than 7 percent of the republic's 537,655 registered voters. Yastrzhembskii also said that elections for a new Chechen president could take place "several months" after the constitution is approved. He said law-enforcement agencies will do their best to ensure security for the referendum, noting that not a single act of violence was registered during the election in August 2000 of a deputy to represent Chechnya in the Duma.

02/28/03 - Chechen organizations cite lack of media freedom in condemnation of planned referendum - RFE/RL

Leaders of 20 Chechen civic and human rights organizations issued a statement on 24 February condemning the referendum scheduled for 23 March on a new Chechen draft constitution and election laws (...). They pointed to numerous alleged violations of Russian law during the preparations for the plebiscite. They further argued that Chechnya already has a legitimately elected president and parliament. Moreover, they claim that what they consider the minimal conditions for holding a referendum -- a cease-fire, a halt to reprisals against civilians, the investigation of

war crimes, freedom of movement and assembly for the population, media freedom, and the lifting of restrictions on political parties -- have not yet been established in the republic.

02/28/03 – Russian human rights group says Chechens intimidated in run-up to referendum-RFE/RL

The head of the Memorial human rights group, Oleg Orlov, (...) said that while the number of "sweeps" in Chechnya has fallen in recent months, there has been an increase in the number of Chechens snatched from their homes at night. Many of the victims are subsequently found dead, bearing clear signs of torture(...).

(...) Retired police General Aslanbek Aslakhonov, who is Chechnya's deputy to the Russian State Duma, told (...) that all Chechens currently not resident in Chechnya should have the opportunity to vote in the 23 March referendum, (...). Aslakhonov argued that the constitution of the Russian Federation guarantees every citizen the right to participate in referendums. (...)

03/24/03 – Chechen President, Parliament, supreme court condemn "pseudo-referendum"-RFE/RL

In a joint statement (...), Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, acting parliament speaker Dardail Khiryaev, and Supreme Court Chairman Abdul-Khalim condemned as sabotage of the constitutional order and security of the Chechen state what they termed the "pseudo-referendum" organized by the Russian political and military leadership and the pro-Moscow Grozny leadership. They argued that holding the referendum, especially while hostilities continue, is illegal and constitutes a violation of the Chechen constitution and a "grave crime" against the Chechen people. The statement characterizes Chechen citizens' participation in the referendum as an action directed against constitutional order and calls on prosecutors and the Supreme Court of the Chechen Republic Ichkeria to bring criminal charges against those who do so. Some 400 people attended a demonstration in Grozny on 22

March to protest the referendum scheduled for the following day.

03/25/03 – Putin says Chechen referendum has removed threat to Russia's territorial integrity-RFE/RL

Meeting on 24 March with Russian government ministers, President Putin said the previous day's referendum in Chechnya "resolved the last serious problem relating to Russia's territorial integrity," Russian media reported. According to official data, Chechen voters overwhelmingly endorsed a new draft constitution that defines Chechnya as an integral part of the Russian Federation. Putin instructed ministers to speed up work connected with reconstruction in Chechnya. Russian presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembskii told Ekho Moskvy on 24 March that Putin will continue to monitor developments in Chechnya closely. Yastrzhembskii also said the personal responsibility of individual government ministers for improving the situation in Chechnya will only increase following the referendum. Also on 24 March, Russian Security Council Secretary Vladimir Rushailo said the referendum was "an important political event not only for Chechnya as a part of Russia, but for the whole of Russia,"

03/27/03 – Doubts cast on reported Chechen referendum turnout-RFE/RL

Usam Baysaev of the Nazran chapter of the Russian human rights group Memorial told journalists on 25 March that no more than 10 percent of the Chechen population cast their ballots in the 23 March referendum on a new constitution and election laws(...). He said he saw entire families and settlements boycott the referendum. Meanwhile, former Russian parliament speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov told RFE/RL's Russian Service on 24 March that the high turnout figures claimed by pro-Moscow Chechen officials are the result of ballots cast by at least 120,000 Russian servicemen. The Defense Ministry claims the combined Russian troop presence in Chechnya is approximately 80,000. Interfax on 26 March quoted Council of Europe Secretary-General Walter Schwimmer as saying that it is now up to the

Russian authorities to fulfill the promises it made prior to the referendum. Schwimmer offered the assistance of the Council of Europe in drafting a power-sharing treaty between Russia and Chechnya.

