

WAR AND PEACE IN THE CAUCASUS

100 selected articles
from IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service

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Introduction

The collection you have before you summarizes in 100 articles the basic events that have taken place in the Caucasus from 1999-2005 - a period during which not only saw the beginning of a new millennium, but of new developments in the region. Every week during these six years, the Caucasus Reporting Service (CRS) of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting provided readers around the world a view on these events. This unique resource published investigations by local journalists conducted according to international standards, joint cross-border reports, and analysis of developments taking place in the furthest reaches of the region.

Our job perhaps looks very simple: merely to lay out the reasons and details of the events in an objective manner. But in fact it proved to be difficult work to be an unbiased journalist in a region where, in the last 10-15 years, four major wars took place - Chechnya, Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, Ossetians and Ingush clashed in the Prigorodny region of North Ossetia, and an "anti-terrorist" operation between Russian federal forces and Chechen rebels continues in Chechnya to this day.

Since actual fighting has ended in all but one of these conflicts, we at CRS had hoped that that in writing on these issues today, there would be reason to speak not only of war, but of peace. In truth, unfortunately, this is not the case. Some of the conflicts are more dangerous today than they were seven years ago. Moreover, there has been a sharp worsening in the inter-ethnic tensions in some of the regions that were considered "quiet" up to this point.

Here in the Caucasus, no one is completely objective. Every one of the journalists working for IWPR is in his or her blood a sympathizer of one side or another. And every time in undertaking a new subject for CRS, he or she should perhaps remember the main rule of working in the Caucasus: each has his or her own truth, but the facts belong to everyone.

Journalists should remind themselves of this rule as soon as the difficulties begin. For instance, they should remember this when writing the name for every piece of land they deal with - a name which differs from one ethnic group to another, and for which each group would fight to the last man to preserve. Or else, they should remember this rule when trying to combine contradictory information from officials and experts. And in the end they should try not to be the defender of the point of view of one of the conflicting sides - which can be a bit of an unusual position for them.

Journalists who have worked and are working for IWPR in the Caucasus have to travel a difficult path. Some have been beaten, like David Paichadze in Tbilisi and Alan Parastaev in South Ossetia. Others have been jailed, like Vagram Agajanian in Stepanakert. Still one, Mark Grigorian in Yerevan, have had grenade thrown at him. And one, Elmar Huseinov of the Azerbaijani magazine, the Monitor, was murdered just this spring. For many of our journalists this professional path well began before they started writing for IWPR. But for others it was the first milestone in their career.

It is our hope that in objectively describing facts and presenting different points of view on a subject, our journalism can serve as a means to overcome misunderstandings and find a way towards resolving the region's conflicts.

We believe that by breaking information barriers and providing balanced analysis, professional journalism can be the bedrock for understanding and conflict-resolution.

And so there we are, striving for objectivity. Of course, the authors of these 100 articles are at the end of the day only people - albeit people with a particularly strong drive for knowledge. But as members of their respective communities, they also represent a particular take on events. Taken together, we at IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service believe that these dispatches provide an objective picture of the region.

Gas poisoning accident kills Georgian prime minister

Tbilisi, February 2005

Freak accident removes key figure of Georgian revolution at a critical stage.

An accidental gas leak was blamed for the death of Georgia's prime minister, Zurab Zhvania, robbing the inexperienced government that took power in the "Rose Revolution" of its most wily political operator.

Officials said that Zhvania, 41, died of carbon monoxide poisoning on the night of February 2 while seeing a friend in the capital Tbilisi, although many ordinary people in this turbulent Caucasus country immediately gave way to conspiracy theories about an assassination.

Bodyguards found Zhvania dead in an armchair at the apartment where he had apparently been playing backgammon with the regional deputy governor of Kvemo-Kartli region, Raul Usupov, whose body was discovered in the kitchen.

President Mikheil Saakashvili described Zhvania's loss as "a huge blow for our country and personally for me as a president". His voice cracking, he added, "I have lost my closest friend, my most loyal adviser, my biggest ally."

Some observers feared that Zhvania's absence will upset the sometimes fragile political balance in government, with the more radical faction, spearheaded by Defence Minister Irakly Okruashvili, gaining an upper hand. There was also a question over the possible effect on conflict resolution efforts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The president called an emergency cabinet session, starting with a moment of silence, as Georgians absorbed the news, coming two days after a car bomb near a separatist province killed three policemen and seriously injured 15. The president has seven days to name a new prime minister.

President Vladimir Putin, who has tense relations with western-leaning Georgia, sent a letter of condolences, the Kremlin said. The US ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, praised Zhvania as a "courageous and wonderful man".

Though never popular, Zhvania was considered the brains of the "Rose Revolution" which overthrew Eduard Shevardnadze in late 2003, as well as a steadying influence over the young radicals who took over, led by Saakashvili, 37.

Hours after the news, Shevardnadze called Zhvania Georgia's "greatest state figure, a brilliant person".

"It's a tragedy for Georgia at this critical moment," said Archil Gegeshidze of the Georgian

Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. "He played a very unique and important role in the country. He was one of the most experienced statesmen in the country - a kind of brain trust of the government. It will be very hard to find an adequate replacement for him."

Since independence from the Soviet Union, Georgians have experienced civil war, two separatist conflicts, the mysterious death of their first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and several assassination attempts against Shevardnadze.

Many ordinary Georgians immediately suspected foul play, citing Zhvania's sometimes difficult relations with Saakashvili, his involvement in attempts to resolve the separatist conflict in South Ossetia, and his role in a recent wave of privatisation deals.

"I don't think this was an accident," Ketino Aznaurashvili, a Tbilisi doctor, said. "Someone wanted him dead."

However, the evidence made public so far points to a poisoning from a faulty gas heater, a not infrequent occurrence in Tbilisi, where few buildings have central heating and gas supplies are sometimes cut. Deputy justice minister Levan Samkharauli said Zhvania's blood contained double the minimum amount of carboxihemoglobin needed to kill.

"The body shows no signs of violence," deputy prosecutor general Giorgi Janashia told journalists.

Officials said the heater was an Iranian-made model and that there was insufficient air circulation to prevent the build-up of the fatal gas.

The task for Saakashvili now is to rebuild a government in which Zhvania had been a key player.

"He ensured there was a balance," said Paata Zakareishvili, analyst at the Centre for Development and Cooperation. Zhvania and Saakashvili "controlled each other".

Now that there is no real counterweight to the power of the radicals, symbolised by the impulsive and ambitious Okruashvili, the responsibility will fall on Saakashvili, said Zakareishvili. If the president further embraces Okruashvili "we won't be going toward democracy".

Levan Berdzenishvili, a member of parliament from the opposition Republican Party, said that Zhvania had been "very necessary to Saakashvili. Zhvania took the blame for a lot of the bad luck. He was the scapegoat, while Saakashvili took credit for the good. This was an institutionalised role, even when he didn't deserve it."

Berdzenishvili said the ultimate result of the coming cabinet shake-up will be constitutional changes that will scrap the premier's post, which was created in 2004 specially to reward Zhvania for his role in the Rose Revolution.

Zhvania was also central to efforts to resolve the long standoff between Tbilisi and the authorities in the breakaway region of South Ossetia. The Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity expressed regret at the news, saying the premier had "played a great role" in peacemaking. "We hope that his death would not affect the process of the talks," he said.

The breakaway government's special affairs minister Boris Chochiev said that Zhvania was part of the "party of peace".

In Abkhazia, the president-elect, Sergei Bagapsh, assured that "the conflict settlement process will continue".

By Sebastian SMITH. CRS No.272, February 03

Opposition still boycotting Armenian parliament

Yerevan, February 2005

President's supporters appear unconcerned as two factions continue boycott in support of a referendum to oust him.

As Armenia's parliament opened for business on February 7, the opposition declared an extension of its now year-long boycott.

The two opposition factions, Justice and National Unity, first announced a walk-out in February last year after the National Assembly turned down a proposed change to the law that would have allowed a nationwide referendum to be held on Robert Kocharian's presidency.

Using a confidence referendum as a tool to oust the president has long been a goal of the opposition alliance, which controls just 24 of the 131 parliamentary seats. The opposition claims that Kocharian won the 2003 presidential election, and his supporters swept the board in a parliamentary poll the same year, only by fixing the results.

Viktor Dallakian, a member of the Justice group, told IWPR that the opposition would not back down since the Armenian supreme court ruling had ruled in favour of a referendum.

"Given that parliament was elected through rigging, our participation can have no real meaning," he said. "But if people think they can exploit us as a mere decoration, to show that the Armenian parliament has an opposition, then they will not succeed."

"There can be no talk of ending the boycott as long as the reasons for it are not removed," said Stepan Demirchian, a leading opposition figure who heads Justice.

"To this day, those who falsified the presidential and parliamentary elections have not been punished. Neither have those who beat peaceful demonstrators in April last year. This clearly shows that it is the authorities who stand behind all the lawlessness."

Demirchian said that his allies would still take part in vital debates, as they did when parliament was voting on whether to send a small contingent of troops to Iraq.

The opposition is prepared to debate matters such as constitutional issues, but more than 40 other bills, some of them authored by the opposition itself, may end up being ignored.

The pro-government speaker of parliament, Artur Bagdasarian, remained optimistic, calling 2005 a year of "parliamentary accord".

But disagreement has already arisen even in those areas which all parties are in principle happy to debate.

Just before the spring session opened, Justice and National Unity made it clear they were prepared to debate a proposed set of constitutional reforms, but said they wanted to see changes to national and local government and the court system placed top of the agenda.

The ruling coalition saw this proviso as an ultimatum. "We don't need any favours from them," said Republican faction leader Galust Saakyan. "Constitutional reform is of national importance. The opposition must make up its own mind whether or not to take part."

Demirchian defended the opposition's stand, insisting there was no ultimatum.

He described the ruling coalition's current plans for constitutional reform as worse than a package of proposals that was rejected in a 2003 referendum.

The parliamentary opposition shows no sign of letting up on its boycott of day-to-day legislative business.

But according to political analyst Aleksandr Iskandarian, head of the Caucasus Media Institute, the current opposition is so weak that "a fundamentally new movement must be established".

Talks are now under way on a new opposition bloc that would bring together Armenia's first post-Soviet foreign minister, Raffi Ovanesian, former premier Aram Sarkisian, and Ovannes Ovanesian, chairman of the Liberal Progressive party. Ovanesian says the idea is to create a pro-Western coalition.

For the established opposition, Demirchian says talk of new alliances is just hot air, and he denied that his colleagues are in disarray, saying "the bloc has been and is functioning, and it is in a position to accomplish the tasks facing it".

Aram Karapetian, leader of the New Times party, believes Armenia has neither an opposition nor a true ruling coalition, "There is a president who more or less carries out his obligations, and there are the people who live far away.

"Between them there's a vacuum which so far no one has been able to fill - not the government and not the parliament."

If Karapetian is right in suggesting the established political groupings - pro- and anti-president alike - are unresponsive to their electorate, few observers are predicting that this could lead to a popular uprising resulting in regime change of the kind seen in Georgia and more recently Ukraine.

"There is no revolutionary situation in Armenia and it is senseless to talk about it," Mger Shakhgeldian, the deputy chairman of the pro-government Country of Law (Orinats Erkir) party, told IWPR.

The leader of the pro-government faction Dashnaktsutyun, Levon Mkrtchian, said there could be "no velvet revolution in Armenia, because there aren't the conditions for it".

By Mariam LEVINA. No. 273, 09 February

Georgia: smuggling crackdown hurts Azeris

Vakhtangisi, February 2005

Ethnic Azerbaijanis claim that raids by Georgia's financial police are targeting their community unfairly.

Azerbaijanis in southern Georgia are complaining of ethnic discrimination after a series of police raids designed to stop smuggling hit the local economy hard.

Villagers protested in the regional centre Gardabani last week initially about a reduced electricity schedule that gave them only a few hours' power a day. But they then began to complain that they were being discriminated against on ethnic grounds by the Georgian authorities.

"We will carry on protesting and keep on demanding solutions to all our problems," said one protestor, Yashar Orujev, from the village of Vakhtangisi.

"They are acting against Azerbaijanis. The police are stopping our business and calling it smuggling while local Georgians carry on transporting their goods freely," he claimed.

"We don't have any prospects of building a career and getting jobs with the local authorities. There is no gas in our villages, practically no electricity and you can't even turn on the television - there's not enough current."

Azerbaijanis are one of Georgia's biggest national minorities with a population of around 300,000 people. Most live in the east of the country near the border with Azerbaijan and are often isolated from what is going on in society and the rest of the country because few speak Georgian.

This community has now become caught up in one of Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's major government programmes - an anti-smuggling campaign on all the country's borders designed to boost the state budget.

The interior ministry's financial police raided Vakhtangisi, a village on the Georgian side of the frontier with Azerbaijan, on January 20 in an operation to confiscate counterfeit goods. However, a fight broke out, and three locals and some policemen were wounded in the ensuing shootout.

The financial police told IWPR that following last summer's closure of the Engneti market inside the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone, which had been a major base for customs-free goods, the main smuggling route into Georgia is now from Azerbaijan at Sadakhlo and Krasny Most.

"That is where most of the goods which are sold in Tbilisi and other cities, in markets, supermarkets and even fashionable shops comes from," said Tea Rusikashvili, head of the press office of the financial police.

Rusikashvili, who took part in the anti-smuggling operations in Gardabani region, told IWPR, "We confiscated black market electrical goods worth eight million lari (4.4 million US

dollars) from just one family in Gachiani. They opened fire on the police and we had to call up 300 special forces soldiers."

When the police travelled to the next village, Vakhtangisi, Rusikashvili said that they met fierce resistance.

"The police were following a minibus carrying smuggled goods," she said. "Inside the village the driver vanished but the residents did not let us take the vehicle, they attacked us with stones and Molotov cocktails. One woman spat in my face and pulled my hair. We had to take shelter at the frontier post."

It was during this episode that the police opened fire and wounded three locals. An investigation is continuing into the incident.

The Azerbaijani villagers complain that the authorities are cutting off their livelihood without giving them any alternative means of earning their living.

"Now apart from all our other problems we've been condemned to live in hunger," said Orujev. "We can't bring in big cargoes because we have to pay high taxes on them and you can't earn anything from small cargoes."

Customs duties in Georgia range from 30 to 35 per cent of the cost of a product.

Rusikashvili told IWPR that corrupt customs officers had exacerbated the situation. "Importing goods worth one million laris, some owners declared it as a cargo worth one thousand lari and did great damage to the state budget," she said.

"Of course the customs played their part in this. All this business starts on the other side of the Azerbaijani border near Lagodekhi, and three customs officers have been arrested there."

But local Azerbaijanis are not convinced by these arguments, and say they are the victims of an ethnically motivated campaign to make them feel unwelcome in Georgia.

"Why are [the authorities] always breaking into the houses of Azerbaijanis and punishing only them?" asked Orujev.

"The moment we don't pay for your electricity, they turn it off. But in the neighbouring villages where Georgians and Svans [related ethnically to Georgians] live they don't pay either but they get 24-hour power.

"And what can we do now, when they've taken away the only means of feeding our families and not offered us anything else? The Georgians don't want us to live here."

In another part of eastern Georgia, a land dispute around the Kulari stud farm resulted in the death of one local Azerbaijani woman late last year. That dispute is still unresolved. (See CRS 266, December 16, 2004. "Azeris Angry over Georgia Killing".)

The local leadership of the Gardabani region strongly denies the charge of ethnic discrimination against the Azerbaijani minority.

"In actual fact the Azerbaijanis live better than the Georgians, you can see that for yourselves and the best proof of that is that Georgians never persecute Azerbaijanis," said David Nadareishvili, head of the Gardabani administration.

"We installed gas in two villages at the end of last year and have improved the electricity supply.

"And we have given help to people who suffered during the recent anti-smuggling operation. We paid for their treatment in hospital and medicine."

But local Azerbaijanis dispute these claims. "Both villages which Nadareishvili is talking about are Georgian," said Orujev. Relatives of two of the wounded men also told IWPR that they had covered their own medical costs.

By Ramilya ALIEVA. CRS No.274, February 17

Sabre rattling over South Ossetia

Tbilisi, March 2005

Following South Ossetia's rejection of a Georgian peace plan, is Tbilisi preparing for war?

A cluster of khaki tents at the Georgian village of Dzevera is at the centre of growing speculation that the Tbilisi government is preparing to resolve the South Ossetian conflict through force.

Set up last November just ten kilometres from the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, the camp serves as base for 300-350 reservists taking combat training courses run in part by US National Guard instructors - from the US state of Georgia.

The camp, which includes three big tents used as barracks, a field headquarters and supply centres, is temporary in nature. There are no fences, watchtowers, or other permanent structures.

However, the site is well inside the 15 kilometre "conflict zone" around Tskhinvali where strict limits are in place on troop deployments. Because of this, many see the camp as part of a widening Georgian military build-up following the rejection by South Ossetia's rebel government of a proposed peace plan on January 24.

The Georgian authorities launched the reservist training programme in August last year, right after a series of clashes that left several dozen Georgian and South Ossetian soldiers and civilians dead. Since then, more than 3,000 men have taken the one-month course, paid for by a five million lari (2.7 million US dollar) presidential fund.

Each new intake of reservists receives heavy media coverage, and the commanders of the reserve battalions are generally members of President Mikheil Saakashvili's ruling National Party, such as Georgy Arveladze and David Kirkitadze. The new recruits, who learn tactics, shooting and use of military equipment, also include parliamentarians and government officials.

Kirkitadze, who is deputy head of the parliamentary committee on defence and security, did not deny that the deployment might result in a military operation. "We are preparing to carry out all tasks which the commander in chief gives us," he said. "We all realise perfectly well that this is a country that has lost part of its territory. In case of need, we should be well prepared and able to resolve any problem with force. That is what they are preparing us for."

At the same time, Georgia is rapidly boosting its weapons stockpiles, mostly with purchases from Ukraine, where Saakashvili has a political ally in the new president Viktor Yushchenko.

In fact, around the time of the recent Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Georgia was buying heavy weaponry, according to Georgian officials.

Military expert Irakly Aladvishili told IWPR this consisted of up to 40 tanks, tracked armoured personnel carriers and wheeled APCs, "This is allowing the complete re-arming of the Georgian army. In particular, the armoured strength has already significantly risen."

Georgia is paying for the weaponry with a threefold increase in the defence budget for 2005.

Meanwhile, US-backed training programmes are also starting to take effect. Some 3,000 regular soldiers have already been through a course completed last year, while a further 3,000 will participate in another based at Krtsanisi, outside Tbilisi.

An additional 850 Georgian soldiers are now deployed in Iraq, and they will be rotated every seven months, bringing important war zone experience to the army.

For Saakashvili, rebuilding the country's demoralised and poorly equipped military, has always been a key goal. One aim is to steer Georgia into NATO, but the president has also never hid his desire to be able to deal with the separatist conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia from a position of strength - although so far he has insisted this will be achieved by peaceful means.

"Disarm, disband your armed groups and begin negotiations with the new Georgian authorities," said Saakashvili, surrounded by special forces soldiers, back in January 2004 after his inauguration.

Soon after, the government announced it had taken possession of five military helicopters and two patrol boats that had been sent for repair to Ukraine four years earlier.

A huge boost came with the May 2004 overthrow of Aslan Abashidze, the regional authoritarian leader in Ajaria. When he fled to Moscow, Georgian officials inherited a small mountain of weaponry.

"We got three containers full of weapons. One of them alone was full of Strela ground-to-air rockets. Each of these costs 10,000 dollars and there were 38 of them," Mamuka Lomsadze, head of the defence ministry's logistics branch, told IWPR.

"There were also serious sniper's rifles made in Switzerland, Russian Fagot anti-tank rockets and a lot else. Apart from that we got eight Mi-8 helicopters and several patrol boats."

The weapons had been purchased from Russia by Abashidze and stored with the local ministry of the interior and security service.

Now, say some observers, the Georgian government is preparing for a spring campaign to pressure South Ossetia - possibly by force.

Political analyst Paata Zakareishvili decried what he said was Tbilisi's "propaganda war".

"Constantly showing off military strength, all this talk about how the country must have a strong army and the training of reserves - all this is an example of war rhetoric. All the more, this is happening when nothing is being done for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. It seems to me that in fact a military build up is taking place and that our authorities are seriously preparing for military action," he said.

The minister for conflict resolution, Giorgy Khaindrava, says that a demilitarisation accord reached after last August's fighting in South Ossetia has "paused".

According to Khaindrava, the situation in South Ossetia remains calm. The Georgian peacekeeping contingent - deployed alongside Ossetian and Russian contingents - has been reduced to about half the stipulated 500 men.

However, the Georgian government says that Russia, which is the unrecognised territory's

sole backer, is pouring arms and advisers into the area through the Roki Tunnel border crossing that connects North and South Ossetia.

Khaindrava also conceded that the Dze vera reservist camp is a violation of existing agreements. "These kinds of violations create problems for us," he said recently.

"What peaceful resolution can you talk about when we are looking at each other through the prism of mistrust?"

The Georgian government, widely criticised for the way the way it attempted last summer to combine military pressure with humanitarian deliveries to South Ossetia, denies it is war mongering.

The peace plan presented by Saakashvili at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in January offered wide autonomy to South Ossetia within a federal Georgian state.

Tbilisi has also named several ethnic-Abkhazians or ethnic-Ossetians like Alana Gagloyeva to government posts. Gagloyeva is Saakashvili's press secretary.

However, South Ossetia's president Eduard Kokoity dismissed the proposal as an attempt "to complicate" the Georgian-Ossetian settlement process and said his people had already chosen independence.

Zakareishvili said the plan was "very serious" in principle, handing the Ossetians much of what they had demanded during the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze. However, the way it was delivered - without consultation with the Ossetians - was "unacceptable".

At the same time, most observers see the increasing influence of Defence Minister Irakly Okruashvili as a victory for the hawkish camp in the government. As the interior minister Okruashvili was one of the main "hawks" on South Ossetia last August. In naming him to the defence post, Saakashvili remarked that his close ally would keep the job until Georgia's territorial integrity was restored.

The death last month of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, who was active in promoting compromise in South Ossetia, has also weakened the more moderate line in the government .

South Ossetian officials say they mistrust the Georgian government's double strategy of peace plans and military build-up.

"Georgia is preparing for armed aggression against South Ossetia," Dmitry Medoyev, Kokoity's representative in Moscow, told Rosbalt news agency.

By Koba LIKLIKADZE. CRS No.276, March 02, 2005

Chechnya shocked by Maskhadov killing

Tolstoy-Yurt, March 2005

The republic is tense after the killing of the rebel president.

The centre of Tolstoy-Yurt, a village 40 miles from the Chechen capital Grozny, was quiet, and on a normal day it would have been easy to miss one small whitewashed house with traditional green gates.

The house differed from nearby buildings only by having a deep basement, said neighbours - and now because on March 8 the body of rebel Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov was discovered there.

Ilya Shabalkin, spokesman for Russian federal forces in the North Caucasus, broke the news that day, although he did not give any details of how the Chechen leader had died.

Shabalkin said only that three accomplices had been hiding with Maskhadov in an underground bunker under one of the houses in Tolstoy-Yurt.

Villagers here claim that a "clean-up" operation began on the morning of March 8, with Russian federal forces making house-to-house searches and checking identity papers. The centre of the village was sealed by armoured vehicles and helicopters circled overhead.

"Around 9 am we heard the first explosion, then there was a whole series of [them]," said Salman, a 32-year-old local resident. "We didn't understand what had happened and no one let us through the cordon. We only heard on television that Maskhadov had been killed."

The locals said they were completely shocked by the news. "The resident of the house was a welder and his wife was a bus conductor," said Salman. "A very ordinary family, nothing remarkable about them."

No one doubts that the killing of the Chechen rebel leader is a hugely significant event for Russia and Chechnya. While Moscow has been celebrating the death of a man they regarded as a dangerous foe, in Chechnya different stories are already circulating about the death of Maskhadov.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the first deputy prime minister of the pro-Moscow government in Grozny and son of the late pro-Moscow leader Akhmad Kadyrov, said Maskhadov had died after one of his bodyguards accidentally fired his gun. The intention had been to capture Maskhadov alive, he said.

Chechnya's interior minister Ruslan Alkhkanov said that the operation had been planned by the FSB intelligence service. "It was a unique operation of great sophistication," Alkhanov said.

But many Chechens doubt that Maskhadov was killed in Tolstoy-Yurt. "The village is in the plains of Chechnya," pointed out analyst and journalist Ruslan Zhadayev. "There are no big forests, mountain gorges where you can hide or escape pursuit."

The contrary theory is that Maskhadov was killed several days ago in the Nozhai-Yurt region of southern Chechnya by the so-called Kadyrovtsy, the armed men loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov.

"Either he shot himself when he realised he was going to be captured, or he was killed by the Kadyrovtsy," said Zhadayev. "The decision was taken to give the 'glory' of the liquidation of the separatist leader to the special services of Chechnya probably so they would escape blood revenge."

But Shahman Akbulatov, who heads the Ingushetia office of the Russian human rights organisation Memorial, believes that the rebel leader was betrayed by one of his entourage and tracked down by the intelligence services.

The death of Maskhadov brings to an end his long efforts to be Chechnya's national leader.

Maskhadov successfully led the armed resistance against the Russian army in 1994-96. Though a military figure, he gained the reputation of being a moderate political figure whom the Russians could do business with and was elected president of Chechnya in January 1997. He then signed a comprehensive peace treaty with President Boris Yeltsin in the Kremlin in May of that year. (For a full obituary see next story).

However, Chechnya slid into anarchy under his rule and Russia launched another military intervention in 1999. Since then, Moscow has rebuffed Maskhadov's calls for negotiations, which were repeated as recently as last week. The Kremlin accused him of complicity in the seizure of a Moscow theatre in October 2002 and the hostage-taking at the school in Beslan last year - a charge which Maskhadov and his envoys strongly denied.

The death of the former president has now provoked a storm of emotions amongst Chechens and is being discussed all over the region. Many people said they felt sorry for the former president and were depressed by his death.

"I'm sorry on a human level for Maskhadov," said Satsita Bisayeva, a 21-year-old student at Grozny's oil institute. "He wasn't the best president and no doubt he is guilty for much that has happened in the republic, but there are people like Basayev who deserved that fate a lot more than he did."

She was referring to the militant commander Shamil Basayev, who claimed responsibility for the Beslan attack and now remains the most prominent living leader amongst the Chechen rebels.

"[I am] angry at how the media is covering this," said Bisayeva. "It was simply blasphemous for Ramzan Kadyrov to call it 'a present for Chechen women' [on International Women's Day]."

Now many Chechens fear that Maskhadov's death will trigger an escalation of violence amongst remaining fighters.

"Maskhadov was a political loss more than a military one," said Adlan Sagaipov, editor of the regional newspaper Zov Zemli. "And whenever a Chechen dies it saddens me."

"But now there will be disputes among the fighters over who is to be Maskhadov's heir. And these fights may have repercussions for the civilian population. Up until now, Maskhadov has restrained Basayev, and it's not certain what will happen now."

Formally the choice of successor falls to the rebels' so-called State Defence Council although

no one knows what status this body actually has. What seems almost certain is that the man it nominates will be a military man, not a politician.

"The leadership of the fighters will pass to a more radical man - to Basayev," said Ali Akayev, a 38-year-old Grozny resident. "His long-cherished dream is coming true."

Political analyst Murad Magomadov agrees, saying that, "If up until now Maskhadov's initiatives were a certain restraining factor on Basayev, then now the radical fighters of whom Basayev is leader will have complete freedom. What that means has been illustrated by the Nord Ost theatre siege and Beslan."

Magomadov suggested that if Basayev or another radical fighter Doku Umarov became the new rebel leader, it would herald a radicalisation of tactics in Chechnya.

For many, this was an occasion to reflect on the tragic history of Chechnya over the last decade and Maskhadov's role in it.

Idris Amayev, a 32-year-old unemployed man in Grozny said, "Maskhadov was a man whom no one hated. Of course he is responsible for what happened in Chechnya, but only as much as anyone else is.

"When everyone elected him in 1997, they swore loyalty to him and said they would support him. But people did not keep their promises, and Maskhadov can't be blamed for that."

By Timur ALIEV. CRS No. 277, March 09

Georgia: Armenians bargain with government

Akhalkalaki, Tbilisi, April 2005

A delegation of Armenians seeks a shift of policy in Tbilisi

In the first meeting of its kind, a group of around 20 Armenians from the southern region of Javakheti are meeting Georgian cabinet ministers to discuss the region's many social problems.

The three days of talks, set to begin on April 14, are seen as a test of the Georgian authorities' commitment to the under-developed region, in which around 90 per cent of the population is ethnic Armenian.

The Javakheti Armenians will meet with officials in the education, culture, transport and conflict settlement ministries in Tbilisi and also the parliamentary human rights committee.

If new policies come out of the meetings it will be a significant victory for the young delegation, most of whose members come from a newly formed organisation called Yediny Javakhk, or United Javakheti.

If not, it may strengthen the hand of sceptical Armenians who say Tbilisi is deliberately neglecting the region.

Yediny Javakhk shot to prominence on March 13 - just three days after it was first founded - when it organized a meeting of 8,000 people in the centre of Akhalkalaki, the main town of Javakheti.

The organization's mainly young members said they had come together so quickly in response to reports that the pro-government Georgian youth movement Kmara was planning a protest rally in Akhalkalaki, against a local Russian military base which is the main centre of employment for the local population.

But the young Yediny Javakhk quickly split into a more moderate and more radical wing.

While the moderates sought to contact the Georgian government, the radical members undertook political agitation, brought people to the rally, made banners and invited a pop-group from Armenia to perform.

"We want to achieve the rights that our people are entitled to as citizens of Georgia," Artur Pogolian, one of the leaders of the moderate wing, told IWPR. "We do not want to be second- or third-class citizens."

"For the last 15 years our people have been silent and loyal to all three presidents of Georgia," he added. "And today the time has come for the government to pay attention to us."

The radicals have refused to take part in the Tbilisi delegation.

Vahagn Chakhalian, one of the more radical leaders of the organisation, is sceptical about the moderates' approach.

"If they really want to solve problems, then we are ready to work with them," he told IWPR.

But he insisted this could not take the form of opposition figures being bought off with highly paid jobs in government, "We need problems to be put to them and to be solved."

Tbilisi political analyst Gia Nodia said he was not surprised by the schism. "[This organisation] is the latest attempt to find some common interests or common demands, around which people can unite," he told IWPR. "But differences in interests, conceptions of strategy or political ambitions generally stand in the way of this unity."

At the March 13 rally Pogosian read out a letter to the government of Georgia setting out the problems of the region, one of the most backward in Georgia.

Many of the issues - including ineffective local government, poor electricity supply, bad roads and problems with customs, taxes and passports - also apply elsewhere in the country.

Others are specific to Javakheti - like the demand that Armenian history be taught in schools and that official paperwork be done in the Armenian language as well as Russian.

But calls for autonomy or secession from Georgia were muted at the rally, in contrast with the more nationalist days of the early 1990s.

A major demand is for the government in Tbilisi to ease pressure on the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki, which large numbers of locals regard as an important strategic and economic asset in the region.

"It's always the ordinary folk who suffer," said local resident Bograt Kakosian, "those in comfortable jobs don't have any problems."

"People are selling their last calf to get a visa and move to Russia - and there, because relations between Russia and Georgia are so bad, they risk getting deported just because they are a citizen of Georgia. And if they close the base, it will be bad for us in Georgia too."

Most of those who came to the rally were seasonal workers, who find employment in Russia for part of the year because there are no jobs at home. Until recently, they had to spend time and money getting foreign passports in the regional capital Akhaltsikhe. But following the rally, the government has set up a new passport office in Akhalkalaki.

Artur Yeremian - the gamgebeli, or governor, of Akhalkalaki - says problems like this occur because the central government does not understand the complexities of the region.

"Every ministry is told to carry out reforms," he said. "But no one is interested how they come about, [even though] every region has its special features."

One of the leaders of Yediny Javakhk, who asked to remain anonymous, said the main reason for the region's social ills was the domination of several powerful clans, who operate according to their business interests, are supported by the authorities in Tbilisi and Yerevan, and have influence on the local government.

Nodia explained that one of these clans in particular, grouped around the family of parliamentarian Melik Raisian, had enabled the government in Tbilisi to exert control over the region.

"[The government] gave the leaders who spoke out against Tbilisi well-paid posts," he told IWPR. "And by doing so, it calmed them down. This policy went on under Shevardnadze and there has not been any principled change of policy under the current government. It is relying on influential local players and not on civic democratic progress."

Nodia said that these kind of intrigues had naturally made people suspicious about the new Yediny Javakhk movement, "Many people thought the rallies in Akhalkalaki were designed to discredit someone so someone else could take his place. that it was being done to strengthen the position of people close to [interior minister Vano] Merabishvili or to the president."

Merabishvili comes from Samtskhe-Javakheti and wields a lot of influence in the region. On March 27 he met the Yediny Javakhk moderates and persuaded them not to take part in a rally that had been called for March 31. He himself promised to visit the region in May and check on the enforcement of government policy there.

At the meeting with the minister, the decision was taken to create a Javakheti Public Committee which would be in regular consultation with the government in Tbilisi.

"I see the solution in a dialogue between representatives of the region and the authorities, so the authorities understand what we want," said Samvel Manukian one of the Yediny Javakhk moderate leaders. "If not, we will call another rally in the middle of May."

In the event, the March 31 rally was dominated by the Sport-Cultural Union of Youth of Javakheti, JEMM, which has more of an Armenian nationalist agenda - amongst other things, it calls on Georgia to recognize the Armenian genocide of 1915.

Vahagn Chakhalian of JEMM said he saw no point in negotiating with the Georgian government because he said the Javakheti Armenians had been deceived many times in the past.

By Olesya VARTANIAN. CRS No.282, April 14

Adygeia: Special status under threat

Maikop, April 2005

Furore over plans to merge a Circassian homeland with the surrounding Russian region.

A debate is raging within the North Caucasian autonomous republic of Adygeia as to whether it should be merged with the bigger Krasnodar region that surrounds it.

Supporters of the move to abolish the territory's separate status is an artificial construction that benefits only a small elite. But opponents say abolishing Adygeia would deprive Circassians of a unique haven. The Adygeis, with the Kabardins and Cherkess, together make up the Circassians, one of the largest ethnic groups in the North Caucasus.

At the end of March, some 700 villagers each in the villages of Yablonovsky and Enem demonstrated against rocketing prices for utilities, against the local president Hazret Sovmen, but also in favour of a merger with Krasnodar region. More rallies are expected in late April or early May, the traditional marching season in Russia.

Timur Kalakutok, a deputy in the local parliament, has vowed to put the proposed merger with Krasnodar on the local parliament's agenda.

The debate has sharpened political divisions within the republic with President Sovmen, a gold magnate, speaking out strongly against it. "Adygeia is an autonomous entity established so as to conserve Adygei culture, language and traditions... and create opportunities to fulfil Adygei national aspirations with the help of government institutions."

President Sovmen is urging all those in favour of the merger to "pack up and go and live on the other side of the Kuban", the river that separates Adygeia from Krasnodar. He vowed never to let his republic become "a colony of [Krasnodar] province again".

Only 23 per cent of Adygeia's population are ethnic Adygei, while the overwhelming majority are Russians. Some Russian rights groups, most notably the Slavic Union, complain of gross discrimination in local employment policies. As well as the president, they say, the prime minister and presidential chief of staff (a rank equal to minister) are all ethnic Adygei, as are six of the eight cabinet ministers. In some government institutions, such as the court bailiffs' office in the local capital Maikop, 80 per cent of staff are Adygei.

Nina Konovalova, who chairs the Slavic Union's board and supports the merger, told IWPR,

"Russian professionals are being kicked out everywhere, or almost everywhere. Look at the faculties of Adygeia's universities. Not only are the rectorates all Adygei, the percentage of Adygei teachers on staff is disproportionately high."

So far, however, there has been no mass exodus of Russians leaving the republic. According to official figures, the percentage of Russians in Adygeia has dropped only five per cent in the past 10 years. This is the lowest rate of Russian out-migration amongst all the North Caucasian republics.

The small republic of Adygeia is an enclave within the Krasnodar region, given the status of a republic within the Russian Federation in 1991 so as to give autonomy to the local Circassian population.

Local scholars and cultural figures have been vocal in expressing concern that the Circassian people could lose their culture and language if the one territory in the world where the titular nationality is Circassian were to be abolished (Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia are each shared with another group).

The language is already close to extinction. Recent surveys indicate that as few as five to 10 per cent of Adygei are fluent in their mother tongue.

"Adygeia's continuity as an independent administrative unit within the Russian Federation provides a modicum of protection for its ethnic culture," Almir Abregov, director of the Adygeia National Museum, told IWPR.

He believes that "all this fuss about the merger is completely contrived", noting that many other regions in Northern Caucasus are no better off economically than Adygeia. "How this merger is going to change or improve anything is a mystery to me," he said.

Taliy Beretar, the Adygeian president's chief of staff, believes that if Adygeia becomes part of Krasnodar, the result could be rising inter-ethnic hostility.

"I am absolutely clear: I'm against the merger," he told IWPR. "In the North Caucasus, which is home to hundreds of ethnicities, the inter-ethnic situation is already tense. There is no reason to further exacerbate tensions by unwisely changing a republic's administrative status."

Beretar added that Circassian emigrants in Israel have voiced concern at the proposed merger and said that they have written to the Adygei government, urging it not to let the merger happen.

"They still regard Adygeia as their historical homeland," he said. "They were overjoyed when Circassian emigrants - the descendants of refugees who fled Russian troops in the 19th century - returned here from [a century in exile]. They don't want the republic to be erased from the map as the homeland of Circassians everywhere in the world."

Members of the Circassian Congress, an organisation recently established in Adygeia, are sworn opponents of the proposed merger.

"The abolition of Adygeia as a republic will anger not only the Adygei, but all North Caucasian expatriates," said one of its leaders, Aslan Shazzo. "This may prompt some of them to take up arms and return here as freedom fighters against Russia."

However, as the rallies in Yablonovsky and Enem showed, the idea of Adygeia joining

Krasnodar has its supporters among local Adygei as well as Russians, especially those who live in parts of the republic that are economically and geographically closely linked to Krasnodar.

Kalakutok, an Adygei elected to represent one of these areas in parliament, has been lobbying for years for a union with Krasnodar.

"Both the Russians and the Adygei taking part in those rallies did so for the same reason," he told IWPR. "They believe Adygeia is an artificial administrative formation whose sole reason for existing, as far as they can see, is to feed and clothe Adygeian ministers and nationalists, who account for between one and one-and-a-half per cent of the population."

The Russian federal authorities have so far refrained from comment. Krasnodar governor Alexander Tkachev, speaking at a press conference in March, lent his backing to Russian president Vladimir Putin's policy of creating larger regions, but he was evasive about the chances of Adygeia merging with his own province. "This is a complex matter. The decision to unite or stay apart should be made by our respective people," he said.

Tkachev noted, however, that Adygeia and Krasnodar should be able to live together. Until 1991, Adygeia was an autonomous district within the Krasnodar region, before it was granted the status of a republic.

Ruslan Khanakhu, who heads a department at the Adygeian Institute of Humanities, told IWPR the idea should be abandoned altogether. "The issue of a merger is irrelevant to what the public really wants. It is only making things worse for everyone," he said.

A taxi driver in Maikop told IWPR, "It does not matter if we do or don't merge. Like snakes, the bureaucrats of the [Adygei] republic and Krasnodar will keep on working together and continue to suck people's blood."

By Oleg TSVETKOV. CRS No.282, April 15

Special report: Smuggling row hits Georgian town

Gori, April 2005

Officials in the town of Gori say that charges of crooked dealing against them are politically motivated.

Top officials in Georgia's Gori region, who have been at the forefront of a major anti-smuggling operation, are denying a flood of accusations that they themselves have been abusing their powers.

"Despite their statements to the contrary, the new authorities that took over after the [November 2003] revolution have chosen to profit from contraband trafficking rather than stop it," said Mamuka Paniashvili, who heads the Gori office of the opposition group Right Opposition.

The accusations entered the public domain in mid-March, when the Georgian prosecutor general's office presented evidence that police authorities in the Shida Kartli region, of which Gori is the main town, were involved in smuggling.

All local police chiefs were sacked immediately. Regional chief of police Alexander Sukhitashvili was dismissed, while Kareli district police chief Besarion Giorgashvili and his two deputies are facing criminal charges.

"The Georgian authorities will not be compromised!" said President Mikheil Saakashvili following the arrests of the policemen.

At the same time, two Saakashvili appointees - Shida Kartli governor Mikheil Kareli and defence minister Irakli Okruashvili, who are closely allied with one another - are under fire for allegedly protecting smuggling operations, a charge they deny.

INTERNATIONAL SMUGGLING ROUTE

The row centres around trade between Shida Kartli and the breakaway region of South Ossetia, which has been outside the political and economic control of Tbilisi for more than a decade.

For many years, the Ergneti market on the border with Ossetia, 20 kilometres from Gori, was a shipment hub for untaxed goods from Russia, mainly food and petrol. Since there were few legal jobs in the region, smuggling was the only way to make a living for both Georgians and Ossetians, who happily traded side by side at the market. At its peak, governor Kareli estimated that the illegal market had an annual turnover of 120 million US dollars, with 80 per cent of the trade conducted by Ossetians and the rest by Georgians.

Last summer, the new Georgian government decided to put a stop to the contraband trade, and

the market at Ergneti was closed down. But the anti-smuggling crack down escalated into a military operation led by Okruashvili, who was interior minister at the time. The small conflict, which cost both sides several dozen lives, was suppressed by the end of the summer thanks to the mediation of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other international bodies.

The Tbilisi government claimed the crackdown had completely cleared the area of black-market trade. Some 750 Georgian police, 200 riot troops, financial police officials and national security agents have been deployed in the area to deter smuggling. No major contraband shipments have since been intercepted, and the typical catch is small-time traders.

Local people say the smuggling is still going on, but that its nature has changed. The shops in Gori still openly sell duty-free cigarettes, butter, flour and other food products which are clearly contraband.

"As much smuggled goods are coming in as ever," said Gori resident Gaioz Tsereteli. "Only one thing has changed. Before, it was normal villagers who dealt in it, whereas now four or five influential people have taken over."

"The levels of smuggling have stayed the same," said Saba Tsitsikashvili, a journalist with *Trialeti*, a local newspaper. "The only difference is that the goods are being brought in by top officials and their associates. And no one else dares to touch it."

Another Gori resident, who asked not to be named, told IWPR that "the goods are transported on trailers at 6 am. Everyone knows that vehicles belonging to the son-in-law of a top official are coming down the highway. The police know the number-plates of these vehicles".

These charges were backed up by a recently appointed senior police officer, who requested anonymity. He told IWPR, "No one really fights contraband trafficking here. The Georgian village of Nikozi stands on the main highway from Russia, so I wonder why the police are stationed at the exit from Nikozi, not the entrance to it. So contraband shipments are freely brought into the village, where they are divided up and sent on in every direction.

"When a particularly large shipment is expected, law enforcement officers are diverted to some other location on a false alert, to avoid them unwittingly intercepting the shipment, which would make them some very powerful enemies."

IWPR approached the Georgian interior ministry about this and other matters, but officials there refused to be interviewed.

SENIOR OFFICIALS DENY INVOLVEMENT

Pikria Chikhradze, who heads the opposition New Rights party, released the findings of her own investigation earlier this month, claiming that three powerful groups of traffickers enjoying high-level patronage continue to operate in the Shida Kartli region.

She publicly named one of the three as "the Tkviavi group", which she said transported cigarettes and butter to Tbilisi and western Georgia and was run by Governor Kareli.

Kareli's patron, Defence Minister Okruashvili, responded to Chikhradze's accusations scornfully, telling a press conference on April 4, "This accusation is as absurd as the allegation that Pikria Chikhradze and [another New Rights party leader] David Gamkrelidze run a prostitution racket."

Responding to the sackings of the police chiefs in Gori, Okruashvili conceded, "We have to admit that large amounts of contraband goods continue to be brought into the country." But he rejected charges made against him personally, telling journalists in March that "no one can prove that I did business with Kareli or that I did deals with him to smuggle goods".

A month ago, Governor Kareli told IWPR in an interview that the accusations against him and his family are made by people who benefit from the smuggling trade themselves. "There are plenty of people whom we have prevented from trading in illegal goods," said Kareli. "They are angry with me and are inventing stories that my sons-in-law are smugglers."

On March 14, after President Saakashvili had publicly commented on Gori's problems, Kareli told 24 Hours newspaper that "I can't say that smuggling has been 100 per cent stopped, but it's definitely been 90 per cent stopped".

IWPR asked for more detailed comments from the interior ministry and from Okruashvili and Kareli. The interior ministry and Okruashvili refused to comment, while Kareli told IWPR through his secretary that he "had no time" to talk.

GORI ACQUIRES SUBSTANTIAL PROPERTIES THROUGH "DONATIONS"

Meanwhile, other officials are under fire in Gori for alleged abuse of power in a controversial property redistribution scheme.

Since the 2003 Rose Revolution, several private businesses in Gori have been taken over by the town's new administration, which describes the takeovers as a "donation".

"The citizens voluntarily donated their property, we were unable to stop them," the head of Gori town administration Nugzar Papunashvili told IWPR, referring to a long list of properties acquired by the municipal authorities in the past 12 months.

OWNERS CLAIM THEY WERE PRESSURED TO HAND OVER BUSINESSES

However, many of the donors interviewed by IWPR said they had been put under intense pressure by the authorities to hand over their businesses, and in some cases had been jailed. Contrary to suggestions made by Papunashvili, they insisted the properties involved were legally theirs and they had the documents to prove it.

Jemal Tsiklauri, a 50-year businessman who handed over the Liakhvi market to the authorities, told IWPR, "Misha Kareli came to me and said, 'hand it over'. I tried to resist, but they had me arrested."

He said he had first fallen foul of local police in January 2004, when most of his traders were issued warnings for trading without using scales. After spending four months in jail, Tsiklauri signed his property over to the local administration in April 2004. He then handed over his market, whose worth he estimated at 228,000 lari (125,000 dollars).

Almost all the transfers of property were handled by the same notary, Malkhaz Makharashvili. He told IWPR that he was taken to Tsiklauri in Tbilisi's Prison No. 1, where the latter signed all the documents, "I told them 'let the man come out and then we will sign everything'. They told me we would sign everything inside the prison."

In March, governor Kareli told IWPR that the redistribution of property was "a restoration of justice".

"They all received this property illegally under [former president Eduard] Shevardnadze," he said. Asked why the handover was carried out as it was and not handled by the courts, Kareli replied, "We are building a state and I don't need court cases, I already know what belongs to whom."

Another case is that of the Kommersant-95 retail market. In June 2004, the Gori prosecutor's office seized all documentation relating to Kommersant-95 and took control of the business, citing charges of tax evasion. When the company's chief executive and co-owner, Teimuraz Bluashvili, tried to fight the prosecutor's interim injunction, he was taken into custody.

After 48 hours in jail, Bluashvili, who suffers from a heart complaint, was brought before the Gori district court. "They took me from the jailhouse to the court, put me before judge Gochitashvili, and forced me to plead guilty, threatening that otherwise they'd keep me in jail," Bluashvili told IWPR. "They also made me sign over 88 per cent of the business on behalf of my 12 partners. When I asked who was to receive the remaining 12 per cent, they told me it was none of my business. I think the prosecutor's office was just doing someone's bidding, most probably, the district government's."

Twenty two per cent of a local company named Gorkoni was "donated" to Gori district administration in a similar manner. Although the owner, Marina Kitiashvili, signed a deed of sale with the government which said she received 19,300 lari for her stake, she said that in reality no money actually changed hands.

"You know how things are these days. So you know why I have to keep my mouth shut," Kitiashvili said sadly, refusing to disclose any further details of her transaction.

The list of properties acquired by the district administration includes the central stadium in Gori. According to a notarised deed, owner Gocha Lomidze donated the sports facility, worth an estimated 56,425 laris, to the district administration of his own volition.

Mayor Papunashvili told IWPR that a similar transfer scheme is currently underway for Forte OOO flour mill in Gori, one of the largest businesses in the region, worth 500,000 dollars, which belongs to Mirian Okroshashvili. Okroshashvili, like most of his fellow businessmen, refuses to comment on the deal.

When it was put to him by IWPR that businessmen were being forced to donate their property under duress, Papunashvili became angry and said, "I don't get it, are you a journalist or a prosecutor?"

By Nana BIGANISHVILI. CRS No. 283, April 21

Comment: Georgia's incomplete democracy

Tbilisi, May 2005

The country President George Bush is visiting on May 9-10 may look like a beacon of democracy from far away, but close up, its deficiencies are more glaring.

The visit of United States president George Bush to Tbilisi on May 9-10 is a momentous event for the small nation of Georgia.

The Bush visit will demonstrate the United States' unwavering support for democratisation in the former Soviet Union, a process which received a powerful boost from Georgia's "Rose Revolution" in November 2003.

It will also confirm Georgia's role as the South Caucasus country that is leading the way to integration in Euro-Atlantic organisations, and send a clear message to Russia that Georgia is not being abandoned by the West.

However, while most Georgians will enthusiastically welcome these statements of support from the president of the most powerful country in the world, they will also be listening out for the specific messages that President Bush delivers to his younger colleague, Mikheil Saakashvili.

This keen attention is understandable. Saakashvili's presidency, which is now one week short of 500 days, has been full of contradictions. And if the president's successes generally appear more impressive than his failures, it is the latter that are more obvious to Georgians themselves.

On May 6, Georgia marks the first anniversary of the country's "second revolution" - the bloodless ousting of Aslan Abashidze, the veteran despot of the south-western autonomous region of Ajaria. The removal of Abashidze, whose dictatorial tendencies rivalled those of President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, has been justly hailed as Saakashvili's biggest achievement.

It contrasted favourably with the feeble actions of former president Eduard Shevardnadze, who not only failed to rein in Abashidze's tyrannical behaviour, but used him to prop up his own faltering administration.

Yet Ajaria after Abashidze provides a fine illustration of the nature of Saakashvili's rule.

An attempt was made - not entirely successfully - to replace Abashidze's totalitarian grip with one-party rule by the president's National Movement; elections to the Ajarian parliament in June 2004 were a missed opportunity in terms of democratic process and transparency; the new constitutional law on the status of Ajaria reduced its powers to the purely symbolic; and

the new elite that came to power there disappointed local people by its high-handed behaviour in office.