04/09/03 – Chechen police tighten security in Grozny - RFE/RL

Chechen Interior Ministry Chief of Staff Colonel Akhmed Dakaev told that security in Grozny has been intensified and additional searches of motor vehicles are being carried out in the wake of the explosions on 3 and 7 April as a result of which a total of 13 people died. He said it is too early to conclude that the two attacks were carried out by the same perpetrators. On 9 April, "Parlamentskaya gazeta" quoted Chechnya's Deputy Prosecutor-General Aleksandr Nikitin as saying the people believed to be responsible for the 3 April explosion in Grozny that killed eight bus passengers have been identified, and a search for both the planners and perpetrators of that attack is under way. He did not divulge the identity of the suspects.

04/17/03 – UN human rights commission rejects EU resolution on Chechnya - RFE/RL

By a vote of 15 in favor and 21 against, with 16 abstentions, the UN Human Rights Commission on 16 April rejected a draft resolution proposed by the European Union condemning human rights violations in Chechnya, Reuters and the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" reported. The draft resolution criticized forced disappearances, extra-judicial and arbitrary executions, and the use of torture by Russian forces in Chechnya. Interfax on 16 April quoted an unnamed Foreign Ministry official as terming the failure to endorse the resolution "a triumph of common sense." He said Russia is justified in hoping that the international community will support its ongoing efforts to reach a political settlement of the Chechen conflict.

04/24/03 – Chechen official rejects Premier's version of bus explosion - RFE/RL

Adlan Magomadov, who is Chechen representative to the Kremlin, that Prime Minister Anatolii Popov "most

likely mixed things up" when he told NTV television on 21 April that 16 civilians were killed on 15 April when a bus exploded near Grozny. Magomadov said Popov was probably thinking of the bus explosion in Grozny on 3 April that killed eight construction workers. Magomadov added that the video footage posted on <http://www.kavkazcenter.com> purporting to show the 15 April explosion was edited and at least one year old. He further stressed that Popov's statement should not be construed as evidence of tensions between the prime minister and Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov.

04/29/03 – Chechen administration head says Chechen elections should not be held too soon - RFE/RL

Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov said that although elections for a Chechen president might be held six months after the 23 March constitutional referendum, the process of preparing and conducting that ballot should not be artificially accelerated. Chechen Prime Minister Anatolii Popov said two weeks ago that he thinks the ballot should be held no earlier than March 2004. Kadyrov also said on 28 April that work on the proposed new power-sharing treaty between Chechnya and the Russian government has not yet begun, and the working groups that are to undertake that project still not been formed.

Speaking days after the referendum, Putin singled out the drafting of the power-sharing treaty as a priority.

NAGORNO KARABAKH / HAUT KARABAGH

02/03/03 – Armenian soldier killed in cease-fire violation - RFE/RL

An Armenian serviceman was shot dead while patrolling the Line of Contact on 28 January, hours after an Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission monitored the area in

question, according to AFP on 30 January, as cited by Groong. Also on 28 January, an Armenian shepherd was wounded in the border village of Voskevan by a bullet fired from the Azerbaijani side of the border, Noyan Tapan reported on 31 January.

02/07/03 – OSCE mission monitors Azeri-Armenian front line - Trend news agency

Baku, 7 February: The OSCE's routine monitoring mission on the contact line between the Armenian and Azerbaijani armed forces near the village of Karmiravan in Tartar District on 7 February passed off without incidents, Trend news agency has learnt from diplomatic sources.

On the Azerbaijani side, the monitoring was carried out by the aides-de-camp to the personal representative of the OSCE chairman-in-office, Imre Palatinus and Karel Kratky, and on the Armenian side, by the personal representative of the OSCE chairman-in-office, Andrzej Kasprzyk, and his aides-de-camp Jan Repa and Yevgeniy Sharov. During the monitoring, OSCE representatives held talks with the military on both sides and once again noted the importance of maintaining the truce.

02/11/03 – Karabakh issue to be decided through Armenian-Azeri agreement - PanArmenian News

Yesterday in Paris Russian and French presidents Vladimir Putin and Jacques Chirac discussed issues connected with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Chechen conflict, as well as the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan within the context of the Nagorno Karabakh problem. As Jacques Chirac stated at a joint press conference upon the completion of the negotiations, the Nagorno Karabakh issue should be decided on the basis of mutual agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In his words, Russia and France have "common positions" on these problems. As reported by "Arminfo" agency, it is important that that the French president, as well as his Russian counterpart, did not mention the principle of territorial integrity when speaking of the Nagorno Karabakh

conflict. Meanwhile, the need to apply the principle of territorial integrity was stressed regarding the settlement of the Chechen confrontation.