The Ajarian case is illustrative of the wider pattern of events in post-revolutionary Georgia. Changes that start out in a positive fashion are cast into doubt or undermined by the authorities' lack of a long-term strategic plan of action, by dubious methods of implementation, by the lack of qualified professionals, by the brazen and uncereceremonious way officials treat ordinary people, and by their reluctance or inability to take on board constructive and well-meant criticism.

Not long after taking office, Saakashvili changed the Georgian constitution to suit his own purposes. As a result, as both Georgian and international experts have argued, an already fragile system of checks and balances was disrupted, and parliament grew weaker while the president acquired greater powers without added accountability.

The creation of a new cabinet of ministers did not have the desired effect, as became clear with the tragic death of prime minister Zurab Zhvania in February this year in an apparent gas poisoning accident which has left many unanswered questions. The president acquired the right to dismiss the "power ministers" responsible for security matters without consulting the prime minister, upsetting the balance of executive authority.

Frequent hirings and firings within government have become a characteristic feature of Saakashvili's style. The number and titles of ministries have changed several times, and the interior and national security ministries have undergone a controversial merger. There have been three defence ministers, and three ambassadors to Moscow, a difficult and crucial post for Georgia. Provincial governors have changed so rapidly that few of them have been able to leave any lasting mark.

Back in 2002-2003, when Saakashvili was head of the Tbilisi city assembly, he campaigned for direct elections for the post of mayor in the capital and other cities. As president he has entirely changed his view, and established an indirect system whereby the local legislature chooses the mayor. Evidently, the prospect of acquiring a strong independent figure in charge of Tbilisi, responsible for a third of Georgia's population and a considerable budget, is no more attractive to Saakashvili than it was to Shevardnadze.

In another volte-face, the president has instituted a new method for choosing members of the central electoral commission that is little different from the one put in place by Shevardnadze. The commission is now selected by the pro-presidential majority in parliament on the recommendation of the president. Yet it was a row over the electoral commission that helped trigger the Rose Revolution in the first place.

Saakashvili's overwhelming majority in parliament, where his supporters hold three-quarters of the seats, is not contributing to increased pluralism or transparency. Parliament is bound to approve any initiative the president submits without properly debating it, with the result that the prevailing spirit in government is one of experiment rather than reform.

For example, in autumn 2004 the parliament voted to reduce the length of conscripted army service from 18 months to one year, but this spring it changed it back to 18 months again. The tax code has been subject to similar whimsical changes, being altered substantially within four months of it being passed.

The most blatant manifestation of arbitrary and opaque decision-making and lack of foresight came last summer, with the campaign waged against the separatist territory of South Ossetia.

An anti-smuggling operation conducted by armed units led, quite predictably, to a dangerous escalation of tension. Several dozen people from both sides were killed, and the trust that had taken many years to build up between Georgians and Ossetians was badly damaged.

President Saakashvili's failed intervention in South Ossetia has complicated relations with Abkhazia as well and the emphasis he puts on restoring control over the two breakaway territories is arguably counter-productive.

Yet despite all the problems that the new authorities in Georgia have caused through inexperience and incompetence, it would be wrong not to note the genuine efforts that Saakashvili has made to drag the country out of the morass of political stagnation and economic corruption in which it was sunk during the Shevardnadze years.

The new president has tried to give Georgians back their sense of pride in a country that had come to be regarded as a failed state.

Reform of the education system, which has encountered strong opposition and will not bring results overnight, is designed to improve the country's prospects. Military reform is gathering pace with the support of Georgia's partners and allies. Attempts are being made to implement judicial reform - although by no means everyone in the establishment likes the idea of independent judges. The anti-corruption campaign has created a mass of unanswered questions but has at the very least swelled the state budget through increased tax revenues.

Finally, Georgia is making genuine strides in its long-term aspiration to join the European Union and NATO. And this is where ordinary Georgians are pinning their hopes - that western partners and allies can make demands on the new leadership of Georgia as it seeks to achieve these goals.

The people can call on their leaders to take Georgia closer to European standards of democracy, rule of law and the free market, and to live up to the obligations it has made to the Council of Europe, NATO and the European Union.

As leader of the most powerful western nation, President Bush could find plenty to say to President Saakashvili on these issues - if he chooses to.

By Ivlian HAINDRAVA in Tbilisi. CRS No.285, May 05, 2005

Rise of "Northern Alliance" in Dagestan

Makhachkala, May 2005

Fears of political instability grow after two powerful regional leaders challenge the head of the republic.

The leadership in Russia's southernmost republic, Dagestan, is under intense pressure after two of its regional leaders showed open dissent.

The leaders of the northern towns Kizlyar and Khasavyurt signalled their new-found confidence when a group of their supporters made a surprise high-profile trip to the south of Dagestan earlier this month, where they met an influential cleric said to command tens of thousands of supporters in the region.

The first signs of a new challenge to the Dagestani leadership began in April in Kizlyar. The head of the region is elected by the deputies of the local regional parliament (the council of deputies). For some time, the acting head, Valentin Yermeev, who is supported by Dagestan's leader Magomedali Magomedov, has been the main candidate.

However, this time Yermeyev faced a challenge from Saigid Murtazaliev, Olympic wrestling champion in Sydney in 2000. Murtazaliev holds great sway, particularly amongst the Dagestanis who come from the mountains, which encouraged him to throw his hat into the ring in the race for the post of regional head.

Almost immediately, Murtazaliev was accused of nationalism in a region that has a large ethnic Russian population and where there has long been an unwritten rule that it should be governed by a Russian. At the last minute, Murtazaliev stood aside and threw his weight behind a relatively unknown Russian candidate named Vyacheslav Burov.

Burov easily won the vote on April 8, but Yermeyev and his supporters complained that the election had been held without a necessary quorum of voters. So fresh elections were held two weeks later, this time with the necessary quorum, and Burov was again the winner. Soon afterwards, Murtazaliev was named head of government in the region.

After this setback, Magomedov announced, "We recognise this victory - it was won with a quorum of voting deputies - but there was no need to inflame tensions in Dagestan. It was perfectly possible to resolve this issue peacefully."

An anonymous source from the State Council of Dagestan told IWPR that, before voting began, deputies were offered huge sums of money - up to 100,000 US dollars and more - to

vote for one or other candidate. No one will comment on this allegation, and the source did not say whether anyone took the money.

The election of Burov made a second wing in what has been dubbed Dagestan's "Northern Alliance", strengthening the republic's leading rebel politician, Saigidpasha Umakhanov, currently mayor of the northern town of Khasavyurt, which borders Chechnya.

"The rebels have gained another strategic outpost - Kizlyar region," said Hamid Kurbanov, head of Dagestan's local centre for political and social research. "As a result, Magomedov and his team do not control almost 15 per cent of the territory of the republic.

"And if three years ago a public show of resistance by the mayor of Khasavyurt to the leadership of the republic was considered a wild exception, today the opposition has significantly expanded."

Last summer, Umakhanov threatened to withdraw his local police force from the Dagestani interior ministry, but both sides backed down from outright confrontation. Umakhanov is believed to have received support from powerful Chechen war lord Ramzan Kadyrov, and still has 2,000 armed supporters and control of the second largest town in Dagestan.

On April 28 of this year, a scandal erupted when Umakhanov complained of harassment as he made his way to a special tenth anniversary session of Dagestan's parliament, the People's Assembly.

Parliamentary deputy Gazimagomed Gimrinsky told IWPR that Murtazaliev, State Duma deputy Haji Makhachev and others became involved in an argument with the head of the republic when Umakhanov did not make it to the session. When he and his entourage finally entered Makhachkala, members of the local police wanted to search him and his supporters.

Umakhanov told IWPR, "Oddly, no one else who came to take part in the anniversary session was submitted to such meticulous inspection.

"As for the issue of my bodyguards carrying weapons, considering the huge number of threats I receive, this is a necessary measure. This was an attempt to humiliate me publicly and make me the laughing stock of the whole republic. But I have no intention of helping them play games like that."

Inside the parliament, the majority of deputies supported Magomedov, and around 200 opposition supporters left the hall.

On May 2 the situation became still more fraught, when the Northern Alliance sought to make new allies in the south, mounting a 52-car expedition to the southern town of Derbent.

Kaflan Khanbabaev, a representative of the committee for religious affairs of the government of Dagestan, told IWPR, "They went to Derbent where they met the influential sheikh Sirazhudin Khurigsky, who has as many as 40,000 active supporters in the southern regions."

The sheikh's supporters were at the centre of an unprecedented fight between different groups of parishioners in Dagestan's oldest mosque in April. He is also an independent-minded figure showing increasing disrespect for the authorities in Makhachkala. (See Dagestan: Muslim

Factions Clash, CRS 282, April 15, 2005, http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/cau/cau_200504_282_2_eng.txt)

Magomedov has been head of the republic for 14 years and in that time has acquired the reputation of being a guarantor of stability. However, he is now 75-years-old, and stands accused of failing to solve Dagestan's social problems. There is increasing uncertainty about his future, now that the Kremlin has decided to appoint regional leaders.

The two leaders of the Northern Alliance, Umakhanov and Murtazaliev, are both young, energetic, have plenty of financial resources, and a team of devoted supporters. They are also both Avars, the largest ethnic group in the republic, whose elite has long been calling for a change of leadership. Magomedov is a Dargin, which is the second largest ethnic group.

The uncertainty is deepened by the fact that the Kremlin has so far not spoken out on the political feud and also because there is an ongoing crisis on another front - the fight between the law enforcement agencies and Islamic extremists. This has led some local political analysts to cautiously predict that Dagestan is on the brink of a wide-scale political crisis.

"At the same time, it is clear that the representatives of the Northern Alliance are by no means political opportunists. On the contrary, they are very sober players in the republic's political scene," said Kurbanov.

Kurbanov predicts that the two men will lobby Moscow for its support in the coming leadership struggle for Dagestan. Magomedov's term as leader runs out next summer, but reports from Moscow suggest that the Kremlin wants to make its decision this November.

By Magomed ISAYEV. CRS No.287, May 18

Abkhaz businessmen challenge Russian commander

Sukhum, May 2005

Unclear legal ownership of a Russian military sanatorium provokes anger on the Black Sea.

A row between Abkhaz traders and a Russian military sanatorium has become so bitter that the former went on an unprecedented two-day hunger strike earlier this month.

The still unresolved quarrel highlights the increased confidence of resident Russians in the unrecognised territory, with many Abkhaz unhappy about the dominant role Russian business is playing in their lives.

The dispute began last year when Alexander Fursenko, who is head of the Moscow Military District's Sukhum Sanatorium, declared that all shops, cafes and businesses on the territory of the sanatorium - a popular destination for Russians wanting a holiday on the Black Sea coast - must come under its ownership, or else shut down.

"That is to say, a Russian lieutenant-colonel decided to expropriate other people's property on territory that had been entrusted to him, forgetting that this was not 1917 but the beginning of the 21st century," said Zurab Zukhba, one of the outraged businessmen.

The Sukhum sanatorium, in common with much property in Abkhazia, has an unclear legal status. Its managers, the Moscow Military District, have not signed any legal documents with the Abkhaz authorities and have no official permission to use the land.

Abkhazia broke away from Georgian rule in 1993 after a fierce war. It is now de facto independent but still regarded by the international community as part of Georgia. Over the last few years it has become increasingly part of Russia's economic and political space, and most of its citizens now carry Russian passports.

An Abkhaz government commission, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Zantaria, ruled that the businesses had the right to continue functioning as before until Russia's defence ministry and the Abkhaz government had signed a formal agreement.

However, with Abkhazia distracted by a political crisis following disputed presidential elections in October 2004, nothing was done - and Fursenko stepped up his pressure on the traders.

He gave orders for some of the buildings to be pulled down, while others were deprived of water and electricity. Many properties had trenches dug and piles of building materials put up directly in front of them to deter customers. Fursenko then proposed to some of the café- and restaurant-owners that they could work as hired labour in their own establishments.

"He calls us occupiers, when we have been paying our taxes here for ten years!" complained Lyudmila Bigvava, one of the threatened proprietors. "All our establishments were put up with the permission both of the administration of the sanatorium and of the town authorities."

Bigvava is the owner of a traditional Abkhaz restaurant known as an "apatskha". Her only son died in the 1992-3 war and this is her one means of making a living. When the military authorities of the sanatorium wanted to take over her business, they blocked the entrance with a pile of steel and concrete.

"I've been forced to sleep here, in the cold apatskha, since last October," said Bigvava. "The moment I leave the territory of the sanatorium, Fursenko will give the order to pull [my business] down."

The proprietors also allege that Fursenko is using the employees of the sanatorium to build his own private house without paying them.

The management of the sanatorium says only that the decision to remove the traders comes from their bosses in the Moscow Military District. Fursenko himself is away in Moscow and could not be contacted for comment, but his deputies called a public meeting to show their support for him.

One sanatorium employee, Zurab Kortava, told the meeting that Fursenko was acting responsibly. "My own brother is one of the protesting businessmen, but I think his position is wrong," said Kortava.

"Fursenko wants to impose order but the private businessmen are stopping him from doing that.

"We employees are accused of building Fursenko's house for free, but I want to tell you that we built the house of the previous owner of the sanatorium, so we are building the house of the current owner and we will do the same for the next one too. It is an honour for us to do this work."

The traders have appealed to the Abkhaz authorities for help on a number of occasions, but without success.

"Maybe their inertia comes from an unwillingness to spoil their relationship with Russia, although it is obvious that Fursenko is simply exploiting that and pretending that his own personal interests are actually Russia's interests," claimed Zukhba, adding that Fursenko has his employees "under his thumb" as they are frightened of losing their jobs - a precious commodity in Abkhazia.

The hunger strike of May 6-8 finally forced a reaction from the government. But officials who visited the strikers only persuaded them to abandon their protest with a promise to intervene in the conflict.

"This is the last chance for the government," said Zukhba. "If nothing is done, we will resume the hunger strike. I don't see any other way."

The deputy mayor of Sukhum, Boris Achba, assured the protestors that they would try to sort things out as soon as Fursenko returned.

"If the issue is not resolved, I will go on hunger strike with you," said Achba.

By Inal KHASHIG. CRS No.287, May 19

Armenia's big dance

Under Mount Aragats, June 2005

Tens of thousands of Armenians literally embrace their country's highest mountain.

One step forward, one step back. Around a quarter of a million of Armenians performed this simple manoeuvre last week in a mass display of national unity. Participants in the Round Dance of Unity symbolically embraced Mount Aragats - Armenia's highest mountain - on First Republic Day, May 28, by dancing hand in hand for 15 minutes.

Around 250,000 dancers formed a 168 kilometre ring around Mount Aragats in an event that organisers hoped would show the world that the Armenians are a united nation and give them an entry into the Guinness Book of Records. Others speculated that the ceremony's organisers had a long-term political agenda.

On the day - which marks the declaration of independence in 1918 - hundreds of thousands of people gathered at the foot of Mount Aragats, an extinct volcano which is 4090 metres high. They stood hand in hand ready to start dancing. It was decided from the start that the movement in the dance would be the simple Gyovndi dance - one step forward, one step back. A week before, Armenian television stations had started broadcasting clips that were meant to explain to the population how to perform the movement correctly.

"The dance could have lasted five minutes, not fifteen. The main idea here is that of unification. Huge sums of money are being spent in Europe to support the idea of the European Union. However, it is not being implemented, as there is no spirit in it," Karen Gevorkyan, chairman of the Union of National Art of Dancing, told IWPR.

Dancers were given orange caps, as the organisers wanted the dance to look as an uninterrupted apricot-coloured ring when shot from a helicopter.

In advance, it was said that this dance would need 168,000 thousand participants, or one thousand people per kilometre. However, in the event many more than that showed up and there were quite a number of sections of the ring where people had to dance in several lines.

The ranks were especially thick where Armenian president Robert Kocharian was dancing and the cameras focused their lenses on him. He danced hand in hand with an old man in national Armenian clothes, a young boy, and an elderly woman, all smiling broadly as they kept time with the music.

The president was surrounded by officials and ministers, all of whom danced extremely well, giving the impression that they had been practicing hard in advance. However, the density of the line was uneven and there were sections that were empty, spoiling the ambition for an uninterrupted circle. That did not dampen enthusiasm and there was universal celebration with music everywhere and separate groups of people organising mini-dances.

"We are inspired by the fact that the Armenians can unite and organise themselves," said Shushan, a student at the Academy of Arts, told IWPR. She and her friends stayed on the slopes of Aragats after the dance was over and went on dancing.

However, the organisation of the event actually fell well short of promises made beforehand. The organisers of the dance had said they would slaughter animals for meat, supply drinking water and plastic sacks for rubbish and build field toilets. In the event, there was one toilet per 1,000 people and there were few plastic sacks. Piles of rubbish were left at the foot of the mountain when people went home after the ceremony.

"We thought that there would be some food, so we did not take much food. We are now going back home earlier because none was provided for us," said Andranik who came to the dance with his family and neighbours.

"We came here a day earlier, on the evening of May 27. They promised that night's lodging would be provided but we had to look for rooms in a nearby village," said a student from Yerevan State University. He and his friends - around 20 young boys and girls - managed to find two rooms with eight beds in them. "However, we are content. We will remember this all our lives," Khachik said with a smile.

The dance was planned by the Nig-Aparan Union, which brings together people from the same Armenian district who settled in the capital Yerevan.

Aghvan Hovsepyan, Armenia's chief prosecutor, the head of the union from Aparan, the area around Mount Aragats, spearheaded the event. He took ten days' leave ahead of the ceremony to make it happen but had planned it over four months.

Hovsepyan is one of Armenia's most prominent officials and received support from politicians, businessmen and public servants. Each group of a thousand people had its leader, who was responsible for bringing people to the dance and supplying food, water, and transport.

The main committee, named Shurjpar and headed by Hovsepyan, resembled a campaign headquarters, with expensive cars outside and emotional discussions inside about who would transport how many people to the mountain. Businessmen and government officials transported their own employees. This level of organisation naturally aroused suspicions that the dance had a hidden agenda.

"Shurjpar is being organised by the people who want to show that they are able to organise events at a state level," said lawyer Haik Tovmasian. "They are 'showing their muscles'."

The Armenian capital virtually came to a halt on May 28 as most of the public transport vehicles were taking dancers to Aragats and taxis were hard to come by.

Student Arsen Kharatian, who did not take part in the Aragats dance, was not impressed saying, "It's unacceptable that state funds are used to implement an idea like this. The main

aim is to ensure a large number of participants. It would perhaps be best to describe this event as a compulsory celebration."

Despite such criticisms, chief prosecutor Aghvan Hovsepyan said immediately after the dance that everything had been wonderful, "Nature helped me, God helped me, everything was excellent and beautiful.

"I am so full of emotion that I do not even know what to think about. I invite you to Shurjpar next year."

Everyday reality returned all too quickly. On his way back from Aparan, a car driver took a look at the heaps of rubbish on the mountainside and remarked bitterly, "The Armenians have been here."

One peasant from Aparan, a short old man with a wrinkled and sunburned face, shouted out "What are you doing?" as expensive cars moved across a ploughed field to beat the traffic jams. He had a wooden stick in his hand and beat the sides of the vehicles with it as they bumped past.

By Gegham VARDANIAN. CRS No. 289, June 02

HAKOP BERBERYAN



Round Dance of Unity at the foot of Mt. Aragats

No rights for Sharia wives

Makhachkala, June 2005

Dagestani women who enter into polygamous marriages risk losing everything - even their children - when their husband tires of them.

Madina thought that she had married well. The educated and worldly Dagestani woman was thrilled with her husband - a wealthy man with a large house - and thought nothing of it when he asked her to marry him in a mosque, instead of at the local registry office. The latter was "all just rubbish, paper", he said. So Madina gave up her job, was a housewife for three years and tried her utmost to be her husband's idea of a Muslim wife.

But her husband, seemingly, had other ideas. His preference for a mosque wedding apparently stemmed from an intention to take a second wife - which is permissible under Sharia law.

"I slaved for the family, to put it bluntly. But my husband decided to marry again. I was not ready for this turn of events and I told him so. Then he showed me the door. And no one supported me. I went to live at my grandmother's house. Some time later, my former husband took my daughter away from me," she said.

The court battle for custody of their daughter is still going on, although Madina says that she has no more money or strength to contest it. Her husband bribed the judge and presented false documents claiming that she had treated the little girl badly, she claims. The child now lives with her former husband's new wife and Madina, aged only 32, says that she has no energy to start a new life.

Madina is one of hundreds of women to suffer as a result of a growing trend in Dagestan - men taking advantage of their Muslim status to take a second or even third wife, even though polygamy is forbidden under Russian law. As a result, these "Sharia wives" have few rights in the secular republic.

Until recently, only Dagestan's wealthiest men with high social status took second wives, as it was thought that they "could permit themselves" to do so from an economic and ethical point of view. However, many other men have also chosen to ignore the official registry office and marry according to Sharia law, and this practice has spread widely. While more optimistic religious figures link this phenomenon to the growth of Muslim self-awareness among Dagestanis, sociologists, psychologists and also representatives of Islam are choosing to see it as the result of a decline in morals.

While imams at mosques in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala say that almost all couples who marry there do so before or after their official registration, there are others who go to the

registry office only under pressure from their families, as it is more important for them that their marriage is blessed by Allah. As a result, some believe that a Sharia marriage is the only necessary form of legalised matrimonial relations.

But in many cases, the process of taking new wives is only indirectly related to religion.

"Modern Dagestan citizens who come to Islam by tradition are what are called 'ethnic Muslims'," said one young man who describes himself as a fundamentalist. "They allow themselves to be Muslims only when it is convenient for them. For example, they drink and smoke quite readily, despite the prohibitions that are clearly set out in the Koran. It is also convenient for them to take a second wife and they do so, saying that their religion allows it."

Many religious young women readily agree to be second Sharia wives in spite of their poor status compared to an officially registered first wife. Husbands tend to treat their second wife with less respect than their first, and such unions are often kept secret from the husband's relatives and his first family.

Irina Rudakova, head psychologist at the Genesis crisis centre for women, which has been working in Makhachkala for five years, said, "At the moment, the chance of taking a second wife for a man is a convenient, socially acceptable form of legalised relations, which are more properly categorised as extramarital.

"The problem is that for women who marry in this way, nothing changes in their relations with the man after they are formally married. They remain in an illegal or semi-legal position, which does not give them any more stability or social protection. And if the marriage breaks up - usually on the initiative of the husband and his family - the woman has no chance to defend her rights. At any rate, it is useless to appeal to the state."

However, many specialists agree that the psychological discomfort and social infringement of marriage rights is nothing in comparison with what women have to endure when their Muslim husbands literally throw them out on the street.

"I am in favour of polyandry - where a woman marries more than one man - and I am happy with the Russian constitution, with its declaration of the equal rights of men and women. But these local 'Sharia marriages' are a big deception by men," said publicist Svetlana Anokhina.

"Men ignore their obligations. If a Sharia husband gets sick of his wife, he throws her out, and this is still considered a disgrace for the woman - as if it's her fault! It's like something out of the Middle Ages."

Amina was still a student when she married a man older than herself. She says that she decided to become a second wife primarily because of the so-called economic factor - her husband was wealthy - and did so against her parents' wishes. Amina lived separately from her husband, in an apartment registered in her name, and did not work, partly because she had given birth to a daughter, and partly because her husband's wealth made it unnecessary. But before long her husband had gently but insistently forced her out of the apartment, and then broke off relations with her. "He got tired of pressure from his family who never accepted me as his lawful wife," she said.

Unable to return to her parents' home, Amina and her daughter lived with a friend for six months while she looked for work. She now works as a house painter and rents a small apartment. Only 25-years-old, Amina has the air of one who is already used to surviving adversity.

The lack of any legal mechanism to regulate relations within a Sharia family can also cause problems for first wives as well as for the second. Women in Sharia marriages usually spend

many years not working, and live a closed-off life. Therefore if the husband withdraws his care of her, she feels completely helpless. With no rights, she cannot approach the state for help in making the husband respect his obligations, and a lawyer can only advise that the Sharia wife is in fact a mistress in the eyes of the law.

The Dagestan legal code does contain provisions for a Sharia wife to claim property that was acquired jointly with her husband. But, in practice, such women have not been able to successfully do so in court, and lawyers do not take on such obviously difficult cases - too many conditions need to be observed, and there are too many factors working against them.

This runs contrary to the principles of Islamic law, which gives a wife more rights than her husband in a marriage, and the legislation of the secular state which stresses equality of the sexes.

"Men who take their obligations seriously do not marry second wives very often, and they treat their first marriage very seriously," said Islamic law specialist Idris Magomedov. "In a real Sharia marriage, all the responsibility for the woman, for the family and the children, lies fully with the man. His obligation is not just to fully provide for his wife financially, but to make sure that his wife is healthy and happy."

And indeed some Dagestan women have never been happier than within a Sharia marriage. Aishat used to be called Alyona before being persuaded by her husband to convert to Islam. The Russian woman is now a Muslim, has been married for eight years, and has three children. She wears a headscarf and long dresses, as is proper, with only her face and wrists visible. "I gained peace and faith. I now have many new friends. I believe that they are all my new Muslim family," she said.

Magomedov, who has made a scientific study of the issue of polygamy in Dagestan, said that many religious Dagestani men remarry because they are unhappy with a first wife who does not wish to adhere to religious principles - for example, wearing Islamic clothing, praying five times a day and observing fasts. They marry women who fully share their beliefs.

According to political scientist Ruslan Kurbanov, "I see a solution in creating a Sharia court. In a secular society this is also possible, and a precedent already exists. For example, in [the Canadian province] of Ontario [such a court] has existed for a long time and with the permission of the authorities.

"Most of the people who so readily marry second wives do this out of an ignorance of Islam. The basis of the requirement laid out in the Koran is fair and equal treatment of wives by the husband."

By Polina SANAYEVA. CRS No.289, June 02

Chechnya: fleeing villagers protest

Kizlyar, Borozdinovskaya, June 2005

The plight of a thousand Dagestani villagers fleeing Chechnya has stoked trouble between the two republics.

Tensions between the Chechen and Dagestani authorities remain high as hundreds of ethnic Avars who fled their village in Chechnya for the neighbouring republic say they are too afraid to go home.

The villagers belong to a tiny minority in Chechnya, but in Dagestan where they have sought refuge, the Avars are one of the major ethnic groups.

A pro-Moscow Chechen special forces battalion raided the village of Borozdinovskaya on June 4, and described the operation as a success. Police officials said 11 "guerrilla sympathisers" were rounded up and two guerrillas killed during the fighting.

However, villagers who fled Borozdinovskaya say the unit, which reports to the Vostok special battalion of the Russian defence ministry, has often been involved in kidnappings for ransom and abuses against local people - and that this operation was no different.

Eyewitnesses said a well-known commander in the battalion, who goes by the nickname of "Beard", was present during the raid. Locals say Beard is a local activist in the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

One Borozdinovskaya resident, told IWPR, "Those people are scum and they are former rebel fighters. Hamzat [alleged to have led the raid] extorts money from the locals. They have kidnapped our people before, then they let them out for a ransom. It was Beard who collected the money. Everyone knows that in our district. The Dagestani government knows it; we've complained many times.

"The federal government knows it, too, assuming our complaints got through. We've been writing to the Kremlin for two years."

The incident was explosive enough to attract the attention of Dmitry Kozak, President Vladimir Putin's special representative for the North Caucasus.

"If Borozdinovskaya residents are telling the truth, what happened there is an outrageous act of sabotage against Russia, Dagestan and Chechnya," said Kozak. "If the perpetrators thought they could terrorise peaceful civilians and get away with it, they were dead wrong."

Aizanat Magomazova, the daughter of a 77-year-old Borozdinovskaya resident who was killed in the raid, told IWPR how she received a telephone call the night her home village was

raided, "A friend of mine who's a schoolteacher called me in Kizlyar in the middle of the night, saying there was another Beslan going on at their village school.

"All the villagers had been brought to the school building at gunpoint and ordered to pull their shirts over their heads. Then they started beating people and robbing their homes. She told me my father had been taken away and his house was on fire.

"The house was still burning when I came to the village. A neighbourhood boy went in to retrieve a gas cylinder that might explode, and he found my father's body. We could hardly recognise him. He had bare bones for legs."

Magomazova said tensions had grown since Chechen authorities began resettling displaced persons from the Nozhai-Yurt district in Borzdinovskaya. "A few families came," she said. "There were fights with the locals and people complained. But the complaints were always ignored. Some masked people came and threatened violence if the villagers didn't retract their complaints."

But Isa Nutayev, the head of Shelkovskoy district, told IWPR that the authorities had simply been battling illegal armed gangs in the area. "A criminal group we call the Avar jamaat [Islamic group] made Borzdinovskaya its home after August 1996," he said.

"Back then the group numbered between 50 and 60 and was headed by the infamous warlord Mitabov, who is accused of numerous murders and kidnappings, including the kidnapping of an Armenian boy from... Stavropol province. Mitabov was killed in a gangland shooting before the second Chechen war."

The displaced persons, who say the raid on their village left several homes burned to the ground, have set up a tent city along the border between Dagestan and Chechnya. The refugees built basic huts covered with polythene sheeting, and have been living there for more than two weeks. They brought their own food, which they cook over fires. Among the more than 1,000 people in the tent camp near Kizlyar, some 150 are children under the age of seven.

"We've been roughing it for two weeks now with no help from anyone," said Magomed Magomedov, a history teacher and father of eight. "The emergency rescue workers wouldn't even give us any tents; each family had to buy its own. The Red Cross people said they couldn't help because we don't have the status of forced migrants. Only individual Dagestanis are helping as much as they can. The heads of Khasavyurt and Kizilyurt municipal administrations have sent us flour and sugar."

Magomedov denied the men rounded up by the Vostok special forces were "criminals" or "guerrillas". He and other villagers want them to be released before they will agree to go home. "Our representatives met with Dmitry Kozak in Khankala," he said, referring to the main Russian military base in Chechnya. "He promised us safety, but people are afraid to go back."

Leading Dagestani opposition politicians from the newly formed Northern Alliance which opposes the government have visited the camp and criticised the Chechen and Dagestani authorities for not helping the refugees more.

The Dagestani authorities want the refugees to go home. They fear the smouldering crisis could spark broader interethnic tensions between Chechens and Dagestanis.

In 1999, relations between Chechnya and Dagestan spiralled downwards after Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev led an incursion into Dagestan - an operation that helped trigger the second war in Chechnya.

According to Magomedov, the raid on Borozdinovskaya is just the latest in a long string of violent incidents against Avars there, and he claims 18 Dagestanis have been killed in the village since 2000.

Chechnya's most powerful figure, first deputy prime minister Ramzan Kadyrov, has now been made head of a commission to resolve the issue of the villagers' return. However, he does not enjoy good relations with the Dagestani authorities.

Zaid Abdulagatov, a Dagestani political analyst, said he feared trouble ahead. "Things have taken an ominous course," he said. "Now everything depends on what the Dagestani and Chechen governments decide."

"If they just leave everything as is, the problem will only grow worse," Abdulagatov said. "On the one hand, the refugees are Chechen citizens and their problems are an internal matter for Chechnya, but on the other, violence was used against ethnic Dagestanis. That does not augur well for this ethnically tense region."

By Musa MUSAYEV and Natalya ESTEMIROVA. CRS No. 293, June 30

Georgian base closure shifts strategic balance

Tbilisi, Yerevan, June 2005

The transfer of Russian military hardware from Georgia to Armenia may alter the balance of forces in the South Caucasus.

On May 30, after years of disagreements, Georgia and Russia finally agreed on a timescale for Moscow to close its two remaining military bases in Georgia. Moscow and Tbilisi are now negotiating the technical details of the pullout - and the critical issue of what will become of the significant numbers of Russian tanks in Georgia.

The Russian bases at Akhalkalaki and Batumi are to close up by the end of 2008. Russia plans to transfer some of the equipment now stationed there to its military base in Gyumri in neighbouring Armenia.

Although Georgian officials have hailed the pullout agreement as a landmark, some observers believe the transfer of more Russian armaments to Armenia could upset the already fragile balance of forces between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The neighbours are still involved in a long conflict over the disputed Nagorny Karabakh territory and lands adjacent to it.

Peace talks to end the decade-old conflict have dragged on for years. Recently, Azerbaijan, which lost 14 per cent of its territory to ethnic Armenian forces in the fighting, has shown increasing impatience with the situation.

The relocation of military hardware from Russia's bases in Georgia to sites in Armenia has been greeted with more concern in Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev says his country will raise defence spending by 70 per cent as a result. Azerbaijan has often accused Russia of covertly backing Armenia in the conflict.

"It is true that this hardware is not being handed over to Armenia but remains at the disposal of the Russian base," President Aliyev said on June 25 as he addressed graduates at the Azerbaijani Higher Military School. "However, it will nevertheless be transferred to Armenian territory - and we have had to take proper steps, which we did by increasing defence expenditure in the budget."

According to the Military Staff of the Russian Troops in the Transcaucasus, at the beginning of 2005, there were 1,700 military personnel stationed at Batumi. In addition, the base had 31 tanks, 131 armoured fighting vehicles, AFVs, and 211 other vehicles, and 76 large-calibre artillery systems.

The base at Akhalkalaki had 1,800 personnel, 41 tanks, 67 AFVs and 61 other vehicles, and 64 large-calibre artillery pieces.

Three trainloads of weapons and munitions, including chemical and nuclear warfare protection gear as well as anti-aircraft missiles, have left the Batumi base for Gyumri since the agreement was signed. Under the terms of the deal, around 40 per cent of Russian equipment in Georgia is supposed to be relocated to Gyumri.

Russian defence minister Sergei Ivanov said the relocation did not mean that Armenia or Russia would exceed international agreements governing arms restrictions in the Caucasus. And, on an official level at least, Yerevan says the relocation is a normal measure regulated by treaty obligations.

Some argue that Armenia needs the boost in weaponry on its territory that the closure of the Russian bases in Georgia will give it.

One Georgian expert predicted that in the event of a resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia would try to prevent new overland shipments of Russian armaments reaching Armenia through its territory. "If the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan is resumed, it may be assumed that Georgia will try to maintain complete neutrality and will not allow the Russian military to deliver additional ammunition to Yerevan," said the expert, who did not want to be named.

"However, it will be first and foremost Armenia that will suffer from Georgia's neutrality, as it will find itself under an almost total blockade."

"Today, the only thing that Yerevan - whose economic potential cannot be compared with that of Azerbaijan -- can think about is replenishment of the stocks of Russian military equipment and ammunition."

However, a number of experts in Armenia believe that the relocation of Russian heavy armaments to Armenia will reduce Yerevan's security, not increase it.

Anatoly Tsyganok, a professor at the Academy of Military Sciences, said, "All the control units for Russian anti-aircraft systems in this region are currently in Georgia. Moscow reinforced them not so long ago, in 2003 and 2004, as it considered it possible that unsanctioned missiles could be launched from the south, perhaps Iran, aimed at Russia."

"The impending elimination of these units will sharply reduce control over the entire system. As a result, not only Russia but also Armenia will encounter new problems."

Four Russian military bases remained in Georgia in the early 1990s when the Soviet Union collapsed. In 2001, in pursuance of agreements reached at an OSCE summit in 1999, Russia gave up the Vaziani base located near Tbilisi and the Gudauta base in Abkhazia.

Some observers say the two bases that were left lost any real strategic value for Russia.

"The two bases remaining on Georgian territory were then deprived of the main component - the airfield in Vaziani," said Koba Liklikadze, an observer on military affairs. "As there was no railway line to reach them, the Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases found themselves blockaded and encountered problems with the transportation of military contingents, fuel, and weapons."

Moscow and Tbilisi had been negotiating on the closure of the Batumi and Akhalkalaki

bases since 1999. The Georgians had maintained that itn could be done in three to four years, while Moscow initially demanded 17 and later 11 years.

Talks on closing the bases were significantly stepped up after President Mikheil Saakashvili and his team came to power in Georgia.

Georgian defence minister Irakly Okruashvili said that the agreement to close the bases marks the end of 200 years of a Russian military presence in Georgia.

However, the question is whether Georgia will become a "demilitarised zone", as its leadership has said it wants, or join NATO, to which the government also aspires.

This question particularly worries the almost 100,000-strong Armenian community in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, as the Akhalkalaki military base located there is not just the only source of jobs for the locals, it is also viewed as a guarantor of security against NATO member Turkey - located right across the border.

Some Armenian security officials are disappointed with the Russian-Georgian agreement to liquidate the bases, seeing it as a capitulation by Moscow.

"Moscow has given in to a weak country [Georgia], failing to protect any of the diplomatic, economic, and military issues linked to its national security, as well as the matters relating to its sole ally in the region, Armenia," an Armenian expert close to the government who asked to remain anonymous told IWPR.

By Irakly ALADASHVILI and David PETROSIAN. CRS No.293, June 30

Armenian phone fury

Yerevan, July 2005

More headaches in store for Armenia's long-suffering mobile phone users.

The launch of a new mobile phone provider in Armenia has left the cellular network close to collapse as overloaded frequencies fail to cope with the increased demand.

The July 1 launch of Viva-Mobile ended the controversial monopoly enjoyed for seven years by Greek-owned ArmenTel, but serious technical problems have ruined the start-up.

Yerevan residents estimate that just one in ten phone calls are getting through on either network, with one expert saying the country's cellular frequencies - which the two companies had agreed to share - simply can't cope.

"If I hadn't paid so much money for this service then I'd probably just throw my phone in the rubbish bin," one journalist told IWPR.

Armenians have long complained of the poor quality and high cost of mobile phone service in their country. The government has been persistently criticised since it gave ArmenTel-owner OTE control over both fixed and mobile lines several years ago in exchange for 140 million US dollars and promises to upgrade the system.

Viva-Mobile was given a license to launch an alternative service following a series of lawsuits and counter-lawsuits between the government and OTE, which ended up in a London arbitration court.

The government, which retained a 10 per cent stake in ArmenTel in its original deal with OTE, accused the Greek company of breaking contractual agreements.

The two sides later agreed that OTE would forfeit its control over mobile service in exchange for a monopoly position as Armenia's lone internet provider.

The appearance of competition in the market immediately triggered a price war. Viva-Mobile announced prices much lower than those offered by ArmenTel, which quickly responded by halving its prices.

However, having rushed to Viva-Mobile when the service was launched, new subscribers immediately encountered problems.

Viva-Mobile officials blame the jammed lines on start-up problems.

ArmenTel representatives say they have no idea why their numbers have also gone down and have asked the Armenian transport and communications ministry to look into it.

Communications minister Andranik Manukian, referred the problem back to ArmenTel, saying his ministry had nothing to do with technical issues.

Independent specialist Grigor Sagisian, the vice chairman of the Armenian Internet Users' Union, pointed out that ArmenTel and Viva-Mobile were sharing frequency ranges and said that might explain the glitches.

ArmenTel's system was designed for a relatively small number of users, he said, adding the companies might be forced to add more base stations.

Adding to the controversy over the jammed mobile lines are lingering questions over the ownership of Viva-Mobile, which some in Armenia suspect has close ties to the country's leadership.

During negotiations with the government, a law firm run by Vatan Harutunian, the brother of Armenian justice minister David Harutunian, represented Viva-Mobile's parent company.

Brushing off allegations that Viva-Mobile had unfairly used government connections, Vatan Harutunian confirmed his law firm had dealings with Viva-Mobile, but said they began well before negotiations over its mobile operator license got underway.

David Harutunian also denied any wrongdoing, saying Viva-Mobile was chosen for its professionalism not its ties to the government.

Harutunian admitted, however, that Viva-Mobile's relationship with the unrecognised ethnic Armenian-controlled territory of Nagorny Karabakh region was a factor in giving the company the license.

Viva-Mobile is owned by K-Telecom, controlled by the Lebanon-based Fatush family, which also operates Karabakh-Telecom.

Karabakh's international telecommunications were in danger of being cut off as the result of an order from Azerbaijan, still internationally recognised as having jurisdiction over Karabakh, which last year forced foreign companies to sever their ties with Karabakh-Telecom.

With K-Telecom now re-registered as Viva-Mobile, an Armenian company, it can connect Karabakh phone users to the rest of the world via Armenia.

By Rita KARAPETIAN. CRS No.296, July 21

Turkmen-Azeri ties stay at low ebb

Baku, London, July 2005

Long-running dispute on Caspian oil reserves creates tensions which may ultimately harm Ashgabat more than Baku.

The contentious issue of how the Caspian Sea and its huge oil and natural gas reserves should be divided is once again souring relations between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Elkhan Huseinov, Azerbaijan's ambassador in Ashgabat, left for home on June 29 for "consultations about the situation in Turkmenistan", diplomatic sources in Baku said. Officials remained tightlipped, but there was speculation that the envoy was recalled because of concern in Azerbaijan at its Caspian Sea neighbour's plans to build up its military forces.

Huseinov's return to Turkmenistan two weeks later avoided a further deterioration in relations, but diplomats and analysts interviewed by IWPR suggested the underlying problems between the two countries remained unresolved.

The heart of the dispute is the oil and gas lying below the waters of the Caspian. Turkmenistan has made plans to develop a disputed oil field which Azerbaijan has already started work on, but which both countries claim.

Baku is also worried by a deal under which Turkmenistan will acquire weapons and military equipment worth 500 million US dollars from Ukraine, paying for it with natural gas supplies. Although the military hardware may pose little actual threat to Azerbaijan, the apparent sabre-rattling by its neighbour has further complicated the oil dispute.

"Relations between our countries are rather cold," an Azerbaijani diplomat told the Baku newspaper Ekho on condition of anonymity.

Before 1991, the sea was divided between the Soviet Union and Iran. The Soviet successor states around the sea have been unable to agree boundaries, and new oil and gas discoveries in central waters have made the debate more than academic.

Azerbaijan reached a deal with Russia and Kazakhstan in 2003 assigning a proportionate segment of the sea to each. But the two other maritime states - Turkmenistan and Iran - have not signed up to this, so that there is no common view on how much of the southern Caspian belongs to them and how much to their neighbour Azerbaijan.

Despite these unresolved matters, Azerbaijan has since 1994 gone ahead with developing major deposits including the Azeri, Chirag and Guneshli fields. Turkmenistan claims at least part of these fields, depending on how the final border lines would be drawn.

Particularly contentious, however, is the Kapaz field, which the Turkmen call Serdar. Ownership has been under discussion since 1997, when Azerbaijan engaged the Russian

companies Lukoil and Rosneft to develop the field, only to find that they backed out following protests from Ashgabat.

There were further attempts by both countries to set up development deals for Kapaz/Serdar, but all failed. However, in January 2005, a Canadian company called Buried Hill Energy announced it had agreed a deal with Turkmenistan to begin work in the area.

Azerbaijan's foreign ministry swiftly dispatched a message to the Canadian firm detailing its concerns and warning that no work should begin until a final ruling is made on who owns Kapaz/Serdar.

A spokesman for Azerbaijan's foreign ministry Tair Tagizade was more conciliatory in an interview with IWPR, saying he was confident the long running dispute would eventually be sorted out.

"I would say that there are a number of issues between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan where the two sides have not reached a full mutual understanding, including the sectoral division of the Caspian and specifically the maritime borders," said Tagizade. "But this is a working problem and can be solved. So I wouldn't dramatise relations between the two countries." Oil is not the only unresolved question between the two countries, however, and relations between the two have been near collapse over a number of issues including millions of dollars that Turkmenistan is claiming for gas it supplied to the Azerbaijan a decade ago.

Turkmenistan has not had an embassy in Baku since 2001, and diplomatic ties worsened the following year after Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov, also known as Turkmenbashi, said some of those involved in an alleged attempt on his life entered the country via Azerbaijan, whose leadership, he hinted, effectively sponsored them.

Baku was particularly irritated by the recent visit of Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko to Ashgabat, during which a defence deal was signed promising deliveries of naval vessels from Ukraine as well as crew training, and servicing and repairs to ships.

Azerbaijan political expert Rasim Musabekov says Turkmenistan cannot solve its Caspian problems by beefing up its military might.

"No matter how Turkmenistan builds up its navy, it is unlikely that the country will draw any benefit from it because hardware alone is not enough," he said.

"It's quite impossible to develop a resource base on the Caspian founded on the constant presence of armed forces. No investor is going to put money into an area like that or send staff there."

Alienating Azerbaijan, with its more developed oil industry and a huge export pipeline ending at the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, may not be in the interests of Turkmenistan, which apart from the Caspian is landlocked. The country is already dependent on Russian goodwill for exporting almost all its gas, and sales of oil and gas via Iran remain on a small-scale because of the latter country's political isolation.

According to Musabekov, "Even if Turkmenistan did find an investor, it will face the fact that this project [Serdar] is not sufficiently profitable, unless it uses Azerbaijan's infrastructure and onward transportation for the product."

An official with the Turkmenistan oil and gas ministry who asked to remain anonymous agreed that his country would benefit from friendlier relations with Azerbaijan, saying, "Turkmenistan cannot attract foreign investors to work in the Caspian sector which it believes to be its own, because any investor wishing to work in Turkmenistan... is above all interested in operating with the support of Azerbaijan's infrastructure."

By Rauf ORUJEV and the IWPR team. No.296, July 21

Azerbaijan embraces northern Cyprus

Baku, July 2005

Baku's overtures towards an unrecognised territory cause controversy.

The first commercial passenger aircraft flew from Baku to northern Cyprus on July 27, strengthening Azerbaijan's ties with the internationally unrecognised territory.

It comes at time when the Caucasian state is having problems with its own territorial integrity.

On June 29, Azerbaijani president Ilham Aliyev said after receiving Turkish prime minister Recep Tayip Erdogan that the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus ought to be allowed more contact with the rest of the world and that Baku was sympathetic to that goal.

"Northern Cyprus should escape from its international isolation and we are ready to help it with this," said Aliyev. "So Azerbaijani companies can collaborate with their colleagues in northern Cyprus and we also plan to open a direct charter flight."

Immediately after this, two airlines, the Azerbaijani company Imair and the Turkish company Improtex announced that regular flights would begin between Azerbaijan and northern Cyprus.

"On Sundays we will begin to make passenger flights to Ercan airport.. not far from....Lefkosa [known internationally as Nicosia]," said Alexander Guliev, director of Improtex Travel.

"The opening of air travel by our company to northern Cyprus has nothing to do with politics and is explained by the attractions of a new region for tourists from Azerbaijan and the lack of a visa regime."

After years of inter-communal violence, Cyprus was divided into two parts in 1974 after a coup d'etat sponsored by the then military regime in Greece triggered an invasion by Turkish forces, who occupied the northern third of the island. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was established in 1983 but has only ever been recognised by Turkey, while the rest of the world continues to regard the Republic of Cyprus in the south as the only legitimate government on the island.

The latest attempt at reunification failed in 2004 after a UN-sponsored plan was approved in a referendum by Turkish voters but rejected by Greeks. As a result, the southern Republic of Cyprus became a member of the European Union on its own.

Azerbaijan, with its traditionally strong links to Turkey, has also developed ties with Turkish Cyprus. At the end of July, the Union of Businessman of Azerbaijan and Turkey organised a trip by businessmen to Cyprus. And a parliamentary delegation recently visited northern part of the island with the aim, according to deputy Hadi Recebli, of "supporting the Turkish Cypriots".

Mustafa Evran, head of Turkish Cyprus' Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan, told journalists that eight Azerbaijani companies are now working in northern Cyprus.

Turkish prime minister Erdogan said that Azerbaijan was close to recognising the sovereignty of northern Cyprus, saying, "I hope that Azerbaijan's steps in this direction will continue."

However, although the issue of recognising northern Cyprus has been on the agenda of the Azerbaijani parliament several times, it has not been debated because of sensitivity over the issue of Nagorno Karabakh, the unrecognised Armenian-controlled republic that exists on what is the internationally recognised territory of Azerbaijan.

Mehmet Ali Talat, who is now president of northern Cyprus, told the Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet* that the Greek Cypriot community had threatened to open a direct flight to Nagorno Karabakh, dismissing this as an empty gesture.

The Azerbaijani opposition is accusing the government of using the Cyprus question as a means of winning political dividends ahead of the forthcoming parliamentary elections, scheduled for November 6.

Elkhan Mekhdiv, a political analyst and member of the Musavat political party, noted, "It's being done now because the world is ready for this and the USA and European Union realise the necessity of the northern part of the island emerging from isolation. Aliiev also wants to receive the support of Ankara in the forthcoming parliamentary elections."

Vafa Guluzade, a former presidential aide to Aliiev's late father, Heidar Aliiev, supported the current head of state. "There is a power struggle in Azerbaijan and Aliiev is using this issue in the struggle," he told IWPR. "But on the whole these steps should be supported. I even think that we must recognise northern Cyprus as a state. Ilham Aliiev ought to make this historic step and we should not be afraid of Greece."

Rasim Musabekov, an independent analyst, also advised his government not to hold back on northern Cyprus.

"As for the Greeks repeating these steps towards Karabakh - they are doing it already," said Musabekov. "Today the US government is giving financial help to the Karabakhi separatists, parliamentary deputies from France, Russia and Great Britain are flying there, big companies are investing there. So we should not be afraid of what has already been done."

Armenpress news agency reported on July 21 that Arman Melikian, foreign minister of the unrecognised republic of Nagorno Karabakh, welcomed Greek Cypriot proposals to open a direct flights connection between Nicosia and Karabakh in response to the Baku-Ercan flight.

Tahir Tagizade, spokesman for the Azerbaijani foreign ministry, sought to play down controversy around the issue, insisting Baku also had good relations with the Greek Cypriots.

"The population of northern Cyprus suffers from economic isolation," said Tagizade. "Azerbaijan hopes that the Turkish community of Cyprus, which supported the plan of the general secretary of the UN Kofi Annan, will benefit from an even-handed attitude by European states. And Azerbaijan is ready to give equal help to both the Turkish and Greek communities of Cyprus."

By Rufat ABBASOV. CRS No.297, July 28

Spy row shakes Azerbaijan

Baku, August 2005

Arrest of opposition activist on spying charge heats pre-election passions in Baku.

An Azerbaijani opposition youth leader has been accused of collaborating with the Armenian secret services, in what his supporters say is an attempt to intimidate the opposition ahead of November's parliamentary elections.