22/02/03 – Deux soldats arméniens blessés sur la ligne de front au Karabagh AYP FM

mardi soir, une unité azéri a tenté une incursion, les soldats arméniens ont ripostés, tuant un soldat azéri et en blessant un autre, un accrochage qui a donc fait également deux blessés du coté arménien.

Haidar Aliev en visite officielle aux Etats Unis réaffirme que l'Azerbaïdjan n'acceptera aucune solution qui remettrait en cause son intégrité territoriale et il accuse une nouvelle fois l'Arménie de faire preuve d'agressivité et de ne pas se montrer constructive dans la recherche d'une solution. Des propos destinés à rappeler la position de Bakou alors que les trois pays qui co-président le groupe de minks en charge du règlement du conflit ont récemment indiqué que la recherche d'une solution ne doit pas se faire sur la base de l'intangibilité des frontières azéries, c'est notamment ce qu'on déclaré Jacques Chirac et Vladimir Poutine lors de leur rencontre à Paris.

02/27/03 – Azerbaijani serviceman killed in cease-fire violation - RFE/RL

One Azerbaijani soldier was shot dead and two Karabakh Armenians were injured during an exchange of fire late on 25 February, according to Arminfo and Mediamax on 26 February, as cited by Groong. Armenian Defense Ministry spokesman Colonel Seyran Shahsuvarian said Armenian troops prevented an attempt by an Azerbaijani reconnaissance mission to penetrate Karabakh-Armenian lines.

04/10/03 – No breakthrough in Karabagh talks expected, Minister says - AZG Armenian Daily

Foreign minister of Nagorno Karabagh Ashot Ghulian dismissed today some reports in Azerbaijani

press, which said that the international peace brokers from the OSCE Minsk group were coming for another visit to the region with new proposals to end the long-running Armenian-Azeri dispute over Nagorno Karabagh, Armenpress reported. The Minsk group (...) visit to Azerbaijan, Karabagh and Armenia in early May. Azerbaijani mass media said earlier, citing the Russian co-chairman that the group will bring with them a set of new proposals, but Ghulian told today that no changes were expected. Ghulian, who was in Yerevan to attend the inauguration ceremony of the reelected president Robert Kocharian, said the latter's new term means that the previously pursued policy on the conflict regulation will not undergo serious changes.

04/17/03 – Pace rapporteur to meet with Karabakh leadership in Yerevan – PanARMENIAN.Net

Today Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) rapporteur on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict Terry Davis said he was going to meet with the Nagorno Karabakh leadership in the Armenian capital. At the same time, as reported by "Mediamax" agency, he emphasized the Council of Europe was not going to figure as "a substitute" for the OSCE in the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict. Although, T. Davis added, the report worked out on the basis of the visit to the conflict region will include information on the OSCE Minsk group recent activities. He said it would be submitted for discussion by the PACE in early 2004.

***INGUSHETIA /
INGOUCHIE***

02/26/03 – Voting in Ingushetia during Chechen referendum ruled out – RFE/RL

Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov told journalists in Grozny on 25 February that no provision will be made to enable Chechen displaced

persons to cast their ballots in the 23 March referendum in camps in Ingushetia (...).

Chechen Election Commission Chairman Abdul-Kerim Arsakhanov said last month that polling stations would be established in five such camps in Ingushetia. But Kadyrov explained that under Russian legislation people may vote only at the place where they are registered as permanently resident. Central Election Commission Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov, however, told Ekho Moskvyy on 25 February that special polling stations will be established in Chechnya close to the border with Ingushetia and that bus service will be provided between the displaced-persons camps and those polling stations (...). Veshnyakov gave the total number of registered voters in Chechnya as 537,000.

03/11/03 – Concession made over referendum vote in Ingushetia – RFE/RL

Those Chechen displaced persons currently living in camps in Ingushetia who cannot travel to the border between Chechnya and Ingushetia to vote in the 23 March referendum will be able to cast their ballots in the displaced-persons camps, Russian presidential envoy for human rights in Chechnya Abdul-Khakim Sultygov said in Moscow on 10 March. He said ballot boxes will be taken to the tents of those too sick to travel or those who are afraid to return to Chechnya to cast their ballots there. Chechen Election Commission head Abdul-Kerim Arsakhanov said in January that arrangements would be made to enable residents of displaced-persons camps to vote, but on 25 February Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov said in Grozny that they would not. But chechenpress.com cited AFP on 9 March as reporting that Chechens in camps in Ingushetia are being threatened that they will be deprived of humanitarian aid if they refuse to sign a pledge to vote in the referendum.