On August 3, Ruslan Bashirli, leader of the youth movement Yeni Fikir (New Thought), which is affiliated with the opposition Popular Front of Azerbaijan party, was charged with "violent seizure of power" for allegedly receiving the sum of 2,000 US dollars from an Armenian in Tbilisi to fund revolutionary activities. If found guilty, he could face life imprisonment.

The prosecutor's office says that on July 28-29, Bashirli met three men - two of whom have recognisably Armenian names - who represented what it calls "democratic forces in Georgia". All three men, prosecutors allege, were working for the Armenian secret service. And Bashirli went to the meeting in Tbilisi "on the orders of the leader of the opposition Popular Front of Azerbaijan Party Ali Kerimli".

Bashirli, they said, was working on the instructions of the United States' National Democratic Institute to foment revolution in Azerbaijan. His contacts in Tbilisi offered to help destabilise the ceasefire line between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces around Nagorny Karabakh, and to provide him with compromising material on the Azerbaijani president's family.

A videotape, apparently taken by a hidden camera and showing Bashirli receiving money from his dinner partners, has been shown on all of Azerbaijan's television channels.

"The law enforcement agencies had information earlier that these forces were collaborating with the secret services of Armenia," Azerbaijan's prosecutor general Zakir Garalov told Lider television. "Now the Azerbaijani public has seen the true face of the opposition and is fully convinced that in order to take power, it is prepared to collaborate with anyone - including the secret services of Armenia, which has occupied 20 per cent of the lands of our republic."

Bashirli's lawyer Elchin Gambarov says that his client vehemently denies all the charges, that he met Georgians, not Armenians in Tbilisi, and that the alleged film is a mock-up.

Gambarov said he had visited Bashirli in detention on August 8, and his client had told him that investigators were trying to make him give evidence against the Popular Front leadership.

"They promised to free Bashirli in 24 hours if he confessed to having taken orders from Ali

Kerimli," said the lawyer. "This is a politically motivated arrest and Bashirli is a political prisoner."

"Ruslan has been called an enemy of the people without trial or investigation - this dirty campaign is reminiscent of 1937."

Bashirli's family home has been pelted with stones and his mother taken to hospital with heart problems. Popular Front headquarters in Baku was also repeatedly besieged by pro-government supporters throwing eggs, stones and bottles.

Kerimli has said the arrest of Bashirli is part of a campaign by the government to blacken the reputation of himself and his party.

"The Yeni Fikir organisation is not legally linked to the Popular Front of Azerbaijan; it is one of several non-government organisations which is supporting our party in the parliamentary elections," Kerimli told IWPR in an interview. "This organisation has close relations with liberal youth groups in Europe and Bashirli participated in a conference in Tbilisi on the invitation of a Georgian NGO, Democracy Without Borders."

Kerimli said the affair was "a pre-planned operation by the Azerbaijani secret services to discredit the opposition".

He added that he had information that the authorities were planning to provoke an outbreak of violence by encouraging their supporters to attack his party headquarters.

The November elections are being keenly watched both inside and outside Azerbaijan. They will be the first test of the popular mood in the country since the controversial elections of October 2003, when Ilham Aliyev was declared the winner over opposition leader Isa Gambar.

Since then, the peaceful revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan have encouraged youth movements and opposition parties to mobilise and seek outside support.

Said Nuriev, deputy leader of Yeni Fikir, said the authorities in Azerbaijan "fear there will be a surge in activity by young people ahead of the parliamentary elections, and they are worried that the Ukrainian and Georgian events could be repeated in Azerbaijan. So they want to discredit and destroy us, but they won't succeed in doing that."

The Baku office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe has condemned the way in which the authorities detained Bashirli. On August 9, Maurizio Pavesi, head of the office, said, "It is unacceptable when groups of people want to impose their own justice." He pointed out that Bashirli was still under investigation and had not yet been found guilty of anything.

In Armenia, the authorities have strongly denied trying to offer covert support to the Azerbaijani opposition.

"Azerbaijan shouldn't try to solve its internal political problems by using methods that were used in the USSR in the Twenties and Thirties and have long been forgotten," said Gorik Hakobian, director of Armenia's National Security Service.

Artashes Geghamian, an Armenian opposition leader, believes the story is far-fetched because his country does not have the resources for foreign espionage. "The National Security Service of Armenia is at best capable of tapping the phone lines of Armenian opposition activists and engaging in other intrigues. I don't think it's capable of recruiting a real spy or attracting serious people to work for Armenia."

By Rufat ABBASOV and Gulnaz GULIEVA. CRS No.299, August 10

Chechnya: The great migration

Nazran, Grozny, August 2005

Tens of thousands of Chechens are seeking a new life in Europe.

For five of the last six years, 49-year-old Zara has been sweeping the railway station platform in Nazran, Ingushetia. She would rather not be there.

With her 21-year-old son, Muslim, a computer programmer, Zara came to Nazran in 1999 as a refugee from the second conflict in Chechnya. In 2003 they left Ingushetia and spent a year in Poland, before being deported back to Russia after they crossed illegally into Germany.

"We had already got to Germany," said Zara. "We crossed the frontier by fording a river. But we weren't met by our German guide, he just deceived us. We spent three days in a German jail and then we were deported to Russia."

Zara and her son are two of tens of thousands of Chechens who have sought to build a new life abroad since war first came to Chechnya in 1994. Chechens now make up one of the most mobile ethnic groups in Europe. And being deported once doesn't deter people like Zara and Muslim from trying to emigrate again.

"Now we are waiting for our passports to expire in two years' time and we want to go abroad again," said Zara. She said she would like to try to go to Norway next time, "I saw the cassette of a Chechen wedding from there, it looked like a good life to me."

She sees no chance of a future in Chechnya. Zara went back to her job as a cleaner in Ingushetia. Muslim had abandoned his studies in Grozny University to go to Poland and did not resume them on his return, finding work in a private firm. She thinks her son could earn much better money in Europe.

Her biggest regret is that Muslim did not pretend to be a rebel fighter when questioned. "That would have made it easier to get political asylum," she said.

The latest figures suggest that around 70,000 people from Chechnya have applied for political asylum in Europe in the last few years. Only a few of them have had their asylum requests granted.

Many more wish to join them. "What is there for me?" said Aslambek Isayev, a 35-year-old father of three from Grozny. "I would go to France or Germany, not for my own sake but for my children's future. They can get an education there and if they want to they can return home."

"Xenophobia in Russian society towards Chechens and also the lack of security guarantees and financial problems in Chechnya are basically forcing many of them to leave for Europe," said political analyst Idris Amayev.

Those who wish to leave face two main problems: getting a foreign passport and obtaining a visa.

The issuing of foreign passports was halted in 1999 at the beginning of the second Chechen conflict and still only Chechens officially registered outside Chechnya can obtain them. The only exception is for top officials and those performing the Haj to Mecca. To buy a passport on the black market can cost as much as 500 dollars.

Amayev says that the Russian authorities are deliberately not giving Chechens passports out of fear of causing an even bigger tide of emigration. "If Chechens began to ask for asylum in other countries in still greater numbers then it would be glaring proof that everything is not so wonderful in Chechnya," he said.

To get a European visa, Chechens also face far more stringent checks and interviews than their ethnic Russian compatriots. A high proportion are turned down - including a whole Chechen wrestling team who wanted to travel to Sweden earlier this year.

If refused a visa, many get in touch with agents and traffickers who can charge up to 600 dollars to smuggle them into European Union countries, generally via Ukraine. A significant number of these Chechens then ask for political asylum when they arrive.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles, or ECRE, an umbrella organisation of 78 European agencies that assist refugees, calls the situation Chechens fall into a "lottery".

According to figures compiled by the US-based non-governmental organisation Chechnya Advocacy Network, figures vary widely on who gets the right to remain in the EU - from 76 per cent of those who apply in Austria to none at all in Slovakia.

ECRE recommends that European governments do not forcibly return Chechens to Chechnya as it remains unsafe for all its citizens.

"It is too dangerous in Chechnya and dangerous in Ingushetia as well," said Claire Rimmer, Eastern Europe project office for ECRE.

In other parts of Russia, Rimmer said, it was hard for Chechens to register their residence and live legally, which, as a consequence, exposed them to constant discrimination.

Under the Dublin Convention, refugees can be removed to the starting point of their European journey, and this posed particular problems for Chechens sent back to Greece or Slovakia, Rimmer said, where there was a high risk that they would be deported.

Robert Skidelsky, the British peer and professor, said that Chechens would continue to receive very favourable consideration in many European countries. "Europe does not believe that Chechnya ought to be independent but it does believe that Russia ought to solve this problem sensibly," he said. "And until Russia does that, the issue of political asylum will remain."

The reception of Chechen refugees is further complicated by a large number of North Caucasian fraudsters who have sought to pass themselves off as ethnic Chechens in order to gain political asylum. These include Ingush, Dagestanis, Ossetians and even Russians and Ukrainians.

Leila, who works for the French migration service, described how a group of ethnic Kumyks from Dagestan had tried to cheat her. "I asked them to say something in Chechen and they spoke in their native Kumyk, hoping I wouldn't understand," she said. "But by then I already knew about ten Chechen words and could judge their pronunciation."

"And I also have perfect knowledge of the geography of Achkhoy-Martan region, as my speciality is work with refugees from this area of Chechnya," Leila said with a laugh.

By Timur ALIEV. CRS No.300, August 18

Special report: Beslan - the search for the truth goes on

Beslan, August 2005

Locals have no faith in Moscow's attempts to find out how the tragedy unfolded.

As the first anniversary of the Beslan tragedy approaches, the people of the town say they have lost confidence in the official investigation into the mass killing in School No. 1 in September last year.

Over a thousand hostages spent more than two days inside the besieged school, most of them packed in horrific conditions inside the gym. More than 330 people died, over half of them children, as the siege unravelled in bloodshed.

Since then five investigations - including the main federal enquiry by the prosecutor-general - have been initiated into the bloody events, but no results have been published to date.

But the version of events put publicly by a number of Russian officials leading the federal probe has differed sharply from what many locals believe, and is causing open tension between the North Ossetian authorities and Moscow.

Taimuraz Mamsurov, himself from Beslan and the new head of North Ossetia since May, has expressed frustration with the main enquiry. "I am not satisfied with the course of the investigation," he said. "I want to be told who is guilty of what. I also want to know what I should do and if I can punish anyone for this."

In addition to the Russian prosecutor-general's criminal investigation into Beslan, there are two parliamentary enquiries, one by the federal parliament in Moscow and one by the North Ossetian parliament, and the people of Beslan have leading their own probe.

At the same time, there is an ongoing trial in the Supreme Court of North Ossetia of the one surviving hostage-taker, 21-year-old Chechen Nurpashi Kulayev.

The trial of Kulayev, now three months old, has unexpectedly thrown up the biggest challenge to the main investigation, as the accounts of former hostages and the frank testimony of Kulayev himself have provided much fresh new information on the siege.

An investigator with the prosecutor-general's office in the North Caucasus, who spoke to IWPR on condition of anonymity, said that the Kulayev trial was putting a big strain on the official version of events.

"But the testimonies which are being heard in court won't be reflected in the materials of the 'main case' [the prosecutor-general's investigation], because they are materials from a separate case," said the official.

In a series of public pronouncements over the past 11 months, officials close to the federal enquiry have been advancing one version of what happened.

This is that on September 1, 32 gunmen left the territory of Ingushetia, travelled without being stopped in a single GAZ-66 truck carrying all their weapons and explosives with them and seized School No. 1 and hundreds of pupils, parents and teachers.

On the third day of the siege, this version contends, an explosion happened inside the school because of a short circuit, two more explosions followed in which most of the hostages died and then an unplanned storming operation to free the hostages ended the whole drama. At the end of the third day, all but one of the hostage-takers had been killed.

The then head of the FSB intelligence service in North Ossetia Valery Andreyev called the operation "successful".

Russia's prosecutor-general, Vladimir Kolesnikov, told a meeting of Beslan residents that his investigation would rely only on proven facts and dismissed their attempts to put different versions to him.

Beslan people are challenging almost all aspects of the official version of the siege, starting with the true number of attackers. Many former hostages say that there were no fewer than 50 militants in the school and that they believe the weapons were brought in earlier. A former special forces soldier from the Alfa brigade told a wake shortly after the end of the siege, "When we went into the school there was a fighter at every door and window.... there were around 70 of them."

Most official statements on the siege have blamed "international terrorism" or "Chechen separatism". However, many Beslan residents believe that there were many more militants of Ingush nationality in the school than has been confirmed. So far, only 22 of the hostage-takers have been named.

If this turns out to be true, it could be politically explosive, as Ingushetia and North Ossetia fought a conflict over the disputed Prigorodny Region in 1992 that resulted in several hundred deaths and inter-ethnic relations are still tense.

"The identification of the terrorists has been deliberately held up because the group had many different nationalities in it," asserted Mairbek Tuayev, who heads the Beslan public commission, the local residents' enquiry.

At his trial, Kulayev, an ethnic Chechen, said the hostage-takers consisted of two groups, one from Chechnya and one from Ingushetia. Kulayev, who was recruited in Ingushetia, said he knew only four other Chechens beside himself and his brother in the group of militants.

Former hostages are also contradicting the official version of events that none of the hostage-takers escaped.

Kazbek Misikov said that a very tall militant had disappeared on September 2. "I am 1.90 metres tall and he was taller than me," said Misikov. "He was not among the dead fighters." Others talk of a small man with a scar who disappeared from the school.

Kulayev also told his trial that he believed three of his comrades had survived.

Another former hostage, Larisa Tamayeva, said she had seen three men with black sacks over their head being taken away alive at the end of the siege by special forces.

Several people believe that the Ossetian hostage-taker Vladimir Khodov survived the siege. IWPR has spoken to a guard of former Ossetian president Alexander Dzasokhov and a member of the parliamentary enquiry, both of whom said that Khodov was taken alive.

"There were three men in the FSB basement," said the source in the parliamentary commission. "They were Kulayev, Khodov and a Beslan resident who was detained by mistake." He said he believed Khodov had died in custody.

There are still important unanswered questions about how the siege ended and whether

many of the hostages may actually have died at the hands of those storming the school, rather than the extremists.

Several former hostages said they thought that the fighter whose foot was on the explosives detonator was hit by a shot that came from outside and that he fell over and triggered the explosion. One ex-hostage told the Kulayev trial that a minute before the explosion she was wounded in the arm by a shot from outside the hall where the hostages were.

Kulayev said at his trial that as soon as the first explosion went off, the leader of the militant group known as Polkovnik (or Colonel), identified by investigators as Ruslan Khuchbarov, rushed into the hall and shouted out, "Snipers have taken out our man."

An investigator in the prosecutor-general's office in the North Caucasus said that no ballistic investigation had been carried out into the weaponry in the school and they were not allowed to take possession of the special forces' weapons for the enquiry, even though this was allowed by law.

"No weapons of either the special forces or the [local North Ossetian] volunteer militias who took part in the storm operation were confiscated, there was no expert study of the bullets taken from the bodies of the dead. [So] it is impossible to prove whether the hostages died at the hands of volunteer militiamen, the military or the terrorists," said the investigator.

The Russian parliamentary commission, consisting of members of both houses of parliament, uncovered one controversial fact which the prosecutor-general's office later confirmed. This was that the fact that Shmel flamethrowers were used in the storming of the school.

Nikolai Shepel, Russia's deputy prosecutor-general, has conceded that they were employed but asserted that technical tests had proved they could not have set the building on fire.

Elbrus Tedtov, a Beslan parent who lost his son in the school and has been taking a leading role in investigating this aspect of the tragedy, said that Shepel had not backed up his assertion that the flamethrowers could not set fire to the roof and that the fact that the school and bodies were burnt to cinders suggested the opposite.

Tedtov has also questioned the official version of the quantity of weapons in the school. "According to Shepel there were 20 automatic weapons, five Kalashnikov machine guns, two anti-tank grenade-launchers and some other things that could fit in a GAZ-66.

"But we have the testimony of former hostages that they brought huge rolls of barbed wire and explosives in boxes and gas masks into the sports hall. That either proves that there were already weapons in the school or that the fighters came in more than one vehicle and that there were more than 32."

The growing split between the version of the tragedy in Moscow and that in North Ossetia will soon become more public.

The North Ossetian parliamentary commission, led by Stanislav Kesayev, has been talking far more closely to the Beslan residents. In September, Kesayev's commission will deliver its first report to the local parliament. However, he stresses it will contain questions rather than answers.

Shepel has dismissed Kesayev's commission, saying it was "created illegally" and calling its activities "shameless and not those of good citizens".

As the first anniversary of the Beslan tragedy approaches, tensions are high and there is anxiety about new attacks in North Ossetia. Anger is also growing as relatives still yearn to know the true story of how their loved ones died.

"If they don't tell us the truth in the end, if they don't agree to accept obvious facts and take account of the testimony of witnesses, we will demand an international investigation," said Beslan mother Susanna Dudieva.

By Madina SAGEYEVA. CRS No. 300, August 18

Georgian journalists protest government meddling

Tbilisi, August 2005

Saakashvili's commitment to a free press is questioned in the wake of controversial media closures.

A row has broken out between the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili and Georgia's independent media, with journalists complaining that critical voices are being squeezed out under a state campaign to control the flow of information.

Critics cite the recent cancellation of the popular television show Archevanis Zgvarze (On the Verge of Choice), which had long criticised government policy, as the latest example of the press crackdown.

Among other topics, the show cast doubt on the official version of prime minister Zurab Zhvania's accidental death by gas poisoning, and questioned the investigation process.

The government has denied any connection with Archevanis Zgvarze's demise, but observers point out that a close ally of Saakashvili, parliamentarian Giga Bokeria, appeared on the show before it was cancelled by independent Mze TV. He used his appearance to lambaste the show as unprofessional and sensationalist.

Bokeria ridiculed the show's presenter, Irakli Imnaishvili, who had compared a recent clash between police and about 100 supporters of a group of wrestlers accused of extortion with the bloody suppression of Georgian pro-independence demonstrators by Soviet troops in 1989, during which 19 people died.

The wrestlers' supporters - among them anti-Saakashvili campaigners from opposition parties - were injured when security troops broke up a rally in July, triggered when the wrestlers were ordered into three months pre-trial detention.

Saakashvili's critics argue that the government did not need to give a formal order to shut down critical voices like Archevanis Zgvarze, because the often clannish ties between the Georgian media and the political world guarantees the latter has influence over the former.

Parliamentarians David Bezhuashvili and Vano Chkhartishvili are co-founders of Mze TV. Bezhuashvili's brother is Georgian National Security Council secretary Gela Bezhuashvili, while Chkhartishvili is the head of the pro-government parliamentary faction and was economics minister under ex-President Eduard Shevardnadze.

Imnaishvili, Archevanis Zgvarze's former host, said pressure from the authorities on journalists is subtle, but definitely exists.

"No ministers or prosecutors phoned me, but the channel policy changes immediately when some certain unpleasant topic becomes real for them. We witness 'twisting of the hands by telephone'," he said.

Other Georgian journalists say they have faced more direct intimidation with some being told they will not be given access to government officials, because they are not deemed loyal enough.

Koba Liklikadze, a defence affairs reporter for the Georgian service of United States-funded Radio Liberty, was denied an interview this week with a defence ministry official.

"I was told by the ministry press secretary, Nana Intskerveli, that I was considered a 'problematic journalist' and was no longer welcome," Liklikadze told IWPR.

A newspaper in the eastern Kakheti region, Spektr, said copies of its last print run had disappeared from stores after it published a series of articles critical of the local government. The Kakheti administration denied any connection with the incident.

Geli Mtvilishvili, one of Spektr's reporters, also said unknown assailants had later thrown a grenade into his yard.

In another case, Rezo Okruashvili, the editor of Gori's main newspaper, was charged with allegedly distributing narcotics. Okruashvili believes the charges, which were later dropped, were retaliation for his critical coverage of the local authorities.

"The very same processes that Russian television companies underwent are developing in Georgian TV companies," Tamar Chikovani, head of Radio Liberty's Tbilisi bureau, told IWPR.

"The print media has been more or less free, but lately state officials have been unable to hide their irritation because of its activity, and they will increase the pressure. In short, everything is leading to the establishment of [the] so called 'managed democracy' that we witnessed in Russia", Chikovani said.

Bokeria, however, denied that the government had taken any steps to censor or control the media, though he accused some outlets of being irresponsible.

"We've dropped all restrictions on the media. All legislative regulations that oppressed media for years have been abolished.

"But the media owners and most journalists do not comprehend that great freedom means great responsibilities. You may be unethical, you may be even ignorant but it does not relieve you from responsibility. Of course, I mean moral responsibility first of all," said Bokeria.

Bokeria was the founder and the public face of the Liberty Institute - a leading non-government group which helped mastermind the 2003 "Rose Revolution" that brought Saakashvili to power. There have recently been a series of closures of both newspapers and television stations in Georgia, few of which have been explained by their owners.

Two television channels, Channel 9 and Iberia, have already stopped broadcasting - though

their owners did not cite government pressure. Channel 9's owner gave no reason for shutting down in April, while Iberia said it was closing due to financial problems.

The newspapers Dilis Gazeti and Mtavari Gazeti also stopped printing. However, the Georgian print media sector is almost completely unprofitable and requires deep-pocketed sponsors to keep operating.

In light of recent events, some observers believe media owners are now afraid of falling foul of the authorities for fear their financial affairs will be investigated, so they actively practice self-censorship.

They say many regional media outlets have turned loyal to the government or passed into the hands of people close to the Saakashvili leadership.

At Rustavi-2, the TV outlet that worked as a cheerleader for Saakashvili's "National Movement" during the Rose Revolution, businessman Kibar Khalvashi now controls 90 per cent of the station. Khalvashi has close ties to the powerful defence minister Irakli Okruashvili, who was his lawyer for years.

However, some critical voices remain. TV channel Imedi [Hope] - owned by tycoon Badri Patarkatsishvili, a former close confidant of exiled Russian billionaire Boris Berezovsky - is staunchly critical of Saakashvili's government in its news programming.

A group calling itself the Georgian International Media Club, backed by more than 70 media representatives, has also formed. It has written to Georgian officials and to foreign embassies in Tbilisi denouncing the government's hostile attitude to the media.

According to the media club's head, Magda Popiashvili, "When the state authority that came to power with much help from the media oppresses it by every means possible, and tries to pass this oppression off as merely a reaction to unethical and unprofessional media behaviour, it becomes clear that it regards as superfluous the existence of independent media which uncover all the errors, suspicious machinations and criminal activities committed by officials."

By Revaz SAKEVARISHVILI. CRS No. 301, August 25, 2005

New Georgian leader faces up to challenges

Tbilisi, January 2004

President-elect Saakashvili begins to confront Georgia's economic collapse and endemic corruption.

After his resounding victory in last week's presidential election, Georgia's new leader Mikael Saakashvili faces both enormous expectations and immense challenges.

"My presidency will be government by the Georgian people," Saakashvili said shortly after his victory was confirmed. "The president of Georgia will be the friend of every family in the country. I will never leave anyone in trouble and I will never allow a single citizen to be humiliated."

Saakashvili won with more than 97 per cent of the vote. But this massive vote of confidence has a reverse side. Experts agree that ordinary Georgians want to see a radical change for the better in their lives and now they are pinning their hopes directly on the man whom they call simply "Misha".

Two domestic issues - cracking down on corruption and turning round the failing economy - are top on the president's immediate agenda, and ordinary people appear to believe they are the most critical problems facing Georgia:

The economy is in a disastrous state. The government has debts of 1.7 billion US dollars and the International Monetary Fund, IMF, suspended its credit programme last year. Western lending agencies have made positive noises about resuming aid to Georgia and an IMF delegation is due to come to Tbilisi in February to discuss restoring the programme.

But Niko Orvelashvili, director of Tbilisi's Institute of Economic Development, said he was worried that a number of leading businessmen who advised the former government and gave it financial support are still exerting influence. He doubts so far that Saakashvili's economic team, led by finance minister Zurab Nogaideli, is up to the task.

"What worries me is the new administration's attitude to economic problems," Orvelashvili said. "A man who simply lacks an economic way of thinking, and I mean the new finance minister Nogaideli, cannot be the key member of the economic team."

Orvelashvili warned, "I have had conversations with several representatives of different donor agencies and they all have the same position, as if they'd agreed among themselves: if the first tranches are spent intelligently and honestly, the aid will continue; if not, the credit of trust will be lost very quickly."

The president won immense popularity last year chiefly for his bold promises to attack

high-level corruption in Georgia. Even before the election, a number of prominent figures, including the head of Georgian railways, the former energy minister and the head of the country's football federation have had criminal charges laid against them.

Saakashvili told journalists at the end of December that the interim government had started tackling the problem, by pursuing corrupt officials who had dubious foreign bank accounts.

"We have been in touch with the governments of at least seven countries with requests to find and freeze their accounts and we've had a good response," Saakashvili said, promising that he would use "legal mechanisms" to have the money returned to Georgia.

"It is not only a question of social justice and filling up the state treasury. It is a kind of security for future presidents because in future these men would not only use this money to finance their television and radio stations and newspapers, which is normal, but would finance subversive activities, such as terrorist acts. That's why we have to get rid of this septic tooth."

Levan Ramishvili, one of the heads of the influential non-government Liberty Institute, welcomes this initiative as entirely legal and says it is a good way of swelling the budget to pay pensions and salaries.

"Saakashvili's coming to power stemmed from the inability of the former leadership of Georgia headed by Shevardnadze to solve these problems," Ramishvili said. "Shevardnadze frequently promised voters that his hand will not tremble when it comes to fighting corruption. It was this desire in society to end the syndrome of impunity that led to the change of regime in Georgia."

So far, Georgians report encouraging signs from both the traffic police and the tax authorities, who are not demanding bribes as much as they used to.

But Ramishvili cautioned that the anti-corruption drive would only work if it was carried out consistently. "Even though criminal charges have been opened against several former officials, I am not inclined to look at that optimistically," he said.

"First of all there has to be radical reform, not just cosmetic reform, in the law-enforcement agencies, especially in the prosecutor's office. We have to learn from the experience of countries like the United States, Italy and Hong Kong in fighting organised crime, and then use all our powers to arrest people."

One key problem remains which is how the new leader will deal with former president Shevardnadze and his family and entourage. Shevardnadze has repeatedly said that he intends to stay in Georgia. "I have spent all my life in Georgia, apart from a few years in Moscow in a top job, and I want to stay here," he told journalists after he resigned in November.

However, many experts expect him to leave the country. If the anti-corruption drive begins to touch people close to the former president, "you can't call it repression, but it won't be easy for him," said Ramishvili.

How far will the crackdown go? "Everything is possible, if you take into account that politics cannot be absolutely isolated from economics or law and because very few of those who have been in politics for the last ten years are completely pure," commented David Darchiashvili of Tbilisi's Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development.

"But you can't put everyone in jail, so some people will be forgiven some things. And those who most helped the victory of the revolution will be forgiven the most."

By Ketil BOCHORISHVILI. CRS No. 213, January 08

Azeri veterans recall military fiasco

Baku, February 2004

The most terrible episode of the Nagorny Karabakh war recalled, 10 years on.

The bloodiest military operation of all the recent wars in the Caucasus occurred ten years ago this month, when thousands of young soldiers died in the mountains west of Nagorny Karabakh. But the Kelbajar operation was also little reported on at the time and is little remembered.

Even today, all information on the terrible loss of life is classified information in Azerbaijan. Unofficial sources say the February 1994 battles took the lives of about 4,000 Azerbaijanis and 2,000 Armenians - or nearly one third of all the victims that perished in the 1991-4 conflict.

Teyar Mukhtarov, aged 30, was born in Kelbajar province, a mountainous area sandwiched between Armenia and Nagorny Karabakh. Nowadays, he lives in a warehouse, still a refugee. Ten years ago, he took part in the ill-fated operation to recapture his home region and remains haunted by the memories of it. Many of his comrades did not die from bullets or shells, he stresses, but from the bitter cold in the mountains.

Mukhtarov took part in a slow and painful retreat over the mountains. "We finally left Kelbajar completely on March 6-7," he said. "I still can't forget the frozen bodies of my comrades that we had to leave behind in the mountains without being able to bury them."

Kelbajar was initially captured by Armenian forces during the Karabakh war in April of 1993, the year that saw Azerbaijan lose one region after another.

By October that year, former Soviet-era leader Heidar Aliyev had returned to power in a country overwhelmed by disasters. Not long after his election, Aliyev decided to become the "saviour of the nation" in every sense and to win back the lost territories.

To do this, he quickly and controversially recruited an army of young people, many of whom were simply press-ganged into action on the streets of Azerbaijani cities.

On December 15, 1993, the Azerbaijani army launched a large-scale attack against the Armenians along the whole front. In early January, on the northern sector of the front Azerbaijani forces crossed the Murovdag mountain range over the Omar Pass and entered the Kelbajar district. It was a risky plan, not supported by all the military commanders.

Teyar Mukhtarov was one of the new raw recruits. "I was 20 years old then and a first-year student at the Construction Institute," he said. "Like many of my peers, I got caught during a 'round-up' and sent to the front." On New Year's Eve, Mukhtarov's regiment launched an attack over the mountains and struck deep into Kelbajar district.

However, by the end of January, the Armenians had regrouped and began a counter-attack.

The Azerbaijanis were far from their supply lines across the mountains. Then the weather took a turn for the worse. Thousands of Azerbaijanis were trapped and mowed down by Grad multiple-missile launchers.

Sergeant Vagif Abbasov, who was just 19 at the time, recalled, "On February 12, really heavy snow began to fall. The next day we were ordered to retreat to northern positions on the slopes of the Murovdag mountains. On February 18-20, the enemy encircled two of our brigades. We tried to get through to them, but we couldn't because of the heavy snow. Many soldiers were killed by the fire from Grads and buried under the avalanches."

"Every day someone got killed in our company," said Mukhtarov. "I was heavily wounded in the leg in action on February 27 near the village of Bagirli. Already then rumours were circulating among our soldiers that we had been abandoned and they wouldn't supply us with food and ammunition any more."

Leila Yunus, who was Azerbaijan's deputy defence minister in 1992-3, blames the commanders for making a bad situation even worse.

"Instead of suspending the operation due to worsening weather conditions, Nadjmeddin Sadygov, head of the general staff, gave the order to attack the enemy's mountain positions," he said. "It was the stupidest decision a military officer could ever take. When the Armenians found out, they simply began to shoot at the snow masses on the tops of the mountains and created avalanches. Even well-trained mountaineers never climb the peaks in weather like that. As a result we lost over 4,000 soldiers and many of them are still considered missing."

Even ten years on, the issue of Kelbajar and the culpability of former president Aliiev is highly sensitive. Ramiz Melikov, head of the press office in Azerbaijan's defence ministry, declined to give any precise information on the episode. He refused to reveal the number of the dead, saying it was a military secret.

Eldar Namazov, who then headed the secretariat in President Aliiev's administration, blamed former prime minister Suret Husseinov - long since disgraced and in prison - for the fiasco.

"The operation was thoroughly planned, and it started very successfully for us," Namazov said. "But later on, some serious mistakes were made, especially regarding provision for the forward units, and as a result we lost a lot of soldiers. You have to bear in mind, the army was then effectively under command of Prime Minister Suret Husseinov, and there were serious disagreements among political leaders of the country. Many orders were given without prior coordination with the Commander-in-Chief. And the result was tragic."

Azad Isazade, who worked as press office for the defence ministry in the Karabakh war, disagreed with this verdict.

"Such a large-scale operation could have been carried out only on the orders of Commander-in-Chief Aliiev," he said. "I would compare the winter campaign of 1993-1994 to the Soviet technique of cotton harvesting. Just as they used to recruit anyone just to fulfil the 'plan', now, too, many completely unprepared young lads were physically dragged out of city buses, rounded up in the streets of Baku and thrown into battle. They had no idea how to handle a gun."

Another veteran Zaur Mamedov from Baku recalled, "The incompetence of the commanders, their squabbles and gossip all had a bad and demoralising effect on us, soldiers. We were very poorly equipped with arms and ammunition and you could forget about repairing anything. They sent us a lot of useless young guys, who were caught by the police on metro trains and sent off to certain death in Karabakh. I remember one new kid who tried to load 5.45 mm

bullets into a 7.62 mm submachine gun. He was killed in the very first battle by a sniper's bullet because of his own mistake."

Azad Isazade also blames the Russians for the disaster. "We captured several officers who were Armenians but were serving in the Russian Seventh Army," he said. "They were transporting Russian military equipment into Kelbajar."

The scale of losses during the Kelbajar operation helped pave the way for the cease-fire agreement in May 1994. But, unlike other less bloody episodes of the conflict, it is little remembered. Even the veterans do not meet up, said Teyar Mukhtarov, to talk about it. "Only the victors have meetings like that," he said.

By Idrak ABBASOV and Jasur MAMEDOV. CRS No.219, February 21



An amateur picture made at the beginning of the war in Karabakh. It is not clear who has captured whom

Armenian president cracks down

Yerevan, April 2004

Dozens are hurt or arrested in the centre of Yerevan as the Armenian opposition calls for the resignation of President Kocharian.

Armenian president Robert Kocharian moved to suppress a campaign to remove him from office this week by ordering the brutal break-up of an opposition demonstration.

Several people were wounded and many more were hurt in the early hours of April 13 when police dispersed the demonstrators in the centre of Yerevan with water cannons, batons and stun grenades.

President Kocharian, who has been fighting a concerted opposition campaign against him for the last three months, inspired by Georgia's "Rose Revolution" made it clear that he intends to hit back hard at his opponents. "The authorities have the resources to restrain political extremism in a legal way," he said on television after the demonstration was broken up.

The opposition, many of whose leaders briefly went into hiding, say they will continue protesting and have called another rally for the evening of April 16.

Several international figures, including US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher and Walter Schwimmer, general secretary of the Council of Europe, have expressed concern at the crackdown.

The opposition leaders, who failed to unseat Kocharian in disputed presidential elections last year, have been employing other tactics since the start of this year. They failed to get a draft law through parliament that would have made possible a referendum vote of no confidence in the president. In February, they began boycotting parliamentary sessions altogether.

On April 9, the first anniversary of Kocharian's inauguration for a second term, they convened a demonstration, attended - by various estimates - by between 10 and 25,000 people. The speakers and demonstrators all called for Kocharian to step down.

At the same time, two secretaries of two opposition groups in parliament, Viktor Dallakian of Justice and Aleksan Karapetian of National Unity, held talks with parliamentary speaker Artur Bagdasarian, demanding that the assembly debate a new draft law allowing for a no confidence referendum in the president. They set a deadline of April 12, when a three-day parliament session was due to begin, for the proposal to be accepted.

The governing coalition rejected the proposal as unconstitutional but issued a statement saying that it was ready "to sit down at the negotiating table to discuss any issues concerning the domestic political situation, including the issue of the legality of the proposal being put forward". The opposition said it would boycott the new parliamentary session.

The opposition went ahead with a demonstration on Freedom Square on the evening of April 12, in the face of a stern warning from the police that the event was unsanctioned and that they would "defend law and order, the rights and security of citizens".

Thousands of demonstrators began to march towards the presidential offices, but their way was blocked by heavy police units and barbed wire. Water cannon stood at the ready. The march was halted in Marshal Bagramian Avenue in front of the parliament building. The demonstrators stopped where they were and continued their protest, shouting the slogan "Kocharian, resign!"

Around 2AM, the police struck with force. More than two dozen people were injured, many ending up in hospital. Amongst those hurt were several Armenian and Russian journalists. Haik Gevorkian, a photographer with the opposition newspaper Haikakan Zhamanak, said the police began to beat him when he took pictures of them dispersing the crowd. Gevorkian's camera was smashed and he was hospitalised for his injuries.

The police said 115 people were arrested, of whom two thirds were released very quickly. The opposition said the number of those detained exceeded 250. No reliable figures are available on how many people are still in detention. Four opposition parliamentary deputies - Arshak Sadoyan, Aleksan Karapetian, Shavarsh Kocharian and Vardan Mkrtchian - were detained but later set free. The police also raided and searched the offices of the three main opposition parties.

A police statement said that officers themselves had been attacked first by demonstrators with Molotov cocktails and that they had had to use force to "ward off danger to the lives and health of policemen and other citizens". President Kocharian warned the opposition that "responsibility for what has happened lies in the first instance with forces that preach political extremism".

"Today the opposition has a chance to return to normal work," Kocharian said. "If this does not happen and the opposition takes a different path, then the authorities have the legal resources to ensure the safety of the people and to prevent any new outbreak of disorder."

The opposition, however, said it would continue its struggle. Stepan Demirchian, who lost the 2003 presidential election to Kocharian, called the police action "a plot by the authorities against its own people". Another veteran opposition leader Vazgen Manukian told IWPR, "Robert Kocharian is doomed. We will continue the fight to establish law in the country and we take responsibility for our all our actions."

Former prime minister Aram Sarkisian said, "We will continue our rallies and marches. As for the authorities, they have no tactics except using force and if they weaken in their use of force then the pyramid of power will collapse."

"Even if all the leaders of the opposition are arrested, then the April 16 rally will still go ahead. Our only demand at the rally is the resignation of Robert Kocharian."

Demirchian said that dialogue with the Kocharian administration was possible only if those responsible for the violence of April 12-13 were punished.

Leaders of the pro-presidential coalition in parliament said they were ready for dialogue with the opposition, but rejected the latter's claims to legitimacy.

"The people of Armenia are not interested in an imminent change of power," said Vahan Ovanesian of the Dashnak Party who is deputy speaker of parliament. "The people have not put this question on the agenda. Just a few thousand people, maybe more than 10,000 have taken part in rallies and events over these past few days. And that means that the people do not share the concerns of the opposition."

Many in Yerevan also point out that, in contrast to Georgia, the Armenian opposition has not picked up the kind of support that its Georgian counterparts used to carry out last November's "Rose Revolution".

"A 'Rose Revolution' is impossible in Armenia because we don't have such a weak governing regime and such a kind police force," said Harutium Khachatryan, a political analyst with the Noyan Tapan news agency.

Khachatryan said that the economic situation was better in Armenia than in Georgia, which also reduced the number of people ready to confront the government, "Many people are unhappy with Kocharian's policy but not many of them are ready to join the ranks of the demonstrators."

"A situation has developed in Armenia, when both the authorities and opposition are weak," commented political analyst Alexander Iskandarian of the Caucasus Media Institute. He said that the Kocharian administration was both nervous and aggressive and the opposition poorly organised and divided. That lessened the chance of Kocharian being removed from office.

By Rita KARAPETIAN. CRS No.227, April 15

HAKOP BERBERYAN



Confrontation at the President's administration building in Yerevan

South Ossetia, Tbilisi fight over icon

Tbilisi, Tskhinval, April 2004

A stolen medieval ivory triptych will be returned to Tbilisi, not the museum that used to exhibit it in South Ossetia.

A precious 11th century icon, stolen more than a decade ago and now in Switzerland, has been caught up in an ownership tussle between the government in Tbilisi and the breakaway authorities in South Ossetia.

The South Ossetian government is demanding the icon be returned to its former home, the Tskhinval State Museum. But after a Geneva judge ruled in favour of the Tbilisi authorities, a Georgian delegation will fly to Switzerland at the end of this month and take the icon to Georgia's main art museum.

"The result is that the international community is depriving peoples who have been termed 'unrecognised republics' by the will of fate of their rights, including the right to their own cultural treasures," said an outraged museum employee in South Ossetia.

The unique "Tskhinval triptych" is a three-panelled icon dating back to the 11th century made of ivory and depicting Christ the Saviour and the faces of saints. Unlike other similar triptychs exhibited around the world, it is in excellent condition and all three panels are undamaged. The icon was discovered in a small chapel in the village of Okoni in 1924 and was then kept in the Tskhinval State Museum. A special commission from Christie's has valued it at two million US dollars.

However, politics has overshadowed art history for the last three years as the governments in Tbilisi and Tskhinval have fought over the icon's ownership, with Georgia's security ministry coordinating Georgian policy.

The two sides fought a conflict in 1991, which is still unresolved and led to the de facto secession of South Ossetia from Georgia. As many as 2,000 people were killed and 100,000 displaced.

The icon disappeared from the museum during the fighting. Museum employee Sergei Chibirov blames the Georgian side for its theft. "In January 1991 the part of Tskhinval where the museum is located was occupied by the Georgian police," he told IWPR. "The triptych was then being exhibited in the most prominent place. When we were able to get back to the building a few days later we found that this, the most valuable exhibit, as well as several daggers in silver scabbards and ancient coins, had disappeared."

For their part the Georgian side accused "Ossetian fighters" of carrying out the theft.

At that time, when people were dying, villages were being burned and thousands of refu-

gees were on the move, the loss of a medieval icon moved few people apart from art historians. Within a few years, the triptych was more or less written off as lost.

Then in the summer of 2001 a man by the name of Zemlyanikov brought a triptych in to the Geneva offices of Christie's, saying that he had acquired it from a stranger in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia. Christie's called in Byzantine expert Krasimira Plackova to study the icon. "She confirmed that the object in question was the missing triptych from the Tskhinval Museum," related Inga Karaya, an adviser to South Ossetia's culture ministry. "Her clinching argument was that she herself had studied it in the Tskhinval museum several years before."

After protracted hearings in a Geneva court, judge Carol Barbel ruled that the icon should be sent back to the State Art Museum in Tbilisi. Her verdict said that "the icon should be returned to Georgia but it should not lead to any complication of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict". However, this is exactly what happened.

South Ossetia's foreign ministry called on the Swiss authorities "not to hand over the icon to Georgia, as there is no guarantee that it will be returned to its lawful owner, the State Museum of South Ossetia. Moreover this will not help the improvement of relations between Georgia and South Ossetia". However, the letter, as well as similar ones addressed to the UN and OSCE missions in Georgia, were not answered.

Merab Jioyev, foreign minister of South Ossetia, told IWPR, "The main argument in favour of handing the icon to the Georgian side is the assertion that conditions in the Tskhinval Museum are unsatisfactory to preserve this holy object. But we have to ask how did the judge Carol Barbel come to this conclusion? No one came to inspect the museum in Tskhinval. The judge used completely one-sided information provided by the Georgian authorities."

However, some museum experts, who preferred not to be quoted by name, told IWPR that conditions in the Tskhinval museum are extremely poor, following artillery damage during the war and an earthquake in 1992.

There are legitimate worries too about what kind of maintenance the triptych can be expected to have in the Tbilisi museum. The annual budget for all 120 Georgian museums under the control of the culture ministry is a mere 25,000 dollars. This is barely enough to cover the salaries of the staff and basic bills.

Kote Kavtaradze, director of the Georgian foreign ministry's internal cultural relations department, stoutly defended the decision of the Geneva court, saying it had followed "scrupulous research". "The treasure is national property and is being returned to its own country, to Georgia," he said.

Murat Jioyev countered that this argument set a dangerous precedent and that the Georgian authorities might start calling for other museum exhibits in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be sent to Tbilisi. "There has already been talk of this in Tbilisi," he said.

Several Swiss officials will follow the returning triptych to Tbilisi at the end of this month and a ceremony is planned to which the Georgian authorities say they will invite guests from South Ossetia. The invitation was greeted with sarcasm in Tskhinval, where the South Ossetian authorities say they will continue to battle for the return of the icon.

Whatever happens to the triptych, its fate is likely to be remembered as a strange sub-plot in the Georgian-Ossetian dispute, while bigger political issues are debated. "Let's suppose that the new authorities in Tbilisi decide to return the triptych to Tskhinvali," said conflict specialist and analyst Gia Anchabadze. "Of course it will be a step towards easing the situation but I don't think it will play a big role in resolving the conflict."

By Eter MAMULASHVILI and Elina BESTAYEVA. CRS No. 227, April 15

Armenian battle of the weak

Yerevan, April 2004

Armenia won't see a repetition of Georgia's "rose revolution" - the opposition is as ineffective as the government it faces.

This month's battle between the opposition and the governing coalition in Armenia has been compared to events last November in Georgia, which led to the downfall of President Eduard Shevardnadze.

It's understandable that parallels should be drawn with Georgia's "rose revolution": the two countries are neighbours, they share a similar post-Soviet legacy, and in both cases the opposition employed the same methods to rock the government boat - rallies, marches and demands for the president to step down.

Yet, despite many similarities with Georgia, the Armenian situation is actually very different.

What they have in common relates mainly to the nature of their ruling regimes. As in most post-Soviet societies, the leadership is determined by a kind of social compact between a variety of elite groups. In these poor countries lacking in democratic traditions, the elites - political, business (very often criminalised) and, in the case of Armenia, the military - have created a system of political-economic groupings.

The feuding between these groups replaces the more conventional politics seen in other countries.

Ordinary people play little part in Armenian politics, except during elections - but even then the authorities find ways of manipulating the vote. As a result, it becomes virtually impossible for power to shift outside the existing political establishment. This creates tensions which can only be relieved through external pressure on the authorities, in other words from the streets. Those groups which are not part of the system of power, or have been expelled from it, have no incentive to wait for the next round of elections.

So far, Georgia and Armenia look very similar. But the differences between them begin to be apparent when one looks at the very different outcomes of the protests.

The Shevardnadze regime was so weak that its police force would not have obeyed orders to break up the demonstrations. In Armenia, by contrast, the alliance of convenience between army generals, business barons and regional leaders was sufficiently strong for them to that feel their interests would be threatened if Robert Kocharian, re-elected as president a year ago, were to be overthrown.

Moreover, Armenia does not have a united opposition. One wing of the opposition is formally

headed by Stepan Demirchian, but he is such a weak politician that his movement really has several leaders.

Another wing is led by Artashes Gegamian, a former mayor of Yerevan and an accomplished orator who can impress a crowd, but has the reputation of being an opportunist.

The leaders of the other parties and groups have no presidential ambitions, but have not been able to unite with the more powerful opposition factions.

Armenia's divided opposition forces have very different ideas about how they would share out positions if they ever came to power. Lacking a single leader, they have also singly failed to demonstrate unity to the population at large. Basically their slogan has been, "Kocharian must go! And then let the people decide".

The first opposition rallies were staged in isolation from one another, and with a diversity of demands, all of which underlined the lack of an agreed programme. Opposition leaders therefore squandered their resources, opting instead for a blitzkrieg strategy of confrontation.

All the talk of an "Armenian rose revolution" would not have merited a second thought were this amorphous opposition facing a legitimate governing regime that could count on the support of a substantial section of society.

But in reality the government is beset by exactly the same problems that afflict the opposition. It is marked by decentralisation, incompetence at a strategic level, a tendency to overestimate its own strength and, last but not least, an inability and lack of will to engage in dialogue and compromise.

On the one hand, the administration does not feel strong enough to become genuinely dictatorial, while on the other, it knows it is estranged from society and cannot call on public support. In Georgia a strong opposition was fighting a power vacuum at the centre. In Armenia a weak opposition is fighting a weak government.

On the night of April 12-13, dozens of opposition demonstrators were hurt when police broke up a rally outside the parliament building. The brutality could have been anticipated. In a country ruled by elite groups, decisions at times of crisis are taken at a very low level by small groups, and the system begins to act aggressively.

All this - especially the aggressive stance - shows up the weakness of the authorities. The break-up of the rally, the official statements that the demonstrators were - at 2am - obstructing the work of parliament, that policemen had "not noticed" that the men whose cameras they were breaking were journalists - all this was no less a sign of helplessness than the opposition's idea of marching on parliament in the first place.

One result of the aggressive action taken by the Armenian leadership is that the public now understands how weak the regime is. That means society will continue to generate opposition groupings.

The demonstrations will continue, but the opposition will remain weak and disorganised as long as it remains in the phase of "negative identity" - in other words, as long as its only unifying idea is changing the regime and nothing more.

The government, too, will only get weaker as long as it equates political strength with the capacity to bash opposition demonstrators over the head with truncheons and put up roadblocks around Yerevan to stop people from the provinces attending demonstrations.

It is not so important who wins in this confrontation, or when that happens. At present there is a stalemate in which both sides reject dialogue, compromise is impossible, and - in line with

Armenian political tradition - no one ever admits they have lost an election or a political fight. Meanwhile, the political system as a whole is losing yet more legitimacy.

Armenia has declared it wants to become part of Europe, but the latest events suggest that it is actually joining Latin America. This might be seen as a success: politically speaking, other post-Soviet states are on the same level as some of the worst African countries.

But that is little consolation for Armenia's political culture - the country is a long way off having a real political opposition that wants to devise real policies and that is based on genuine party structures and the positive support of broad sections of society.

When that eventually comes about, it will be impossible for the police to break up demonstrations because hundreds, rather than tens, of thousands of people will take part - people who know what they want to happen after the resignation of the president, not just before it. In fact, there will be no need for demonstrations at all because it will be a different kind of opposition, one that the authorities have to compromise and share influence with, as happens in many Latin American countries.

Armenia still has a long way to go before that happens. For the moment it faces the prospect of a long stalemate between a weak opposition and weak government, where it does not matter who emerges as victor.

By Alexander ISKANDARIAN. CRS No.229, April 28

Chechnya without Kadyrov

Grozny, May 2004

How will Moscow govern the war-torn republic after the death of the man they put in charge?

A day after the explosion that killed Chechnya's pro-Moscow leader Akhmad Kadyrov, Grozny is unusually quiet. The occasion car speeds through the otherwise empty streets, shrouding the few pedestrians in clouds of dust.

Instead, the city is dominated by army and police patrols, and there are also men stationed every 200 metres along the main highway that cuts through Chechnya.

But these security measures all come too late to save Kadyrov, who was assassinated along with at least seven others at Victory Day celebrations in the city's Dinamo Stadium on May 9.

"It looks as if everyone has gone to Tsentoroi for Kadyrov's funeral," said one passer-by in Grozny, referring to the ex-leader's home village where he was to be buried.

Eyewitnesses said an explosion ripped through the wooden seats of the VIP stand in the stadium just as the official part of the ceremony, marking the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany, was coming to an end and singers were starting to perform on the football pitch.

Several government officials had mounted the stand hoping to be part of a group photograph that was to be taken by Reuters photographer Adlan Hassanov. Kadyrov sat in the middle with Valery Baranov, the commander of Russian troops in the North Caucasus, on his right and Hussein Isayev, the head of Chechnya's State Council, on his left.

The bomb blast threw everyone into a panic, and initially many people did not realise what had happened and simply tried to get away. Kadyrov was pulled from the wreckage of the stand, but died on the way to hospital. Isayev also died, as did photographer Hassanov and five more people, including an eight-year-old girl.

According to Chechnya's interior ministry, a further 63 people were wounded, including Baranov, Grozny's military garrison commander Grigory Fomenko, economics minister Abdula Magomadov, presidential press secretary Abdulkbek Vakhayev and singer Tamara Dadasheva.

Questions are now being asked how the Chechen leader could have been assassinated at such a public gathering amidst tight security.

The bomb, packed into an artillery shell casing, weighed about one kilogram. It was concealed in the concrete and iron framework of the stand, and escaped the attention of mine-detectors who swept the stadium before the event.

Russia's deputy prosecutor general Sergei Fridinsky, who is leading the investigation into

the blast, told a press conference in Grozny that the suspects included some of Kadyrov's personal bodyguards.

"It would have been very hard for just anyone to get into the stadium," Fridinsky said. "That was impossible because of the security measures taken at the stadium on the day of the terrorist act."

Fridinsky said that while the investigation was still continuing, at this point it appeared that the explosives could have been planted long before May 9. Security experts said they found two bombs, one of which failed to explode, and that both were armed with two trigger mechanisms, using a timer and wires. The attackers decided not to use a radio-controlled bomb - a preferred method in Chechnya - because they would have been aware that the authorities had installed equipment to jam incoming signals around the stadium.

Both the Russian authorities and local pro-Moscow Chechen authorities said they had no doubt that the assassination was the work of the pro-independence rebels under the command of either rebel president Aslan Maskhadov or radical leader Shamil Basayev.

Maskhadov denied any involvement. "In connection with the act of terror... where, as well as occupiers and national traitors hated by the Chechen people, peaceful citizens of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria suffered, I express sincere condolences from myself and my government to the families and relatives of our fellow countrymen who died innocently," he said in a statement for his own Chechenpress web-site.

Maskhadov blamed the "intelligence services of the occupiers" for "liquidating a puppet government that had exhausted its resources".

Interestingly, most of the ordinary Chechens in Grozny whom IWPR interviewed shared this theory - that the Russians rather than the rebels were behind the blast.

According to Chechnya's electoral legislation, a new presidential election should take place within four months, in other words before September 9.

Until then, Kadyrov's prime minister Sergei Abramov will be acting leader of the republic. But it is highly unlikely he plans to become Chechnya's leader on a permanent basis.

Abramov is an ethnic Russian from Moscow who has been in post less than two months. He is a former finance minister of Chechnya.

At Kadyrov's funeral on May 10, Abramov, wearing a Muslim skullcap like the other mourners, looked extremely depressed.

Abramov immediately announced that Kadyrov's feared son Ramzan, 27, who is de facto leader of his father's 4,000-strong armed militia, was to become his first deputy prime minister. Another protégé of Kadyrov's, current nationalities minister Taus Jabrailov, was also made a deputy prime minister.

This attempt at political continuity cannot disguise the fact that Kadyrov's death comes as a massive blow to Russian president Vladimir Putin. The president personally promoted Kadyrov, and spent four years building him up and giving him legitimacy, against the wishes of many other powerful voices in Russia including the army, who never trusted Putin's choice.

Putin arranged for a referendum which gave Chechnya a new constitution, and then the election last October in which Kadyrov was elected president. Even though both polls were widely dismissed as heavily rigged, they gave Kadyrov a legal power-base from which to operate.

Kadyrov was a controversial choice. He was Chechnya's mufti, or chief Muslim cleric,

when it declared independence from Russia in the early Nineties, and he fought against the Russians in the first conflict of 1994-96. He went on to switch sides at the beginning of the second war in 1999, taking a stand against radical Islam and declaring his loyalty to Moscow.

He was invaluable to Moscow as someone who could mobilise his own paramilitary force against the rebels, and over the past few months he scored significant successes, persuading several former commanders loyal to Maskhadov to lay down their arms.

In return, Moscow turned a blind eye to his massive accumulation of local power, and the persistent allegations of torture and cruelty levelled against his security forces and their leader, his son Ramzan Kadyrov.

Putin's whole strategy of "Chechenisation" - devolving government and security functions to a client administration - is in grave crisis after the killing of the figure around whom it was built.

"For all his faults, Kadyrov was a strong leader," said political analyst and human rights activist Usam Baisayev. "If Kadyrov had got the post of president after the end of the first war in 1996 instead of Maskhadov, it's possible he could have dealt with Basayev and the Wahhabis [Islamic militants]."

The biggest question facing Chechnya today is what the Kremlin will decide to do now.

Analyst Murad Nakhshoyev told IWPR that initial steps by Putin and Abramov suggested that the Kremlin was staying with Kadyrov's team. "Until the presidential elections, Abramov will just be the 'general at the wedding' [a necessary figurehead], carrying out decisions that are made by Kadyrov's team and agreed by the Kremlin.

"To continue its previous policy course, the Kremlin needs someone like Akhmad Kadyrov. Someone to whom [Maskhadov's former defence minister Magomed] Khambiev believed it was not shameful to surrender, and to whom other field commanders can come and pay homage."

However, said Nakhshoyev, neither of the two men currently being talked about for the job, businessman Malik Saidullayev and former policeman Aslanbek Aslakhonov - both former presidential hopefuls - have enjoyed the same kind of authority, based on force.

Other options facing the Kremlin would involve installing a figurehead leader while giving real power to an ethnic Russian "governor-general", or tearing up last year's constitution and giving Chechnya a parliamentary system. Both options would entail a major loss of face and substantial political risks for Putin.

In the meantime, most observers say that Kadyrov's legacy is one of continuing violence in Chechnya.

"The fact that Chechens are shooting at and killing one another today is primarily thanks to Kadyrov," said Baisayev.

By Timur ALIEV. CRS No.232, May 11

Investigation: Karabakh: Missing in action - alive or dead?

Stepanakert, Baku, May 12

Ten years after the Nagorny Karabakh ceasefire agreement, hundreds of Armenians and Azerbaijanis are still missing, presumed dead.

On December 9, 1994, a meeting took place on the Karabakh ceasefire line and an unusual transaction was made.

Two young captive soldiers - Azerbaijani Rauf Budagov and Karabakh Armenian Levon Babayan, both aged 23 - were exchanged for one another and allowed to go home.

The two men shook hands, each finding the other's - like his own - chafed rough by the cold and coated in dirt. Both trembled with emotion.

"I've become a different person, quite different," said Levon. "I don't sleep a wink all night," said Rauf. "And even now I don't believe I'm going home. It's like being born a second time, like coming back to life from my coffin. Basically, you've given me back your life and I've given you yours."

Levon replied, "And what a life, 100 years long.... I wouldn't wish what I've been through on my enemies." Then each man moved on and returned home.

Sadly, the return from the dead of these two men, seven months after the Nagorny Karabakh ceasefire agreement of May 12 1994, was a rare happy ending in what is one of the most ignored and tragic aspects of the unresolved conflict.

As the tenth anniversary of the truce is observed, thousands of people are still reported missing and their fate remains a mystery.

Most independent observers believe that all those still missing are in fact dead. But many relatives refuse to give up hope - and they will be encouraged by occasional cases where captives are traded for money through Georgia.

From the very beginning of the Karabakh dispute in 1988, both sides took hostages.

At the beginning of 1993, a year into the full-blown war, Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh - the latter still unrecognised as a state - formed government commissions to deal with prisoners of war and hostages. Armenia later set up its own commission.

As the fighting raged, the Azerbaijan and Karabakh Armenian sides kept up a constant dialogue and continued to exchange prisoners.

"There were several corridors along the front-line, where meetings, negotiations and exchanges took place," said Albert Voskanian, deputy head of the Karabakh commission from 1993 to 1997. "It all helped us to work realistically and fruitfully. Several hundred people from both sides were sought out and exchanged."

The formal end of hostilities with the 1994 ceasefire, which sealed a de facto victory for the

Armenians, resulted in a sharp decrease in captive numbers, but the fate of thousands remained uncertain.

In 1997, the Azerbaijanis stopped working directly with the Karabakh commission. After that, the Karabakh Armenians engaged with Baku mainly through the Red Cross.

Since 1995, an International Working Group - led by Bernhard Clasen of Germany, Russia's Svetlana Gannushkina and Paata Zakareishvili of Georgia - has worked with all sides, going back and forth to visit sites where prisoners might be detained.

The Azerbaijani State Commission says 4,959 Azerbaijanis are still missing in action from the Karabakh conflict, a figure that includes 71 children, 320 women and 358 elderly people. Furthermore, the Azerbaijanis say they have information that 783 people, again including civilians as well as combatants, were taken captive by the Armenians and have not been released.

On the Armenian side, the Karabakh State Commission lists around 600 people as missing, 400 of them civilians.

The vast majority of these missing people have not been heard of for more than a decade, and it is presumed they are dead, buried in graves whose location is known only to a few people or to no one at all.

But every year, a few soldiers still go missing across the front line, generally in places where the trenches of the two opposing militaries run closest to one another. Some of the men may simply have got lost and blundered into enemy lines, others may have got caught on reconnaissance missions, and others still may have been trying to desert.

Each side alleges that the other is hiding captives - and each strongly denies this charge.

The Azerbaijani commission says it does not trust the Armenians. In a statement to IWPR, it said that between 1993 and 1999, the Armenian side consistently said it was holding no more than 50 or 60 captives, yet from 1992 to 2000 the far higher figure of 1,086 Azerbaijanis was freed.

"There is information about a few possible burial sites of Azerbaijani soldiers after certain battles," Viktor Kocharian, head of the Karabakh commission, told IWPR. "From time to time we hand over remains which are discovered in the searches we carry out. But the figure of 5,000 is ridiculous! It should be obvious that it's simply impossible to secretly hold this number of prisoners of war or even human remains within Karabakh."

It has mainly fallen to a partnership of non-government organisations on either side, together with the International Working Group, to investigate the allegations that captives are still being detained.

"To debunk myths, we've had to climb into quarries in Azerbaijan and check out information we'd received that hundreds of Armenian prisoners were working there," Svetlana Gannushkina told IWPR. "We didn't find a single Armenian."

To investigate similar allegations about the other side, the Helsinki Initiative 92 group organised a trip by a group of Azerbaijan women to Karabakh last August. Carrying a list of 50 soldiers missing in action, the women were allowed to visit Karabakh's two prisons, one in Shusha (which the Armenians call Shushi) and one in Stepanakert (which the Azerbaijanis call Khankendi) - and found no one.

The three international investigators point out that for purely practical reasons, it is difficult and expensive to keep prisoners over a long period and hide them from prying eyes.

This is not enough to satisfy all the relatives. After the trip to Karabakh, one Azerbaijani mother, Tamara Eyubova, told IWPR, "We are not entirely certain that there are no Azerbaijani prisoners in Karabakh. We were shown one prison and one detention centre, but where's the guarantee that they are not being held in other prisons?"

Vera Grigorian, an Armenian mother whose son is missing in action, told IWPR, "We have definite information that there are Armenian prisoners of war and hostages in Azerbaijan. We receive various kinds of information through different channels about this or that person. Former prisoners come to us and identify one and the same person with whom they shared their captivity."

The most explosive allegation made by both sides is that prisoners are being traded for money via their common neighbour Georgia.

Arzu Abdullayeva, a well-known human rights activist who is head of Azerbaijan's Helsinki Committee, spent a long time in the early Nineties investigating this trade, particularly at the market in Sadakhlo in Georgia. In 1994, Abdullayeva personally paid 1,000 dollars that she had been awarded with the Olof Palme peace prize, allowing Azerbaijani father Fikret Mamedov to buy back his son. She said the decision to pay the ransom was made because it was feared that the criminals said to be holding the boy would kill him before normal channels could be made to work.

"People are bought for cash," said Donara Mnatsakanian, whose son Nelson went missing in 1996, two years after the ceasefire. "Today no one makes a secret of that. But I won't name any names because the problem still exists and unfortunately money is just about the only way of freeing hostages."

Donara said that her son was found through the efforts of relatives in Kiev and acquaintances in Azerbaijan. Nelson had grown so desperate in captivity that he tried to commit suicide by jumping out of a window - but he survived. He was finally freed for a cash payment in Georgia four years after he went missing, and after an initial attempt to free him in Tashkent had failed.

Donara refused to answer IWPR's questions as to who was the intermediary, what sum was paid and how Nelson was finally freed, because she didn't want to wreck the chances of a similar transaction helping someone else.

"It's easier to come out with fine slogans about how people mustn't be bought and sold - until your own son is over there," said another Karabakh mother, Vera Grigorian. "The thing is that money, unfortunately, is the last thread that connects relatives on either side of the border."

One desperate Azerbaijani, Hamlet Badalov, has gone to great lengths to secure the release of his son Vugar, who he is convinced is still alive after vanishing in 1993. Badalov paid over some money in return for some news about his son, and then bought a fax machine and waited all night for the promised information.

But as Russian investigator Gannushkina reports, "Eventually a fax came through with a Moscow address and the surname of a man supposedly holding Vugar. I checked - that address in Moscow is the Stanislavsky Theatre, and no one by that name works there."

The experts believe Badalov is the victim of a cruel hoax.

All the relatives of the missing agree that what they want more than anything else is certainty. Not knowing what happened to their loved ones, they say, is worse than knowing for sure that someone is dead.

"We want real help in the search for our relatives," said mother Svetlana Martirosian. "We want to know for sure whether a person has or hasn't died. We need just one thing - true information."

Sadly, ten years after the Karabakh ceasefire, hundreds of families are still waiting to find out the truth.

By Karine OHANIAN and Zarema VELIKHANOVA. CRS No.23, May 12

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is a unique collaboration by two journalists from the opposing sides in the Karabakh conflict. The terminology used to refer to aspects of the conflict was chosen in London in an attempt to achieve neutrality. It may not necessarily reflect the original wording.

Karabakh: Ceasefire's troubled anniversary

London, May 2004

A decade after war ended in Nagorny Karabakh, the peace is still as fragile as ever.

Appearances can be deceptive.

The 200-mile strip of land that marks the ceasefire line around Nagorny Karabakh is one of the most peaceful places on earth. In the last ten years it has become overgrown with wild vegetation and tall thistles.

The main sound is of soft birdsong. The main scourge appears to be the locusts and other insects that range freely here.

Yet no one can set foot here, because the land is heavily mined. And for ten years, two armies have faced each other across the line. The Azerbaijani and Karabakh Armenian soldiers looking at one another through binoculars do not even have telephone or radio contact.

Perhaps only the militarised border between North and South Korea is a more forbidding dividing line than this one. Although the ceasefire agreement of May 12, 1994 halted more than two years of heavy fighting - sealing a de facto Armenian victory - it did not resolve the conflict.

The ceasefire line continues to scar the southern Caucasus and prevents hundreds of thousands of refugees from returning to their homes. Peace plans have come and gone, yet nothing has shifted.

Looking back on a decade of truce, Vladimir Kazimirov, the Russian diplomat who negotiated the 1994 ceasefire agreement, told IWPR that, "it really does summon up mixed feelings. It's good that it's held for ten years - that the mass bloodshed has stopped in the gravest armed conflict on the territory of the former USSR, but it's sad that in all that time the mediators have not managed to achieve a breakthrough in the political resolution of the conflict.

"Back then, I knew it could take several years - but not that it would take so long."

Moscow's original plan to deploy Russian peacekeepers along the ceasefire line was vetoed by Azerbaijan, with the result that the conflict effectively has a self-regulating truce with no neutral troops in between.

"There are pluses and minuses in the fact that the parties to the conflict bear all the responsibility for observing the ceasefire," said Kazimirov. "It means no one but them is responsible for incidents along the line of contact."

That makes for a truce that is particularly vulnerable. The last year has been one of the most difficult of the whole decade. In 2003, around 30 soldiers died in shooting incidents across the front line, a reverse in what had been a positive trend. Others continue to be killed by mines.

International mediators and analysts worry that the situation of "no war, no peace" is unsustainable in the long-term, and needs to be buttressed by a proper peace settlement. A second Karabakh war, given the weaponry that both sides have acquired since 1994, would be far more devastating than the first.

That war of 1991-94 was tragic enough, resulting in the deaths of perhaps 20,000 people, the wounding of more than three times that number, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of refugees.

"There is a saying that once a gun fires itself - there is always a temptation to use it," warned Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk in an interview to IWPR by telephone. Kasprzyk is the personal representative of the chairman-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, with responsibility for the Karabakh conflict - in other words the international official who most closely monitors the situation on the ground.

"The Armenian side likes to say that the ceasefire holds because of a balance of power; that there is no chance for either of the two parties to win," said Kasprzyk. "But in a situation where you have two armies facing each other, there is always a temptation to start something."

US diplomat Carey Cavanaugh - who convened talks at Key West, Florida in 2001 that came closer than ever before to a peace plan - noted that the first thing the mediators did when the talks failed was to support the ceasefire.

Some in Azerbaijan argue that the coming billion-dollar oil revenues the country is about to earn from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project will change the balance of power, especially if the price of oil remains at levels of more than 30 dollars a barrel.

In Azerbaijan, there have already been vociferous calls this year for the government to resort to the military option to reclaim its lost territories. A pro-war group, the Karabakh Liberation Organisation, is currently orchestrating a march from Baku to the ceasefire line.

The murder of Gurgen Markarian, an army officer from Armenia, by his Azerbaijani colleague Ramil Safarov at a NATO language course in Budapest in February showed how quickly passions can become inflamed around this issue. As soon as the news broke, defence groups formed for Safarov in Azerbaijan, while Markarian was given a public funeral in Armenia and his death provoked angry denunciations of Azerbaijan.

Foreign diplomats point out that Azerbaijan currently has a poorly-equipped army, which is far from ready to go back to war. It would take years for that to change - but the perception inside Azerbaijan that the power balance is shifting could in itself be enough to halt the peace process in its tracks.

The Karabakh conflict has created a strange world in the south Caucasus, in which two countries are almost hermetically sealed off from one another and from the other's attachments and concerns. That means that the views that both societies have about each other are still basically stuck back in 1988.

Two surveys taken in parallel by the Baku and Yerevan Press Clubs in 2001, the year of the Key West talks, suggest why those talks were doomed to failure.

Asked what would be an acceptable status for Nagorny Karabakh, the disputed territory at the heart of the conflict, 45 per cent of respondents in Armenia said they wanted to see Karabakh become independent and another 42.7 per cent said it should become part of Armenia. Less than one per cent of those asked believed Karabakh should be part of Azerbaijan.

The Azerbaijani poll produced answers that were polar opposites of the Armenian ones. Fifty-six per cent of respondents said Karabakh should be "within Azerbaijan, without any autonomy", and 33.7 per cent favoured Karabakh returning to Azerbaijan with autonomous status. Only 0.9 per cent were prepared to countenance Karabakh becoming independent or part of Armenia.

Yet the bold innovation of the document discussed at Key West was that Azerbaijan was ready to cede sovereignty over Nagorny Karabakh to Armenia, along with a land corridor through the town of Lachin connecting Karabakh to Armenia.

In return, Azerbaijan was to get back the occupied parts of seven provinces surrounding Karabakh, and a land corridor was to be built through Armenia to link the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan with the rest of the country. The town of Shusha, inside Karabakh, which formerly had a majority Azerbaijani population, was to be placed under international administration.

One problem with the scheme was that the Armenian side was unhappy about giving up Shusha. More fundamentally, Azerbaijani president Heidar Aliiev had not prepared even some of his top advisers for the idea of giving up sovereignty over Karabakh.

Boxed in by public opinion that they themselves had helped entrench, the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia were unable to build on the relative success of Key West.

Some observers including Kazimirov argue that it is impossible to achieve a "package agreement" for Karabakh, in which everything is decided at once.

However others involved in the process resist this idea, with the Karabakh Armenians for instance opposing any deal in which their final status is not determined at the outset. Others say that nothing will be possible until Azerbaijan opens a dialogue with the Karabakh Armenians - but it still refuses to do so.

As the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers meet in Strasbourg in May 12-13, they find themselves as far from a solution as ever. The silence on the front line is becoming a little ominous.

By Thomas DE WAAL. CRS No.233, May 12

South Ossetia: president builds power base

Tskhinval, May 2004

A new pro-presidential party hopes to dominate South Ossetia's next parliament

South Ossetian president Eduard Kokoity looks set to strengthen his position and powers in Sunday's parliamentary elections.

Kokoity will continue his efforts to assert himself in the unrecognised republic, just as attention in Tbilisi is being switched to South Ossetia following the peaceful ouster of Aslan Abashidze in Ajaria earlier this month.

South Ossetia unilaterally declared independence in 1992, after a conflict with the government in Tbilisi, and has lived apart from Georgia ever since.

Last summer Kokoity, who has been in office since December 2001, purged his government and security structures. He removed a group of men known as the "Tedeyev group" who had dominated the republic's economy for several years, in particular the lucrative freight traffic down the main highway from Russia.

Now he appears to have his sights on Stanislav Kochiev, the veteran leader of South Ossetia's Communist Party and the outgoing speaker of parliament, in which the Communists currently have a majority of seats.

A new pro-presidential party known as Edinstvo or "Unity", and modelled on President Vladimir Putin's party "United Russia", was founded a year ago and hopes to capture a majority of seats in the May 23 poll.

There is much speculation in South Ossetia that Kokoity hopes, as Putin has effectively done in Russia, to downgrade the role of parliament and turn it into a "ministry for passing laws". In a television interview that caused a stir in the region, Gleb Pavlovsky, a political analyst close to the Kremlin, said the elections in South Ossetia were going according to a plan written in Moscow, not Washington.

Kochiev told IWPR that the election of a one-party parliament would divide South Ossetia, a situation "which can't be permitted when the conflict is still unresolved".

"It could be dangerous for the president himself, too since in that case absolutely all the responsibility rests on him," Kochiev said.

There are just 34 seats in the republic's parliament, four of which remain unoccupied because they were set aside for deputies from ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia which refused to take part in the 1999 election.

The remaining 30 seats are being fought over both in straight constituency contests and on a party list system. Edinstvo is putting up considerably more candidates than the Communist Party for all seats. There are just 33,500 registered voters.

The two main parties competing in the elections have very similar programmes, pledging that they want to resolve the conflict with Georgia, strengthen relations with North Ossetia across the mountains, and become part of Russia. Edinstvo's slogan is "Unity - our Road to Russia!"

All the candidates are also vying for the patriotic vote. With the republic feeling vulnerable following events in Ajaria, outspoken member of parliament Georgy Cheldiev attacked the president's choice of appointees, saying that, "We are being ruled by deserters!" Cheldiev said that the current leadership mainly consisted of people who had left South Ossetia when fighting was at its height.

In answer to this, Kokoity told a press conference on May 17 that, "the time for chatter is over; everyone has to show their patriotism and competence by concrete actions which people can see."

Political analyst Batradz Kharebov said no one doubted the coming victory for Edinstvo. "I think that the parliament will change by more than two-thirds, it will get much younger," he said. "But it won't get more professional - rather the reverse."

The previous parliament fought a long-running battle with Kokoity's predecessor Ludvig Chibirov over the division of powers in the republic.

An official in the presidential administration, who asked not to be named, conceded that the new parliament would have fewer stronger individuals in it. "The outgoing group of deputies, although almost all belonged to one party, was still formed by the people choosing particular candidates," he said.

But Julietta Ostayeva, pro-rector of South Ossetia's State University, argued that the new parliament would be more effective than its predecessor.

"I am convinced that through the party system, we can make a significant contribution to building civic society and involving a wider circle of people in running the state," she said.

The election campaign has so far failed make an impression on voters. In March almost 100 per cent of those South Ossetians who have acquired Russian passports voted in Russia's presidential elections. No one is expecting that kind of turnout this time around for the republic's own poll.

"I have observed that people are pretty uninterested in the coming elections," said Alimbeg Pliev, a deputy who is running for another term. "People are tired of endless promises and few people believe their life will seriously get better."

"Whoever they choose, nothing will change in our daily lives," said a trader at the market in Tskhinval, the South Ossetian capital. "It doesn't matter - our fate will be decided by whatever Russia and America decide."

By Kosta DZUGAYEV. CRS No.234, May 19

Meskhetyans head for America

Krasnodar, August 2004

Some of the world's most displaced people have left southern Russia for Philadelphia.

In the latest leg of an extraordinary 60-year odyssey, three small groups of Meskhetian Turks left southern Russia for the United States at the end of last month, as part of a US State Department-sponsored initiative.

The departure of the first group of 11 Meskhetians on July 21 followed years of wrangling with the local authorities in the Krasnodar region, who had made them feel unwelcome for more than a decade.

For the older people amongst them, Russia was their third place of residence and the US will be their fourth, after southern Georgia, where they were born, and Uzbekistan, where they were deported by Stalin in 1944. In 1989, tens of thousands of Meskhetian Turks fled Central Asia after a pogrom against them, ending up in Russia and Azerbaijan.

Their problems in Krasnodar came to a boil last year as old Soviet passports were phased out and replaced by new Russian ones. Many of the Meskhetians living in Krasnodar region did not receive Russian citizenship, and refused to take the "immigration cards" offered them. As a result, January 1 this year left many Meskhetians without any proper identity papers at all.

Accompanying his family to Krasnodar airport, as they left for Philadelphia on July 21, Tianshan Svanidze, head of the local Turkish Community organisation, said that the offer of "immigration cards" - generally given to temporary visitors to Russia - had been entirely unacceptable, "As we arrived in Russia in 1989, when the Soviet Union still existed. But the authorities in the Kuban [Krasnodar region] are refusing to register us and give our children Russian passports, and as a result our people have been completely disenfranchised."

Svanidze followed his family to the United States soon afterwards.

To many it seems surprising that the issue of 12,000 Meskhetians should be such an emotive one in a province containing five million people, many from other non-Russian ethnic backgrounds.

Their strong traditions and high birth rate have antagonised some locals, particularly the local Kuban Cossacks, who are traditionally highly distrustful of Muslims and "aliens".

The Meskhetian Turks, who generally prefer to call themselves "Ahiska Turks", are a close-knit group who lived in southern Georgia for generations. In November 1944, some 120,000 people from the region - the overwhelming majority of them Meskhetian Turks - were forcibly

transported to Central Asia. Unlike most of the other "punished peoples", however, the Meskhetian Turks were not allowed to return in the Fifties.

In 1989, around 13,000 resettled in the Krasnodar region from Central Asia. Of the 12,000 Meskhetian Turks now living there, over 7,000 have no Russian citizenship or residential registration required by law, but as they had been living here already when the Russian Citizenship Act took effect in 1992, citizenship should have been granted to them automatically.

The majority of the Meskhetians are not registered locally and this means that they cannot register their marriages or their cars or get international passports.

Over the last few years their plight began to attract the interest of international human rights groups, as well as the international refugee agencies, the International Organisation for Migration, the IOM, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR.

Alvaro Gil-Robles, commissioner on human rights for the Council of Europe, who visited the region, said the local Meskhetians should ideally be given three options: those wishing to emigrate to the US should be able to do so. Similarly, those wishing to go to Georgia instead should have that opportunity, but he said "this might be problematic, since the Georgian side is involved". On the other hand, those wishing to stay should also be able to do so.

Georgia agreed to allow the return of Meskhetian Turks as one of the conditions for its entry into the Council of Europe in 1999, but almost no progress has been made since then.

Russian human rights commissioner Vladimir Lukin, who accompanied Gil-Robles on his tour, promised to petition the Russian Constitutional Court to determine the status of the Meskhetian Turks in the Krasnodar Province. Lukin also strongly criticised the Council of Europe for not putting enough pressure on the Georgian government to change its stance on the Meskhetians.

Eventually, in February 2004 the US government came up with a plan for a voluntary resettlement of the Meskhetian Turks from the Krasnodar region to America. The programme, administered by the IOM, accepts resettlement applications only from Turks residing in Krasnodar region, but not from neighbouring parts of Russia.

Mark Brown, who manages the resettlement programme for the IOM, said that more than 5,000 Meskhetians in the region had applied to emigrate to the US.

Krasnodar's controversial governor Alexander Tkachev has not concealed his delight that the Meskhetians are leaving. "Kuban residents have waited a long time for this to happen," he said. "The process has begun, and we will be acting in a civilised manner, in full compliance with the law. From the day they [Meskhetian Turks] came here, they have enjoyed free health-care, schooling and kindergarten care on an equal footing with the natives. They have had many years to naturalise and accept the Kuban lifestyle, but they have failed."

The Russian federal authorities have remained more of a detached onlooker than active participant in resolving the Meskhetian issue, and the breakthrough is being hailed by local non-governmental organisations as a success for their activism.

The case is part of a wider issue of migration to Krasnodar region, which the local authorities are seeking to restrict. Only 12,000 migrants came to Krasnodar region last year compared with 90,000 in 1992, as the local authorities try to restrict immigration. If this trend continues, the influx of migrants to Kuban will soon be unable to make up for the natural population loss.

By Mikhail SAVVA. CRS No.246, August 11

South Ossetia conflict heats up

Tskhinvali, Tbilisi, August 2004

Ossetian and Georgian forces on brink of war as Tbilisi accuses Russia of meddling.

In the peaceful, shaded yard of a church in central Tskhinvali, women prepare a huge bowl of plov - food for their menfolk when they return from their night-time defensive positions on the outskirts of the South Ossetian capital.

"Daytime is quiet, but at night it all starts up, it's scary," said a young woman who, like many people in Tskhinvali (called Tskhinval by the Ossetians) was unwilling to identify herself to foreign journalists. The Georgians "want this land, but they never owned it and they never will", she said, and then refused to say any more.

Georgia's long-frozen conflict in South Ossetia, a sparsely populated territory backing up against the south side of the Caucasus mountain range, is heating up. For the last few nights, there have been heavy exchanges of gunfire on the outskirts of Tskhinvali, with both sides accusing the other of using not only small arms, but also large 120-mm mortars and the cannons of armoured vehicles.

Reports of casualties are impossible to verify, but the trend appears to be towards more aggressive action, as large numbers of volunteers on both sides take to the field. On August 12, Georgian officials reported three of their men killed, while South Ossetia's chief surgeon reported 15 Ossetians wounded.

"Until two days ago, it was only provocations," said Colonel Alexander Kiknadze, commander of a Georgian battalion that is supposed to be keeping the peace alongside Russian and Ossetian battalions, said. "Yesterday and the day before, it was war."

Tension has been rising in South Ossetia since June, after more than a decade of uneasy but stable peace that followed the 1990-92 conflict in which the region de facto seceded and then later unilaterally declared independence from Tbilisi.

But in mid-June, following his success in the rebel province of Ajaria, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's government shut down the huge Ergneti market on the outskirts of Tskhinvali. The Georgians said the market was an economic black hole into which vast amounts of Russian contraband fuel, cigarettes, alcohol and wheat flour were pouring - robbing Georgia of revenues and propping up the breakaway region.

Today, the sprawling market is a ghost town of abandoned kiosks, huts, and row upon row of rusting petrol containers.

The Georgian government says the loss of Ergneti means the South Ossetian administration's days are numbered. However, the closure has also hurt thousands of ordinary traders, and has reinforced pro-Russian sentiment and a siege mentality in the rebel province.

"They say they are on the side of peace, but they don't allow anything to come in here," said Boris Chochiev, South Ossetia's minister for special affairs and one of its chief negotiators. "Russia has shown that it is our main guarantor today."

The South Ossetian authorities make no secret of their ties with Russia - the vast majority of their citizens have taken up Russian passports - or of their desire for unification with the autonomous Russian province of North Ossetia, across the mountains.

"Our working language is Russian, our industry is Russian, our economy is tied to Russia of course... a whole generation has grown up that virtually does not know Georgian," Murat Jioev, minister of foreign affairs for the unrecognised republic, said in an interview.

The Georgian government has complained bitterly about what it says is Moscow's interference, and has alleged that Russian military aircraft have repeatedly crossed into Georgian airspace over South Ossetia.

When a car carrying a senior Russian parliamentarian, Andrei Kokoshin, came under fire in South Ossetia recently, he blamed "extremist forces in Tbilisi". But the Georgians claimed the incident was staged by South Ossetians to whip up anti-Georgian feelings in Russia.

"They played some good theatrics and showed it on all the television channels," said Kiknadze, the Georgian peacekeepers' commander.

Exactly who is behind the night-time shooting remains unclear. The three 500-man peace-keeping battalions are the only forces authorised to be in the conflict zone. However, unknown numbers of armed men have taken up position on both sides, and there are now about nine unauthorised Ossetian military posts, and between 16 and 22 Georgian ones, according to various estimates.

Trust between the three battalions mandated to keep the peace is at rock bottom. The Ossetian authorities blame the Georgian battalion, which now includes the United States-trained elite of Tbilisi's impoverished army, for the fighting. "This has never happened before in course of the last 12 years," said Chochiev.

Tbilisi says that Ossetian troops are not only equipped, trained and led by officers from Russia, but that the Russian peacekeeping battalion has itself taken sides. "They clearly support the Ossetians," said Kiknadze.

After three days of talks in Moscow, Georgian defence minister Giorgi Baramidze signed an agreement on August 11 to pull back all "unauthorised forces", but he stressed that the withdrawal of Georgian troops was conditional on the Ossetians doing the same.

Both sides agree that such a move would do much to reduce tensions. But it may already be too late, given the reports of bloodshed.

Saakashvili, who has dedicated his presidency to restoring Georgia's territorial integrity, says he has no desire for war, but insists progress has to be made on a political settlement.

The situations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia "are no longer frozen, but they are not like full-blown conflicts", he told a group of journalists in Tbilisi. "Some people would like to take them into a war-like situation, and some into serious negotiations."

Saakashvili said he was offering South Ossetia "ten times more autonomy" than it had before the war in the early Nineties. He promised compensation for victims of that war, and assistance for the tens of thousands of people who fled and have still not returned.

This, says Georgia's radical reformist government, is the only way to restore control over South Ossetia - through hearts and minds, not war.

"Why would I be so crazy as to start a war when we have everything ahead?" asked Saakashvili.

By Sebastian SMITH. CRS No.246, August 12

PHOTOAGENCY "EYE OF GEORGIA"



"Why would I be so crazy as to start a war ...?" asked Saakashvili

Abkhazia revels in nationalist's visit

Sukhum, August 2004

Abkhaz tourist season is saved by a bizarre political stunt.

Populist Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky became Abkhazia's most unlikely tourism promoter last week after paying a four-day visit to the Black Sea republic that was deliberately designed to defy Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili.

Putting aside his reputation as a Russian nationalist with xenophobic and anti-Caucasian views, the unrecognised republic welcomed Zhirinovsky with open arms, as he continually advertised Abkhazia as a safe holiday destination for Russian tourists.

On August 4 Saakashvili had warned Russian tourists that if they came to Abkhazia by boat through what are internationally recognised Georgian waters they risked being fired on. The statement caused a storm of protest in Abkhazia and Russia, although Georgian government officials later said the president's words had been misinterpreted.

Zhirinovsky, who is deputy speaker of the Russian parliament and famous for his outspoken anti-Georgian views, then set off for the Black Sea coast, accompanied by 40 of his parliamentary deputies.

On August 11, he bought places for himself and his colleagues on the cruise ship *Acacia* and was followed by dozens of Russian journalists. Despite bad weather, ticket prices on the boat shot up.

Zhirinovsky whipped up excitement further by telling the Moscow radio station *Ekho Moskvy* live that the *Acacia* was being pursued by a Georgian military vessel that was ordering the *Acacia* to turn around.

Georgia's deputy security minister Giorgy Ugulava confirmed that the *Acacia* had been ordered to turn back, but said that "no reaction came from the trespassers across the Georgian national state frontier".

The Georgians said the *Acacia* was accompanied by a Russian military vessel and did not respond to calls. Nika Tabatadze, first deputy foreign minister, said, "We aren't going to open fire and attack and sink all tourist vessels. ... What we are trying to do is prevent illegal entry into Georgia. Commercial or not, under international regulations Georgia has the right to inspect those vessels under presumption they are helping the Abkhaz side."

The Georgians say that Russia is breaking a sanctions regime on Abkhazia set by the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Half an hour before the Acacia arrived in port, the quayside in Sukhum had filled up with ordinary residents and activists from Zhirinovsky's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia who handed out T-shirts and caps with the LDPR inscription and put up banners saying "Abkhazia and Russia - Forever Together. LDPR" and "Everyone on Holiday to Abkhazia. LDPR". The LDPR symbol had even made it onto an Abkhazian warship, next to the Abkhaz flag.

When Zhirinovsky himself stepped off the boat he seemed exhausted by his six-hour sea journey and said little. He was met by almost the entire Abkhaz government and parliament. As a mark of honour, he was given a room in Stalin's former dacha - now the summer residence of Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba - on the edge of Sukhum.

Over four days Zhirinovsky did everything in his power to please the Abkhaz. He said in interviews that the Abkhaz themselves had to choose what state they wished to live in - and that Abkhazia should not necessarily become part of Russia. He met local parliamentary deputies, held a public meeting in the Sukhum philharmonia, and visited the Glory Memorial to the dead in the war in Abkhazia on the 12th anniversary of the outbreak of fighting on August 14.

He also pursued an exhaustive tourist schedule, walking along the Sukhum embankment, drinking coffee in the famous U Akopa caffè, visiting the Novy Afon monastery and Lake Ritsa.

By doing so in the presence of Russian television cameras, Zhirinovsky provided unprecedented free advertising to Abkhazia as a tourist destination.

Summer tourism from Russian visitors is virtually the only source of income for the residents of Abkhazia's coastal towns of Gagra, Pitsunda and Novy Afon, who try to earn enough money to last them until the next year. They had been worried that news reports from the Caucasus would put off holidaymakers.

In fact this year has broken records for tourist numbers since the war ended in 1993. Last year, 300,000 tourists came to Abkhazia but this year the number has already topped 400,000. Holidaymakers are attracted by the clean, uncrowded beaches and low prices.

Whatever the Russian ultra-nationalist may have said in the past, Abkhaz were unanimous in gratitude for the bizarre saviour of their tourist season.

"We don't expect Zhirinovsky to solve any important political issues, that has nothing to do with him," said Rafael Sarkisian, a chef in a Sukhum restaurant. "We needed him to come on holiday here. You couldn't wish for a better advertisement for a peaceful Abkhazia."

By Inal KHASHIG. CRS No.247, August 19

Beslan siege unravels, slowly and bloodily

Beslan, September 2004

Sporadic shooting continues hours after Russian assault on school where hundreds of children are held hostage.

The local hospital in Beslan looked like something out of a horror film as more and more wounded people were brought in, many of them very badly injured, and blood everywhere. Relatives were screaming, some passing out.

Lists of people delivered to the hospital were stuck up on a wall. There were some 400 to 500 names, and rising. As this report was published, Russian news agencies were putting the total number of wounded at over 600 - and fighting was still continuing.

Relatives and friends chased around searching for their loved ones. Not all the injured were here, as some were taken to hospital in North Ossetia's main town, Vladikavkaz, only 30 kilometres away.

As evening fell, IWPR contributors saw three big refrigerator lorries parked just outside Beslan, apparently waiting to go in to pick up the dead.

Casualty figures varied widely, with some reports talking of at least 150 dead as Russian troops evacuated the living from the school and special forces went from room to room, where pockets of hostage-takers were said to be hiding out - still holding groups of schoolchildren.

"I've seen piles of bodies burning in the gym, many of them dismembered," a member of a civilian rescue team told IWPR. "We wanted to do rescue work there, but it was impossible because we came under fire from two directions. And there was really no chance of saving anyone; the roof of the gym had collapsed and was on fire".

The battle began shortly after 1 pm local time on September 3. In the morning, the fighters had agreed with negotiators that they would allow bodies of the dead around the school to be collected.

Rescuers from Russia's emergencies ministry went into the school and were carrying out two bodies when two powerful explosions went off and part of the roof collapsed.

Then bursts of small-arms fire were heard, and shortly afterwards some freed hostages started to appear. A middle-aged man was one of the first to emerge, covered dirt and wearing just a pair of trousers. "We suddenly heard two explosions and then someone shouted 'run!' - so we ran," he told IWPR.

The official version is that the storming of the school was not planned, but that the military

was forced to act when hostage-takers tried to break out of the building when the rescue team went in to collect the bodies.

People who got out of the school said there an explosion blew a hole in a wall, through which they escaped. It was not clear whether the blast was caused by explosives laid by the hostage-takers, or whether it could have been done by the security forces.

"I was hiding in a house near the school, and my impression is that the storm did not start spontaneously; but rather that it was planned by the security forces," said Elbrus, one of the local men who joined armed groups which formed outside the school.

One by one, ambulances and private cars drove up and went off carrying the people who had just emerged - many of them coated in blood and grime. IWPR saw at least one dead body being taken away in a car, and eyewitnesses said they had seen at least six others.

The gunfire continued from 1pm to at least 6pm. Mostly it was automatic rifle fire, but at times the sound of heavier weapons could be heard. Police radio traffic suggested that some of the attackers had divided up into groups and were now trying to escape from the town.

As the action unfolded, the crowds of people - many of them relatives of hostages - who had been waiting for news outside the building grew increasingly agitated. As the first shots and explosions went off, many cursed the authorities who they believed had initiated a storm of the building.

When the sound of combat was heard inside the school buildings, many of the women outside - and some men, too - wept. "What have they done to us?" said an old man. The crowds milled about, sometimes getting closer to the school and then backing away when the shooting intensified.

Feelings ran high - IWPR saw at least two cases where crowds beat up individuals they thought looked suspicious. In both incidents police waded in and dispersed the mob, preventing a worse fate befalling the two people. One was taken off to a police station, while the other was recognised as a local deaf mute.

As IWPR went to press, it remained unclear how many people might have been held hostage in the school, with local people saying the true number was more than 1,000 - much higher than the official figure of 350. North Ossetia's president Alexander Dzasokhov said on the morning of September 3 - when talks with the hostage takers still appeared to be ongoing - put the figure at 500 or more.

The school roll had close to 900 pupils, plus 50 teachers. In addition, it was the first day of school - September 1 - when the attackers burst in. The special day is marked by celebrations in Russian schools. Therefore many parents were in the building, some with the babies and toddlers seen being allowed to leave the building on September 2.

It was not clear who the attackers were, apart from their obvious links to the Chechen separatist war.

Speaking just an hour and a half before the violence erupted - at a point when Russian officials were still insisting they wanted a negotiated settlement - North Ossetian leader Dzasokhov said the demands made by the hostage-takers were unclear. "They said Chechnya should be separate from Russia, it is an independent state. But they didn't go beyond this

assertion. They didn't say who they would like to talk to, or whatever. My impression is that they are cut off from the outside world," he said.

In its efforts to secure the release of the hostages, Moscow began talking to people whom it formerly considered *persona non grata*.

Both Dzasokhov and former Ingush president Ruslan Aushev spoke by telephone to Akhmed Zakayev, the emissary of pro-independence leader Aslan Maskhadov. As Dzasokhov put it, "I even got permission to contact Maskhadov and talk to him, so yesterday [September 2] I phoned some people in London."

Speaking to the separatist news agency Chechenpress, Zakayev said Maskhadov totally condemned the attack and said they had nothing to do with the hostage-takers.

The Kommersant newspaper in Moscow quoted freed hostages and policemen as saying the hostage-takers introduced themselves as Magas, Fantomas and Abdullah.

The first two are *noms de guerre* of men believed to be associates of the most notorious Chechen warrior Shamil Basayev. Magas is Magomed Yevloyev, an Ingush who organised the bloody raid on Ingushetia on June 22 in which more than 90 people died. Fantomas is a former bodyguard of Basayev, who some believe is an ethnic Russian. The third man, Abdullah, is Vladimir Khodov, who the paper described as "a well-known criminal" from a Muslim family in North Ossetia.

The possibility that some ethnic Ingush were involved in the hostage-taking is likely to inflame the sensitive relations between Ingushetia and North Ossetia, which fought a brief but violent conflict over the disputed Prigorodny district (part of Ossetia) in 1992.

The involvement of Ingushetia's ex-president Aushev in freeing 26 women and small children on September 2 will have calmed some of those passions.

According to the North Ossetian president, a senior official whose own children attend the school refused to ask Aushev to secure their release.

The word is that the official was Taimuraz Mamsurov, speaker of North Ossetian parliament. His son is believed to have escaped, but was wounded. It is not yet known what happened to his daughter.

By Valery DZUTSEV and Alan TSKHURBAYEV. CRS No.250, September 03

Life after Beslan

Vladikavkaz, September 2004

IWPR's North Caucasus editor reflects on the tragic events in North Ossetia.

Everything has changed in North Ossetia since the Beslan siege, and it is impossible to go back to where we were before September 1. It feels as if the image that we once had of the mighty Russian state shielding us from danger has gone - stripped away by the nightmare in Beslan's school No. 1. Life - and death too - now appear governed by a new and outlandish set of rules.

Indeed, the first thing that surprised me when we arrived in Beslan on September 1 was the lack of any build-up of security forces in the town. At first sight, life outside the immediate area of the school seemed quite unaffected by the seizure of the children. The school itself was so closely surrounded by civilians that if the armed men inside the school had suddenly broken out at that point, there would have been plenty of casualties.

I had a sense of the surreal for virtually the whole time I spent standing outside the school, and I am not sure it has left me yet. It often felt as if the whole thing was a performance, and the director would shortly call out, "Well done everyone! You all acted brilliantly, you can go home now!"

But there was a man lying dead in front of the school and there was live gunfire, so sometimes it suddenly seemed all too real.

Some of the parents could not believe that anything bad could happen to their children. Many of them talked about the Chechen war and about pro-independence rebel president Aslan Maskhadov, who they hoped would be able to free their kids. They cursed all political leaders, from North Ossetian and Ingush presidents Alexander Dzasokhov and Murat Zyazikov to Russia's Vladimir Putin.

But officials gave the impression they didn't care, even though people were desperate for the smallest drop of information.

Anger was the most widespread feeling. I spotted it in myself, too. When a fat Ossetian policeman casually told one of the parents in the crowd asking for information, "Look, you're not the only one who has relatives in there," I was amazed he didn't get a slap in the face - I wanted to give him one myself.

But I restrained myself with the thought, "I can't - I'm a journalist, I wouldn't be doing my job and it wouldn't really help anyone." On another occasion, when an official protested that

an argument he had with a parent was filmed on camera, I intervened and told him had no right to complain.

I mostly felt comfortable in my role as a journalist, but I often wanted to be able to do more. A relative of mine had two sons inside the school, and I never told him I was a reporter, somehow thinking it would undermine my expressions of sympathy. Yet I was hardly able to hold back my tears all the time I was there.

I now recall with shame how rarely I prayed to God to come to the rescue of the hostages, and of all of us.

As for my relative's two sons, they found them one of them alive, but badly injured. The other was unaccounted for until a full week after the September 3 disaster, when he - or what was left of him - was recovered from the morgue and buried.

On September 3, the waiting came to an end with two explosions that set off an afternoon of violence. From that moment, the relatives knew that no good news was going to come out of the school. Their wailing was heart-rending and extremely hard to bear.

The former hostages started to arrive in the safe area where we were waiting. I expected a whole tide of them, but there were just several small groups. Not a thousand people, for sure.

Volunteers in private cars quickly took the victims away. Later on I was shocked to hear rumours that some of those volunteers were actually comrades of the hostage-takers, rescuing militants as well as hostages - and that the latter were then found slaughtered in nearby villages. And I was there watching them do it! The police say the rumours are untrue, but the trouble is that no one has much trust in them these days.

There was a strange sense that everyone was going about his business and that the state had very little involvement. Civilians fired guns, rescued hostages, and did anything else they thought right, and no one was really in command.

The only thing the state authorities seemed to do well unfailingly was generate lies. The number of hostages taken was first given as 120, then it grew to 354 - this precise figure apparently given in order to appear more credible. But everyone in Beslan knew there were over 1,000 people inside the school, and this indeed turned out to be the case. One of the former hostages quoted his captor saying, after watching a TV report, "OK, we'll leave 354 and shoot the rest now!"

Moscow steered clear of the crisis and no high-ranking officials came to Beslan until it was all over. The demands of the hostage takers were not made public. Had the demands of the terrorists been made public, had Putin himself come to Beslan and failed to resolve the crisis, he would probably be facing the toughest challenge of his career, in the shape of outraged and despairing parents.

The local, North Ossetian authorities appeared to be following Moscow's directions on how to handle the crisis. It seems that Dzasokhov played by the rules set by the Kremlin, but lost.

If only the lives of innocent people had not been at stake!

The overall impression is that keeping intact certain abstract principles of how the Russian state should operate, and more disturbingly, the tough reputation of the Russian president, were deemed more important than people's lives.

In Beslan I noticed how when the state stops meeting people's basic needs, including the

right to life, they start organising themselves. If the authorities lie all the time, society begins to treat them as an alien organism. Of course, people still long for stability and want the state to deliver it, but they are no longer confident that it will do so.

In North Ossetia, the true identity of the killers has become less important than who they are believed to be - a group of Ingush with a smattering of Chechens.

Rumours and horror stories abound. Many people believe, for example, that women and children were raped in the school, or that the hostage-takers escaped taking some of their captives with them. It is widely believed that many of the people still unaccounted for are in Ingushetia, Chechnya or elsewhere. That leads desperate people whose loved ones are still missing to believe that they will get their children back - and it makes others burn with the desire for revenge.

Someone once said that the invention of nuclear weapons made a world war senseless. I have the same feeling about this hostage taking. A slaughter like this makes all causes meaningless to me, whether they be independence, statehood, sovereignty, dignity or even revenge itself.

"How should we react?" - this question is the greatest challenge now facing Ossetian society.

Taking revenge on people who may be completely innocent would not only be unjust, it would lead straight along the path to war and more bloodshed.

Yet something has to be done, and things cannot be left as they are. One constructive response could be a move for domestic reform within North Ossetia - much needed given the prevalence of corruption and moral decline. But who will take the lead? The corrupt state that has just failed its people? The intelligentsia, who largely serve the interests of the state? Grass-roots organisations, when they simply don't exist? I wonder whether it is at all possible to transform this anger into something positive and constructive.

So far, sadly, the tragedy has merely enabled politicians to resolve other problems. President Dzasokhov sacked a government which had long been said to be ripe for dismissal. By introducing reforms to end the direct election of regional governors and dispense with constituency-based members of parliament, President Putin seems to have deprived the Russian nation of basic democratic rights.

At the moment, no one has ready answers. A hostage who escaped with one of his two small boys told me, "I can see now that my boy will again never be the same as he was before the siege".