03/12/03 – Russian, Chechen officials deny displaced persons under pressure to vote in referendum – RFE/RL

Ella Pamfilova, who heads the Russian presidential human rights

commission, and Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov both denied that Chechens in displaced-persons camps in Ingushetia are being denied humanitarian aid if they refuse to sign a pledge to vote in the 23 March referendum on a new Chechen constitution and election legislation. Speaking in Moscow on 11 March, Russian presidential aide Sergei Yastrzhembskii likewise denied that voters in Chechnya are being subjected to pressure to participate in the referendum. In Grozny, Chechen Central Election Commission Deputy Chairman Buvaisar Arsakhanov told TASS that each of the more than 30,000 displaced persons entitled to vote is free to decide whether to do so. Also on 11 March, Ingushetia's President Murat Zyazikov met in Magas with first deputy presidential envoy to the Southern Federal District Aleksandr Korobeinikov to discuss the arrangements being made to enable displaced Chechens in Ingushetia to participate in the plebiscite.

04/10/03 – Two Ingush on trial for Vladikavkaz market bombings – RFE/RL

Two Ingush from a village in North Ossetia's disputed Prigorodnyi Raion went on trial on 9 April at the Supreme Court of the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania on charges of perpetrating bombings in the central market in Vladikavkaz in recent years. They are also accused of maintaining contacts with Chechen fighters and involvement in the incursion into Ingushetia in the fall of 2002 by Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev.

***KRASNODAR REGION /
REGION DE KRASNODAR***

02/21/03 – Six law-enforcement officials killed in shoot-out with poachers – RFE/RL

Four police officers and two forestry service employees were killed in a heated gun battle with a gang of suspected poachers in Krasnodar Krai on 19 February.

(...). The shoot-out occurred during a massive police operation involving helicopters and thousands of police officers to root out poachers in the region.

A pitched gun battle was fought for several hours against suspected poachers reportedly armed with machine guns and hand grenades. A spokesman for the Interior Ministry said that "there are no traces of Chechen involvement" in the incident. However, he added that the suspects might have resisted so fiercely because they are also involved in drug trafficking, which is reportedly on the rise in the region.

03/03/03 – Local governments try to block worker's protests - RFE/RL

The three-day nationwide protest by state-sector workers ended on 28 February,

(...), about 310,000 people participated in the action in 33 regions. The workers were protesting low wages, chronic arrears, and proposed legislation that would make local governments, rather than the federal government, responsible for paying state-sector workers such as doctors and teachers. In Moscow, protestors were banned from marching in the streets. However, groups of 10-15 people each gathered and collected signatures at some 50 metro stations in the city. (...) authorities in Krasnodar also tried to prevent a large gathering by digging a hole in the center of the city's main square in front of the krai administration building. However, protesters gathered around the hole and "expressed their thoughts about local authorities," according to the daily.

04/01/03 – Southern Russian province to set up immigration camps - AZG Armenian Daily

The southern Russian province of Krasnodar, home to the biggest Armenian community, which varies between 500,000 to 1 million according to different estimations, has become the first Russian territory to decide to set up special camps for illegal immigrants (...) The decision was passed at a session of the provincial security council. According to local

immigration service, the province, the population density of which is six times higher than the average density across the country is the destination of around 250,000 illegal immigrants annually. Last year some 39,000 people in the province, including 7,500 Armenians, were subjected to administrative punishment for violating immigration laws, of which 448 people were expelled and another 3,000 left the territory of the province voluntarily under the supervision of law-enforcement bodies. (...)

JAVAKHK / DJAVAKHK

01/02/03 - Les turcs Meskhet se disent prêt à s'installer au Djavakhk - AYP FM

une enquête menée auprès de cette communauté installée pour l'instant dans les régions ouest de la Géorgie, indique que la majorité d'entre eux seraient prêts à retourner au Djavakhk, d'où ils ont été déplacés par Staline en 1944 pour être conduit au Kazakhstan, Moscou craignant alors une collaboration entre les turcs Meskhet et la Turquie voisine, alors alliée l'Allemagne nazie.

Sur les 70 familles interrogées, 63 indiquent cependant qu'elles craignent d'avoir des problèmes avec la population arménienne, majoritaire dans cette région sud de la Géorgie, tandis que les Adjars, musulmans et le géorgiens de souche ne sont mentionnés comme motif d'inquiétude que dans 20 pour cent des cas.

Les sources de conflits redoutés avec les Arméniens portent notamment sur les droits de propriétés, le facteur religieux n'étant cité que dans 17% des cas.