I believe none of us will ever be the same again.

By Valery DZUTSEV. CRS No.253, September 15

Freeing of Karabakh military chief stirs debate

Stepanakert, September 2004

There's heated speculation about the significance of the pardoning of an Armenian commander.

News of the release from prison late last month of Karabakh Armenian military leader Samvel Babayan came out of the blue and has provoked a lively debate within both Karabakh and Armenia - stoked by the fact that Babayan himself has refused to comment on his unexpected freedom.

Babayan has a mixed reputation amongst Armenians. When the Karabakh war ended in 1994, he was widely lauded as a military hero and the commander of the entity's Armenian army. After the war, however, he became not only the military leader but the most powerful man in Karabakh overall, controlling its government and economy. His accumulation of more and more power for himself and his despotic tendencies made him many enemies.

Then in 2000 he was accused of organising the assassination attempt on Karabakh president Arkady Gukasian in which Gukasian was wounded. In January 2001, Babayan was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment.

Ever since he went into jail, there have been rumours on the eve of every national holiday that Babayan would be freed. But his actual release came as a surprise. On September 17, Gukasian published a decree saying 13 prisoners in Karabakh had been fully pardoned and 22 partially pardoned. Amongst those named was Babayan.

Babayan himself did not stay in Karabakh for long but left shortly afterwards for Yerevan. People close to him say he intends to leave the former Soviet Union to have treatment for his health, which suffered while he was in captivity.

Neither Gukasian nor any other Karabakh officials have commented publicly on the pardon. A spokesman in the presidential press service told IWPR only that Babayan had been freed because of his "service to the motherland" and because he had served more than a third of his sentence, which made him eligible for release.

For a prisoner to be pardoned he must first write a letter formally request to be forgiven. There has been much speculation in Karabakh as to whether such a letter was written. The Aravot newspaper reported that the letter was written not by Babayan himself, but by his mother. Aravot also reported that the former commander had been banned from holding office in Nagorny Karabakh for another five years.

Iravunk newspaper in Yerevan reported that the decree had been signed on September 2, but that the authorities in Armenia and Karabakh spent two weeks discussing what should be the terms of his release. Iravunk said that in the end no final agreement was reached.

With nothing been said in public, Karabakh Armenians have been actively debating among themselves whether the right decision had been made to set Babayan free.

"The law is the law," said policeman Ashot Gabrielian. "He ought to have served out his full term. I think that by pardoning Babayan, the president simply wanted to improve his ratings with the public and show he is a humane and forgiving ruler."

A former soldier Leonid Sogomonian said of Gukasian's decision, "He simply understood that Babayan had more positive virtues than he made mistakes."

"I think that the pardon was not on the wishes of Gukasian himself but came as a result of pressure from opposition forces in Armenia," said another veteran Vardges Gasparian. "But all the same I would like to believe the former commander did not spend so many years in prison in vain and that he is aware now of all those actions he committed which were unacceptable."

Another subject of lively discussion is what Babayan's freedom means for the unrecognised republic now and whether the former defence minister has a political future.

"I think that a definite condition of the pardoning of Babayan was that Gukasian made him a demand - his freedom in exchange for his neutralisation as a political figure," said businessman Artur Karapetian.

"Maybe this means war?" said pensioner Valena Grigorian. "They didn't just release him for nothing. That means they need him again."

A local analyst in Karabakh, who asked not to be named, said, "It's unlikely that Gukasian was acting under pressure from one group or another. Actually I think Babayan's release is connected with the latest twists in the Karabakh peace process.

"I don't think that Samvel Babayan will make himself known as a political figure again in the near future. He needs time to look around and get used to the situation because after all a lot has changed here in recent years. But I don't think that he will disappear without trace either."

By Karine OHANIAN. CRS No. 255, September 29

Azerbaijan's defenceless child mothers

Masally, November 2004

The law is failing to protect child brides forced into early marriage in southern Azerbaijan.

Fourteen-year old Leila Rustamova (not her real name) was almost speechless when she found out that her father was giving her in marriage to his school friend, a businessman from Russia 23 years her senior. But like many children brought up to obey their elders, Leila complied with her father's will.

After the wedding, and now pregnant by the "uncle" - the term she used for her husband - Leila began suffering from frequent fainting fits. In the fifth month of pregnancy, she went into shock and was rushed to hospital, where the foetus was removed by emergency Caesarean section.

"Because her body -that of a child - was not ready to carry a foetus, the only means of saving the girl was removing the infant surgically," said Leila's surgeon, who asked not to be named.

Experts believe that in the Masally region of southern Azerbaijan, underage marriages are widespread. Girls of 14 and 15 are married off, although the law sets the marriage age for women at 17, and for men at 18.

According to Alizair Aliev, regional head of the bureau of statistics, between 700 and 1,000 legal marriages are recorded in Masally region every year. But experts believe the number of underage marriages exceeds that figure.

"There isn't a village in the region where these marriages do not take place," said doctor and medical expert Mehman Aliev.

The specialists say early marriages are a symptom of economic hardship, since families are then able to rid themselves of an extra mouth to feed.

According to Aliev, who is spokesman for a non-governmental organisation, NGO, called Migrants and Us, there are 30,000 to 40,000 men from Masally region living in other countries. Many have got married there, creating a surplus of unmarried girls back home.

In traditionally-minded homes, a daughter who stays unmarried is viewed as a blow to the family reputation, even a catastrophe.

"That's why, when a matchmaker turns up, and from a wealthy family besides, a marriage is considered even if the girl is 14 years old," said Zaira Bairamova, spokesperson for the NGO My Family. If a girl isn't married by 20, her chances of marriage are drastically reduced, she added.

The bridegrooms are often rich, older Azerbaijanis living in Russia, while the girls are from poor families.

"Such a misalliance suits both families," said Bairamova. The bridegroom gets a wife young enough to be his daughter, and the father of the bride gains a rich relative and access to his money.

Apart from Leila, the Rustamov family has three other daughters. The father, the family's sole breadwinner, only has occasional work. "I wanted my daughter to be happy, but it turned out the opposite," he confessed bitterly.

The young brides often suffer health problems, and also lose out on schooling.

"Some of them lose the ability to have children, and several develop psychological disorders," said Ali-Aslan Alamov, a doctor.

Bairamova commented that many adolescent girls dropped out of school, their absence often going unnoticed. In the village of Arkivan, one girl had been married for two years, yet her name continued to appear on the school roll as if she was attending, and she was even awarded grades.

"The schools are not at fault for this," said a local headmaster. "The parents alone are responsible for the personal lives of their daughters."

In a predominately Shia region close to Iran, some see external influences at work. One observer who asked not to be named suggested that the practice of marrying young girls off was being imported to Azerbaijan.

"That is completely absurd," responded Haji Mirgiyas Tahmazov, a cleric in the southern region. Islam does not prescribe a specific age for marriage, which is instead dependent on physical and psychological maturity.

Tahmazov pointed out that the Council of Qazis, or Islamic judges, part of the government-approved Board of Muslims of the Caucasus, has issued a directive stating that clerics should only allow Muslim weddings if a marriage certificate is presented, and that the approved ages that the religious ages for women and men must correspond to Azerbaijani law and be 17 and 18 years respectively. Moreover religious figures are told to perform wedding ceremonies only after the presentation of a marriage certificate.

But in practice, there are reports that people go through the religious ceremony as a way of sanctioning an otherwise illegal marriage with a minor. For the wife, that creates the additional problem that she is deprived of legal rights. "There is no obligation to settle questions of property and inheritance between the two parties," said independent lawyer, Raj Rajev.

Rajev said giving away 14 to 16 year-old girls in marriage is a criminal act, as articles 152 and 153 of Azerbaijan's Criminal Code stipulate that sex with someone under 16 is punishable by two to three years imprisonment.

The lack of a legal foundation for underage marriages causes problems for the children born from them. Mehman Aliev said that children born from these marriages do not always receive birth certificates - which can delay entry into school - or other allowances granted by the state.

"Moreover, these children are born at home, under unsuitable medical conditions, which often leads to the ill health of the child," he added.

"And what will become of their upbringing? How can a mother who still plays with dolls, with neither education nor skills in child-rearing, provide a valuable citizen to society?" asked Bairamova.

Bairamova says that the girls suffering from this practice are currently defenceless. Azerbaijani NGOs fighting for women's rights can be counted on the fingers of one hand. A partial solution, she suggests, would be the establishment of a Women's Crisis Centre in the Masally region, where child brides could at least receive professional advice.

Leila's father is now in Russia with her husband. She has recovered from her illness. A large brick-red doll with golden hair and blue eyes is her only consolation.

Still a child herself, she is overcome with tears when she hears the joyful squeals of children playing on the street.

By Zamin TAIROV. CRS No.261, November 10

SAMIR ALIEV



Early marriages are more common than legal ones in Azerbaijan

Abkhazia's political roulette goes on

Sukhum, November 2004

Even seizing the presidential palace is not enough to bring the opposition to power.

When a huge crowd of supporters of Abkhaz opposition politician Sergei Bagapsh seized government buildings in the republic's capital Sukhum last week, they believed the disputed presidency would finally fall into their leader's hands. They were wrong.

Instead of bringing Abkhazia's election debacle to an end, the dramatic seizure of the presidential palace, the government building and the parliament proved to be just another twist in an unfinished story.

The latest escalation of the crisis began when the rival camps of Bagapsh and the pro-government candidate in the October 3 election, Raul Khajimba, called out their supporters early on Friday, November 12. About 10,000 Bagapsh loyalists gathered on Freedom Square. Some 500 Khajimba supporters demonstrated next to the presidential building.

Just a day earlier, there was an attempt to negotiate a solution to the power struggle, when outgoing president Vladislav Ardzinba had a three-hour meeting with Bagapsh and Khajimba.

Both sides have for weeks stuck to their claims of election victory. The electoral commission and supreme court have confirmed that Bagapsh won. Khajimba's call for a rerun of the vote also received backing from the supreme court - but only after his supporters stormed the building and, according to the chief justice, forced the court's hand.

Khajimba's entourage has not revealed the content of the discussions with Ardzinba. However, Daur Tarba, a parliamentary leader and a member of Bagapsh's election team, said that Ardzinba, who is gravely ill, but continues to command respect, insisted on new elections. Bagapsh reiterated his refusal, saying he had already won and that fresh elections could not be held in a calm atmosphere, given the weeks of tension. Instead, he offered Khajimba a "very high post" in any future government.

According to Tarba, Ardzinba unexpectedly gave his approval to this proposal, but added that it was up to the two candidates to sort out their problems. Khajimba - according to Tarba - warned that he would need time to persuade his supporters to abandon the idea of repeat elections.

Talks were suspended until the following day, when they took place as the rival demonstra-

tions were under way. Bagapsh was on the podium in Freedom Square when his mobile phone rang, and he soon left for the Galereya café, where he met again with Khajimba. Half an hour later, he was back at the square: Khajimba wanted a short delay. At 3 pm, the two rivals met again, but for no more than 10 minutes.

"A compromise with the government was not reached," Bagapsh told supporters. "We will pursue dialogue, we will act within the limits of the law."

But his words were drowned out by a huge chant, "Enough talks! Enough waiting! Let's decide this today!"

With that, the crowd broke into two columns which moved off in the direction of the presidential palace.

Within ten minutes, the crowd had arrived, and the opposition demonstrators moved away from the building to a lawn opposite. As punch-ups broke out in the entrance to the building, the prime minister, Nodar Khashba, and Khajimba himself, left through a back door.

Bagapsh's supporters finally broke through and entered the presidential palace. Guards fired into the air. Ricochet bullets lightly injured two opposition members and fatally wounded a 78-year-old woman, Tamara Shakryl - a famous academic and human rights campaigner who was a supporter of Khajimba. She died in hospital three hours later.

Adding to the tension, special forces soldiers positioned nearby raised their rifles, and only an order from first deputy prime minister Astamur Tarba to "put weapons away" defused the situation. The government complex was now fully in opposition hands.

Inside, Bagapsh activists found some liquor for a brief, impromptu celebration before their leaders asked them to leave and place all the offices under guard. Before leaving, someone managed to use chewing gum to stick a papersign on a door reading "Prime Minister [Alexander] Ankvab", in reference to a leading member of the opposition alliance.

At about 5 pm, Bagapsh came to the building - but, to everyone's surprise, he was accompanied by Khajimba. After a half-hour meeting in the prime minister's office, Khajimba emerged looking despondent and left.

Bagapsh was conciliatory.

"We are one people and we will make a common front against all our enemies. We are not planning to pursue anyone. Enough shake-ups. Raul Khajimba is my younger friend, he is my younger brother, and we will work together," he said, to applause from his supporters.

Bagapsh then called on everyone to return home. Within minutes, the square outside was empty but for a few dozen armed Bagapsh guards.

Control over the government buildings was handed back to police, while Bagapsh supporters held the area around them.

On Monday, November 15, more than half the government staff turned up, including vice president Valery Arshba. However, prime minister Khashba, did not appear in protest at the continued presence of armed supporters of Bagapsh.

The Russian government, which had thrown its support behind Khajimba's candidacy, said it was alarmed, and threatened intervention to protect Moscow's "interests."

The storming of the government building was "an attempt at forcefully seizing power by the supporters of one presidential candidate," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander

Yakovenko. "Such illegal, forceful actions worry Moscow" and threaten instability "in Abkhazia and across the region as a whole", he said.

Yakovenko warned that if the crisis continued, "the Russian side will be forced to take the necessary measures to protect its interests".

There were also tough words from Ardzinba and prime minister Nodar Khashba, who said what had happened was "an armed coup".

One of Bagapsh's closest allies, Leonid Lakerbaia, who is leader of the Aitaira movement, denied that there had been a coup, since no one had seized power. "This did not happen and must not happen," he said. "Sergei Bagapsh was elected president, as confirmed decisions by the electoral commission and supreme court. He will take up his duties after the inauguration on December 6."

The endpoint in this long-running struggle may now be that inauguration, when Bagapsh is likely to declare himself the lawful president - whether Khajimba agrees or not.

Khajimba, whom supporters describe as being depressed, is still believed to be able to count on the presidential guard and a special forces unit for support.

His opponent appears to have won over most of the police force. Earlier this month, 250 interior ministry members declared their support. The defence ministry has declared neutrality.

By Inal KHASHIG. CRS No.262, November 17

VLADIMIR POPOV



Hot autumn weather in Abkhazia

Anger spills over in Karachai-Cherkessia

Cherkessk, November 2004

Furious crowd occupies president's office after seven dismembered bodies are found in a pit.

President Vladimir Putin's envoy is seeking to defuse a growing crisis in the North Caucasian republic of Karachai-Cherkessia after angry demonstrators occupied the president's office for two days.

It was the second time in a month that angry locals stormed the government headquarters of Karachai-Cherkessia, one of Russia's most ethnically diverse autonomous republics.

They are demanding the resignation of the president, Mustafa Batдыеv, who they allege was involved in the deaths of seven young men in what has become a highly politicised quarrel.

The seven men, all from influential affluent Karachai families, went missing on October 10 after being invited to the villa of the president's son-in-law Ali Kaitov, who was subsequently arrested and charged with murder. His wife, the president's daughter, has sued for divorce. (See "Karachai-Cherkessia in Turmoil by Akhmat Ebzeyeв, CRS No. 260, November 4 2004)

On November 8, the seven bodies were recovered from a pit in a hill 70 kilometres south of the republic's capital Cherkessk. After being tipped off by Kaitov's bodyguards, the detectives removed rocks blocking the entrance to the pit, and retrieved the dismembered and burned remains of the seven men. The bodies, which could not be immediately identified, were sent for examination to a laboratory in Rostov.

The prosecutor's office is investigating a link between the murders and the controversial privatisation of the Tsakhilov Chemicals Factory in Cherkessk. Kaitov's lawyers were unavailable for comment.

Angered by the news of the discovery of the bodies, a group of relatives tried to hold a demonstration on the morning of November 9 in Cherkessk's main square. However, the rally could not start because there was no electricity to power the sound amplification equipment, and a number of invited government officials failed to appear.

"They cut the power to stop our protest," Khalit Bairamukov, one of the organisers, yelled into his loudspeaker in the Karachai language - and this sounded like a battle call to the wailing women.

The 6,000-strong crowd turned on the government building, the White House, although only several dozen attacked. The police guards used teargas and water jets to repel the crowd, but did not open fire.

The crowd spent about an hour smashing up the ground floor of the White House before they reached the presidential offices. Batdjev had already escaped through a back door and his office was empty.

The insurgents occupied the president's suite for two days. Many of the women were weak from fasting over Ramadan, and their clothes had been drenched by water jets. This, coupled with the emotional strain, took its toll on the occupants' health. The president's office was suffused with the odour of a cheap heart medicine, and one of the victims' relatives - a 36-year-old man - died in the ambulance that had come to pick him up from the government compound.

The besiegers soon revealed that they also had a political agenda. When Russia's deputy prosecutor general Nikolai Shepel arrived to negotiate, he was told that last year's election in Karachai-Cherkessia had been rigged, and that former president General Vladimir Semyonov had been unjustly removed from office.

Batdjev, former head of the national bank of the republic and Semyonov, former head of Russian ground forces, are both ethnic Karachais, who head two powerful political groupings in a divided region.

On November 11, Putin's envoy Dmitry Kozak - who is the presidential representative for the entire North Caucasus - arrived and held five hours of talks with the demonstrators, after which he convinced them to leave without conceding to any of their demands.

"There can be no question of any dialogue as long as you are here," Kozak told them. "I have kept all my promises about the investigation into the murder of your family members. All those accused have been arrested, and the bodies have been found.

"As for your political demands, they cannot be met. We will not allow a precedent to be created that could lead to civil war."

Oleg Safonov, an aide to Kozak, reinforced this message, telling IWPR, "There's no doubt that standing behind the relatives who stormed the government house, there are forces which present a danger not only to the republic and for the southern regions, but to Russia as a whole."

Batdjev, who showed up at Kozak's request, promised to resign if the official investigation determined he had played a role in covering up the killings. But few took his promise seriously, and the day after the attack on his office, the president vehemently denounced the actions of the victims' families in parliament and threatened criminal proceedings.

A former Semyonov loyalist, parliamentary deputy Islam Krymshamkhalov, put the blame squarely on Batdjev.

"This is not an interethnic conflict because both parties are Karachai," he said. "But it's not a political conflict either. We are talking about a crime in which the president's family is mixed up, and which has provoked mass disorder."

In the mean time, the relatives have begun their own inquiry into the financial activities of the president and the government.

"We understand that the Kremlin wants to keep Batdyev as president, perhaps temporarily until Putin's constitutional amendments take effect and enable him to appoint and remove governors," said Svetlana Gerugova, the mother of one of the victims, referring to plans to abolish direct elections for the heads of regions in Russia.

"But maybe they need him for some other purpose. However that may be, we cannot live with a president like this, so we will continue to push for his removal from office by any means necessary."

The attack on the government headquarters was an almost exact repeat of an episode on October 21, when the families of the missing men invaded the same building. On that occasion, too, Kozak persuaded the relatives to leave by promising them an impartial investigation into the disappearance of the young men.

The Russian prosecutor general's office then sent in an investigative team headed by General Boris Karnaukhov, which arrested 15 suspects within 12 days, including the president's son-in-law Kaitov, six local police officers and homicide detective Kamal Veziev.

The latest turmoil will focus attention on what is one of Russia's most ignored trouble spots. On November 12, Vladimir Kulakov, deputy chairman of the North Caucasus commission in the upper house of parliament, the Federation Council, described recent events in Cherkessk as "brigandage, a kind of lawlessness that is happening with the tacit agreement of the law enforcement agencies".

Kulakov added that in the past five years, more than 200 people had died and more than 500 had disappeared in the Karachai-Cherkess republic, which has a population of fewer than half a million people.

By Fatima TLISOVA. CRS No.262, November 17

Ajaria: Concern over missing funds

Batumi, November 2004

Public discontent with Tbilisi's new regime in Ajaria mounts, not helped by officials' refusal to talk about where revenues have gone.

Prison Number Three in the western Georgian region of Ajaria was meant for 250 people but currently holds 341 inmates, most of them members of the administration thrown out earlier this year.

These officials, who left office after Ajarian president Aslan Abashidze was ejected from the Black Sea region in May this year, are being held on charges of tax evasion or misappropriating government funds.

When an IWPR contributor visited the jail, the prisoners all voiced the same request - just to have enough air to breathe in the cramped conditions.

But prison governor of jail David Gogmachadze was unapologetic about the squeeze, saying, "Even if they bring in twice as many prisoners, I will fold them up like napkins and imprison them nevertheless. You can't do anything about it. All the prisons are overcrowded in Georgia."

Not that the fate of unpopular former officials worries the public much these days - many people think it serves them right.

However, there is more concern about the fate of the thousands of dollars which disgraced officials are handing over as compensation for their alleged crimes. Officially, the money is supposed to go to the Georgian treasury, but there are accusations that funds are going instead to an institution called the Fund for the Development of Ajaria, about which little is known.

The struggle against corruption has been at the heart of Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili's policies since he overthrew Eduard Shevardnadze last year. When Shevardnadze departed, so did most of the political and economic elite around him.

By the time Saakashvili was elected president in January, dozens of former top officials and businessmen accused of tax evasion were already being investigated and jailed.

Many were subsequently freed after they paid large fines.

The money they handed over was channelled into the government budget, but critics of the scheme say that it has been less than transparent.

In Ajaria, the development fund set up after Abashidze's departure has come in for particular scrutiny by local non-government organisations, NGOs, which say that six months on, they still know nothing about it, except that it was set up by the incoming Ajarian regional government and the republic's new leader, Levan Varshalomidze.

The local Gazeta Batumelebi newspaper has repeatedly asked both the fund's managers and Varshalomidze to provide details of its incomes and expenditures, yet officials remain tight-lipped, offering little more than confirmation that the fund actually exists.

IWPR has been told by a source close to the fund that all the money it receives is transferred to the central government in Tbilisi. "You should understand that Levan [Varshalomidze] cannot speak about this openly," said this source.

The newspaper has filed a lawsuit to find out where the impounded money is.

"If the fund holds monies that should have been transferred to the budget, that's a crime," said Kakha Palavandishvili, of the Batumi branch of the Georgian Young Lawyers' Association. "If we are able to obtain documentary proof of the public's suspicions, we [too] will file a suit."

Not all fines entering the Ajarian account come from former high-ranking officials. A group of customs officers serving at the Sarpi checkpoint on the border with Turkey paid a total of 10,000 dollars to avoid further detention after they were accused of allowing a freight consignment to cross the border without the proper formalities being completed.

"Why was it necessary to handcuff us?" asked one of the detained officers interviewed by IWPR. "Let them say the country needs it and we'll pay up. We had to collect the sum from friends and relatives, because customs officers are by no means rolling in luxury, as the authorities believe."

Saakashvili defends the system of allowing allegedly corrupt officials to pay and go free. "It's better to have corrupt officials and mafia bosses out of prison but without the money, than having them in jail yet still in possession of it, and a cellphone," he told journalists.

He said the huge fines had replenished empty government coffers. For example, the former head of national railways had paid over eight million dollars, enough to fund repairs to five major stations. The former roads chief had paid about 3.6 million dollars, while Shevardnadze's son in law, a businessman, paid at least 26 million dollars in back taxes - "enough to pay back two months of pension arrears", said the president.

But the lack of transparency is fuelling rumours that the money is finding its way into the pockets of the new generation of officials.

Many NGOs in Ajaria say the new authorities are as unwilling to disclose information as the officials who served Abashidze.

Paata Mgeladze, leader of the Batumi branch of the Party of Industrialists, said that the regional leadership is not supportive of Ajarian interests, "None of them is speaking openly about the drastically reduced budget, or about the republic [Ajaria] losing its real autonomy."

As an example, Mgeladze claimed that President Saakashvili's order to increase the wages of traffic police as a way of reducing bribery was simply not being implemented in Ajaria.

Traffic police in Kobuleti told IWPR that over the past four months they have been paid only 40 lari (approximately 20 dollars) a month instead of the promised 400 lari.

"We were told that 400 lari is the salary for Tbilisi only. It has been reduced to 200 in Batumi and even less in Kobuleti. But we're not even receiving that amount. Each of us is owed 1,000-1,200 lari," said a young policeman, who asked not to be named.

The policemen said they were sure the Georgian president was unaware of their problem.

However, Emzar Paksadze, a language and literature teacher in the Khulo district, said he felt deceived, and he holds Saakashvili to blame, "The president has said he loves the Ajarians. Yet for some reason, all the top officials in the security agencies are from Tbilisi. A lot of us have the impression that the president has dispatched punitive units. Even the Communists did not display such a lack of trust in the Ajarians."

Hostility to law-enforcement chiefs brought in from outside came to a head after police dispersed a demonstration in Batumi, held to protest against the arrests of the local government chiefs in Khulo and Shuakhevi districts, Nodar Kartsivadze and Otar Tsetskhladze, both of whom were popular locally.

There was strong criticism of Giorgi Papuashvili, appointed by Tbilisi as Ajaria's interior ministry chief.

Nestan Tsetskhladze, a reporter for the Rustavi-2 television channel, said, "Papuashvili used Aslan Abashidze's methods. He blocked off entry points to the city. Masked men tried to smash cameras and attacked journalists standing near the courthouse."

Papuashvili subsequently turned down a summons from the Ajarian parliament to account for his actions.

The incident highlighted the broader tensions which have accompanied the imposition of Tbilisi's will on this once wayward part of the country. It is a process diplomatically described as a "redistribution of spheres of influence" by the Ajarian media.

The state-run media is itself undergoing similar turmoil: the authorities are taking radical steps to reform broadcast and print outlets that - with a few exceptions - used to toe the Abashidze line.

In a surprise move, 120 staff from the Ajarian Television and Radio and the Achara newspaper were dismissed in early November.

Some journalists who had hoped for a new era of freedom are disappointed by the changes.

"The TV station was able to work properly for just two months," complained Anano Sirabidze, one of the sacked television reporters, predicting a return to the culture of slavish compliance with which local journalists are all too familiar.

Sibaridze said she was removed for being too critical of the new order, "Initially, the leadership tried to hinder me from broadcasting comments by NGOs and political organisations opposed to the Ajarian government, and now they have simply sacked me."

She claimed that Avto Gadakhabidze, the deputy chairman of Ajarian TV, told her "that I am against the people because I am against the president's decisions".

Gadakhabidze told IWPR that the journalists were dismissed for professional reasons, "We are in fact shaping a new television, and this is happening as an initiative by the president [Saakashvili] and the Ajarian leadership."

By Eter TURADZE. CRS No. 263, November 25

Georgian church letter raises storm

Tbilisi, December 2004

The Georgian Orthodox Church rejects criticism that it is abusing its special status in society.

Twenty-three Georgian seminary students have drawn the wrath of the church leadership in Tbilisi for an open letter that called for reforms in the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The row comes as a group of Georgian parents is seeking an enhanced role for the church in schools.

The seminary students complained that church figures had a poor level of spiritual education and limited world view and condemned corruption within the church.

After the letter was published in the Georgian daily newspaper 24 Hours, the signatories said they were angrily denounced by their teachers in the seminary and threatened with expulsion.

"He who criticises the church is speaking against sacred things and against God," a spokesman for the Patriarchate told IWPR.

"This is a fight against the church because you cannot fight on its behalf with these kind of disgraceful allegations," a church official, who did not want to be named, said. "We are going to study in detail the problems which the students raised but we are declining to comment publicly on them. Church matters are church matters."

The public is broadly backing the church against the students. "We shouldn't forget that in the times of change in which we live a stable institution like the church is absolutely essential," said Rismag Gordeziani, a history professor at Tbilisi State University. "You can't use the same laws against the church, which you use in ordinary life."

"They want to hurt the Georgian Orthodox Church and to split it up," said Mikhail Kurdiani, a literature scholar, blaming outsiders for organising the letter and saying, "He who pays the piper calls the tune."

Koba Davitashvili, a leading opposition member of parliament, went further, blaming organisations who "want to destroy the Georgian Orthodox Church". "Behind this stands the non-governmental organisation the Liberty Institute and the security ministry of Georgia," he said.

President Mikheil Saakashvili himself weighed into the debate on the side of the church, accusing the media of irresponsibility for their coverage of the letter.

"The state should not interfere into the business of the church," Saakashvili said. "I want to ask journalists to be more careful in the way they cover religious issues."

Saakashvili came to power pledging to crack down on religious extremism. The renegade

priest Father Basil Mkalashvili, who had organised violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious minorities, was arrested and these attacks ceased.

However, while welcoming this, some experts are worried at what they see as a general rise in religious intolerance within society.

Naira Gelashvili, a writer who heads the non-governmental Caucasian House, said, "I first noticed that a trend of aggressive religious faith was growing in society early last year when politicians and media, who had completely ignored the beating up of Jehovah's Witnesses by Orthodox believers, attacked a group of writers and leaders of non-governmental organisations who had signed an inoffensive letter to the Patriarch asking him to respond to the fundamentalist statements and actions of some figures in the church."

This September, at the beginning of the new academic year, new Orthodox organisations appeared in schools, saying they wanted to oversee the educational programme and exclude from it subjects such as sex education.

Representatives of the Union of Orthodox Parents have been picketing the education ministry, demanding that the history of Orthodoxy be added to the curriculum.

"We respect representatives of other religions, but no one should forget that they live in Georgia, an Orthodox country," Jondi Bagaturia, a member of the union told IWPR. "And many people want to make Orthodoxy a religion of the minority."

The Georgian Orthodox Church has had a special status in the country since 2002 when the state and church signed a special concordat. The document said that the church was an "essential foundation for the revival of the country" and gave the church special commercial privileges.

While few dispute the special place of a church in Georgia which dates back 16 centuries, it remains a country in which 30 per cent of the population - notably its large Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities - belongs to other confessions and religions.

The students who signed the letter say the church is abusing its special place in society.

"The deplorable situation we have now is a result of a policy of silence which has lasted for many years," Beka Mindiniashvili, one of the signatories of the letter.

"It's no secret that a lot of money is changing hands for the performing of church rituals such as weddings, baptisms and funerals," he said. "In big city churches the rates being asked are absolutely huge. They even take money for hearing confession."

Paata Zakareishvili a well-known political analyst and theologian, condemned what he called the church's "mafia mentality" and said it badly needed reform.

"Society has to raise its voice and discuss the problems of the church as actively as possible," he said. "And we shouldn't be afraid of a schism in the church. That will happen only if the church cannot free itself of its spiritual and moral darkness."

The students have received the backing of Georgia's state ombudsman Sozar Subari, himself a former seminary student, who said, "The reaction to the students' letter worries me a great deal. It's no surprise that the seminary students are

discussing the state of the Orthodox Church. If they don't, who else should do it? And every citizen has the constitutional right to express his opinion, regardless of where he is a student."

The students say that they received a final warning from their rector Teodor Chuadze to stop their complaints.

By Sofo BUKIA. No.264, December 1

Chechnya: Ten years of violence

Grozny, December 2004

Chechens reflect on the anniversary of a war that has shattered homes and lives.

Ten years ago, on December 11, 1994, Russian troops entered Chechnya in what was officially called a campaign for the "restoration of constitutional order".

For Chechens, the Russian military intervention a decade ago was the moment their society was plunged into a cycle of violence that continues - although in reduced form - today.

Until the last minute, few believed that Russian president Boris Yeltsin would resort to a military assault to remove the regime of Jokhar Dudayev, who proclaimed independence from Russia in 1991.

"If Yeltsin hadn't sent troops to Chechnya in 1994, things could have evolved according to a very different scenario," said a professor at Grozny State University, who did not want to be quoted by name. "In fact, Dudayev had never said openly that Chechnya wanted to secede from Russia. He wanted more independence for Chechnya as part of the Russian state. No more, no less."

Talking about the Russian attack of December 1994, the professor said, "I recall the words of [French diplomat Charles] Talleyrand: 'It was worse than a crime; it was a mistake'."

An initial attempt to overthrow Dudayev failed on November 26, 1994, when Chechen opposition fighters with Russian support entered Grozny but were defeated by Dudayev's troops. More than a hundred prisoners were captured, including a dozen Russian army officers.

Negotiations followed, but already Moscow was gearing up for a full-scale invasion.

On December 11, despite an agreement between Dudayev and Moscow to enter into peace talks scheduled to take place the following day in Mozdok, North Ossetia, Russian federal army divisions poured into Chechnya from three different directions.

Hussein Iskhonov, a former aide to rebel president Aslan Maskhadov and member of the Chechen parliament, says the intervention was "highly unnecessary and provocative".

"Dudayev was prepared to offer significant concessions to Moscow to avoid bloodshed," said Iskhonov. "Peace talks had been scheduled for December 12 in Mozdok, but Russia instead launched its massive invasion on December 11. Now peace talks were out of the question."

A decade on, the nature of the Chechen conflict has changed substantially.

One shift is that radical Islamic sentiments are growing amongst Chechen youth. While

"Freedom or Death" was a popular slogan among Chechen fighters during the first campaign of 1994-96, you are more likely to hear "Victory or Paradise" now.

"Over the past 10 years, Russia has shown that its real aim is the physical elimination of the Chechen people," said Grozny resident Aslanbek, aged 25, who has spent his entire adult life surrounded by conflict. "In 1994, when the Russian army came to Chechnya to 'restore constitutional order', it destroyed half of Grozny, dozens of smaller towns and thousands of civilians.

"In 1999, the same army came back to 'fight terrorism' with even more disastrous consequences. Grozny has been annihilated. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and maimed, or have gone missing, and it's not over yet. The Chechens have no choice but to defend themselves."

Aslanbek is a member of a Grozny-based "jamaat", a group of radical Islamic militant fighters commonly known here as "Wahhabis".

"Russia is fighting us on every level: militarily, in ideology and religion," he said. "All you have to do is turn your TV on to see that this is true. They often show Russian priests blessing the soldiers going to Chechnya, calling them 'Christ's warriors', What else can you call this if not a religious war?"

Another change is that the conflict has turned into a civil war within Chechen society.

"Security forces are hunting militants and sympathisers, destroying civilians indiscriminately in the process," said the professor in Grozny. "For their part, the militants target law enforcers and government officials.

"But behind each dead Chechen, be it a militant or a government employee, stand his family and friends. Our supreme [traditional] law says 'blood for blood'. That means the carnage will go on for years or even decades to come."

As well as the immediate violence, warfare has had a massive impact on society and the economy in Chechnya. As the professor said, "No good ever comes out of any war. A war brings devastation, bloodshed and disaster; it degrades morality and destroys the soul. We in Chechnya have suffered all of this.

"The republic is decades behind in economic terms. The official unemployment rate is over 70 per cent. More and more young people are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Not to mention the thousands of people dead or missing, disabled and orphaned. That's what this war has cost our people."

The conflict has affected the lives of every person in Chechnya -- mainly ordinary civilians like Aminat Aduyeva, a 53-year-old woman from the Kurchaloi region.

"During the first war I lost a brother," she said. "In the second war my son died and my nephew disappeared without trace. They weren't fighters or terrorists or Wahhabis.... There are lots of people in Chechnya like me."

"As a mother and a woman, I cannot understand why Russian soldiers and Chechen lads should kill one another. Who needs it? If Putin and Russia are so bothered by [rebel leaders Aslan] Maskhadov or [Shamil] Basayev, why do our children have to die?"

"When will it all finally end, I want to know. When will they stop destroying us, let us live, give us a chance to live like normal people, bring up and educate our children, and build houses? I no longer have any hope that I will live to see that day."

By Umut DUDAYEV. CRS No.265, December 08

Azerbaijan's hidden lepers

Umbaki, January 2003

Forgotten by the outside world, 36 leprosy sufferers are fading away quietly in the small Azerbaijani village of Umbaki.

Every morning, the women of Umbaki draw their eyebrows with black eyeliner in front of the mirror, striving to recreate the features they have lost. Their withered fingers often disobey them, and their faces end up looking like eerie masks.

Here, in Azerbaijan's Gobistan desert, whether by accident or design, the former and current patients of the Umbaki leprosarium, 80 km from Baku, are now virtually forgotten by the outside world and receive little government or international help.

The centre's 36 inmates will be celebrating World Leprosy Day on January 26, but there will be no cameras recording the event: patients refuse to be photographed. "We don't want time to be fixed," one of them told us. "It stretches like an eternity anyway."

The first and only facility for leprosy sufferers in the southern Caucasus was established in the capital in 1926 to house upwards of 300 lepers from Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The hospice was relocated several times before it was moved to the outskirts of the village of Umbaki in 1957. Azerbaijan's only leprosy doctor, Vagif Abdinov, who was head physician at the Umbaki hospice until the mid-1990s, told IWPR that the leprosarium has fallen on hard times.

The buildings are in dilapidated, the large club and the library have both gone. But the worst thing is the centre's diagnostic laboratory has been out of operation for five years. "This means that new patients will have to travel overseas to have their diagnosis confirmed and the nearest similar facility is in Astrakhan, Russia," Abdinov said.

Doctors from Turkey's National Association for Leper Assistance and other international organisations, such as *Médecins sans Frontières*, occasionally visit the Umbaki inmates. But, compared to wages in Baku, salaries for doctors here are low and there is little incentive for medical staff to come from the capital to work.

The Umbaki complex consists of four ramshackled single-story buildings with a verdant courtyard, surrounded by a high fence. The only way to the colony is on a rickety bus, which makes the round trip here from Baku once a day.

Access to the compound is restricted. Journalists are only allowed inside by written permission of the minister of health. The few reporters who have seen the inside of these walls have come under the auspices or together with international charities.

Reluctant to go through the bureaucratic ordeal of obtaining a permit, we decided to risk going to Umbaki independently. To our astonishment, we simply walked in and no one tried to stop us.

The current residents are all elderly people. The oldest is 85.

Zarifa Seidova, 60, is one of the veterans of the leprosarium. She has no eyebrows or eyelashes. Her face is lifeless with puffs around the eyes. Her fingers are crooked.

Zarifa, a mother of three perfectly healthy daughters, was sent to the colony 36 years ago, and gave birth to her fourth daughter here. She went to a regular maternity hospital during her pregnancy, and the doctors took her daughter, and sent Zarifa back to Umbaki. She visits her grown-up children every year.

Leprosy is a germ-based disease that attacks the extremities of a person's body. It makes a person's face large, bloated and covered with sores. You can no longer identify the eyes, the nose or find the eyebrows on such a face.

A Leper's arms and legs gradually lose feeling. They feel no pain, heat or cold. Their nerve ends, skin and muscle cells die, and their bones crumble.

Leprosy is now a fully treatable disease and in most cases in Azerbaijan it has been halted before doing great damage to sufferers. Official statistics show that no one has contracted the disease in the country for 10 years.

In addition to the Umbaki inmates, there are 55 other lepers registered in Azerbaijan, who are allowed to stay with their families. All are required to visit the colony for examination every year. The main problem for the Umbaki patients is that there are not enough medicines to treat them - and that they remain the victims of fear and prejudice.

The lepers know only too well that healthy people are afraid of them and are grateful to those who are brave enough to greet them with a handshake.

Families are allowed to visit at any time, but they rarely come, so the inmates do their best to make their life at the hospice as comfortable as they can. Some breed poultry and rabbits.

They celebrate holidays like everyone else, building fires at Novruz, the spring festival, and slaughtering sacrificial animals at Kurban Bairam. They are even permitted to drink a little alcohol on holidays.

Once one of the patients made a bet with his fellow inmates that he would find and marry a healthy woman. And he did. He wed one of the hospice nurses. "This happened more than 30 years ago. They have healthy children now who come to visit their father at the hospice. They are not afraid of contracting leprosy by being around us," one patient told IWPR.

Most of the residents of Umbaki end their days here, and are buried at the unkempt, overgrown cemetery next to the hospice.

The head doctor of the Umbaki leprosarium, Vidadi Aliev, refused to meet us. When they finally found out we were journalists, the nurses said we should leave immediately. "This is a restricted area, and our head physician's policy is never to talk to journalists," they said.

It is a small consolation for Umbaki that it does not lack for natural gas or water. The local government has ensured a steady supply of both.

Nor is the centre likely to close soon, if only because it is the only employer in Umbaki and paying steady wages, employing over 30 locals in a variety of capacities, from janitor to nurse. The locals also help the inmates work their vegetable patch and take care of their farm animals.

"The hospice is a desirable place to work, paying higher wages than others. Nurses earn about 30 US dollars a month, doctors up to 60," said Tofik Poladov, the head of the village administration of Umbaki.

By Shahla ABUSATTAR and Mamed SULEIMANOV. CRS No.62, January 17

Pankisi gorge: Chechens fear backlash

Duisi, January 2003

Chechen refugees fear they will be the losers in Georgia's campaign to clear the Pankisi Gorge of Islamic militants.

The first thing that strikes a modern-day visitor to the Pankisi Gorge is the heavy police presence. Men in camouflage guarding a checkpoint with concrete blocks and bonfires stand at the entrance to the 30-kilometre-long valley.

But if for the outside world the increased Georgian law enforcement presence represents a new push to restore order in a valley that has acquired a notorious reputation for harbouring Islamic extremists, it is making the Chechen refugees who live in the Pankisi feel very unsafe.

Last week, in Duisi, the main village in the gorge, Chechen refugees protested over their poor conditions and security fears.

"Last autumn, five Chechens who had come to the Pankisi illegally from Chechnya were handed over to Moscow, even though they were ready to suffer any punishment in Georgia," said Aslanbek Abdurzakov, a human rights activist who was organised the protest.

He said that the climate in Georgia had worsened for Chechens since a mass round-up in Tbilisi in early December. (See CRS 159, 12 Dec 2002.)

"By holding this rally, the refugees are trying to draw Georgian and western attention to their plight," Abdurzakov said. "The authorities in Georgia are changing their policies under pressure from abroad and Chechens are worried that they could be pawns."

Since 1999, the Pankisi Gorge has housed several thousand Chechen refugees who fled Russia's second military campaign in Chechnya. They chose the valley because it is home to their ethnic kin, the Kists, whose ancestors fled Chechnya for Georgia in the 19th century.

This little-known valley 70 km from Tbilisi shot to prominence last year when it won a reputation for being a centre for kidnapping and a base for Chechen fighters and Islamic militants linked to al-Qaeda. Last summer, the Russian airforce bombed the gorge and the Georgian security forces moved to reassert control over it.

Recently, it has been claimed that two groups of suspected militants from North Africa arrested in Paris and London over the past two months, one possessing the deadly toxin ricin, had trained in the Pankisi.

In the past, the Georgian authorities always downplayed this kind of allegations, but two weeks ago Georgian security minister Valery Khabardzania admitted for the first time that until last year the Pankisi had indeed been a haven for around 700 Chechen fighters as well as 100 Arabs, led by a commander named Amjet or Abu Hapsi, who may have had links to Osama Bin-Laden.

The ministry said there was a satellite communications centre and extreme Wahhabi schools preaching fundamentalist Islam.

"Today the region is fully under the control of the Georgian security forces," interior minister Koba Narchemashvili said on January 28 after a visit to the Pankisi. "But we do not intend to withdraw our interior forces for the time being, as we can't rule out the possibility of provocations."

On the same day, Georgian border guards chief Valery Chkheidze warned, "Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev's group may make an attempt to cross into Georgia, as they did several years ago."

Georgian military analyst Irakly Aladishvili said that the authorities in Tbilisi were afraid of a new influx of guerrillas this spring.

"(Russian president Vladimir) Putin came to power by beginning the Chechen campaign," Aladishvili said. "The best way for him now is to solve the problem any way he can before the next elections in 2004. So there is a real threat that Chechen armed groups will be squeezed onto the territory of Georgia, when the snows melt in the mountains."

Many Georgians are also worried that Moscow will use the cover of a United States-led war in Iraq to carry out military strikes across the Chechnya-Georgia border.

Chechens in the Pankisi do not deny that until recently they had extremists living among them - but complain that the timing of the disclosures is politically motivated.

"Who needs all these new revelations?" asked Baudi Itayev, a Chechen refugee in Duisi. "We are already guessing what comes next. The security forces now say that they knew all about the Chechen and Arab fighters. Why did they lie for such a long time, almost a whole year, and say there were no fighters here - and in that case can we believe them now?"

The refugees are now being made to feel unwelcome, even from Georgians who sympathised with them in the past.

"The Chechen refugees have created enormous problems for Georgia, especially in relations with Russia, but that is not their fault, just the consequence of the authorities losing control," said Georgian member of parliament Vakhtang Shameladze.

However, Shameladze went on to say that "it will be better for everyone, including the Chechens, if they go back home", a process that "should have started two years ago".

Many Chechens have already decided to leave the Pankisi and moved on to Turkey or Azerbaijan. Independent estimates suggest that only two and a half thousand refugees remain. Increasingly, those left behind find it hard to support themselves.

"Chechen refugees can get only legal help from the Georgian authorities," Hussein Saidov, chairman of the local refugee committee, which works with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, told IWPR. "The only help they get of being fed is from international humanitarian organisations."

"It's hard to keep a family when there is absolutely no work, not enough land and when winter lasts seven months a year. Really that is why very many have left. Why does the number with refugee status not go down? Because many people when they leave sell their papers to their neighbours for 20-30 lari (around 10 US dollars). Then these people will get free food for a whole year from the humanitarian organisations until the next census."

Wherever, they go, however, almost no one wants to go back to Chechnya.

Eighty-year-old Sajat Sardalova, the grandmother of a Chechen family of eight living in

Duisi, is an exception - but perhaps because she is suffering exile for the second time. Like all Chechens two generations ago, she was deported to Kazakhstan in 1944.

"Above all I am afraid of dying here," Sajat said. "I would go home now, but my children won't allow it."

"The refugees here have developed a strong immunity to the idea of returning home until the Russian forces leave," explains her 42-year-old son Ibragim.

"We already know that those people who go back to Chechnya from Georgia suffer the most brutal filtration process because the Russian leadership believes that those who fled to Georgia were the most aggressive supporters of independence for Chechnya," he said, referring to Russian soldiers' violent detention of suspected militants.

The Sardalov family is now pinning some faint hopes on a third possibility. Recently, the refugees in Duisi wrote a collective letter to Canadian prime minister Jean Chretien asking to be given asylum in Canada. A reply from Canada said their request was being considered.

*By Beslan MAKHAURI. CRS No.64, January 30
Margarita AKHVLEDIANIA, IWPR Georgia editor, contributed to this report*

PHOTOAGENCY "EYE OF GEORGIA"



Chechens do not feel safe in Pankisi

Dagestan struggles to stem TB scourge

Makhachkala, February 2003

Local customs and poverty are hampering the fight against TB in Dagestan.

At the tuberculosis day clinic in Makhachkala, clotheslines stretch across a dilapidated courtyard. People with gloomy faces pace around, and a group of women sit by the door, clutching their health reports.

TB is an old scourge in the Caspian Sea republic of Dagestan, one of Russia's poorest regions. Formerly its incidence was up to twice as great as in the rest of the country, but in recent years the situation has got far worse.

Makhachkala, the Dagestani capital, which has about 2,000 TB patients on record, has the dubious distinction of being the only regional centre in Russia without a TB hospital. According to Abdurazak Adziev, head doctor of the main TB clinic, no more than 40 per cent of patients diagnosed with TB are hospitalised in Dagestan - the republic only has 45 per cent of the required number of hospital beds.

More than 300 Dagestanis died of TB in 2002, and 102 children contracted the disease. According to Nikiet Tarkhanova, field supervisor with the International Committee of the Red Cross in Dagestan, her organisation rushed an emergency supply of pharmaceuticals to the region last year to try and stem the spread of the disease.

The World Health Organization, WHO, has stated that the TB rate can be considered low if the number of patients does not exceed 30 per 100,000 of the population.

Dagestan now has an estimated 94 TB patients per 100,000 people. The qualified good news, say doctors, is that it is not getting any worse.

Gusein Guseinov, head of the Phthisiatric Department of the Dagestani Medical Academy, who rang the alarm about a possible tuberculosis epidemic in Dagestan as far back as 1998, is cautiously optimistic.

"Thirty two other regions of Russia have a higher TB rate than Dagestan, and it's spreading faster," he told IWPR. "Not that the situation has improved here, but it has surely worsened in those other places."

Doctors and officials alike say that the anti-TB effort is now getting funding from Moscow and Jamaludin Gasaev, Dagestan's senior deputy health minister says the epidemic has already passed its peak.

However, a new hospital is still not in prospect. Plans for one have been discussed for years. After the authorities failed to find a suitable building in the centre of Makhachkala, they began construction in the suburbs, but only a foundation pit was dug.

And while proper medical facilities are not in place, many city dwellers are worried by the invisible threat the disease poses. There is an ever-present suspicion that the actual figures for the disease are far worse than the official ones.

"I've been told every sixth resident of Makhachkala has TB," said Aminat, an accountant. "I'm from Charodin area, and many of my fellow villagers are also infected. I worry about my children and make them wash their hands all the time. You never know who you're riding next to on the bus. I took an X-ray test last year. I went in with a cold, and they made me have one."

"I know very little about TB, but I know it's dangerous," said layout specialist Timur. "If one of my friends or family members got it, I would read up on the subject and act accordingly."

Health professionals say traditional hostility to TB patients and local customs are helping TB to spread. In the early Nineties, the residents of Makhachkala suburb Tarki destroyed a local TB hospital, claiming it threatened their health. Eyewitnesses recall that bedridden patients were removed from the building on their beds, and left outdoors for days. Four patients died.

On other occasions, voters have promised they will support those candidates in local elections who pledge to shut down their existing TB treatment facilities.

Enormous weddings and wakes and sprawling street markets also help circulate the disease.

Dagestani doctors recently offered to disinfect the republic's mosques, but clerics are still considering the proposal. Meanwhile, TB patients pray next to healthy parishioners, and leave traces of the disease on the praying rugs.

The highest incidence in Dagestan is among socially disadvantaged groups, with an overwhelming majority of them unemployed. Many TB patients who are aware of their condition, especially ex-prisoners, are reluctant to take treatment. Only around half of sufferers released from prison report to medical institutions.

Prisoners who contract the disease in jail are usually confined to a special TB colony outside Makhachkala for the remainder of their sentence. Abdulkadir Tutunov, deputy chief of the colony, told IWPR 189 inmates with an active form of the illness were released from the colony during the first 10 months of 2002.

Another at-risk group are women in the remote mountains of the republic. "Women have very poor health in mountain villages: they have to work hard and they don't eat well," said Aishat Magomedova, chief doctor of a charity hospital for women in Makhachkala and head of the NGO Mother and Child Protection League. "We had the hardest time in 1999, when the influx of refugees from Chechnya peaked. Every eight or nine women in a hundred that came to us were suspected to have TB."

The local government recently purchased 18 new mobile digital X-ray machines, which will be dispatched to the remote mountain areas where few locals can afford to travel to get proper treatment.

However, doctors agree that the situation is unlikely to improve while a far worse epidemic rages in Dagestan's western neighbour, Chechnya.

"I'm scared to even look at those figures," said Raisa Shapieva of the social policy department of the Chechen government. "TB is a disaster in Dagestan, but here it's a veritable catastrophe. No one keeps accurate statistics, but we figure there are at least 10,000 patients in Chechnya. Personally, I believe the real figure is many times that. The republic has not had a TB screening in two years."

According to Shakhman Akhmadov, head doctor of the sanitary and epidemic control centre in Gudermes, Chechnya's second city, there is only one X-ray machine in an area with a population of 112,000. To make matters worse, the area currently hosts some 18,000 refugees. There are more than 400 proven TB loci in the Gudermes area, a rate which Akhmadov maintains is fairly typical for Chechnya - and which poses a constant threat for Dagestan.

By Nina AGAYEVA. CRS No.167, February 21

Armenian election clash looms

Yerevan, February 2003

Government and opposition are set on a collision course following the disputed first round of Armenia's presidential election.

With a few days to go before a second and final round of voting in Armenia's presidential election on March 5, political tensions are growing, as both government and opposition look set to claim victory.

Incumbent leader Robert Kocharian, fighting for re-election, is using strong-arm tactics against the opposition and has even deployed soldiers from his native territory of Nagorny Karabakh to Yerevan.

Challenger Stepan Demirchian is bringing tens of thousands of supporters on to the streets of the capital to boost his claim that the first round of voting was fraught with irregularities.

The official adjusted final results of the first round held on February 19 left Kocharian marginally short of an immediate victory with 49.5 per cent of the vote, and Demirchian trailing in second place polling 28.2 per cent.

However, foreign observers from the Council of Europe and the OSCE recorded "serious shortcomings" in the way these votes were counted.

Third placed Artashes Gegamian, who was awarded 17.7 per cent of the vote, has denounced the first round of voting as illegitimate but has not given his support to either of the other two candidates.

The furore over the initial vote has left the two sides deeply divided. Demirchian now has the endorsement of several of the other former candidates in the contest, including two ex-prime ministers, Aram Sarkisian and Vazgen Manukian, and US-born, onetime foreign minister Raffi Hovannissian, all of whom say he has already been elected president of Armenia.

The opposition has held a string of demonstrations in the centre of Yerevan, attended by between 45,000 and 100,000 people, according to various estimates. For Armenia, whose population is officially put at three million people, this is a vast crowd.

Kocharian and the government have responded aggressively and with barely veiled threats of force. The authorities have blocked vehicles from outside Yerevan coming into the city, which might bring people to the demonstrations. Many drivers from the provinces have complained that they are being turned back by traffic police.

More disturbingly, several dozen opposition activists are now under arrest.

On February 22, police detained more than 50 pro-Demirchian demonstrators for 15 days on charges of "petty hooliganism". Their court cases were held behind closed doors, contrary to regulations. Another wave of arrests followed at the rally the next day.

The government says that 56 people have been detained, while the opposition puts the number at 96. Justice ministry spokesman Ara Sagatelian alleged that many of those arrested had criminal records. But Arshak Sadoyan, a parliamentary deputy and close adviser to Demirchian, told demonstrators that the arrests were "an obvious provocation by the authorities, intended to set the people and the law enforcement agencies against one another".

Both sides clearly anticipate more trouble. A statement by senior staff at the defence ministry has warned opposition demonstrators rather ominously that force may be used to put down protests.

"We are calling for an end to declarations and actions that are anti-constitutional and divide society," the statement said. "Should public order be breached and a possible threat arise to the security of our frontiers, the armed forces cannot adopt a passive position."

However, sources close to the government have told IWPR that senior army officers are refusing to take part in any operation against opposition demonstrators and that Kocharian has deployed more than 100 elite troops from Nagorny Karabakh to give him support.

"In the best case this step threatens to complicate relations between the two ethnic Armenian homelands and it may lead to real hostility between them," said journalist and political analyst David Petrosian.

Demirchian's tactics thus far have been shaped by his lack of access to state television, whose news coverage is strongly favouring the incumbent president. He is using the public rallies to press his case that following the February 19 vote, he, not Kocharian, is the legitimate leader of Armenia.

Speakers at the rallies proclaim that Demirchian is already Armenia's elected president and call on Kocharian to step down.

"My first step as president of the Republic of Armenia will be to punish those guilty of faking the elections," Demirchian told his supporters. "Today it's obvious that the people has rejected Kocharian and the political will of the people will prevail. A regime, which defies the will of its own people, is doomed. We will not tolerate the regime seizing power."

Dismissing these charges, Kocharian warned the opposition not to upset "stability" in Armenia. "We will respond very seriously and harshly to any attempts to disrupt the normal work of the government and to disturb public order," he said on February 22.

The incumbent leader rejected accusations of vote rigging, suggesting that his opponents were embittered losers. "I think that the opposition was much more active in falsifying the vote," he said.

Time has virtually run out for any compromise to be struck between these two almost irreconcilable positions. Campaigning ends on March 3 - and the final vote due to take place two days later.

By Susanna PETROSIAN. CRS No. 68, February 27

Baku cemetery controversy

Baku, March 2003

Plans to build road through Baku cemetery may lead to destruction of thousands of old graves, including Armenian ones.

Plans to build a major road across part of an old Christian cemetery have sparked a bitter controversy in Baku and among former citizens of the capital no longer living in Azerbaijan.

The Baku authorities say that they are taking special care to rebury people interred in the Montin cemetery near the centre of the capital, so that they can build a much-needed new road, and have made an effort to contact their relatives abroad.

Human rights activists say the city authorities are proceeding much too fast and, by threatening Armenian graves, risk poisoning relations further with Armenia.

The reconstruction work has already begun. Early one morning this week, a group of elderly people had gathered by the main gate of the Montin cemetery. The Korobtsov family was waiting for Ali Nasirov, the city official responsible for reburying their relatives.

Like other families - from Baku's Russian, Armenian and Jewish communities, as well as some Azerbaijani families too - they were told that they could choose whether their late relatives would be transferred to another part of the graveyard or to another cemetery.

"I would like to point out that when it comes to work of state importance, any state has the right to move cemeteries," Ali Nasirov told IWPR. He observed that Baku's Chemberikend cemetery was relocated in the 1980s.

Around a quarter of the 80 hectares at Montin are affected by the new plans covering several thousand graves, dating back to the 1890s. Announcements were first made in January, with notices placed on the gates of the cemetery and in the newspapers. A new 50-metre-wide road will be built, which will help ease congestion in the Narimanov district of the city, where the graveyard is located.

Nasirov said that the city authorities were underwriting all the costs and staff had been instructed to act sensitively, wear rubber gloves and listen to the requirements of relatives.

Galina Nenashева, a 67-year-old pensioner, was standing at the cemetery gates as workers reburied her late husband and four of his relatives. "I cannot bear to be present," she said. "Thank God, my late husband's brother came from Russia and he is looking after it."

Taking an IWPR correspondent for a fellow mourner, she said she was very happy with the way the process had been handled and that the graveyard workers had even refused her offer of money.

However, if locals and people who have kept their connections with Baku can be located easily to take part in the reburial process, this is not true of other immigrants, scattered across the world, including almost all the Armenians, who fled Baku during the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The reburials are supposed to take place before April 1.

Eldar Zeinalov, director of the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, has strongly criticised the Baku authorities for rushing into the decision and failing to anticipate the likely reaction in Armenia. "It would be ideal to postpone this issue until the Karabakh problem is resolved," Zeinalov told IWPR. "But if there is an urgent need, we should use the experience of the Red Cross in reburying the Armenians." However, Red Cross spokesman Oktai Mamedov said no one had approached them over the issue and, as far as he was aware, their mandate did not cover the transfer of Armenian graves in Baku.

City official Nasirov said that they had received many telegrams from former Bakuvis abroad authorising them to rebury their relatives. He said that a decision on Armenian graves would be postponed until after April 1.

So far there has been little reaction in Armenia, which has been preoccupied with its presidential election. However, some former Baku families living in the Armenian capital Yerevan are worried. Mikael Melikov and his family left Baku in 1988. They said that they would like to return to rebury their grandfather, grandmother and other relatives, but that it was almost impossible for them to do so.

Another Baku Armenian living in Yerevan, Amalia Pogosova, said that she had heard that her mother's tombstone had already been vandalized in the inter-ethnic violence of 1990 and said there was "no point in the whole exercise".

Zeinalov has warned that the issue of the Armenian graves could cause a serious row between the two nations, who were at war until 1994 and regularly accuse each other of mistreatment. "Now, when the Karabakh conflict has gone quiet, any actions which can cause additional tension can harm the peace process," Zeinalov said. "What would happen if tomorrow the mayor of Shusha [a town in Karabakh, which formerly had a Azerbaijani population majority and is now held by the Armenians], decides to build a stadium on top of the old Azerbaijani cemetery and justifies it on the grounds that the relatives have long not visited these graves and have not come to rebury them?"

The mayor of Baku Hajibala Abutalybov has accused Zeinalov of adopting an "anti-Azerbaijani position".

"Reburials are a normal practice, which take place all over the world," the mayor said. "No one is planning to destroy any Armenian graves. I don't understand why they raised such a fuss. There are other nationalities buried there besides Armenians."

It is not clear what will happen to the Armenian graves, if, as is almost inevitable, their relatives cannot come to Baku to see their loved ones reburied. But many observers are now watching closely. Ulvi Akhundli, spokesman for the OSCE office in Baku, told IWPR that his organisation is only likely to get involved if there is "any vandalism of the graves".

*By Zarema VELIKHANOVA and Leila AMIROVA. CRS No.69, March 07
Armenika KIVIRIAN in Yerevan contributed to this report*

Chechen referendum row

Grozny, March 2003

The war-torn republic is gearing up for a constitution that will controversially affirm its status as part of Russia.

Chechnya is heading for a constitutional referendum that has sharply divided opinion in the shattered republic.

Voters will be asked on March 23 to approve a new constitution, which regards Chechnya as an "integral and inseparable part" of the Russian Federation and, in contrast to any other constitution of an autonomous region, declares the republic's president may be dismissed at any time by Moscow.

Also controversial is the constitution's reference to Chechnya as a secular state, pointedly rejecting the Shariah Law introduced by the republic's pro-independence government in 1998.

Human rights activists and non-governmental organisations have been calling for a boycott of the vote, saying that Chechnya is not ready for a constitution that categorically defines the status of the republic, when it is so politically divided and still wracked by conflict.

In this they have received the backing of Lord Judd, special rapporteur to the Council of Europe on Chechnya, who is stepping down from his post, because of his opposition to the vote.

Even some anti-independence Chechen politicians have condemned the plebiscite. Salambek Khajiev, who headed a pro-Moscow government in Chechnya in 1994-5, called it a deception, while prominent businessman Abubakar Arsamakov, said it was a desperate attempt of those who have "degraded Chechnya to its current state, to remain in control".

A conference of Chechen rights groups and NGOs held in Nazran, Ingushetia, earlier this month called on President Putin to cancel the poll. In their final statement, the participants concluded that, "In the current environment, Chechens will not be able to express their true opinion. The referendum will, therefore, prolong and aggravate the disastrous military standoff."

Former Russian deputy Lev Ponomaryov of the NGO For Human Rights drew a parallel with Algeria, where France held a plebiscite in the late 1950s affirming that it was part of the French state, only to allow another vote in 1962, which gave Algeria independence.

In the last ten years, Chechnya has held two votes in 1991 and 1997 in which its citizens supported the idea of independence. Although the first was widely disputed, the second, bringing Aslan Maskhadov to power, was recognised by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and Russia itself. On February 3, 1997, the newly-elected parliament in Chechnya proclaimed the republic an independent state.

Not surprisingly, Maskhadov, who is still leading armed resistance to Russian forces in the mountains of Chechnya, has furiously condemned the vote and threatened to step up military action.

In radio and television message, Maskhadov and his supporters have urged Chechens to "boycott the referendum imposed by Russian authorities and a group of traitors led by (Moscow's current leader in Chechnya) Akhmad Kadyrov".

Colonel Ilya Shabalkin of the Russian military command has warned that Chechen guerrillas are "preparing a series of major terror attacks aiming to disrupt the referendum and ignite the situation".

This month has already seen a series of armed clashes across Chechnya. According to local villagers, last week more than 20 Russian marines were killed and several were captured by Chechen guerrillas near the mountain village of Sharo-Argun in the east of the republic. Caspian Fleet Commander, Rear Admiral Yuri Startsev, told ITAR-TASS six marines had died and 10 wounded in the skirmish.

A random poll on the streets of Grozny revealed widespread scepticism about the March 23 poll.

"They've been exterminating us as citizens of independent Ichkeria. Now they will start killing us as their fellow countrymen," said Alikhan Khasanov, a student at the Chechen State University. "I would gladly vote if this referendum were meant to bring peace to Chechnya, but I just don't believe the war is going to end in the foreseeable future."

"If they hold a referendum on a new constitution for Chechnya without ending the war and achieving national accord, it probably means more terror and violence and maybe even a civil war," said 56-year-old Apti Arsakayev.

Putin has given his strong backing to the March 23 vote ever since it was first suggested in June 2002. "We must back the initiative of the Chechen people," Putin told an extended meeting of the leadership of the Russian intelligence service, or FSB, on January 31, declaring that Chechnya itself had come up with the idea for the referendum, which, he said, would bring stability to the region. Kadyrov, the strongest advocate of the vote, told ITAR-TASS news agency in January, "People need peace. The referendum and ensuing election will be the cornerstones of the peace process."

Preparations for the vote on the "Kadyrov constitution", as many have already named it, are proceeding at full speed. All Chechen newspapers have published the draft in both the Russian and Chechen languages.

Khasan Taimaskhanov, one of the main organisers, told IWPR that some 500,000 brochures of the draft constitution and its laws for both presidential and parliamentary elections (expected to take place later in the year) have been handed out to people in Chechnya and that 414 polling stations have been set up around the republic.

Controversially, around 40,000 Russian soldiers stationed in Chechnya are being allowed to take part in the vote.

A series of Chechen newspaper articles give no room for doubt that the result will be a resounding yes vote. In phrases, heavily redolent of Soviet times, the headlines proclaim "Everyone, to the Referendum!" and "The Referendum is Our Future!"

Speaking at a press conference in Grozny on February 21, Kadyrov said, "The people have spoken in favour of the referendum. Those who resist it are enemies of the people, and we must get rid of them."

The draft constitution defines Chechnya as a presidential republic. The legislative branch will be represented by a two-house parliament: the Republic Council (Senate) and the Popular Assembly, consisting of 21 and 40 deputies respectively. The president and parliament deputies will be elected for a four-year term.

By Umalit DUDAYEV. CRS No. 170, March 14

Circassians turn full circle

Nalchik, May 2003

Descendents of Caucasus emigres hoped to make new lives back in their ancestral lands, but many are giving up in disappointment

When they sailed away from the Caucasus in the 19th century, it seemed unlikely that a century and a half later the descendents of the Circassian community would return.

Some of the great-grandchildren of those who left to settle across the Middle East did trickle back with the fall of Communism -- but their romantic notions were dashed by the reality of life in today's Russian Federation. And now many of them are leaving again.

There are an estimated 3.5 million descendants of emigrants from the North Caucasus living in the Middle East and Turkey. More than three million of them are Circassians whose forebears were forced to leave the Caucasus in the 19th century at the end of the Caucasian wars.

The size of the Circassian diaspora far exceeds the number who still live in the North Caucasus, mainly in the three autonomous republics of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia and Adygeya.

Dinamis Tausultan from Syria was one of those who made the move back to Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, 11 years ago. Now with her parents and two brothers, she runs a chain of cafés in the town. "At least we're here, in our native land from which we were once forcibly deported," she said.

"I still visit my relations back in Syria, but I definitely want to live here in the Caucasus. No price is too high for being able to freely speak your own language, which your mother and grandmother carefully preserved for you. Our homeland is a holy place. I feel our return has made the souls of our ancestors rejoice."

But the number of those planning to move back to the Caucasus has dwindled in recent years, and hundreds of those who returned stayed only a few years. By the returnees' own calculations, 600 Circassians have returned to Kabardino-Balkaria from Syria since 1992, but 200 of them went back after a while. About 500 more have returned to Kabardino-Balkaria and Adygeya from Turkey. There are currently some 350 returnees in Adygeya.

Some Circassians in the Middle East had little comprehension of the changes that Soviet rule had wrought to culture and daily life.

"In our mind's eye, before we came here, we all imagined the Caucasus of our forefathers," said Majid Utij, who moved back from Turkey 13 years ago. "I used to visualise riders in Circassian coats and girls fetching jugs of water from the spring."

IWPR talked to a Circassian family originally from Syria, who are preparing to go back to the Middle East after spending three years in Nalchik. They asked for their names not to be used.

"I had my own business in Syria, but my childhood dream was to return to the land of my forefathers," said the father. "I told my fiancée she had to promise to move back to the Caucasus with me if she wanted to be my wife. I've spent all my savings here trying to start a business, but I haven't found work partners I could rely on."

"I am a religious person and I live by the commandments of Islam," added his wife. "I thought Kabardino-Balkaria was a Muslim republic, but I was not prepared for what I found. There are very few true Muslim families here. Adygeyan culture is all but forgotten. I would like my grandchildren to grow up in a Muslim country."

"I'm sad that my husband's dream of dying in the homeland will not come true."

The culture shocks faced by Circassian returnees have been compounded by Russian bureaucratic difficulties. The latest of these is a new citizenship law, which came into force in July 2002.

"For four years any foreign national was entitled to seek dual citizenship, and many of our compatriots from abroad did so," explained Zaurbi Nakhshiev, chairman of the Parliamentary Council of Kabardino-Balkaria, who is also president of the International Circassian Association. "But the new Russian citizenship law does not provide for this."

The new law stipulates that in order to qualify for Russian citizenship, the applicant must be fluent in Russian, give up his former citizenship, and must have lived in Russia permanently for five years. Many Circassians believe this will dry up the return of their Middle Eastern compatriots altogether.

"Despite all my patriotism, I wouldn't be able to comply," said Utij. "No one would."

"The new law discriminates against the three million-strong Circassian community abroad," Vladimir Nakatsev, chairman of the Kabardino-Balkarian branch of the Rodina (Homeland) Association, told IWPR. "We have asked our diaspora leaders in Jordan to petition President Putin. In his reply, he wrote that the law is not dogma, and is open to amendments."

The first problem that returnees to Kabardino-Balkaria face is obtaining a residence permit entitling them to live there for five years. Aslan Betrozov, senior inspector at the visa and registration office in Nalchik, told IWPR that this can take up to six months.

"Foreign nationals may face difficulties gathering all the requisite paperwork. Then the package of paperwork has to undergo a thorough check," he said.

Until recently, Adygeya had simpler procedures for issuing residence permits and Russian passports. Many have taken advantage of this and are grateful to the local authorities, although others say the Adygeyan officials were just more corruptible.

"I don't want to pay bribes or pull strings to solve my problems," said Nikhat Berzeg, who was in the first wave of returning Circassians and is now officially registered as a resident of Maikop, Adygeya. "One has to defend one's rights under the law. If we pay bribes it will only complicate things for the newly arriving returnees."

It's not just the Russian authorities who have proved a source of disappointment for returning diaspora members. Some are unhappy with the associations that were set up in the early 1990s to advance Circassian interests.

"Adyga Khasa and the International Circassian Association were established to address ethnic issues, including ours, but they are not doing their job," said Utij.

Ahmed Stash, born in Syria and now a Russian citizen, agrees. "We shouldn't trust these organizations," he said. "In 10 years they haven't kept a single promise they made to us."

Recalling once prominent Circassian community leaders, Utij said, "Those who spoke at rallies 10 years ago, calling for all Adygeyans to unite, have vanished without a trace. When we started saying things like that, the authorities reacted very swiftly to suppress us."

Those who weather the bureaucratic ordeal of obtaining a Russian passport, finding a job and putting down roots, say that new returnees need to tough it out and be adaptable in order to survive in the North Caucasus. They blame those who have left for spreading negative rumours about life in the homeland.

"If you come back you must find a way not only to survive, but also to prosper - and to make friends, not just find your relatives," said Imdat Kip, who opened a trading firm in Nalchik 10 years ago.

As the two communities, in the North Caucasus and the Middle East, remain isolated from one another, linguists and historians are warning that the Circassians abroad are losing their mother tongue. They warn that the Circassian language could die out in Turkey, Syria and Jordan in the next 20 to 30 years.

By Zarina KANUKOVA. CRS No. 177, May 01

Georgia: Bogus agencies prey on jobless

Tbilisi, May 2003

High unemployment in Georgia spawns rogue job centres which rob their customers.

Last week the Dro employment agency was plying its services from an office in Machabeli Street in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. This week it had gone.

Dro, a privately-owned agency, placed advertisements printed in several newspapers offering help in finding work on a massive new pipeline which will carry Azerbaijani oil through Georgia to Turkey.

The pipeline project is a major employment opportunity, especially for a country as impoverished as Georgia, and thousands of people will end up working there. So the advert drew up to 100 hopeful visitors to Dro's offices every day. Each one paid the sum of five lari (around 2.50 US dollars) and was directed onward to another address.

"Of course no one found anything there," said Revaz Sakvarelidze, head of the Georgian government's labour and employment department.

"Under the terms of this project, it is the residents of regions through which the pipeline runs who ought to be given work first. But that's not even the main point. It's up to the Georgian International Oil Company to give out jobs, and it has not delegated that to any private company."

When this IWPR correspondent went looking for Dro agency on Machabeli Street, there was no longer anything there. The company had either changed its name, moved to another address, or ceased to exist. But its owners had earned a good sum of money.

This fraudulent job agency is just one outgrowth of Georgia's chronic unemployment problem. Officially, 14.7 per cent of the population is jobless, but the figure is probably an understatement since it covers only those who are actually registered.

"According to data we have collected through our own research around 70 per cent of the population has no permanent job," Sakvarelidze told IWPR. "A majority of poor people just don't think it's worth getting registered, as they have no chance of getting a job that way, unemployment benefit is worth 15 lari (about seven dollars) and it doesn't get paid for months at a time."

Sakvarelidze's department calculates that in 2002, Georgian job agencies found jobs for 6,000 people out of the 40,000 who had registered with them. They estimate that there are less than 1,400 vacancies to be filled across the country at the moment.

Nevertheless, in special advertising sections and newspapers and on the news bar running across television screens, huge numbers of jobs are offered every day for people to work as guards, shop assistants or waitresses.

Yet a little research shows that over several successive issues of the most popular advertising newspaper *Sitkva da Sakme* (Word and Deed), most of the jobs on offer did not change from week to the next. As thousands of unemployed people read the paper, it is implausible to believe that there was no one to fill these their vacancies.

The rogue agencies have a number of tricks to deploy. Lali Grdzlishvili, a pharmacist by profession, says that she has made a lot of attempts to find work, without success. Then she saw a job at a pharmacy advertised by an agency named Dila.

"I went straight to this agency," Grdzlishvili said. "A young woman there was very polite and after I had paid five lari, told me I had to hurry as they had already seen people who wanted to get this job that day."

When she went to the pharmacy, they expressed surprise and said they had no vacancies. And when Grdzlishvili went back to complain to the agency they told her regretfully that someone else must have got the job before her.

Sometimes the agency works in cahoots with the supposed employer. Several people are sent to enquire about a job which may not even exist. They fill out a form, for which they are charged one lari, and wait two weeks before being told politely that they have not got the job. Of course they do not get their money back.

"Just this one thing - taking money off people to provide them with information about a job - breaks the law on employment," Revaz Sakvarelidze told IWPR. "The law categorically forbids taking money from the unemployed. The employer ought to pay for these services."

However, in a country with such a high unemployment rate, this law is not being enforced. Zurab Labartkava, director of the Eliz supermarket in Tbilisi, has no intention of paying any agency to find potential employees, "Why should I be helping out the agency in this way, when I can find workers myself in a country with high unemployment?"

Under a law passed two years ago, job agencies must obtain a license and register with the government's employment department, and give it three-monthly updates on the jobs they have provided. The law is not working - the department has seven agencies on its books, but knows of the existence of 90 in Tbilisi alone.

In an attempt to regulate them, it has tried publishing guides to how they should operate. "We distributed them to all the agencies that we could find," said Sakvarelidze. "We also told the police about the blatantly fraudulent practices we have found. But it is all to no avail."

The police say there is nothing in Georgian law with which they can charge the job swindlers - something which leads Sakvarelidze to believe policemen are mixed up in the fraud.

Sakvarelidze and his colleagues have now drafted amendments to the law, which would give their department oversight of all job agencies and oblige the courts to hear any cases of fraudulent practice within 24 hours. The draft has been submitted to parliament but is still a very long way from the statute books.

By Maia CHITAIA. CRS No. 178, May 09

Chechnya: Blasts signal new campaign

Znamenskoye, May 2003

Two suicide attacks in three days indicate a shift in tactics by Chechen guerrillas.

Two bomb attacks in three days which took the lives of at least 75 people have underlined that the war in Chechnya goes on, now pursued with even more ruthless tactics.

On May 14 two suicide bombers struck during a religious festival in the village of Iliskhan-Yurt in eastern Chechnya. The Russian interior ministry said that the attackers - both women - were trying to make their way to the platform where Chechnya's pro-Moscow leadership was gathered.

The women were stopped by bodyguards of Akhmad Kadyrov, leader of the pro-Moscow Chechen administration. One blew up herself. The explosives strapped to the other failed to detonate, but she died in the first blast. By May 15 the death-toll had risen to 16, with more than 140 people wounded.

The week began with an even more deadly bombing in the northern village of Znamenskoye, deep inside what is usually regarded as the most pro-Russian and peaceful part of Chechnya. At least 59 people died. The day after the Znamenskoye bomb blast, a huge crater in the centre of the village had already been filled in. Workers from Russia's emergencies ministry were picking through the ruins of destroyed buildings, hoping to save someone or at least recover some bodies.

Malika Yusupova from the local administration of Nadterechny Region, of which Znamenskoye is the centre, was lucky. She was at the far side of the building from the explosion and suffered only light injuries. "If I had stayed in my office I would have died," she said.

The blast happened when a truck turned onto the central street of the village, tore through a roadblock and exploded. The force of the explosion, which experts estimated came from about one tonne of explosives, was so strong that eight buildings on either side of the street were destroyed, including the offices of the local authorities and the security agency, the FSB. Witnesses said they saw two women and a man in the truck.

Local officials said that 23 women and 12 children were among the dead.

Both these attacks were followed by the now customary accusations and denials. The Russian federal authorities accused separatist president Aslan Maskhadov of complicity in the explosions, while his spokesmen abroad condemned the blasts, blamed them on extremist elements, and said that Maskhadov had nothing to do with them.

At the very least, the attacks show that radical fighters who have adopted suicide tactics more familiar in the Middle East than Chechnya are now setting the agenda.

The two attacks followed a lull - by Chechnya's standards - since another suicide attack in Grozny killed 72 people on December 27.

Many had expected that the Chechen fighters would try to disrupt the March 23 referendum on a new constitution for the region, as a way of demonstrating that Moscow's declared "normalization" of the situation was not going to plan. However, there were no major incidents on referendum day. Several polling stations came under fire the night before, and schools where voting was supposed to take place were burned in the villages of Valerik and Chiri-Yurt. But the heavy security operation conducted by the federal authorities mostly worked.

The same scenario recurred on May 9 - Victory Day in Russia. "We had information that 200 kilograms of nitrate used for fertilizer, but also a potential explosive, was being moved across Ingushetia into Chechnya," FSB major Gennady Sapozhkov told IWPR. Police were unable to track the cargo, but there was no bombing.

May 12, the day of the Znamenskoye truck bomb, was also a symbolic date in Chechnya - the sixth anniversary of the signing of a peace agreement in the Kremlin. On that day in 1997, Maskhadov and President Boris Yeltsin promised "to reject forever the use, and threat of the use of force, in resolving any disputed questions".

The Znamenskoye attackers now make that declaration look more ironic than ever, especially as they did not choose a military target. Two FSB employees were probably the only security-related victims of the blast.

Recently the rebels have been concentrating on laying mines. In April for example, five FSB officers in a car were killed by a mine in the centre of Grozny, even though sappers had already disabled an explosive device on the very same spot the same day.

Military spokesmen in Chechnya estimate that ten cars or armoured vehicles are blown up every week in the republic and that around 100 explosive devices, including 20 land mines, are defused. Soldiers with mine-detectors in their hands are a common sight moving slowly along the roadsides of Chechnya. An armoured personnel carrier, APC, generally crawls along behind them. Cars and minibuses try to pass by quickly in case they get caught by a sudden blast.

According to Aburan Ismailov, deputy police chief in Grozny's Oktyabrsky region, the fighters generally lay their mines at night, in places where military columns are due to pass. "They place them just on the off chance - anyone who passes by will get blown up," he told the news website strana.ru. "They are rarely hunting for someone in particular."

Most of the explosive devices are home-made. "Often they use ordinary 122- or 152-millimeter artillery shells," explains Alexander Gorelov, commander of a platoon of engineers. "The explosive force of these is enough to blow up an APC." The fighters often add pieces of metal to the device to create more shrapnel, and put a plastic bucket on top to thwart the mine-detectors. "Sometimes an ordinary bucket with explosive and nails inside is enough," said Gorelov.

A teenage boy who introduces himself as Abdurakhman Ilyasov says that he has planted mines on many occasions on behalf of the fighters. Abdurakhman said it was easy, as he had done it since childhood and a good way of making money.

"There was one occasion when I laid the mine and waited for an APC," Abdurakhman said. "Then I saw a de-miner who found it and began to defuse it. I thought 'I don't want the mine to be lost, so at least I'll blow up one soldier'."

He said that he was paid between 30 and 100 US dollars for laying a mine, and the reward was increased three or fourfold for a direct hit.

The Russian military claims that the "war of mines" proves that the rebels are getting weaker and are now avoiding open military clashes. Yury Kostrovets, deputy commander of federal forces in Chechnya, told IWPR that the separatists were taking heavy losses, and mine-laying was "the means of resistance which is best paid for by foreign sponsors."

Kostrovets said that the separatist commanders had given orders to carry out attacks in places where people were concentrated. The aim was to trigger protests from the civilian population.

Akhmad Kadyrov, the acting president of Chechnya since the March referendum, said, "The separatists want to prove any way they can that they are still strong and ready to continue their pointless war."

For their part the rebels are promising to launch a new conventional offensive this summer.

"We are undergoing reorganization and choosing the general line of our activity," said one rebel commander in a videocassette widely distributed in Chechnya.

By Timur ALIEV. CRS No. 179, May 15

Bloodshed on the streets of Baku

Baku, October 2003

Three reporters provide eyewitness accounts of how election day in Baku turned into tragedy

In the last 12 years since Azerbaijan became independent we have seen many rallies and even several putsches in Baku. But what happened on October 15-16 shocked even seasoned observers.

The trouble started after the polls had closed on October 15 and both police and anti-government protestors converged on the headquarters of the main opposition party Musavat.

Three journalists - one of them IWPR's Azerbaijan coordinator - have provided eyewitness accounts of what they saw.

Idrak Abbasov (of the newspaper Impuls):

By 10 o'clock there were around 2,000 people in front of the Musavat offices. Shortly afterwards, police started pouring onto the scene. At around 10.55PM they carried out the first assault. The demonstrators dispersed, but came back an hour and a half later. By that time the party leadership had erected a dais on the second floor from which Musavat leader Isa Gambar spoke, declaring that he had collected more than 60 per cent of the vote.

Several times the police called on the demonstrators to disperse and warned them they would use force. The head of the OSCE observer mission Peter Eicher also asked them to disperse. In response, Gambar called on people to keep calm and to "celebrate their victory in a civilised way."

After this, OSCE observers went and stood between the police and the demonstrators. Eicher tried to negotiate with a police colonel named Guliev. The police gave the protestors an hour to leave, and again warned them that they would break up the rally.

Then a Musavat party official emerged and told the crowd that CNN had declared Isa Gambar had won the elections. Although it later transpired that CNN had only reported on an exit poll conducted by the sociological centre ADAM, this news was greeted with a surge of joy by the crowd. Arif Hajiev, head of Musavat's electoral campaign, then invited everyone to gather the next day at 2PM in front of the Carpet Museum on the Baku seafront, which is right next door to the Central Electoral Commission and not far from the city's biggest public space, Freedom Square.

When the ultimatum expired at 1.35AM the police stormed the Musavat building. The operation lasted no more than three minutes. Dozens of people, including journalists and OSCE official Eicher, were hurt.

Shahin Rzayev (IWPR Azerbaijan coordinator):

The next day everyone awaited the appointed hour with dread. Around 13.30 I went with Huquq Salmanov, head of the journalist protection committee Rukh, to the spot where the rally was about to begin. On the way we met journalists we knew, and our group grew in numbers.

Around the museum stood policemen in flak jackets and carrying riot shields. There was no practically no one else there, but we could see a large group of opposition supporters standing to one side on the seafront boulevard, and around 50 policemen with them.

I was turned back by the police for not having my journalist accreditation with me. When I came back to the scene just a few minutes later, document in hand, everything had changed.

The police had broken up the crowd, and both police and demonstrators were running in my direction. Most of them ran straight past but one sturdy policeman told me to leave the scene. When I said I was a journalist, he struck me on the leg with his truncheon and shouted "you'll get the next one on the head." Thanking him for his "humane" approach, I too ran off.

"Allah, save us and our children!" wailed a weeping old woman in a Muslim headscarf, limping away from the museum. Behind us were around 40 special-forces policemen in flak jackets and helmets. They banged their truncheons against their shields in rhythm for psychological effect. The old woman could go no further, and sat down in the road. Two soldiers picked her up carefully, put her on the pavement and ran to catch up with their comrades.

As shops and cafes saw what was happening, they began closing.

Rufat Abbasov (Olaylar newspaper):

Around 2PM around a thousand Musavat supporters, shouting "Isa" [Gambar] began to break through onto the square in front of the museum.

It turned out that most of the protestors were armed with various metal instruments and stones. Attacking the policemen and pushing them into the fountains on the embankment promenade, they moved towards the Carpet Museum and then set off for the Musavat headquarters. Along the way, they began to smash both police cars and ordinary vehicles.

For ten minutes, they shouted the slogan "Musavatyn bashgany, olub jumhurbashgani!" which means "The head of Musavat has become head of state!" Then the crowd, which was now one-and-a-half thousand strong, began to move on Freedom Square and Government House. They threw stones at Government House, which is headquarters of several ministries.

The euphoria of many protestors had turned into savage anger, and they started beating up those policemen who did not run away. Before my eyes, a group of Musavat supporters beat a thin soldier aged about 18 and who had got randomly caught up in the march. They beat him on the head, legs and stomach and dragged him along the ground. The soldier was already unconscious, and his life was saved only thanks to the intervention of journalists and a Musavat official who told them not to spoil the party's image and give in to provocation.

Perhaps because of their surprise tactics, by 3PM the Musavat activists had stormed Freedom Square, their former favourite rallying place, where they had been trying in vain to meet since 1993.

Exulting in this victory, the crowd - now numbering some 3,000 people - began demanding the resignation of "prime minister" Ilham Aliev, while opposition leaders urged protestors not to react to any provocations by the police.

After about 15 minutes of this jubilation, the police and interior ministry troops surrounded the square and began to advance on the crowd. Opposition supporters responded by throwing stones. One protestor took over an interior ministry truck and drove it at the police, running over several of them.

After this the police used tear gas to break up the crowd and the protestors ran off into the surrounding streets. The security forces, many of whom were wearing black masks and had dogs, began savagely to beat not only the opposition demonstrators, but also journalists and observers. Interfax correspondent Fuad Husseinliev was hospitalised after a severe blow to the head.

At least one person was killed and a five-year-old child was severely hurt in the violence.

In a number of streets, the police pressed on after the protestors and beat any that they found. The ground was littered with bricks and scraps of clothing, and there were occasional splashes of blood. Shop windows were smashed. The police brought in a water cannon.

"This proves once again that Ilham cannot be president, like his father was," said Hussein, a former member of the governing party Yeni Azerbaijan who had recently joined the opposition and was hurt by the police.

"You just can't treat your people like that," said Hussein, wiping away tears and blood from his face. "How can they live like that? Let us live too, we're people as well."

Shahin Rzayev:

After the rally on Freedom Square was broken up, the crowd spread out into streets in the centre. Around 5PM I saw a group of young people aged between 17 and 25 moving along Rasul Rza Street towards the centre.

They had a flag and plenty of weapons for hand-to-hand fighting. Most of them were armed with an instrument that looked like a mattock, only smaller. I had never seen a weapon like that before, so I was surprised that the opposition protestors had been able to organise so many of them so quickly. Others were carrying concrete blocks.

They were led by a young man of around 25. He ordered them not to respond to any provocations or touch civilians, cars or shop windows.

The same scene was occurring in the parallel streets. These men soon came out onto Fountain Square, the favourite promenading spot for Baku residents. They began to smash advertisement hoardings carrying portraits of Heidar and Ilham Aliev. Shop owners whose windows were adorned with dozens of portraits of father and son began quickly to rip the posters down and trample on them. People fled in panic.

The trouble died down around 10PM. An hour later, Baku residents were out for their usual evening walk on Fountain Square. Around them were strewn broken glass and torn posters of the new and previous president. The next morning, all the advertising stands had been put up again - but now they just showed a map of central Baku.

By Idrak ABBASOV, Rufat ABBASOV and Shahin RZAYEV. CRS No.200, October 17

North Ossetia: refugee resettlement furore

Vladikavkaz, October 2003

Ingush displaced by conflict a decade ago remain marooned in an unrecognised refugee camp, as disputes hamper resettlement process.

Eleven years after a brief but bloody conflict between North Ossetia and Ingushetia, hundreds of people are still stuck in temporary camps on the border between the two north Caucasus republics.

The Ossetian government has offered to rehouse the displaced Ingush - but not necessarily in their home areas. This angers Ingush activists, who do not want to see their ethnic kin resettled anywhere but their original places of residence.

In 1994, ethnic Ingush displaced from their homes in North Ossetia by clashes two years earlier set up an impromptu encampment outside the village of Maisky, still inside the republic but close to the border with Ingushetia. The settlement remains technically illegal, and has no formal status as a camp for forced migrants.

"Even children know they have no right to live here," said Suleiman Katsiev, a lawyer with the Memorial human rights group in Ingushetia. "They also know that their troubles will never end until the settlement is granted official status."

"These people have been disowned by both North Ossetia and Ingushetia," said Vitaly Smirnov, who handles Ossetian-Ingush post-conflict issues at the Russian presidential envoy's office. "Ossetia is in no hurry to seek official recognition for the settlement from the [Russian] federal government, while Ingushetia wants the 'Ossetian' Ingush to go back to their former residences."

Ingush and North Ossetian forces went to war in 1992 in a dispute over the Prigorodny district, most of which used to be part of Ingushetia. The land was transferred to North Ossetia when Stalin had the entire Chechen and Ingush nations deported in 1944, effacing all trace of the Chechen-Ingush republic. His successor Nikita Khrushchev reinstated the republic - but North Ossetia kept the Prigorodny lands.

The Chechen and Ingush set up separate republics within Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Ingushetian claims to Prigorodny mounted. But by now there were many Ossetians living alongside the local Ingush.

Conflict broke out at the end of October 1992, and in a battle lasting just five days, hundreds of people - mainly civilians - died and thousands of homes were burnt to the ground. According to different estimates, between 30,000 and 60,000 Ingush and some 5,000 Ossetians became

forced migrants. The fighting ended when Russian troops were deployed in the region.

Many displaced Ingush have lived in the shantytown near Maisky for nine years. They are unable to return to their devastated homes or resettle anywhere else. The settlement consists of some 250 families living in 150 railway cars clustered between a road and a railway. Another 1,300 people have found shelter with relatives, or are renting rooms in Maisky.

Maisky, whose residents are nearly all Ingush, managed to escape the violence that affected other parts of Prigorodny district. After the conflict, it was left de facto beyond the control of the Ossetian authorities. According to Smirnov, "North Ossetia lost control of the village after the conflict for a long period. Ossetian social workers and police alike were afraid to come here."

As a result, the village played host to the displaced people - much to the annoyance of North Ossetian government, which blames neighbouring Ingushetia for encouraging the impromptu refugee camp.

"The authorities in Ingushetia made the people come to Maisky and establish the settlement without our knowledge," said Sergei Tabolov, North Ossetia's minister for ethnic affairs and external relations.

"They made these people settle in our territory, encouraging them to build this makeshift refugee camp. Not wishing to aggravate the conflict, North Ossetia allowed this to happen, but now we are facing a lot of problems stemming from the unofficial nature of the camp."

One of these problems is that local people have thrown power lines and gas pipes from Maisky to the camp. There are no meters, and the refugees would not be able to pay anyway, and residents of the village have stopped paying as well. The North Ossetian electricity company says the village and the camp owe it 330,000 US dollars, and periodically cuts off the supply to both. The gas supplier is threatening to cut supplies as well.

"Last time the electricity stayed off for about a month," said Katsiev. "Only when the refugees threatened to block the federal Caucasian highway and wrote to the presidents of Russia and North Ossetia... did the authorities agree to sit down and talk, and eventually resumed the power supply to the camp. But the electricity can go off at any time, since the problem has not been solved."

Smirnov said the Russian presidential envoy in the region had paid for the power lines to the village and the camp to be separated so that the debt could be assessed more easily, "We have also spent a lot of money rehabilitating power networks in Prigorodny district, so we've asked the North Ossetian power company to offset the camp and village debt against this investment. But they have only agreed to write off less than a million roubles [33,000 dollars]."

The North Ossetian government does not want to see the settlement growing into a permanent site, and takes the view that residents should be rehoused in other parts of Prigorodny.

One hundred and fifty families have moved out of the camp since 1997, but the resettlement process has been far from smooth because of distrust between the Ossetian and Ingush communities. In spring this year, there were cases where convoys of Ingush vehicles returning to their former villages were stopped by crowds of Ossetians throwing stones. Sometimes the Ingush try to negotiate their return in advance, but talks often fail.

On other occasions the authorities rule that return is not an option, and offer unoccupied plots of land so that the Ingush can build new homes. But a recent attempt to relocate 91 families who took up the offer failed earlier this month. An official report by the Russian

envoy's office said that unidentified people blocked the authorities' attempts to transport the families' railway cars to be used as a temporary home at the new site.

Smirnov explained that the problem was that many of the refugees come originally from villages close to the Ossetian capital Vladikavkaz, but Ossetian government policy is to resettle them in other parts of Prigorodny. The policy is condemned by some Ingush groups who see it as an Ossetian attempt to consolidate political control over lands that were historically theirs. "In a bid to preserve them [these lands], those forces are pushing for the return of former Ingush residents to those villages," said Smirnov.

Meanwhile, the people at the Maisky camp - caught between the differing agendas of Ingush interest groups and the North Ossetian government - continue to live in dire conditions. "Our suffering is beyond description," said Patimat Khamkhoeva, who has been in the camp since it was founded. "When the power is out, there is no water either. In summer and in winter we have to haul water in buckets from a neighbouring village five kilometres away."

By Vsevolod RYAZANOV. CRS No.202, October 31

"Rose Revolution" sweeps away Shevardnadze

Tbilisi, November 2003

Eduard Shevardnadze's dramatic fall from power leads to opposition exultation and constitutional confusion.

The Georgian opposition has been celebrating the bloodless ousting of President Eduard Shevardnadze, leader of the country for the last 11 years.

Interim leader Nino Burjanadze, speaker of the outgoing parliament, today, November 24, called for the assembly to meet tomorrow to discuss holding both new presidential elections within 45 days and a new parliamentary ballot to replace the disputed poll of November 2, which triggered Georgia's three-week-long crisis.

A string of powerful state politicians resigned on November 24 as the opposition, who claimed they were cheated of victory in the parliamentary poll, moved to consolidate their victory. They included State Minister Avtandil Jorbenadze, Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili and a series of regional leaders such as the governor of the western province of Imereti, the southern region of Kvemo Kartli, the mayor of Tbilisi and the presidential representative in the Armenian-majority region of Javakheti.

Shevardnadze announced on November 24 that he had been prepared to step down the previous morning - several hours before he actually did - but was stopped from doing so by his entourage, who have been accused by the opposition of exacerbating the crisis.

The country remains in a state of constitutional confusion with no replacements appointed for the outgoing governors and other ministers staying in their jobs. Burjanadze said regretfully that she was not allowed to remove the latter. "According to the constitution I can only transfer the powers of ministers to their deputies but that will further complicate the situation," she told a meeting of foreign ambassadors.

The confusion partly stemmed from how, in the end, the man who has dominated Georgia for more than thirty years was forced to step down with extraordinary speed.

Shevardnadze is best known in the West as the man who as Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign minister negotiated on behalf of the Soviet Union to end the Cold War. At home, his reputation has been more mixed. Credited with bringing stability and foreign aid to Georgia in the seven years that followed his return to the country in 1992, he saw his support ebb away in the last five years as the country was stuck in economic depression and a perpetual energy crisis.

The tens of thousands of younger Georgians, supporting the opposition, who crowded Tbilisi's central Rustaveli Avenue and Freedom Square for two days on November 23-24 celebrated the

resignation of Shevardnadze with unbridled joy, drinking and dancing in the streets. There had been 48 hours of extreme tension when people feared a civil war was a real possibility, however in the end no lives were lost. As IWPR went to press, crowds again converged on the city centre to celebrate.

"A revolution has occurred in Georgia," David Berdzenishvili, leader of the opposition Republican Party and a political analyst told IWPR. "I do not mean the assault on a number of buildings. The people began besieging Shevardnadze on November 2 and on November 23 the siege ended in victory."

The Tbilisi newspaper 24 Hours called the takeover "The Rose Revolution" after the red rose that radical opposition leader Mikael Saakashvili held aloft as he and his supporters stormed into the parliament building on November 22. Shevardnadze was addressing the first session of what had officially been declared to be Georgia's new parliament.

However, the police ringing the building melted away in the first sign that the security forces were no longer prepared to support the president. Opposition supporters charged in and burst into the chamber, with Saakashvili leading the way, shouting and jabbing his finger at the pro-government deputies gathered inside.

Irma Nadirashvili, a journalist with the Rustavi-2 television channel, was amongst those who stormed the parliament. "The only dangerous moment in the march was when it came alongside the state security ministry where it seemed violence might break out. But the cordon of security ministry troops parted before us, just as the interior ministry cordon had parted before that. It seemed as though the security ministers were already going over to the opposition," she said.

As the opposition demonstrators piled into a parliament which was now completely undefended, the President's monotone speech could be heard as he addressed the assembled pro-government deputies. The opposition ranks then hit a line of defence from representatives of the Revival movement of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze who had been called in to support Shevardnadze.

"Two walls basically collided with each other," Nadirashvili said. "People were pushing each other aside with their arms, heads and legs. But the hall filled up incredibly fast with people from the street and in a few minutes it was entirely full. It was a strange feeling - what had happened felt unpleasant but good."

Shevardnadze was physically bundled away by his bodyguards. He was followed out of the parliament building by his supporters. Soon the whole centre of Tbilisi was in the hands of the opposition.

The president, having retreated to his residence, defiantly called the takeover a coup d'etat and tried to declare a state of emergency. But he was rapidly losing authority. In an unexpected move, which has yet to be fully explained, Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov flew to Tbilisi and shuttled back and forth between the three main opposition leaders and Shevardnadze.

Late on November 23, he arranged for Saakashvili and Zurab Zhvania - a former speaker of parliament and ally of Shevardnadze - to go and meet Shevardnadze. After a very short meeting, the president announced he had resigned.

Ivanov then flew on to Ajaria. The pro-Russian Abashidze had buried his differences with Shevardnadze over the past few weeks to support the president. Ivanov told journalists in Moscow that he had gone to Ajaria on the request of Shevardnadze himself.

Ajaria could become the next clash-point now that the situation in Tbilisi has calmed down. Abashidze, who is a strong opponent of the Tbilisi-based opposition, declared a state of emergency and has virtually closed the border between Ajaria and the rest of Georgia. One of the leaders of Abashidze's Revival party, Tsothe Bakuria, announced that Ajaria would boycott early parliamentary and presidential elections.

The opposition also now face an enormously high level of expectation from their supporters and difficult questions about who will be their candidate for presidential elections.

"Until this moment everything has gone as well as it possibly could," said Berdzenishvili. "I hope that in the future the political elite will live up to the hopes placed on them. We can't say yet that the era of Shevardnadze is over. We still have the problem of freeing ourselves from Shevardnadzism, from the system he created over so many years and in people's minds.

"People from the Communist past are still in power and I don't think that Shevardnadze has entirely lost control over his government. Burjanadze has to put her trust on the serious figures who displayed good sense on November 2 and in subsequent events, above all in the regions."

Shevardnadze has been officially invited to come and live in Germany, a country where he is still very popular for the role he played in the 1990 unification process, but he told German television on November 24, "Although I am very grateful for the invitation from the German side, I love my country very much and I won't leave it."

The next constitutional battle will be over attempts to annul the November 2 parliamentary election and continue using an assembly that had formally given up its powers. "The old parliament is legitimate since the newly-elected one did not begin functioning," lawyer David Usupashvili told IWPR. "The old parliament has the right to continue working until two thirds of the members of the new one acknowledge their new powers."

By Revaz SAKEVARISHVILI and Margarita AKHVLEDIANI.

Georgia Alert No. 01, November 24

Joy and chaos in western Georgia

Zugdidi, November 2003

Western Georgia, the stronghold of the victorious opposition, has been plunged into wild celebration and administrative chaos.

The westernmost Georgian region of Samegrelo, bordering Abkhazia, has been turned upside down by the peaceful revolution in Tbilisi.

In scenes that sometimes bordered on farce but often threatened to turn violent, the swift fall of President Eduard Shevardnadze on November 23 led to a mass takeover by various opposition groups. The governors of western Georgia's two biggest regions, Samegrelo and Imeretia, were forced out, together with several other regional officials. Local power structures, which had become well embedded under Shevardnadze's decade-long rule, collapsed rapidly and almost completely.