01/02/03 - Le Djavakhk est victime de températures exceptionnellement basses - AYP FM

Les thermomètres affichent moins 30 la nuit, dans une région où les infrastructures ne sont pas suffisamment développées pour permettre aux habitants d'être chauffés correctement. De

nombreuses canalisations d'eau ont éclaté à cause du gel, et les écoles sont fermées pour l'instant. Le gouverneur du Djavakhk qui a affirmé que les réparations ont déjà débuté, promet la réouverture des écoles pour le 3 février.

02/10/03 – Russian military base in Georgia guarantees local Armenians from possible Turkish aggression - PanArmenian News

The presence of the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki region of Georgia guarantees the Armenian population from possible aggression of Turkey. Akhalkalaki mayor Nairi Iritsian told "Black Sea Press" agency. In his words, after the Armenian Genocide in Turkey Armenians fear repetition of these horrible events. The Armenian population does not object to the military aid rendered to Georgia by the US. "If Americans want to establish a new military base in Akhalkalaki, we agree to that, but America is far away and Turkey is near," – Nairi Iritsian said. Besides, in the city mayor's words, due to the Russian military base the social status of the Akhalkalaki population is much better than that of the people in the neighboring regions. "A sizeable part of the local population works at the military base and notable replenishments enter the city budget," – he noted.

02/17/03 - Military base is first of all of physical security importance for Javakhk Armenians - YERKIR Online

In recent years, the Georgian statesmen keep stating - including during their meetings with their Armenian colleagues - that after the Russian military base is withdrawn from Akhalkalak, the Javakhk residents working for the base will be given jobs by the Georgian state. Mels Torosian of the "Zang" Party based in Akhalkalak, believes that by using this policy, the Georgian authorities are merely trying to stress only the economic importance of the base. Torosian, however, thinks that the base is first of all of physical security importance for the Javakhk Armenians.

As for the Georgian authorities' promise of jobs, Torosian says that

if the Georgian state wishes to create new jobs in Akhalkalak, it can create new jobs for 50-55 thousand unemployed people who leave Javakhhk in search for jobs.

02/17/03 – Russian military base in Javakhetia Georgian region first of all guarantee of local Armenian security - PanArmenian News

The issue of withdrawal of the Russian military base from Javakhetia region of Georgia, mostly populated by Armenians, is recently exaggerated by Georgian statesmen, who at the same time express official Tbilisi readiness to employ locals working at the base. As reported by "A-Info" agency, in the opinion of co-chair of "Kolokol" party functioning in Akhalkalaki Mels Torosian, Georgian authorities wish only to mark the social and economic significance of the Russian military base for Javakhetia. Meanwhile, as noted by Torosian, the Russian military base is first of all physical security guarantee for Javakhetia Armenians. As to the Georgian authorities' pledge to employ locals working at the military base, M. Torosian noted that if the state had wished to create workplaces in Akhalkalaki, it could have done that for the over 50 unemployed residents of the region.

04/17/03 - Russian base guarantees security, says Georgia's ethnic Armenian leader - Arminfo

The situation surrounding Russian military base No 62, which is deployed in the predominantly Armenian region of Samtskhe-Javakheti in Georgia, remains complicated, the cochairmen of the Virk Party, David Rstakyan, has told our correspondent.

Rstakyan believes that the Virk Party's attitude towards the Russian military base in Georgia remains unchanged and the military base should remain in the region because it guarantees the region's security. Rstakyan described as irrelevant rumours that the Russian base allegedly only plays a social and economic role. "Those politicians and organizations would do better to speak about the 40,000 unemployed

inhabitants of Samtskhe-Javakheti, who are leaving the region with their families," the cochairmen of the Virk Party said.

04/18/03 - Migration rate very high in Javakhhk - ARMENPRESS

The problem of migration is a major concern for local organizations of southern Georgia's region of Javakhhk region, mostly populated by Armenians. The region is facing many serious social and economic problems, resulting in a very high rate of migration. If serious measures are not undertaken the region is going to lose its national identity.

This was the key issue of Javakhhk Benevolent Union's recurrent conference yesterday. The participants in the conference spoke of the efforts, which were being and should be performed to prevent the migration of native Armenians from the region. "Otherwise the region is facing the danger of being re-populated by the authorities of Georgia."

The participants also noted that Georgian authorities are doing nothing to ease the tension caused by social-economic difficulties. They dislike the idea that probably it would be better to grant autonomy to the region to improve social economic situation there, which does not necessarily aim at separation.

It was also noted that Armenian authorities, various Diaspora and local individuals and organizations, as well as Yerevan City Hall so far have been and are being very supportive to the region to achieve improvements in the social area. Armenia's help to provide the region with electricity was essential for the region as well.

INFORMATION

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