The people of Samegrelo have been among the fiercest supporters of Mikael Saakashvili and his National Movement. It was from Zugdidi, the capital of Samegrelo, that he launched the three-kilometre-long column of vehicles that moved on Tbilisi and helped carry out his triumphant "rose revolution."

When the revolution was over, supporters of Saakashvili and his allies Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania rushed to declare themselves the new leaders of Samegrelo.

On November 25, Ramin Gogokhia, the local leader of the National Movement in the town of Tsalenjikha, declared himself in charge of the local administration and occupied its offices. However, the man he had apparently deposed, Robert Karachava, who was in Tbilisi at the time, is one of the few local leaders who have not yet resigned.

Gogokhia called a meeting of all the local town officials and told them he was their new boss. When asked who had appointed him, he said that "they called me from the centre [Tbilisi]", but added, "I am very tired as I haven't slept for several nights in a row, so I can't quite remember who actually appointed me. But what's the difference?"

Georgia's acting head of state, Nino Burjanadze, has very poorly defined constitutional powers, and this makes the status of local leaders unclear everywhere in Georgia, and all the more so in the far west, which has a tradition of political turbulence.

The same day, activists from two of the victorious opposition parties began gathering outside the regional administration building in Zugdidi. The day before, supporters of Georgia's first post-independence president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, had managed to take over the empty offices inside. They had even managed to take down a portrait of Shevardnadze and replace it with

one of their hero, Gamsakhurdia, who was deposed in 1992 after a period of political unrest far more violent than the current one.

Many people in western Georgia still cannot forgive Shevardnadze for his role in chasing Gamsakhurdia out of office, and suppressing his subsequent attempt to raise a revolt in the west.

But the liberal opposition has little liking for the "Zviadists", as the late president's supporters are known. There is currently a standoff in the building, with the "Zviadists" inside.

In the town of Senaki the transfer of power was even more extraordinary. Around 30 National Movement supporters broke into the local administration offices by force. A little while later the Democrats, who support Burjanadze, arrived and demanded that their allies in victory cede them the building, calling their actions "unconstitutional".

The row ended with National Movement leader Kakha Adamia snatching a table-lamp and using it to hit Democrat leader Meraba Mirtskhulava over the head. In the ensuing mass brawl, victory went to the Democrats.

"The thorns of revolutionary roses are beginning to hurt Samegrelo," remarked a political activist in Zugdidi.

Samegrelo has suffered perhaps more than any other region of Georgia over the last ten years, since it became home to up to 70 per cent of Georgian refugees from the war in Abkhazia - around 170,000 people, according to official figures. The crime level has been so high this year that the government has discussed pursuing a special anti-crime operation there.

This legacy has made the region a hotbed of opposition to the Shevardnadze administration in Tbilisi. And Georgia's new leaders found fertile ground for winning support there.

"From the very beginning, Saakashvili made a very precise calculation and focused his attention on Samegrelo," Bezhan Nizharadze, who works for the Tbilisi non-governmental organisation Fair Elections as well as the Caucasus House in Zugdidi, told IWPR. "People were overjoyed to hear him promise to get the courts to make officials hand out frozen benefits and pensions, and to imprison the officials who had made the situation so bad."

Saakashvili and his party dominated the local television and radio networks, with his adverts changing every day. Other parties got very little airtime by comparison.

Saakashvili's Dutch wife Sandra also increased his popularity, making restrained appearances that contrasted with her often ferocious husband, and winning praise for her command of both Georgian and Mingrelian - the latter a local language widely spoken in Samegrelo.

When a National Movement rally was fired on by unknown gunmen on November 7 and several people were hurt, Saakashvili became a hero throughout the region.

Zugdidi currently has electricity for only three or four a day, water is in short supply, and there is no gas.

The anarchy has had one positive effect on daily life, say local people - for several days the price of firewood, which most people use to heat their homes, fell sharply on the black market. That was because most of the traffic police who generally collect bribes from drivers ferrying the firewood melted away. But now they are coming back to work, and prices are going up again.

The police were the subject of another bizarre incident, characteristic of these interesting times. In Senaki the self-proclaimed head of administration, Kakha Adamia, appointed Tea Duduchava as his new police chief, forgetting that the actual police chief had remained in his post. But the conflict was resolved when Duduchava's father came to police headquarters and took her home with him.

By Gocha MINJORA. Georgia Alert No.03, November 26

Shevardnadze: a bitter resignation

Tbilisi, December 2003

In an interview with IWPR, Georgia's former president says he stepped down quickly to avoid bloodshed.

Ousted Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze has spoken with bitterness about what he called a Western-inspired plot to remove him, and stressed that he had stepped down to avoid bloodshed on the streets of Tbilisi.

Shevardnadze, in an interview with IWPR and other journalists five days after he was forced to resign as president on November 23, also acknowledged that, at the age of 75, his political career was over. "No, that's my will, my business," he said, when asked whether he would heed any calls to go back to politics. "I don't plan to return. I have a lot of unresolved things to do."

He received the group of journalists on the evening of November 28 in his residence at Krtsanisi, just outside Tbilisi. He sat on a leather sofa in his study, surrounded by paintings going back to the days when he was Georgia's Communist Party leader in the 1970s, and signed photographs of himself with a string of Western leaders such as President George Bush (senior) and French president Jacques Chirac.

Shevardnadze spoke for about an hour, his mood changing throughout. At the beginning, white-haired and with lines under his eyes, he seemed very tired. He began in a halting slow voice, but gradually livened up as he got into debates with the journalists. Bitterness changed to humour and the charm he was once famous for.

The former president's repeated message was that he had chosen to resign to ensure a bloodless end to Georgia's political crisis. When opposition demonstrators took over the parliament building on November 22, he declared a state of emergency. But he announced his resignation a day later, as the security forces begin to desert him and after a mediating mission by Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov.

"I don't want to go down in history as a man who allowed blood to be shed," said Shevardnadze. "In my life I have always found ways of dealing with a situation. Although I have been in even more serious situations, I still found a way through and didn't allow any bloodshed."

The ex-president said that "the coup was prepared over several months, everything was thought through in advance and everything was built on one idea - Shevardnadze won't spill blood".

But he was not able to explain why he had miscalculated so badly and proved incapable of negotiating a better solution to the crisis, triggered over disputed parliamentary elections on November 2.

Many of his comments suggested a man who had either lost his former political acuity, or else one whose entourage had been screening him from what was going on in the country. He said, for example, that the issue of his resignation had only arisen on the last day of the crisis, when in fact it had been discussed publicly for two weeks. And he expressed surprise at the success of opposition leader Mikael Saakashvili, even though the latter has been widely perceived as Georgia's most popular politician for at least a year.

Shevardnadze did not blame the United States government itself for engineering his downfall, saying he had had two friendly telephone calls with Secretary of State Colin Powell. He also absolved the Russian foreign minister of blame. But he spoke with anger about what he regarded as a plot, engineered by unspecified Western figures, to bring him down.

"I can't speak about the whole country, the whole of America playing a role," he said. "There are different forces there. Someone took part, someone helped, someone made things possible. But I don't think that the administration itself was involved in what happened. I don't believe that."

Shevardnadze's angriest words were reserved for the non-government organisations that monitored the elections - which he still insisted had been fair, despite widespread condemnation - and carried out a parallel count. He strongly blamed Western governments for giving them financial support. "Maybe it was not the intelligence agencies, but some agents. And definitely representatives of different countries. One ambassador told me that it had cost him up to four million dollars."

Later in the interview, he said that he had long detected strong Western support for the trio of opposition leaders -Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze and Zurab Zhvania - who ousted him.

"You know in the West they support realistic forces," Shevardnadze said. "They were convinced that those people were coming to power. Yes, there was Shevardnadze, he was a good man, they could work with him. But he only had a year or two left and he had to go. And then whom could they deal with? So they started looking. And they found these three people, and maybe some others too. As to whether they made the right choice - let's see."

But when he spoke about the trio - all of whom used to be his protégés - it was with little bitterness and even some pride, despite the way they had ousted him.

He described the three as being educated, talented individuals, with special words of praise for Zhvania, now head of the new government, whom he at one time groomed to be his successor.

"While they were with me, they behaved well," he said. "Zhvania was the general secretary of the organisation which I founded, the Citizens' Union. It was the biggest organisation and came first in all elections, and Zhvania was the leader. I did everything specially, I specially created the conditions for him to be independent and grow quickly. He did grow quickly, but in the wrong direction!"

Shevardnadze said he was ready to offer the new leaders advice, now that they were in power. "I told them that if they needed some advice, I am ready. But I am not sure this kind of advice is always needed. Only a few days has passed, and I am already cut off and don't know what is happening."

Shevardnadze sometimes lapsed into reflective mood about his extraordinary political career, reminiscing about the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991, when he shared a room in the besieged White House with cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, or about his role in the unification of Germany, when, as he put it, "we managed to extinguish that fire", the Cold War.

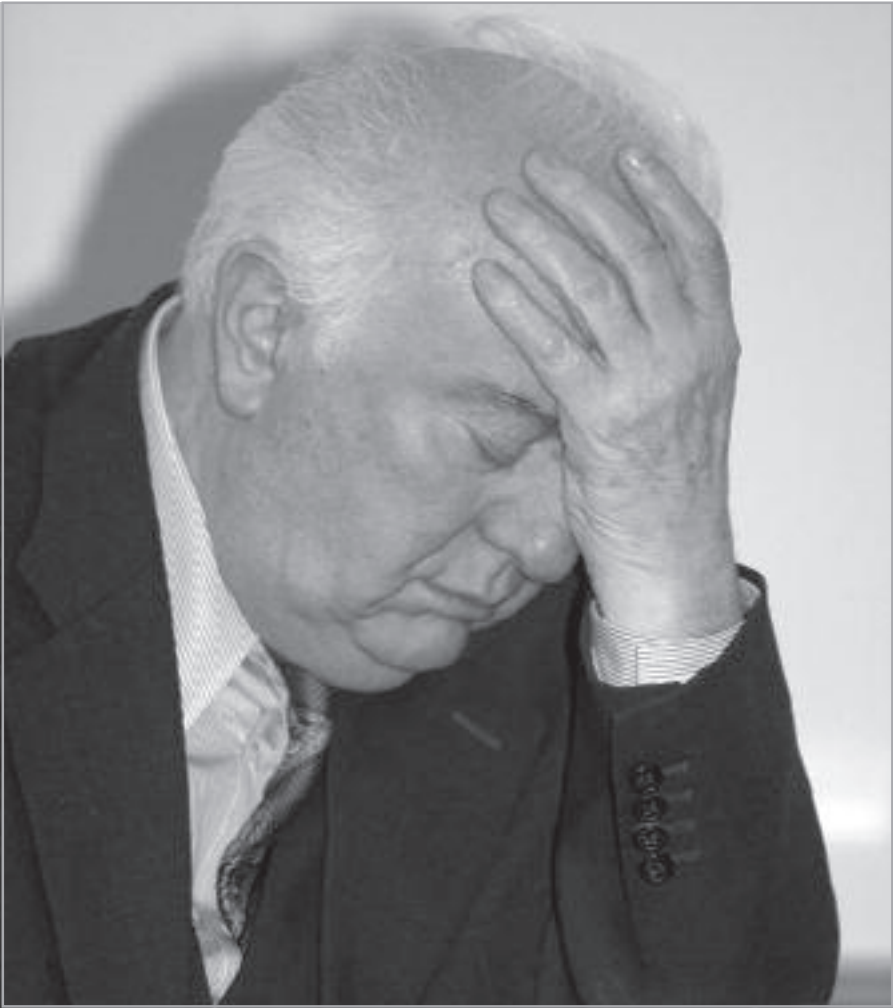
He said he had received many phone calls from former friends and colleagues, "but I have to tell

you honestly, I refuse to take these calls. Well, what can they say? That they are sorry, or they can tell me to be strong. But I know that myself. And I don't want them to become part of this story."

"Stay if you want!" the ex-president said to the journalists as they got ready to leave. He was joking, but perhaps also expressed the feelings of a man who is feeling lonely after 30 years at the pinnacle of high politics.

By Thomas DE WAAL and Margarita AKHVLEDIANI. Georgia Alert No.06, December 01

GIORGI KRAVEISHVILI



Shevardnadze leaves

Azeri refugees slowly rebuild lives

Alkhanly, December 2003

New and rebuilt houses allow Azerbaijanis displaced by the Karabakh war to move out of tent camps.

Nine years after the ceasefire which ended the war over Nagorny Karabakh, a group of Azerbaijanis have managed to return to their village. The Azerbaijani government is taking steps to rebuild houses or build new ones so that the tent camps where many refugees have lived for years can finally be closed.

The village of Alkhanly, in the Fizuli district, is an unusual case. During the war over Karabakh it was occupied by the Armenians for just a few months in the winter of 1993-94, and then recaptured by the Azerbaijanis the following spring. By then, however, the village was already badly devastated and mined, and it has taken years of work to restore it to its current state - a portent of what is to come if and when Azerbaijan gets back the regions it lost during the conflict.

As well as Karabakh itself, a number of surrounding areas remain under Armenian control. According to official statistics, more than 779,000 people displaced both from Armenia itself and from the lands in and around Karabakh now live in Azerbaijan.

Only part of Alkhanly has been rebuilt. The ruins of bombed and burnt-out houses are interspersed with new building. The ruins of the plant that used to produce well-known Azerbaijani wines before the war stand in the middle of the village like a war memorial. This whole area remained mined for years. Many ruins are still signposted "Safe House" to indicate that all the mines have been defused.

Some 60 per cent of Alkhanly's former residents have returned home, mostly those whose houses have been rebuilt by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent. The 700,000 US dollar reconstruction program, funded by a number of international donors, was completed on November 15.

"The Reconstruction and Repatriation Programme saw a total of 151 houses rebuilt for 230 families. Every house is much bigger than the one that stood there before," said Təilor Husseinov, Red Cross representative for Fizuli district. "The village will now be home to 830 people. We are proud of this result, but before the war there were 574 houses here with 650 families."

The returning villagers themselves, after some special training, took part in the reconstruction work. Many of them learned new trades in the process, becoming carpenters or house-painters.

Adil Guliev, a school teacher, was one of the first to return. After 1993, he lived in a tent in

a camp near the town of Saatly, before returning in 2001 to rebuild his house. He brought his family along, and his wife, two children and neighbours all lent a helping hand. But the ruins of the old house still stand in his yard. "It's a reminder of days long gone," he said.

In addition to homes, the village school has also been rebuilt, and currently lists upwards of 250 students. "This school is better than the one we had before," said 12-year-old Samir Guliev. "In the old school in Saatly we often didn't have classes because of the cold and the lack of teachers."

Most importantly, the Red Cross has helped the villagers start farming again, providing a steady source of income. Thanks to a loan scheme, the villagers now grow enough food to sustain their families.

Locals said they returned to their new homes without fear, even though Armenian military positions are clearly visible beyond the village. In fact, part of Alkhanly is still under Armenian control, and the families who used to live there before the war cannot safely return from the huts in Saatly where they have spent the past ten years.

In Saatly, another construction scheme- this one sponsored by the Azerbaijani government - is under way, in what amounts to a new trend. So far, housing has been built for more than 2,000 refugees. Each house contains two rooms and comes with its own vegetable patch.

But some of the refugees are not keen to move in. "In Alkhanly, they gave people jobs and money. We didn't get anything. Where can we find work here? There is not a single employer around," complained one of the residents, who has just moved into a new house in Saatly.

The housing project is part of a government programme to get out the displaced people out of tents and into decent housing. Gabil Abilov, press spokesman for the State Committee for Refugees and Forced Migrants, told IWPR that up until summer this year there were 12 tent camps in Azerbaijan housing 52,000 refugees from Nagorny Karabakh and other Armenian-occupied districts. Now there are only seven left as the government resettlement programme draws to a close.

Most refugees live in makeshift accommodation of various kinds - some in railcars. Zeinisharaf, a primary schoolteacher and mother of two from the Zangelan district who lives in a worker's hostel, told IWPR, "I had to work night and day, but now my hostel room is totally fit for living."

Like some of the refugees, Zeinisharaf does not like the idea of returning home if she ever gets the chance, "I'm not sure we would be safe on our native lands. Who can promise we will never relive the horrors of 1993?"

Another Zangelan native, Svetlana Garayeva, expresses the more common opinion. "We live in the capital Baku, not in a tent camp - but people treat us like aliens, as though we're not wanted," she said. "No matter how good I have it here, I will still be counting the days until I can return to Zangelan. My home is there, even though it's destroyed."

By Leila AMIROVA. CRS No.208, December 04

Armenian verdict leaves relatives unhappy

Yerevan, December 2003

Four years on, the men behind the assassinations in the Armenian parliament have been sentenced but not everyone is satisfied.

The longest and most politically charged trial in recent Armenian history has ended with a string of life sentences for the men accused of shooting eight politicians dead in parliament in October 1999.

After a case lasting almost three years, six of the seven men charged were given life in jail on December 2. They were the brothers Nairi and Karen Hunanian, their uncle Vram Galstian, as well as Eduard Grigorian, Derenik Bejanian and the driver Ashot Knyazian. A seventh man, Hamlet Stepanian, was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment.

No one ever doubted that the men were guilty, since their actions were caught on film on October 27 1999. That was the day Nairi Hunanian and four of his accomplices burst into the chamber of the Armenian parliament and opened fire, killing eight top politicians, including the then prime minister Vazgen Sarkisian and speaker of parliament Karen Demirchian.

The assassination of two of the three most powerful men in Armenia rocked the country and changed its political landscape forever.

The seven men were found guilty of six charges that, apart from murder, included "attempting to seize power" and "terrorism."

The first sessions of what became known as the "October 27 trial" attracted huge interest. There were no empty seats in the courtroom, and demonstrations were held outside. But over time, public interest in the case waned. As the verdict was read out - a process which took four hours - people in the courtroom remained calm, and the street outside the court was empty.

The trial has been dogged by allegations from the victims' families that the accused were just the executors of the crime, while those who had ordered it were escaping justice. Opposition politicians have alleged that members of the presidential administration - including President Robert Kocharian himself - were complicit in the attack.

"Instead of uncovering the truth behind the evil deeds of October 27, the court carried out the orders of the regime and concealed the real circumstances," claimed Albert Bazeyan, head of the political council of the Republican Party.

The families of the two most prominent men killed, the Sarkisians and the Demirchians, were not present for the final verdict.

Aram Sarkisian, brother of Vazgen Sarkisian, has invited Kocharian to a public debate,

saying "If Robert Kocharian can prove he was not involved in October 27, then I am ready to ask him publicly for forgiveness," Sarkisian said.

Kocharian has categorically denied any involvement in the shootings, and Sarkisian's offer was dismissed by the presidential press secretary, who said everything had been resolved by the courts.

Opposition deputies are also angry Kocharian did not sign off on a legal amendment - which would have prevented the defendants appealing for a pardon - in time for it to take effect.

There was further controversy over a five-month break in proceedings which led to the number of witnesses called being cut back drastically. From January to June this year the trial was halted, first because of the ill health of the judge, then because one of the defendants, Vram Galstian, was apparently sick. When he returned to court Galstian claimed he had been force-fed with medicines that made him ill.

When the trial resumed, several dozen witnesses found that were not called, and in the end only 28 of the initial list of 129 witnesses gave testimony.

Ruzan Khachatryan, the only journalist to interview Nairi Hunanian immediately after the shootings, was among those who were not called to the witness stand. She alleges that the film she shot that day was confiscated from her, and then edited before it was shown.

Lawyers of the murdered men allege that the assassins had accomplices who were never charged. Ashot Sarkisian, the Demirchians' lawyer, claimed for example that the five men did not bring their weapons into the parliament building from outside but were given them inside the chamber.

However, a pro-presidential politician, transport minister Andranik Manukian, said he was unhappy with the trial for another reason - because it did not end in death penalties for the accused men.

Manukian, who was gravely wounded in the attack and only just escaped with his life, alleged that the accused men were tortured to make them testify against others, including the president, but had refused to do so. He was convinced that Kocharian was not complicit in the attack.

Four years after the most notorious crime in the country's recent history, many people still feel they are no nearer to understanding what happened in parliament that day. The central question - whether the killers were acting on their own or under orders - is still unanswered.

"In effect the court did not anything to what we already knew," said Samvel Sarkisian, a doctor. "The Hunanian group was convicted of a crime it did commit and which we knew about on the day it happened, but there was no reply to the question of who gave the orders."

All the defendants plan to appeal against the verdict.

By Zhanna ALEXANIAN. CRS No.209, December 11

Heidar Aliev: a political colossus

London, December 2003

The extraordinary career of the man who dominated Azerbaijan for more than 30 years.

Heidar Aliev, who died recently at the age of 80, was perhaps the ultimate political operator in the former Soviet Union.

Of all the men who ruled the 15 new post-Soviet states, his career was the most dramatic - from a Stalinist intelligence officer in the Forties to a Politburo member in the Eighties, disgrace and exile, and then rebirth as the pro-western leader of independent Azerbaijan.

Aliev, who died on December 12, was a formidable presence, with piercing blue eyes, plenty of charm and - when required - a towering anger.

His stamina was legendary, as was his phenomenal memory - he knew literally hundreds of Azerbaijanis by name, many of whom he had personally launched on their careers.

One western diplomat famously remarked, "Heidar Aliev gets up each morning, looks in the mirror and decides he doesn't have enough control."

His leadership was heavily personalised. He took decisions alone, suppressed all political rivals - many are still either in exile or in prison - and reluctantly appointed an heir only when already seriously ill.

But he could also be extremely flexible, and was a born pragmatist who skilfully shifted Azerbaijan's strategic priorities westwards in the new era.

According to official records, Aliev was born in May 1923 in the poor and barren exclave of Nakhichevan between Armenia, Iran and Turkey, the third of eight children.

His father had recently emigrated from the village of Jomartly in the Sisian region of Armenia across the border. Rumours have long circulated that Aliev was in fact born two years earlier, but that it was decided that a senior Azerbaijani politician should not have an Armenian place of birth.

Little is known about his early life and the perfect school reports in the Heidar Aliev Museum in Nakhichevan do not tell the full story. We know that at the age of 18 he joined the Stalinist secret police and rose rapidly through the ranks. When President Vladimir Putin visited Baku in 2001 and presented Aliev with his graduation certificate from the Leningrad KGB academy in 1949, it was the first anyone knew that he had studied in Leningrad.

Aliev clearly had the survival skills needed to prosper in this world. It was reported - but again never confirmed - that in the Fifties he was employed by the Eastern Department of the KGB and had worked in the Middle East. His political opponents often alleged that he was involved in setting up a Kurdish terrorist organisation, the PKK, another claim strongly denied.

In 1960, aged just 37, Aliev became head of the KGB in Azerbaijan and nine years later, was appointed the republic's first party secretary.

As party boss, he put Soviet Azerbaijan on the map. He secured increased funds for the republic, promoted ethnic Azerbaijanis to top positions and got them places in Moscow universities.

Above all, he befriended Leonid Brezhnev, who came to Baku on three lavish visits. On one of these occasions, Aliev famously presented the Soviet leader with a ring which had one large diamond in the middle - representing Brezhnev - surrounded by 15 smaller ones, the Union republics.

Aliev also presided over a climate of corruption and patronage that the Gorbachev-era investigative journalist Arkady Vaksberg later dubbed "Alievshchina" or "Alievism". Members of his "Nakhichevan clan" were given key jobs and positions were bought and sold.

In 1982, shortly after Brezhnev's death, Aliev was promoted to become "the first Turk in the Politburo" and deputy prime minister of the Soviet Union, giving him enormous influence.

His star began to wane when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power. Two years later he was forced to resign on health grounds - he did indeed have heart problems - and his career seemed to be over.

He began his comeback in January 1990 with a public and forceful denunciation of the Soviet army's bloody intervention in Baku. The following year he went back to his home region of Nakhichevan and became speaker of the local parliament. As Azerbaijan gained its independence, he turned Nakhichevan into a semi-autonomous fiefdom.

Aliev watched from the sidelines as the new state descended into chaos under its first two presidents, Ayaz Mütəllibov and Abulfəz Elçibey. His return to power in 1993 was a textbook study of political manoeuvring.

When dissident colonel Səret Hüseynov staged an uprising against Elçibey's government, the administration invited Aliev to come to Baku to help them - the equivalent, as veteran Azerbaijan-watcher Thomas Goltz said, of "inviting a crocodile into the goat-pen".

Within four months, Elçibey had fled. Aliev had outwitted everyone and was president of Azerbaijan.

The price to be paid was in the ongoing war with the Armenians over Nagorno Karabakh. Between the disintegration of the Popular Front government in June 1993 and Aliev's election in October Azerbaijan lost five whole regions and 350,000 people became refugees. Aliev ignored the war effort in favour of the domestic political fight. He disbanded 33 Popular Front battalions, which were central to the defence of the Karabakh front, but were also a threat to his authority.

With a typical zigzag, once elected, Aliev held secret negotiations with the Karabakh Armenian leader Robert Kocharian in Moscow after the election and then, when these talks were going nowhere, launched the bloodiest campaign of the conflict, which cost the lives of thousands of young conscripts. Then in May 1994 he negotiated a ceasefire with the Armenians.

Aliev gradually and ruthlessly restored stability to Azerbaijan. Democracy faded, while order returned. An especially unpleasant surprise awaited the chief rebel Səret Hüseynov, who was appointed prime minister under President Aliev only to be accused of plotting against him several months later, denounced and arrested.

As president, Aliev's great achievement was to negotiate a series of oil and gas agreements that made Azerbaijan a big new player in international energy politics.

Over the next 20 years, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Erzurum pipelines should give Azerbaijan billions in revenues. He became a popular figure in Washington. He built a new strategic alliance with Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been his ideological opponent in Gorbachev's Politburo.

With the departure of another old Politburo rival, Boris Yeltsin, relations with Russia significantly improved such that President Putin, at Aliev's funeral said that, "Not only did I think of him with a lot of respect - I loved him."

Aliev inspired strong feelings. Pro-government deputy Sirus Tebrizli said, "Heidar was a great and irreplaceable politician. He was able to rule the country on his own, to perform all the duties of the government single-handed."

Opposition analyst Zardusht Alizade said, "Aliev was the last representative of the political heritage of Stalin and Beria. [He] personified the most terrible experiences in the fate of the Azerbaijani people."

It was characteristic of Aliev that he wanted to stand for a third term as president this year, aged 80, and only failing health prevented him from doing so.

The outpouring of grief at his funeral on December 15 was obviously genuine. Any Azerbaijani under 50 had lived their whole adult life in his shadow. For once the stock phrase is true - his country is utterly different without him and will never see the like again.

Editor. Shahin Rzayev in Baku contributed to this article.

By Thomas DE WAAL. CRS No. 210, December 18

SAMIR ALIEV



You see billboards like this everywhere in Baku

Special report: Trans-Caucasus pipeline under way at last

Azerbaijan, Georgia, December 2003

Project to build pipeline from Azerbaijan to Turkey has some obvious winners, but some may also lose out.

A tractor drew up. It was rusted through, all its parts rattling, missing a windscreen, and plastered with mud. Out climbed a middle-aged man in muddy shoes, trousers made of sacking and a worn greasy sheepskin coat. He took a cigarette.

Thanks to his tractor, Vitaly, poor as he is, is one of the better-off residents of Tsnisi, a village in southern Georgia. He can feed his family and make ends meet.

This region is often called the "Georgian Siberia" because of its difficult soil and tough climate. Thousands of locals have emigrated, either to Tbilisi or abroad. The main source of income is potato plots.

But now, as if from nowhere, the region is about to host perhaps the largest infrastructure project currently being built in the world, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, running from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean. Builders are at work, trucks line the road, vast lengths of pipe are being shipped in. For the locals this means large windfalls, given out as compensation for the plots of land they are giving up to the pipeline.

Farmer Zelimkhan Natenadze, 64, has been paid 1,104 US dollars for his plot. "Now I have plenty of money to live on and put aside for a rainy day," he said. Even in Georgia that is not a large sum, but it makes all the difference to Natenadze. "I'm happy, it's serious money," he said.

Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, or BTC, is about to change the economics and the politics of the Caucasus forever. Starting on the Caspian seaboard near Baku, the pipeline will travel through Azerbaijan and mountainous areas of Georgia on its way to the Turkish port of Ceyhan.

The 1,760-kilometre pipeline, which has been costed at 2.95 billion dollars, will run for 442 km through Azerbaijan and 248 km through Georgia, with the longest and last stretch in eastern Turkey. It is due to become fully operational in early 2005.

Vast revenues will be earned from the project, particularly for the main oil exporter, Azerbaijan. Peak capacity will be one million barrels a day and the line is due to have an operating life of 40 years. According to Samir Sharifov, managing director of the National Oil Fund of Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan will earn profits of between 700 million and one billion dollars a year if the export price stays at 20 to 25 dollars a barrel. This would translate into total revenues of five billion dollars or so for the government's coffers by the year 2010.

Almost everyone in Azerbaijan and Georgia is enthusiastic about BTC, yet IWPR's investigation has uncovered that various sides have very different expectations of it. The

development of BTC has in fact three stories - one for the investors, one for the governments, and one for the people along the route.

Attitudes in Azerbaijan and Georgia diverge greatly. What both countries have in common is problems with compensation payments being given out to landowners. The broader consequences of the project for the two countries are very different. BTC will bring Azerbaijan huge revenues, although there are perennial worries about funds being siphoned off through corruption. In Georgia, most people agree that their pipeline brings political advantage, but are less sure about the economic benefits.

For the investors, BTC is a huge logistical challenge, but the overall aim is very simple.

"We view the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline strictly as a commercial venture," said Michael Townshend, General Manager of BTC Co, the company managing the project. He said the pipeline was designed as the shortest and most cost-effective route for getting Caspian oil, extracted by BP and its partners, to international markets.

The project was first mooted in the early Nineties and then ran into trouble as oil prices fell towards the end of the decade and estimates of the likely reserves in the Caspian were downgraded. But instability in the Middle East, rising oil prices, and continued interest from the United States, in particular, put BTC back on track.

BP is the main shareholder in BTC Co with just over 30 per cent of the shares. Next in importance come the National Oil Company of Azerbaijan, SOCAR, with 25 per cent, the United States' Unocal with 8.9 per cent, Norway's Statoil with 8.7 per cent, and seven other companies with smaller shares.

The shareholders came up with 30 per cent of total project financing. The rest of the funds came in loans from international financial institutions. The International Financial Corporation, IFC, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, EBRD, approved loans in November, opening the way for commercial banks to finance the project. With a return of 12 per cent of investment per year built into the project's feasibility study, BTC is expected to pay for itself in 20 years.

The green light for BTC augurs well for another project, the South Caucasus Gas Pipeline which will funnel gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas fields in the Caspian to Turkey and on to Europe. That pipeline will be laid alongside BTC for most of its route and is due to be completed about a year later, in 2006.

"DREAM COME TRUE" FOR GOVERNMENTS

At a ceremony marking the beginning of construction in September 2002, the late Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev called the pipeline project a "dream come true" for his country. "This project and its implementation can become a guarantor of peace, stability, and security in the Caucasus region. This steel pipe will bring Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Georgia even closer together," he said.

The geopolitical significance of the pipeline escaped no one. By making a route from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean that bypassed Russia, Iran and Armenia, the three countries were building a pro-western strategic alliance through the new energy corridor.

Former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze has made it clear he sees the building of BTC as perhaps the most important achievement of his presidency. "Everyone recognises that Georgia is a key link in this project," Shevardnadze said in a radio interview on August 5.

"The functioning of the pipeline will largely depend on our country. Georgia has become part of a sphere of global interests, which is a serious factor in strengthening our state independence."

Unusually for the Caucasus, the opposition in both countries also supports the project. Their misgivings are confined to its implementation. Ali Kerimli, head of the Popular Front party in Azerbaijan, said, "On the whole we support the BTC project. The signing of the contract was guaranteed in the early Nineties during the rule of the Popular Front government. The project is economically beneficial to Azerbaijan but we have to control its implementation."

In Georgia, all political forces have also welcomed the pipeline. Differences have centred on whether Shevardnadze promised too much.

Transit fees for the pipeline across Georgia are expected to peak at 60 million dollars a year, but the number of permanent jobs created for Georgians once the construction work is over will be just a few hundred. The revenues are a significant boost to the small Georgian budget, but tiny by the standards of Azerbaijan - which actually donated its transit fees to Georgia when the project was in trouble - and unlikely to make a big change to the latter's economy overall.

Opposition leader Mikael Saakashvili, who looks set to become Georgia's next president on January 4, following the peaceful "rose revolution" in November, criticised Shevardnadze's handling of BTC in an interview given in September, saying he had made exaggerated promises that were in fact a "big lie".

He told IWPR, "Shevardnadze was selling this to the population as a future bonanza, [saying] that all will be well in a couple of years. Many years have elapsed since then, and what's really happening is that people are asking more and more loudly, 'Did we get anything from that?'"

"Of course people understand the political importance of this, but Shevardnadze promised much more than just political importance," said Saakashvili. "He promised wealth for pretty much everybody here because of this pipeline. He overplayed it."

A CONTROVERSIAL ROUTE

The decision was taken last year to run the pipeline through a central route in Georgia that takes it next to the Borzhomi valley. This makes it longer and negotiates more difficult terrain than a more direct route would have done. The oil will now flow close to a national park and the sources of the famed Borzhomi mineral water.

A group of local non-government organisations, NGOs, in Georgia which have been fighting the Borzhomi route say that the decision was made without proper consultation. For example, a big public meeting which the EBRD and IFC held with local Borzhomi residents took place only in September, when details of the route had already been chosen.

"I think the project was badly designed, and the one issue that is clear to me and clear to BTC Co is that they know the project design is not complete," said Manana Kochladze, Caucasus regional coordinator of the NGO Bankwatch at the Borzhomi meeting. "They are still designing how the pipeline will go through Borzhomi [and] the Turkish mountains."

"Now they are starting to think how to put a pipeline in [Borzhomi] in a way that is safe," she said. "First they come and say they are choosing this land to cross, and then they decide how they can make it safe."

The main mineral water firm in Borzhomi - and Georgia's third biggest exporter - Georgian Glass and Mineral Water, has also strongly opposed the Borzhomi route.

In response, investors and lenders said they have been talking to locals for at least two years. And certainly most voices at the public meeting came out in favour of the pipeline.

The alternative would have been to run the pipeline through Akhalkalaki district in the Javakheti region of southern Georgia. There are indications that some decision-makers saw a problem in the fact that Javakheti is overwhelmingly populated by Armenians.

Political analyst Irakli Kakabadze said Georgian and foreign experts had polled the locals in three villages which would have lain along the pipeline route if it had gone through Akhalkalaki. None objected to the project, and many welcomed it as a forerunner of new economic opportunities for the region. Kakabadze believes that running it through Akhalkalaki would have dampened separatist tendencies and improved living standards.

No one in Georgia is clear about how or when the decision was taken to choose the Borzhomi route rather than the one via Akhalkalaki. References have been made to a meeting of Georgia's Security Council, but the date and content of that meeting has never been made public. The investors say that it was done on the recommendation of the Georgian government. A member of the BTC consortium, speaking anonymously, said the World Bank had recommended the Borzhomi route as the most feasible.

Giorgi Chanturia, president of the Georgian International Oil Company, said the southern route option was scrapped because of the continued - and controversial - presence of a Russian military base at Akhalkalaki. He stressed that the prevalence of ethnic Armenians in the area was not an issue.

Ramaz Jabauri, Georgia's deputy intelligence chief, told IWPR the decision to place the pipeline around Akhalkalaki "was made when the nation was facing a different set of threats". But he now says, "At this point, it might stand to reason to run the pipe through Akhalkalaki to boost local employment opportunities there."

The mayor of Akhalkalaki, Nairi Iritsian, told IWPR he had the impression that Georgia's central government makes a point of alienating the region. As many as 2,000 of its residents go to Russia every year to look for work. Georgian election campaigners coming to Akhalkalaki promise new jobs to woo local voters, but the pledges are never kept. The only jobs in the region are at the Russian military base.

Like many others in Akhalkalaki, Apet Tsaturian, who lives in the village of Alastan, was disappointed by Georgia's decision to run the pipeline elsewhere. "That pipe could make a real difference here," he said. "Georgian officials seem so eager to remove the [Russian] base and deprive us of our only source of income, but what can they offer in return? It could have created more jobs here, but Georgia denied us that opportunity, as if we were some hostile state."

In Azerbaijan, objections to this route are expressed openly. "It was impossible to lay it through Javakheti," said opposition leader Ali Kerimli. "This region is populated by Armenians and so it represents a threat to the project. Running the pipeline through Borzhomi is more secure."

The man who is now president of Azerbaijan has also pointed the finger at the Armenians. In February this year, Ilham Aliiev, then vice president of the Azerbaijani oil company SOCAR, now president of Azerbaijan, said that "certain forces have always sought to hamper Azerbaijan's oil projects. However, they have only resorted to extreme tactics at the very last stage, when there is no other way to hold the project back. All this is the fault of Armenia and its communities abroad, as well as certain groups that are in league with them".

A PIPELINE FOR THE PEOPLE

The Shirvan Steppe in Azerbaijan is a parched wasteland punctuated with bare mountains and salt marshes. Drinking water is hard to come by as is water to irrigate the soil. Here, in the Gajigabul and Kurdamir districts, there is almost no land worth farming, and most of the men have left to work in Russia.

When we arrived in the village of Karasu in the Kurdamir District, we were shocked by the sight of teenage girls, aged 13 to 16, submerged up to their knees in mud and gathering mushrooms to sell to passing motorists at one dollar per bucket. Their faces brightened up when they learned we were on a fact-finding mission about the pipeline. "Are they going to pay us some compensation too?" they said.

The mother of one of the girls said, "We need to collect a large dowry for our daughter. We don't have that kind of money. And the land where the pipeline goes has already been snatched up by the municipal authorities."

Mehman Agayev, the father of the family, teaches history in Karasu's local school. He is considered one of the most educated men in the village and so villagers ask him to handle their paperwork for them. Agaev said that his fellow villagers had missed their chance of BTC compensation due to the negligence of local authorities, even though the pipeline runs several hundred metres from his house.

"Land reform was much delayed here," he said. "In other villages, people have already been allotted land plots, but here we have no idea who the land belongs to."

Issues of compensation are causing big headaches for the pipeline investors in two countries where the legal status of land is still quite murky. The arrival of such a massive and wealthy project in the backwaters of Azerbaijan and Georgia has been a windfall for many, caused disappointment to others whose lands are too far from the route to qualify, and angered those who say they have been cheated of compensation payments.

BTC passes through 13 districts in Azerbaijan and eight in Georgia. During the construction period, a temporary corridor 44 metres wide will run across land owned by several thousand farmers in the two country. Most of it will be returned to the owners once the pipeline is in place, a process estimated to take three years. Compensation will be paid for the temporary loss of land, for the loss of crops, and for any property damage.

While the procedures have been worked out in detail, on the ground things do not always go to plan.

In Azerbaijan, rural residents feel they have been wronged by their local authorities. After they allotted land to local peasants in nationwide reforms, some local administrations voided the contracts before the land was properly apportioned. In other cases, local administrations reportedly threatened to sever farmers' contracts unless they paid over a share of their earnings.

"Sometimes, we were able to successfully settle controversies between farmers and their local authorities, but in most cases, we had no mandate to intervene," said Namik Abbasov, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey pipeline development project manager for BTC Co.

In Karasu, local government head Islam Huseinov explained that land had already been earmarked for allotment to villagers, but not yet distributed. "The villagers were in no hurry to sort this out either," he said. "Our water supply is so erratic it's next to impossible to grow any crops here. In addition, once people get their land, they will have to pay tax on it. They have no money to pay, so why bother?"

When Karasu residents realised that compensation payouts had started in a nearby village, it was too late. The Karasu local authority received 11 million manats, or around 2,240 dollars,

in compensation. "We don't yet know who we should complain to," said Mehman. "Not to BP - they have nothing to do with this. The municipal administration blames the executive body, and the latter swear that it's all the fault of the municipal administration."

Some local farmers were much quicker off the mark. Andulali Gulamov, an enterprising 45-year-old farmer from Gajigabul who goes by the nickname of Sarybala (Blond), knew better than to wait for handouts from the government. "I heard about the pipeline a year before it started," said Sarybala. "I had no land, but I quickly rented a plot from the government."

Sarybala's neighbours said he then planted various expensive crops on his land to maximise the compensation he would get.

"Do you know what amazed me most?" he said. "These people from BP wouldn't even have a cup of tea with me. I offered them a couple of watermelons, but they wouldn't take them. It's hot here and they were working the whole day under a blazing sun. They said it was a bribe and they couldn't take it. I've never seen anything like that in Azerbaijan."

The biggest beneficiary of the handouts is probably a grape farmer from the Geranboi district of northwestern Azerbaijan. In this case, he genuinely did not want to lose his lands, and for three years he resisted requests to rent it out to the pipeline.

"I'm just a regular grape farmer. My work is my whole life," he said. The farmer asked the pipeline builders to find a way around his vineyards, "They looked and looked but apparently couldn't find anything. Eventually I gave in. I didn't want to disrupt a project that means so much for the country. And when I signed the contract, I suddenly realised I was rich."

He received the largest compensation payment in the whole of Azerbaijan, 185,000 dollars. At the end of the conversation, the farmer asked not to be named. "It's a large amount of money and it's safer that way," he said.

Mehman Agayev in Karasu is one of the losers. "I've got no one [no relative working] in Moscow, that's why I'm so poor," he said. "I'm making a pittance as a schoolteacher. BTC was my only hope but now it looks like our local government blew my chance for me."

NO GOING BACK

Construction is now underway at dozens of points along the route, helped by news of the loan agreements from the EBRD and IFC.

A few worried voices are still heard. Manana Kochladze of the NGO Bankwatch argues that Georgians' euphoria will wear off when they discover that very few jobs have been created, and that in return the country has signed up to agreements which give the pipeline company very broad powers over Georgian territory for 50 years.

"We have created a bad precedent," she said. "If tomorrow other companies come here and want to start other projects, it means the government will easily give way and there will be permanent violations.... After this project there will be no rule of law in Georgia."

It is clear, however, that the governments of both Azerbaijan and Georgia see Baku-Ceyhan as a passport to European integration.

Speaking in November, two months after he made critical remarks and as he stood poised to become Georgia's next president, the country's opposition leader Mikael Saakashvili warmly backed BTC. "This is a strategic project, and it is vital for Georgia," he said.

*By Leila AMIROVA and Nurlana GULIEVA,
and Gennady ABAROVICH and Giorgi KUPATADZE. CRS No. 211, December 23*

Chechnya: New Russian atrocities exposed

Stariye Atagi, March 2002

Russian troops engaged in new levels of extortion, looting and rape in their recent eight-day operation in the Chechen village of Stariye Atagi.

The inhabitants of this southern Chechen village are so used to surviving from one Russian military "clean-up" operation to the next that they talk about their lives in a surreal fashion. "Do you remember, that was during clean-up number 19?" they say. Or "My neighbour was killed in clean-up number 23."

Stariye Atagi, 20 km south of Grozny, is one of the largest villages in Chechnya, with 15,000 inhabitants. The eight-day "passport checking operation" that occurred there two months ago was the twentieth such action since the start of the second Chechen war, and definitely the worst. The village is a troubled place, home to many Islamic militants, usually referred to as "Wahhabis", which makes it the object of sustained attention from Russian soldiers. But locals, telling the story of what happened, wonder if it is really the Islamists that they are after.

Clean-up number 20 lasted from January 28 to February 5. As in earlier operations, federal forces besieged the village, using heavy armour, aviation, artillery and a contingent of 5,000 troops. Inhabitants were forbidden not just to leave the village, but also to move from one street to another or from house to house.

The soldiers came to the house of two sisters, Markha and Taus Musayeva, on Nagornaya Street at about 9 am on the morning of January 29. They are a poor family, who live off food they grow themselves and the pension of their old and almost bed-ridden father.

Markha said the soldiers immediately began demanding cash, but there was none. "Then we will screw you in front of your mum and dad," said the soldiers. They surrounded Markha, pushing her from one to the other like a punching bag, pulling her by the arms and hair. Tearing herself away, she rushed to the man who seemed to be the most senior, perhaps even an officer, wearing a black mask. Two fine calm green eyes looked at her and the man said, "Give us 300 roubles [about 10 dollars] and we won't screw you."

Taus, Markha's sister, who was being held in another room, cried out, "I'll run to the neighbours and bring it!" But the same drama was being played out there. Soldiers had forced Milana Kutsayeva, a beautiful 18-year-old from Grozny, with a one-year-old son in her arms, into her house, while her husband and father-in-law were made to stand against the wall in the courtyard. Milana was given a simple choice: be raped by the soldiers or pay 500 roubles.

Over the past two years, the mass document-checking process in Chechnya has turned into

mass looting, as the soldiers "clean up" whatever they like, especially cash and jewellery. This time, however, for the first time in this second Chechen war, the soldiers ravaged the village by extorting money - or indulging their own sexual pleasure.

The federal forces took 300 roubles from the poorer-looking houses and 500 from the richer ones. Women were spared rape if they handed over earrings and necklaces. The poorest in Stariye Atagi suffered worst of all, because they had nothing to give the Russians. Milana Kutsayeva was able to pay off the soldiers, but Markha and Taus weren't - and suffered the brutal consequences.

Money was also demanded from men. Entering houses, the soldiers told them that if they paid up, they would be free from checks or suspicion of links with members of armed resistance groups. If they didn't, they could be taken away to "filtration points", where they would be interrogated and tortured.

Payments from men ranged from 500 to 4,000 roubles, depending on their age (younger men paid more) and how wealthy they seemed. From Saidash Akhmadov, of 26 Kooperativnaya Street, they extorted 3,500 roubles, as well as a commercial consignment of chewing gum he was planning to trade worth 2,700 roubles. Khozh-Ahmed Akhmadov, an old man aged almost 70, paid 4,000 roubles - money he had collected for his own funeral arrangements.

The same process applied to property throughout the village. For not destroying or not expropriating items, the soldiers demanded payment in return, with the price for a car, for example, beginning at 1,000 roubles.

According to the Russian General Staff, a contingent of 70,000 soldiers is facing around 1,500 members of "illegal bandit formations" in Chechnya. The "passport-checking regime" or "clean-up" operation is deemed an essential part of the "counter-terrorist" actions. But there appears to be no connection between the operation in Stariye Atagi and warriors, terrorists or Islamic extremists - the official targets of the vast military contingent sent into Chechnya two and a half years ago. On this occasion in Stariye Atagi, the soldiers did not even check the villagers' documents.

"As always, the real bandits bought themselves out and sat it out at home," said Said-Emin Apayev, who lives on Nagornaya Street. "They have a deal with the federal forces." Apayev did not want to buy his freedom. As a result, on February 1 he was taken to a filtration point, where, together with eight Stariye Atagi police officials employed by the Russian authorities, he was tortured for three days and nights.

One of the policemen was Ramzan Sagipov. A junior sergeant in the patrol service, he was injured on duty in Grozny at the end of December. And so, on February 1, his arm was in plaster, the stumps of his torn-off fingers were bleeding and shrapnel was still digging into his legs. The soldiers seized him, took away his gun and began to beat him, aiming straight at his bandages.

But didn't he cry out that he was a policeman? "Of course," said Sagipov, "They said, 'You're all one band! We will shoot you all! You are sheltering fighters!' Then they tied me up and threw me into the back of a military truck on top of live bodies. They were other policemen who had tried to defend their fellow-villagers from looting and rape. When I tried to lift my head or move it, they immediately kicked me in the head or beat me with a rifle-butt."

The detained men were taken to a semi-abandoned poultry farm on the edge of the village.

"First they drove us 'down the line'," said Sagipov. "The soldiers formed two files facing

each other and threw us out of the truck at their feet, so that each one could kick us, just as he wanted to. Then they put us against the wall. I was all bandaged up and one man came up, turned me to him and said, 'He is sick', and immediately hit me with a truncheon over the head. Then they took off my bandages and began to squeeze, trample and crush me."

After they had finished with Sagipov, they let him go. He said they detained him and his colleagues "in order to humiliate us, to break our spirit.

"They put us against the wall with our arms raised, legs spread out and heads lowered," said Apayev of his ordeal at the filtration point. "It was forbidden to move or speak. For every act of disobedience blows landed on us from behind. They beat us with their feet, hands, rifle-butts, whatever they wanted. We stood there for six or eight hours."

"On the morning of February 2 they led us back to the wall and kept us in the same position until evening," he went on. "At dusk they took us to interrogation with an investigator, who demanded the time and itinerary of the fighters' movements, their hiding places and addresses. On February 3, they again stood us against the wall, then in the evening they forced us to sign in a book that 'we had no complaints' and let us go."

In fact, all of Russia saw Apayev on its television screens during this period in reports from Stariye Atagi. He was standing behind General Vladimir Moltenskoi, commander of federal forces in Chechnya, as the general declared that they had arrested bandits with guns, whom the local police had been defending. "We were all at home," said Apayev. "We had no weapons. We simply didn't buy ourselves out."

The operation ended on February 5, when armoured cars, loaded with loot, left the village. A few days later, a different set of looters arrived in the village, also wearing camouflage and black masks. These were members of one of the Wahhabi units, who were demanding "money for jihad". Like the Russian soldiers, they wanted money from young men, or would take them away by force.

Two days later, local people say, a group of young men from Stariye Atagi staged an armed revolt against the Wahhabis, which was crushed by Russian units. Relatives of the young men said that the Russians had been summoned by the Islamists to assist them. As a result, the local mutineers were all killed, while the Wahhabis escaped into the hills.

Two and a half years after the beginning of the second Chechen conflict, the Russian war machine is being operated with methods which only serve to create new recruits for terrorism and inflame hatred and the desire for revenge amongst ordinary Chechens. Meanwhile, bandits on both side profit.

By Anna POLITKOVSKAYA. CRS No.122, March 28

Battle over Ingushetia's future escalates

Nazran, May 2002

Ingushetia's leadership contest will be between a supporter of regional autonomy and a Moscow-backed general.

Alikhan Amirkhanov, a deputy from the Russia's State Duma, was the surprise front-runner after the first round of voting in presidential elections in the Russian republic of Ingushetia on April 7, after the favourite was forcibly removed from the ballot.

Amirkhanov was awarded 33 per cent of the vote, while Murat Zyazikov, a general from the intelligence service, the FSB, who enjoyed broad support in Moscow, won 19 per cent. They will meet in a run-off vote on April 28.

But the elections have been notable so far more for who was not standing than for who was. The ballot did not include Ingushetia's first president, former army general and Afghan veteran Ruslan Aushev. He remains popular in the small North Caucasian republic, but stepped down early from his post at the beginning of the year. Nor did it include another popular figure, interior minister Khamzat Gutseriev, who was removed from the contest two days before the vote.

The Ingush are closely related to their ethnic kin and neighbours, the Chechens. And Aushev consistently pursued an independent line from Moscow, criticising its military action in Chechnya, keeping up contact with the republic's separatist leadership and welcoming tens of thousands of Chechen refugees into Ingushetia. However, in the last three years he came under heavy pressure from Moscow.

"[Aushev] could stay in his post only if he carried out Moscow's orders," said Musa Zurabov, former prime minister of Ingushetia. "So he left, although it's true he did leave behind his team - Amirkhanov and Gutseriev."

Gutseriev, who enjoyed the support of Aushev, was accused of breaking election rules chiefly on the grounds that he had not given up his post as interior minister in order to contest the election. His case was debated for 14 days in Ingushetia's supreme court.

According to Alexei Vasilyev, a lawyer who observed the case, at issue was a decree of President Putin, issued at the beginning of 2002, on division of powers between the centre and the regions. According to one interpretation, a local minister should step down from his post to fight an election, according to another he has the right to stay in his job. Gutseriev's case was transferred to the Russian supreme court, which found against him and removed him from the ballot.

Gutseriev's departure left the race clear for Amirkhanov, who did almost no campaigning, but was considered loyal to Aushev, and Zyazikov, who is deputy plenipotentiary of the

Russian president in the Southern Federal District. The preferences of the centre became clear when one of the Russian central television channels showed Zyazikov shaking hands with Putin.

The head of Zyazikov's election campaign, Zelimkhan Yevloyev, accused Amirkhanov's supporters of buying votes, alleging that "for a vote for Amirkhanov people were paid between 500 and 1000 roubles (17 to 35 US dollars) at polling stations".

However, election observers from Russia's Central Electoral Commission said they had not noticed these activities, while supporters of Amirkhanov made counter-accusations that Zyazikov's campaigners had stuffed ballot boxes. They alleged that 33,000 unused ballots were filled out in favour of Zyazikov and in this way, the general managed to overtake another pro-Aushev candidate, the ex-president's brother, Mukharbek Aushev.

"Zyazikov was level with Mukharbek Aushev and a little behind him, when he suddenly surged ahead and came in second, which guaranteed him a place in the next round," said an Amirkhanov supporter. "In the end Aushev was 2,000 votes behind."

Complaints of a different kind came from the head of the organisation The Chechen Committee of National Salvation, Ruslan Badalov, who said that tens of thousands of refugees from Chechnya, registered in Ingushetia, were not allowed to vote.

"Chechen refugees are interested in who will become president of Ingushetia, just as much as the native Ingush population," said Badalov. "This will decide whether they remain in Ingushetia or whether they will have to return to Chechnya, where, as before, war is continuing."

Badalov said that Aushev had supported the claims of Chechens to remain in Ingushetia, but that if a new leader loyal to Moscow came to power in Ingushetia their fate might change.

According to immigration statistics, around 160,000 people fled Chechnya for Ingushetia at the beginning of the second Chechen war in 1999. According to Ingushetia's electoral commission, only 14,000 refugees, registered as "internally displaced persons" and mainly Ingush by nationality, had the right to vote. But other legal experts point out that Russia's electoral law gives the right to anyone temporarily registered in another Russian region to take part in its elections.

The second round of the election promises to be a bitterly contested fight between a candidate promising to continue Ingushetia's tradition of autonomy and one who will bring it closer into line with Moscow.

"The conflict which is developing will not be anything new for Ingushetia," said former prime minister Zurabov. "Ruslan Aushev, an independent regional leader, who came to power during the Yeltsin era, frequently acted against the recommendations of Moscow and Putin who was pursuing the policies of a strong federal centre."

The fight for the final result has already started. According to local police officials, two days after the first round of voting, a group of masked men broke into and smashed up Amirkhanov's campaign headquarters. The men said that they were from the Rostov branch of the FSB and had been sent there by the Southern Federal District, of which Zyazikov is deputy head. However, its leadership denied any involvement in the incident.

Roza Musayeva, a resident of Nazran, said that she and many of her neighbours were worried about what would happen next. "The elections have hardly passed and terrible things are already happening," she said. "On Sunday my husband went to vote in the elections, but next time he does not want to go."

By Timur ALIEV. CRS No. 124, April 12

Georgian reformer faces political oblivion

Tbilisi, May 2002

On the eve of Georgia's local elections, the country's most prominent pro-Western politician has lost control of his party - and perhaps his political career

Zurab Zhvania, former right-hand man of President Shevardnadze, is struggling to rescue his political career after losing the battle for control of the former governing party, the Citizens Union of Georgia.

As speaker of parliament, Zhvania was a favourite of the West and widely talked of as the heir to Shevardnadze. But, after resigning as speaker last year, Zhvania has now ceded control of his CUG power-base to Shevardnadze loyalists.

Zhvania and his supporters have been forced to stand on the ticket of the little-known Christian Conservative Party in the upcoming local elections on June 2. These polls are being seen as the prelude to parliamentary elections, which are due to be held in the autumn of 2003.

The feuding inside the CUG erupted into the open last autumn when Shevardnadze, who had quarrelled with Zhvania's "reformers", resigned as party chairman.

The party broke into two warring camps: supporters of the president, headed by the governor of the Kemo Kvartli region Levan Mamladze and pro-western allies of Zhvania, who announced that the CUG was becoming an opposition party.

Zhvania stayed on as head of the committee organising the party congress at which they planned a purge of party ranks. His team hoped to use the party's coffers and property to become the heir of the old CUG and prepare for the post-Shevardnadze era, which begins in 2005, when the president's second term expires.

However, the "reformers" suffered a series of serious reverses - in what many in Tbilisi are calling a "velvet revolution". First, the Tbilisi district court and then the supreme court disallowed the application by Zhvania's team to run under the CUG's name in the local elections. This was what forced them to find refuge in the Christian Conservative Party. Then the Zhvania group lost the chairmanship of all 16 parliamentary committees.

The pro-Shevardnadze group are capitalising on their success. The head of the CUG coordinating council, the parliamentary deputy Gela Kvaratskhelia, said that he plans to call a party congress before the June elections, which will adopt changes to its regulations, change the structure and start the process of appointing a new leader. The post of party chairman has been vacant since Shevardnadze stepped down in September.

Kvaratskhelia said that Zhvania and his supporters had done "nothing but evil" to the party, and confirmed that they would have nothing to do with the planned congress.

Zhvania supporter Eduard Surmanidze said that the CUG parliamentary group would split in two within the next few days. He said that 10-12 of the 36 deputies would form a group loyal to Shevardnadze. The rest, supporting Zhvania, would set about creating a new party. They will probably go into alliance with another "dissident", the former justice minister Mikhail Saakishvili.

Twenty-two parties and blocs are contesting the elections for the local assembly, or "sakrebulo", in Tbilisi. Shevardnadze appears to be placing his bets on the "New Rights" movement, founded by a group of MPs who quarrelled with Zhvania a few years ago.

Leading candidates on the New Rights list for the Tbilisi poll on June 2 include five-times women's world chess champion Nona Gaprindashvili and Mzia Tortladze, sister of influential businessman, Badri Patarkatsishvili. Patarkatsishvili recently donated one million lari (about 500,000 US dollars) to help victims of last month's earthquake in the capital.

The string of setbacks presents Zhvania, who is still only 38, with the biggest challenge of his career. Political observers are wondering if this is his political funeral or whether he can rise from the ashes of the governing party and be able to stand for president in 2005.

Zhvania made his reputation as a young member of Georgia's Green movement, who had not studied in party schools. First elected to parliament in 1992, when he was not yet 30, he became speaker in 1995 and formed a close relationship with Shevardnadze. In 1999 he was re-elected to the post.

One seasoned political analyst, the former parliamentary deputy Ivlian Khaindrava, said the former speaker's star was definitely waning - but cautioned against the idea that the Shevardnadze-Zhvania alliance was necessarily over.

"I don't believe we can say that it is all over between Shevardnadze and Zhvania," he said. "We can't definitely rule out their coming together again in the future. If they find they need each other, they will reunite. At the same time, there always have been, are and will be many people who wish to replace Zhvania as Shevardnadze's favourite."

Khaindrava said that the president had little reason to turn to Zhvania at the moment and that his refuge in the Christian Conservative Party was "not the shortest route to president". "To keep himself in politics, Zhvania has to look more realistically at his own strength and prospects," Khaindrava said.

By Mikhail VIGNANSKY in Tbilisi. CRS No.129, May 17

Dagestani blast inquiry "floundering"

Kaspiisk, Moscow, May 2002

Officials have fingered a Dagestani warlord for the slaughter at last week's military parade, but important questions remain unanswered.

Russian officials have named their prime suspect for a horrific bomb blast at a Victory day parade in the Dagestani town of Kaspiisk a week ago, but have so far failed to establish a motive.

Three suspects, initially detained for the May 9 explosion, which killed 42 people and wounded 90, were cleared of involvement. Then officials blamed Rappani Khalilov, a little-known Dagestani militant, said to be hiding in Chechnya, for the massacre. No one has explained why.

The bomb, an anti-personnel mine, filled with pieces of steel wire and with a force equivalent to three kilograms of dynamite, appears to have been planted to cause the greatest possible destruction. It was left in shrubs next to a road, where a crowd was gathering, and detonated as a military brass band marched past.

Excerpts from an amateur video taken by a Kaspiisk resident and broadcast on television show the military band playing a festive tune before being engulfed in billowing black smoke. Screams break out. As the smoke clears, soldiers in camouflage and civilians are seen sprawled around a deep crater in the street, with blood pouring from their wounds.

Twenty-two people, including six children, were declared dead at the site, and about 110 more were hospitalised. As of Sunday, 20 more had died of their injuries. The dead included 21 soldiers stationed in Kaspiisk, mostly musicians marching in the parade, and 13 children who were running in front of the band.

When an IWPR correspondent reached the blast site an hour after the explosion, it was dotted with large pools of blood, strips of victims' clothing, shoes and sheet music.

Alimagomed Isayev, 32, was in the crowd a few dozen metres away from the epicenter of the explosion. "At first, people scattered in all directions in panic," he said. "But they quickly came back to help the moaning victims. They didn't know what to do and stood motionless in despair, women were moving among the maimed bodies and sobbing hysterically. Then we began to load all those who were covered with blood into cars and drive them to hospitals."

Two hours after the explosion, with the area sealed off and explosives experts investigating the fragments of the bomb, federal servicemen began to compile the first list of the deceased. A young lieutenant loudly read out the names, "Kravchenko Alexander, Bass Sergei. . ."

A burly major in a black beret stood nearby, his hands covering his face, tears running down the cheeks. "Bitches, bitches," he cursed.

Kaspiisk, a town of 70,000 people, is the headquarters of the Russian federal border guards and marines stationed in Dagestan.

The latest bomb blast occurred a few minutes before President Putin was due to address World War Two veterans at a Victory Day rally in Moscow. Signaling how seriously he took the news, Putin said he would take personal charge of the inquiry into the attack. He ordered Nikolai Patrushev, head of the counter-intelligence service, the FSB, to head the team of investigators and to report directly to him.

Unusually, the authorities did not directly accuse Chechen rebels of being behind the bombing. Speaking on national television, Viktor Kazantsev, Putin's plenipotentiary in the Southern Federal District, told Russians not to jump to such a conclusion.

The rebels themselves denied any involvement. "The Chechens and those who sympathise with the Chechens in their struggle have nothing in common with such actions because it would mean playing into the hands of our enemies," Akhmed Zakayev, a spokesman for separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov, said in a statement posted on the separatists' website Chechenpress.com on May 10.

However Patrushev, who flew to Dagestan to lead the investigation, said on the same day that the explosion "may be a result of events taking place on the territory of Chechnya".

Three ethnic Dagestani suspects were arrested in St. Petersburg on May 11 and flown to the republic's capital, Makhachkala. A day later, they were cleared of involvement in the May 9 attack but remained in custody on suspicion of having carried out other bombings in Dagestan.

Later Dagestan's interior minister Adilgirei Magomedtagirov blamed Rappani Khalilov, a Chechnya-based warlord of Dagestani origin, for the bombing. The minister said that Khalilov was hiding in the Nozhai-Yurt region of eastern Chechnya. "As interior minister I swear that he will be either seized or eliminated," Magomedtagirov told reporters in Makhachkala. He said his ministry, rather than federal forces, would carry out the operation.

According to the Dagestani interior ministry, Khalilov has employed about 40 militants in as many as 15 terrorist attacks in the republic over the past eight months. His name first surfaced after a bomb exploded near a military truck in Makhachkala in January, killing seven servicemen and injuring 20. Russian deputy prosecutor general Vladimir Kolesnikov claimed that most of Khalilov's group had undergone training in Chechnya, Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At the same time, other versions for the bomb explosion are being widely discussed in Dagestan. In November 1996 Kaspiisk was the scene for another horrendous attack against Russian servicemen. An apartment block, which was home to border guards and their families, was destroyed by a bomb, killing 68 people. Nobody was ever convicted of that crime that many linked to the battle for control of Dagestan's lucrative caviar trade. Some believe the same smuggling business - rather than radical Islam - may be involved this time.

In another version of events, which has been widely discussed in the national press, it claimed the bombers may have been trying to undermine Dagestan's leader Magomedali Magomedov ahead of new elections for the post of head of the republic in June. Magomedov is expected to be the only candidate for the job he has held since 1994.

However, respected Dagestani sociologist Enver Kisriev, said this theory did not hold water. "Such an explanation for the attack might make sense, if there was any suggestion that it would hurt Moscow's relations with Magomedov," said Kisriev. "But today Magomedov's position inside the republic and Moscow's support for him are remarkably strong."

By Sergei RASULOV and Nabi ABDULLAYEV. CRS No. 129, May 17

Azerbaijani catholics' day in the sun

Baku, May 2002

There are just 200 practising Roman Catholics in Azerbaijan - but next week they are receiving a visit from the Pope.

When Pope John Paul II visits Baku next week, he will be the guest of a surprised and delighted Roman Catholic community, which is so small that it doesn't have a house fit to put him up in.

Azerbaijan's Catholics have suffered persecution, assimilation and emigration and now number only around 200 people - although accurate estimates are hard to come by. Now, they are playing host to one of the Pope's more unusual trips. He will be in Baku for only 24 hours and - for the first time ever - stay in a hotel.

Irina Orlova-Stroganova is one of the community's survivors. Her grandmother was a Pole, who continued to observe Catholic rituals, despite the atheist Soviet state around her, and insisted that her children spoke Polish at home. Irina's husband, Rostislav, who has aristocratic roots, was christened Orthodox, but finally converted to his wife's faith last year.

Elchin Akhmedov also adopted Catholicism, at the prompting of his wife Svetlana, who is of Polish descent. Firuza Mamedov and Tair Karayev inherited the faith from their mothers, despite non-practicing Azerbaijani fathers - their children now go to church.

The vast majority of the community are made up of these mixed families. It proved impossible to find one family in the city, which was entirely Catholic. Even the wife of the head of the community, Ophel Ismailov, is not of the faith, although she often attends services with her children.

"For me the Catholic community is like a family," said Yelena Sheikh-Zade (her married name). "It is a great source of support for us elderly pensioners. If someone insults us, then it will write an official letter and you feel protected."

The Pope's arrival on May 22, which Azerbaijan's Catholics are awaiting with great excitement, should change all this. Father Jysef Daniel Pravda, a Belgian with Slavic ancestry, hopes the Pope's visit will enable those Catholics who have no connection with the local community to learn about the parish for the first time.

Many see a broader purpose behind the event. As well as reviving Catholicism in Azerbaijan, there is a belief that the Pope wants to use the authority of his church to have an influence on the conflict zones of the region.

Presenting his credentials to President Heidar Aliyev in April this year, the Papal nuncio for

the Caucasian countries, Claudio Gugerotti, said that the Holy See was working hard on planning his visit, despite his poor health. Gugerotti said the aim of his foreign trips was to spread peace between different religious groups.

"In this sense, Azerbaijan, at the crossroads of East and West, can be a symbol of this toleration and of peaceful coexistence between citizens of different faiths," said the nuncio.

The Pope recently visited Armenia and Georgia, but paid no attention to Azerbaijan. His arrival here is therefore an attempt to reassure Azerbaijanis that he does not favour the Armenians. "As the representative of a world religion, the Pope visited Armenia," said Father Daniel. "Now he intends to visit Azerbaijan to demonstrate his balanced position towards these countries."

On arrival, the Holy See will meet President Heidar Aliyev. The day after he will celebrate mass in Baku. The congregation, including visitors from neighbouring countries, is expected to number around 5,000 people. He will then meet representatives of the three main religious groups in Azerbaijan, Catholic parishioners, refugees and internally displaced people.

The Catholic community in Azerbaijan is so small that they do not have anywhere to accommodate the Pope. So - for the first time ever on a foreign trip - Pope John Paul II will be staying in a hotel.

To be precise, he will be staying in the apartments of the Hotel Arshad, which is also the office of the head of the State Committee on Religion, Rafik Aliyev. Normally a room there - equipped with a mini-bar, jacuzzi and 30 cable television channels - would cost 200 US dollars a night.

"The residence of the Catholic church here does not have suitable facilities for an important elderly person, who has just travelled a long distance, to stay there," explained Father Daniel.

Azerbaijan's Catholic community was only recently re-formed after years of neglect. Its first priest, Father Jerzy Pilus only arrived in Baku in 1997 and under his leadership the church was registered. In 2000 the community managed to find funds to acquire a parish house, which serves as both a meeting place and a house of worship. Asked where the money had come from, Father Daniel replied, "Obviously not from local Catholics and not from the Vatican. From donations by rich believers in Italy."

The first mention of Catholics in Azerbaijan is from the year 1846, Father Daniel says. According to Ophel Ismailov, most of the community were Poles, exiled to the southern Caucasus by the tsarist regime. First of all, not having a church, they used to meet in people's homes and sometimes at the cemetery. Then in 1912 a magnificent church was built in the centre of Baku modelled on Notre Dame in Paris. But in the 1930s the church was destroyed by Stalin's regime and the Catholic community was broken up.

Throughout the succeeding years, the Catholic families did not lose touch with each other or with the church abroad and met wherever they could, including in public canteens. Now, for a day, their years of darkness will be forgotten.

By Gulnara MAMEDZADE. CRS No.129, May 17

Russia to capture Armenian industry

Yerevan, May 2002

Russia may write off Armenian debts in return for large slices of the republic's industry.

A proposed deal that will see Russia cancelling the country's debt in exchange for control of many Armenian industries has met with a mixed reception here.

Some members of the Armenian governing elite have hailed the planned agreement as a step forward, giving the country a much-needed boost at a time when it does not have the revenue or resources needed to kick start its flagging industries. They believe it will bring in Russian investment, expand the market for Armenian goods and encourage industrial growth.

Others are more sceptical and are interpreting the move as a bid by the Yerevan government to strengthen its shaky grip on power with Moscow's support.

Under the terms of the agreement, Moscow will write off Armenia's 100 million US dollar debt and gain control of the Razdan hydroelectric station, the Mars factory and two scientific research institutes.

"An agreement on transferring a series of Armenian factories to Russia in return for the cancelling of debts will be signed in the near future," Anatoly Dryukov, Russia's ambassador to Yerevan, said earlier this month.

A joint Armenian-Russian intergovernmental commission on economic cooperation struck the deal last December. "This is the first really powerful integration between Russia and Armenia to happen in ten years," said Ilya Klebanov, co-chair of the commission.

Yerevan-based political scientist Alexander Iskandarian believes Moscow is reconsidering its relationship with Armenia, its oldest ally in the Caucasus. For more than ten years the emphasis was on military and political cooperation, with economics playing a secondary role. However, there is now a growing feeling in Moscow that Russia must use other methods to exert influence over regions it considers of strategic importance.

That is why the communique signed between presidents Putin and Kocharian in Yerevan last September was mostly devoted to the economic and trade relationship between the two countries. Putin declared that it was a good moment to develop such relations because Russia was experiencing an economic boom.

"Today an effort is going on to push Russia out of the regions, like the Transcaucasus,

where traditionally it had undisputed influence," said Eduard Simoniants, former Armenian national security chief who is now one of the leaders of Socialist Armenia, a block of five small extra parliamentary left-wing parties. "Russia is looking for ways of staying in the Transcaucasus in whatever way it can and defending its interests."

Moscow expressed alarm over the arrival of US troops in Georgia to train the country's army counter-insurgency forces. It has also voiced concern at Azerbaijan's developing relationship with the West.

While Yerevan remains Moscow's strongest ally in the region, some observers here warn that what is in Russia's best interests may not be helpful for Armenia.

For example, Armenia is pursuing a number of economic projects with Iran, including a tunnel and gas pipeline connecting the two countries and a hydroelectric station on the River Araxes.

Although Russia has formally welcomed the Iran-Armenia gas pipeline project, Moscow has an interest in not seeing the plan come to fruition, as it currently has a monopoly on gas supplies to Armenia via Georgia.

Yet, Iskandarian suggested, Russia may not be as powerful as it thinks it is in the region and the growing economic cooperation between the south Caucasian countries and their southern neighbours, Iran and Turkey, may be unstoppable. "We are returning to a period when there is Russian influence in the region, but the region is not part of Russia," he said.

By Susanna PETROSIAN. CRS No. 131, May 31

Azerbaijan: rebel village remains defiant

Nardaran, June 13 2002

Residents of a blockaded Azerbaijani village continue to voice their fury over the government's crackdown on its Islamist critics.

Tensions between the Azerbaijani government and the rebellious village of Nardaran escalated this week, after prominent Islamist politicians from the besieged settlement were arrested.

There had been reports of a breakthrough in negotiations between the two sides on Saturday, June 8, but this correspondent managed to make it through police checkpoints into the blockaded village the following day to find the atmosphere still tense, with residents refusing to negotiate until men arrested after clashes between police and demonstrators the week before - which left one man dead - were released. (See IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service, No. 132).

The villagers' defiance was fuelled by the arrest on Monday of two leaders of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, Haji Aliakram Aliev and Mirmehti Darafarin, both from Nardaran. The villagers resumed demonstrations, while all entrances and exits to the village remain strictly controlled by the security forces.

It proved very difficult for an outsider to visit Nardaran. No Baku taxi-drivers would agree to take this correspondent to the village, about 30 km away. A driver in the neighbouring village of Mashtagi did agree, but my first attempt to go in as a journalist failed, when a police captain at a checkpoint one km from Nardaran said that he had instructions "from above" not to let any visitors, including members of press, past without written permission from his bosses.

My driver then suggested we take another road, where we told police that we were from the next village and had come to pray in the Nardaran mosque. Luckily, the policeman at the checkpoint decided not to examine the extent of my religious knowledge. He merely wrote down my identity details and asked a couple of questions about the geography of the Apsheron peninsula, which, as a native of these parts, I could answer without difficulty.

The mosque in Nardaran is a holy place not only for Shiite pilgrims from Azerbaijan, but also from neighbouring Iran, as Rahima, the sister of the eighth Imam, Reza, is buried there. There were about 20 worshippers inside, far fewer than normal.

Coming out of the mosque, I met Jeyhun, a swarthy 13-year-old boy, who agreed to be my guide. First of all, he took me to the central square, named after Imam Hussein. This name tells you a lot. Even in Soviet times, the Nardaranis were famously devout. You do see women wearing headscarves and the shops do not sell alcohol. But I was most struck by how all the walls lining the road from the mosque to the square were inscribed with quotations from the Koran and precepts of the Prophet. All of these phrases, and also the names of the streets, were

still written in the Cyrillic alphabet, despite a presidential ban on the script one year ago.

There were about 100 Nardaranis in the square at 11 o'clock in the morning. They seemed fairly calm and it was clear they had come out to exchange information and discuss the situation. The spot where 52-year-old Alihasan Agayev was killed in last week's clashes was covered in carnations, laid out to form the word *shahid*, or martyr. Nearby, bullet casings were similarly arranged to say *gatil*, or murderer. The villagers had taken down their barricades, but I could see the marks of bonfires and broken glass strewn on the ground.

Jeyhun introduced me to 50-year-old Mamedali Agayev, the brother of the dead man. "Like most people in Nardaran, my brother was very hard up," he said. "He has left five children behind, three daughters and two sons. The oldest daughter is 11. When the executive head of Baku Hajibala Abutalibov visited us, he promised to build a new school. Why should we have a new school, when our children don't even have shoes to go to school in?"

Many believe that Nardaran's protests stem mainly from socio-economic discontents. In demonstrations that began in January this year, the villagers, who live mainly from the cut flower trade, demanded gas for heating their greenhouses, work for the young and cheaper bus travel.

Since the violence of June 4, they have added more demands: the release of men arrested in the disturbance and a criminal investigation into the death of Alihasan Agayev.

Mamedali Agayev said that no government official had expressed condolences to his brother's family, taken any interest in their problems or helped organise the funeral.

The Azerbaijani authorities continue to insist that the demonstrators in Nardaran were armed. "We are convinced that a large quantity of weapons was being stored in Nardaran," said Sadig Gezalov, the press secretary of the interior ministry. "Our officials have appealed to the villagers to give them up voluntarily. If they do not, we cannot rule out carrying out a search operation."

Baku police chief Yashar Aliyev told ANS television that all the detainees had been arrested lawfully and there was "no question" of them being released. He claimed most of the Nardaranis wanted the police to "impose order" in their village.

However, the villagers all emphatically deny that they were armed. One elderly man, Haji Mursal said, "If we had had weapons, we would probably have used them. Because even on January 20, 1990 [when Soviet troops entered Baku and more than 120 people died, then Soviet defence minister Dmitry] Yazov's army was not as brutal as this towards unarmed civilians. We only threw stones."

The Nardaran violence has become the main topic of political debate in the country. A proposal by the opposition for a parliamentary debate on June 10 on the troubles was thrown out by the speaker, Murtuz Aleskerov, who said that a full investigation should be held first.

The Islamic Party said that the authorities was trying to "play the Nardaran card against the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan" by arresting its leaders.

"The punitive organs of Azerbaijan - I won't call them law enforcement organs - have made yet another mistake, arresting Haji Aliakram, one of the most respected elders of Nardaran," agreed Araz Alizade, leader of the Social Democratic Party. "Now the authorities are trying to whitewash themselves, by forcing innocent people to confess to things that didn't happen."

According to our information, the Islamic leaders are being held by the interior ministry's Organized Crime Department and no charges have been laid against them. Thirty Nardaranis are now under arrest. New negotiations are underway and hundreds of villagers on Imam Hussein Square continue to wait nervously for news.

By Shahin RZAYEV. CRS No.133, June 13

Georgian kidnapping: a deadly trend

Tbilisi, June 2002

The abduction of a British banker in Georgia has dealt another blow to the country's international reputation and raised questions about official collusion in the kidnapping business.

The dramatic abduction of British businessman Peter Shaw in the centre of Tbilisi on June 18 was a grave setback to Georgia's image abroad and its efforts to attract foreign investment.

Shaw, aged 57 and from Cowbridge in South Wales, was the director of the Tbilisi-based Agrobusinessbank. He was kidnapped just two days before he was due to leave Georgia, after spending six years working there.

Shaw's seizure follows the kidnapping of several other overseas businessmen in Georgia over the last two years and several attacks against foreigners. None of the perpetrators have been found or charged, something which arouses increasing suspicions of high-level collusion in the kidnapping business.

The latest abduction poses a strong challenge to Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, who urged his security ministers to capture Shaw's kidnappers as soon as possible. "Kidnapping has come into fashion in Georgia," Shevardnadze remarked on June 19. "This practice must be uprooted once and for all."

The circumstances of the abduction were a great embarrassment to the law enforcement officials charged with solving it. Shaw's car was ambushed near his apartment in the city centre by unidentified gunmen wearing military fatigues and police uniforms. The latter pulled the businessman out of his car, threatening him with guns.

He put up a struggle - and in the midst of the tussle a police patrol car turned up. The officers, misled by the attackers' fatigues, initially assumed that Shaw was resisting arrest. As soon as the policemen clicked what was going on, another car arrived on the scene carrying accomplices of the criminals, also disguised in police uniforms. They opened fire on the light-armed policemen with automatic weapons. During the exchange of fire, the attackers managed to force Shaw into his own car and escaped.

The entire city police force was immediately put on high alert, emergency checkpoints were set up on the roads throughout Tbilisi and officers searched all passing cars. The next day, police found the abandoned cars of the victim and his kidnappers in the Tbilisi suburb of Dighomi. Shaw's driving license, keys and suit-buttons were all found in his vehicle.

Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili said that it was unlikely that Shaw has been removed from Tbilisi. However, unofficial sources claim that the abductors moved their victim to the criminal-infested Pankisi Gorge to the north-east of Tbilisi, bordering Russia's breakaway republic of Chechnya.

On June 24, Scotland Yard joined the investigation. Two detectives arrived and will help their Georgian colleagues in tracing Shaw.

The law enforcement agencies are considering two possible reasons for the abduction: a ransom demand or revenge. The latter theory stems from the fact that Shaw seems to have had difficult relations with some business circles in Georgia. The heads of several Georgian banks had been accusing Shaw of bringing their businesses to the brink of ruin.

The kidnapping victim arrived in Georgia in 1996. He worked on regional farming reform projects run by the European Union, and then managed credit programmes run by the EU donor organization TACIS. In 1999, he set up Agrobusinessbank, which gave out loans to Georgian farmers. When some did not repay their loans, smaller intermediary banks suffered and a few of them are understood to have blamed Agrobusinessbank for their troubles.

Two Spanish businessmen, Antonio Tremino and Francisco Rodriguez, are the best-known victims of the Georgian kidnapping scourge. The two men were freed December last year after being held for more than a year in captivity.

The circumstances of their abduction were similar to that of Peter Shaw: they were seized by five gunmen from their own cars a few days before they were planning to fly home to Spain. Their families managed to free the hostages by paying 500,000 US dollars to the kidnappers. On their release, the two told how they had been kept in degrading conditions in the Pankisi Gorge.

Last June, Sharbel Bashar Anu, a Lebanese businessman working for a US-owned company in Georgia, was snatched from his car. He was freed by police in December last year in a raid on a derelict house on the outskirts of Tbilisi. The kidnappers managed to escape unharmed.

There have been strong rumours of police involvement in all these kidnappings. Fady Asly, vice-president of the American Chamber of Commerce and a former employer of Sharbel Bashar Anu, said he believes that the chain of crime leads back to high-ranking officials in Georgia.

According to Asly, Anu told him that he was moved to the place where the police found him only an hour before his release. Asly strongly suspects officers knew both the whereabouts of Anu and the identities of the abductors and that a mock police raid was staged, which allowed the kidnappers to go free.

"This kidnapping followed a familiar pattern, which means that the same people are involved," Asly told IWPR, referring to the seizure of Shaw. "Unfortunately, these people are probably very highly-connected and no one is able to get hold of them."

He conceded, however, that since the new interior minister came into office, the security situation has improved, "Foreigners aren't mugged in the streets the way they used to be mugged before."

Asly was referring to increasing number of assaults on foreigners in Tbilisi, which reached a peak last winter. Many were severely beaten up and had their money and belongings stolen by criminals. In most cases, the criminals have not been found. In one of the worst incidents, G nter Beuchel, an official with the European Commission in Georgia, was robbed and murdered last December. Afterwards, a special department was set up in the interior ministry to combat crimes against overseas visitors.

Crimes against foreigners have hurt Georgia's reputation. According to Niko Lekishvili, the Head of Taxpayers Union of Georgia, they are also harming the economy because rampant criminal activity is discouraging investors. Many businessmen are reconsidering their position in the country.

"Why should a foreigner come to Georgia today?" Asly asked. "Criminality as well as taxes is higher than elsewhere. It is a small country and it is a very high risk."

The web-based Daily International Security Report described Georgia as a country with growing crime and kidnap rates caused by an economic downturn. "Kidnappers will not discriminate between foreigners working for NGOs and those working for commercial firms, as both are presumed to be supported by wealthy organisations able to pay large ransoms," read the report.

Shaw's kidnapping has caused the European Commission to express serious concern about Georgia's reputation. Chris Patten, the EU external relations commissioner, called on President Shevardnadze and the Georgian authorities to provide foreigners resident in Georgia with an adequate level of protection.

By Giorgi LOMSADZE. CRS No. 135, June 27

Karabakh: Farmers in survival struggle

Stepanakert, July 2002

War and poverty have made life increasingly difficult in the breakaway republic of Nagorny Karabakh.

David Abramian, a villager from Nagorny Karabakh's eastern Askeran region, makes no bones about the struggle facing local farmers, "It's every man for himself."

For centuries, Karabakh's rich farmland was famous for its wine, fruit and corn. Yet the heavy rains that lashed the country for most of the spring have stripped the once-fertile land of its bounty.

"If we are lucky with the weather and have the necessary equipment, there will be a harvest and we will not starve," said Abramian, who lives with his family in the village of Astkhashen. "But we have no back-up from any authority or non-governmental organisation."

In April and May the rainfall was around twice the average. Hail struck the grain crops, potato plants and vines of the Askeran region, causing more than 300 million drams - 500,000 US dollars - of damage.

Agriculture also suffered during the war with Azerbaijan, and it has not flourished since the end of the conflict in 1994, when Karabakh came under Armenian control.

In the Seventies, the region produced 100,000 tons of grain. It now struggles to grow a third of that. And where it once boasted a tonne of grapes per head of population, now only a fraction of this amount hangs on the vine.

"Perhaps around five per cent of the 130 households here are able to farm and receive a steady income from the harvest," said Abramian.

When the republic privatised the land, he was assigned 12 hectares. However, the farmers are expected to pay for the use of equipment they do not own, pushing up the cost of harvesting - and making it harder to earn a profit.

The agriculture ministry sees the solution in a consolidation programme, where farms are merged to form larger, more profitable units. It's a return to the collectives of the past, most of which did not survive the war or its aftermath.

"Excessive speed and a slapdash approach to the privatisation process, which began immediately after the ceasefire in 1994, led to many collective farms breaking up," said agriculture minister Benik Bakhshian.

"Shared property and equipment was split up, while the farmers - who did not have any entrepreneurial skills - were in no state to do good business."

Karabakh's whole environment has suffered over the past fifteen years. The famous forests were hit hard before and during the war, and the government has recently taken steps to tackle this problem.

"From 1988 to 1995 the forest was being felled practically without control," said Yaroslav Gasparian, a forester in charge of the woods of the Martuni region. "But since 1996, thanks to the efforts of the authorities and in particular the forestry authority of the republic, there is more protection. Trees are being classified and fines imposed for unlawful felling."

There is also concern about rivers and streams, as most which have their source in Nagorny Karabakh dry out in the summer and are not replenished by rainwater. The country's irrigation infrastructure was practically destroyed during the war, and this has left most farmers at the mercy of the elements.

The government has devised a new irrigation programme but there are fears that its estimated cost - 100 million dollars - will be well beyond its capacity. Experts believe the problem is exacerbated by Azerbaijan's refusal to cooperate with the Karabakh Armenians.

The local authorities proposed a joint scheme to provide irrigation for regions on both sides of the ceasefire line, and to fight the rodents that plague both peoples. However Baku, which does not recognise the legitimacy of the Karabakh Armenians, refused.

Many of the government's ambitious plans for turning Karabakh's agriculture around will come to nothing without investment. Today, most of the population buys imported food, even though it would prefer local produce. Karabakhis believe this situation will remain unchanged for as long as the international community refuses to recognise the republic.

"International organisations and interested states will not donate aid to improve our situation because Nagorny Karabakh is not recognised," explained Bakhshian. "Only one foreign body, America's Armenian Technological Group, is working here and bringing useful equipment into the republic."

Every little helps, but it is clear that Nagorny Karabakh has a long way to go before the ravages of war can be repaired. However, its farmers remain hopeful in the face of hardship.

"We won't starve yet," said Abramian. "Some stores are left over from last year and we will get through. Our stomachs are not sophisticated - what we need is some potatoes, beans, bread and homemade spirits. In spring we will eat herbs and fresh vegetables, and in winter, preserves and dried fruit."

Until this situation changes, most Karabakh farmers can only look forward to many more years of hand-to-mouth existence.

By Ashot BEGLARIAN. CRS No. 137, July 12

Georgia-Russia row intensifies

Tbilisi, August 2002

An upsurge of fighting on the Georgian-Chechnya border had sparked the worst quarrel in years between Tbilisi and Moscow.

Georgia and Russia have turned up the heat in a quarrel that began over Chechen fighters and has led to a mutual ban of passenger aircraft from each other's airspace.

The cause of the latest row is the upsurge in fighting between the Russian army and Chechen rebels in the mountainous Itum-Kale region of Chechnya, near the border with Georgia.

Tbilisi has accused Moscow of taking the war across the border and bombing Georgian territory, while the Russian government has angrily condemned Georgia's refusal to hand over 13 Chechen fighters, detained in the Pankisi Gorge region after they crossed into the republic.

The Georgians refused to give up the Chechens, even though the Russian prosecutor general Vladimir Ustinov personally visited Tbilisi on August 6 with a request for their extradition.

The 13 Chechen fighters, five of them wounded, have been charged with illegally crossing into Georgia and the illegal possession of firearms and explosives. If found guilty by the Georgian courts, they could be sentenced to up to ten years in prison. The Tbilisi authorities say they are prepared to send them to Russia, but only if Moscow provides reliable evidence proving the men's involvement in crimes committed inside Chechnya.

Georgia's decision led Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov to accuse the Georgians of being soft on terrorism. "Once again the deeds of the Georgian leadership have not matched their words," he said. "It has used a formal pretext to refuse to hand over the criminals."

Moscow stepped up the pressure by imposing a ban, in force until September 1, on Georgian aircraft using Russian airspace, except between the hours of 3 and 8 AM. The Russians say this is because they are conducting missile-training exercises in southern Russia and cannot guarantee the safety of the airplanes. However, the ban does not apply to Russian or Armenian aircraft.

On August 8, the Georgian aviation ministry retaliated and closed Georgian airspace to Russian aircraft between 2 and 8 AM. The Georgians say they will lift the ban, if Moscow removes its own restrictions.

Russia and Georgia already require each other's citizens to obtain visas to travel to the other country - in contrast to the visa-free travel still possible between Russia and Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A string of Russian politicians have called recently on President Vladimir Putin to extend Russia's war in Chechnya across the border into Georgia to areas where Chechen fighters have

taken refuge. Over the last week, Russian planes have bombed Georgian territory three times in raids, which have been confirmed by OSCE monitors.

The crisis has plunged Georgian-Russian relations - already soured by disputes over Abkhazia, military bases, gas supplies and visas - to a new low. The media in both countries has been shrill and neither side seems ready for compromise.

Putin stirred things up by saying that "the Georgian people as a whole have a better attitude towards Russia, than the Georgian authorities do" - a remark which did not go unnoticed in Georgia.

The Russian president's comments gave pro-Russian politicians in Georgia a new lease of life and the Socialist Party, headed by Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, has embarked on a campaign of collecting signatures for a petition calling for better relations with Moscow.

"I've come here because I feel a real nostalgia for the times when we were friends with the Russians," said Natela Nozadze, adding her name to a list in one of many specially opened petition stands in Tbilisi. "I have very many dear friends there, whom I can't see because of the fault of our and their politicians."

"It's not only us Russians who live here, who are suffering because of the awful visa regime," said an ethnic Russian Irina Stoletova. "The Georgians themselves, who have lots of relatives in Russia who went there to live and work, are also suffering."

The media war waged against Tbilisi in Russia has meant that many Georgians have begun talking and writing about the humiliations they suffered in the 19th century, when Georgia was part of the Russian Empire and about its enforced Sovietization in the 20th century. Doing so, they ignore the treaty signed by King Irakly of Georgia in 1783 with Russia, which saved it from its Persian and Ottoman enemies.

"I am Russian by nationality, a third generation citizen of Georgia," said Svetlana Mikheeva, who is married to a Georgian. "My ancestors were born here and lived their lives here. My children are Georgians but they speak good Russian and know about Russia. That makes it all the harder to see how Moscow is trying to bring this country to its knees and lead it like a dog."

Zurab Chiaberashvili, a political scientist with the Liberty Institute in Tbilisi, believes that Russia cannot forgive Georgia for its military partnership with the West and in particular the new US Train and Equip programme, under which American soldiers are training Georgian special forces. (See the article by Mikhail Vignansky later in this issue)

Chiaberashvili said he thought it was no coincidence that the Russians had bombed the Pankisi Gorge during a visit to the country by US congressmen and senators. It made it all the more important for Washington to take into account Tbilisi's national interests, especially as Moscow was bent on showing the international community that Georgia was failing as a state.

President Shevardnadze sees the crisis within a long historical perspective. "Only ten years has passed since Georgia's independence," he told a government meeting on August 7. "It is a very small period to solve the problems which have piled up between us. Much more time should pass."

However, Chiaberashvili laid much of the blame for the latest crisis at the door of the Georgian government. "Neither Shevardnadze, nor the whole political elite of the country is capable of solving the internal problems, which are making Georgia so vulnerable before Russia, both politically and economically," he told IWPR.

The only constructive way of building good relations with Russia, he believes, is to change the governing political elite in Georgia.

By Ketí BOCHORISHVILI. CRS No.41, August 09

Abkhaz children learn of parents' war

Sukhum, August 2002

Young people in Abkhazia are struggling to understand the conflict with Georgia.

In a small courtyard in Sukhum, a group of children is playing war games. One of them, evidently the leader, cries out, "Come on, let's make teams - we're Georgians and Abkhaz!" They proceed to act out a bloody war that began before many of them were born.

Adults know that the war between Georgia and Abkhazia began on August 14 1992, lasted 413 days and cost thousands of lives on both sides. What do the children of Sukhum, who have grown up since then, know about it now?

"I heard about the war from dad and grandma," says Anri, aged seven. "It was a war between Georgians and Abkhaz because the Georgians attacked us. Grandma said that the Abkhaz couldn't go to the town, because they could be killed. It was frightening living here in that year. Dad said that he was wounded in the leg."

After a short pause, the boy adds, "Maybe when I grow up I will be friends with Georgians."

Sergei is 13 years old but admits, "I don't remember anything about the war, although I was with mum in Sukhum in that year."

Karine is three years younger than her friend. She tells IWPR, "I can't say anything, but I heard that they took us away from Abkhazia because the war began here. When the Abkhaz won, we came back home."

"My dad and uncle were killed in the war," says Lana, also aged ten. "We keep dad's machine gun at home. I hate war because my dad died."

Most of the children seem to know about the war - or at least have heard of it - only if it touched their family directly. While less than half had been taught about the conflict through the tales of their parents or grandparents, it was not quite clear to them who fought and for what.

One of the boys begins by saying that, "one side attacked the other to take away its motherland and the other side tried to beat back the enemy and won."

A girl of 14 quietly says that she had a vague memory of how, at the age of four, she was put on a huge white ship. "There were a lot of people, everyone was shouting and pushing." In all probability she was talking about the time when people were hurriedly evacuated from the city after it was captured by armed men from the Georgian National Guard.

Some children have not heard of the events of 1992-3 and are not at all interested in IWPR's

questions. Their parents had not told them about it - not out of pacifism, but because they were frightened at the thought of their children becoming politicised at a young age.

The father of one of the girls explains, "I fought so that my daughter could live in a free and independent country. We've lived through ten years; somehow we'll carry on living. That's what we fought for, after all. My daughter will find out about the war later on."

The issue of what young people do or not do know about the war was discussed at a recent conference devoted to the tenth anniversary of the conflict and organised by Abkhazia's opposition movement, Aitaira, or Revival. The conference was attended by historians, deputies, writers and former combatants.

Revival leader Leonid Lakerbaianoted in his speech that many schoolchildren do not know the meaning of the date August 14. "I'm afraid that this day will only act as a memorial for those who took a direct part in the fighting of 1992-3," Lakerbaia said.

The conference delegates discussed the events leading up to the war, the main phases of the formation of Abkhazia's armed forces, the role of the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus and of volunteers in the Abkhaz victory.

Worries were expressed that the history of the war has not been written, that many people who know a great deal about it and who "made history" through their actions will soon no longer be alive to tell their stories.

A deeper worry is that the conflict remains unresolved and that the children, who innocently play street games about a war that they can barely comprehend, are reflecting the very real division that remains between Georgians and Abkhaz.

By Indira BARTSITS. CRS No.42, August 14

MIKAEL NERSESYAN



Youth cross-country race in Sukhum

Georgian refugees: ten years from home

Tbilisi, August 2002

More than 200,000 Georgia refugees from Abkhazia remember a tragic past and anticipate an uncertain future.

A decade ago, Marina Margvliani was a frightened seven-year-old Georgian girl who was hidden in the safety of a neighbour's cowshed after the northern resort town of Gagra fell to Abkhaz forces. Today, as a young adult, she tells the story of the most tragic moments of her life with astonishing calmness.

"It was very difficult to get out of Gagra," Marina told IWPR. "It was just after my mother had her breast removed because of cancer. Our Abkhaz neighbour took pity on us and somehow managed to get us to the border."

"I was only seven, but I well remember the cruel faces of the men. They wouldn't let us through and searched everyone, especially my mother."

"I remember how they shone a torch onto the scar which was left after the operation. They poked it with a stick to see if she had hidden gold there."

Border guards stripped the family of all their possessions, including medicine. Marina was orphaned soon after - her father had stayed behind alone in Gagra and died of worry, while her mother, weakened by stress and surgery, died three years later.

Marina now lives outside the Georgian capital in the Hotel Kartli, a once fashionable but now completely rundown and defaced building on the shore of the artificial lake known as the Sea of Tbilisi.

She shares this fate with more than 1500 families from the first wave of Georgian refugees - formally they are internally displaced persons or IDPs - from Abkhazia. And although the big hotel complex is only around ten kilometres from the city centre, it is as though these people are entirely cut off from the outside world.

The only state help the refugees receive is a benefit of 11 laris (around five US dollars) a month, while some get another 14 laris (seven dollars) as a pension for the loss of the main breadwinner.

In spite of the upheaval and hardship, Marina's 15-year-old friend, Salome Kvekveskiri, has faith in the future between Georgians and Abkhaz. "I know that our generation will solve this problem," she said confidently.

"The main thing is to meet, look one another in the eye and understand. No one needs war, we have already seen its horrors, and I don't think anyone wants to see it happen again."

With the defeat of their army in 1993, practically all Georgians in Abkhazia, comprising

some 47 per cent of the total population of 500,000 people, fled. The bulk of this vast human tide poured into Georgia. Since then, a large refugee population has become a fact of Georgia's everyday political life.

Ordinary Georgians have a complex attitude towards the displaced people. On the one hand, they feel sympathy towards those who have lost both their past and their future. However, the refugees are also competitors for the few available jobs, in agricultural regions they lay claim to farmland and in the cities they move into empty buildings from where it is impossible to evict them.

Last spring, a group of refugees caused a furore when they forcibly occupied Tbilisi's Botanic Institute, which was partially shut down because of lack of funds. Shouting women with children took over the laboratories and offices and made space for their beds by smashing equipment and test-tubes, and throwing out scientific literature.

There are also complaints that the arrival of the refugees has caused the crime-rate to soar, although this is not confirmed by statistics. In the first half of 2002, only 0.2 per cent of crimes in Georgia were committed by IDPs.

For their part, the refugees complain that lack of work has forced professors, engineers and teachers to earn a living by working as porters hauling sacks at the bazaar.

After working for more than a quarter of a century as a doctor in Sukhumi's Railway Hospital, Juli Kvaratskhelia is humiliated that she has to support herself by selling sweets.

Malkhaz Sikharulidze, a professional ornithologist, was one of many who left Abkhazia on foot, escaping over the snowy Saken-Chubersky pass. He left his greatest treasure, his collection of 400 birds of various breeds, behind. He was able to take only three small songbirds with him.

"Isn't it a tragedy that our government has estimated the worth of almost 300,000 refugees at 14 laris each, as if they were railway station prostitutes?" he said.

After Tbilisi, the second highest concentration of refugees is in the Zugdidi region, just south of Abkhazia. In several villages there the number of refugees exceeds the number of local inhabitants.

The refugees from Gali who live in the Inguri Technical College are just a short distance, via the bridge across the Inguri River, from their former homes. Many of them continue to go back there despite the risks. Every day, the bridge is packed with Georgians, dragging trolleys or homemade carts, piled with assorted goods and food.

"The state is incapable of resolving the problems of the refugees," said Teimuraz Lomaya, Georgia's deputy minister for the employment and settlement of displaced persons. "It's beyond the capabilities of our budget to do even elementary repairs to inhabited houses, let alone think of building anything new."

"The only solution is to return the IDPs to their homes. We have to appeal to the countries of the CIS and ask for their help to begin this process soon. The social and psychological state of the refugees is such that we will soon have a sick generation on our hands."

By Salome ODISHARIA. CRS No.142, August 14

Special investigation: Russians and Chechens collude in oil trade

Grozny, October 2002

The Russian military and local police in Chechnya are earning vast sums plying an illegal trade in oil, officials and villagers say.

As dusk falls, thin fumes of smoke from illegal micro-oil refineries, dubbed "samovars" or "boilers" by the locals, spew up here and there on the outskirts of Dolinskoe near Grozny. A few hours later, the whole village is suffused in thick suffocating smog.

On October 3, Russia's military commander for the North Caucasus, General Vladimir Molenski, was quoted as saying upwards of 300 such refineries had been eliminated in the previous four days.

Those in the know would question the credibility of such statements. With upwards of half a million tons of oil being illegally extracted in Chechnya each year, too much money it seems is being made for this lucrative but highly dangerous practice to be stopped.

"Illegal oil extraction and refining has become one of the most profitable businesses in Chechnya, and few are prepared to let go of it," said Khamid Isayev, an official with the republic's state-run oil refinery Grozneft. "The shadow industry has developed its own hierarchy of 'tycoons', 'barons' and regular workforce."

Local Chechens go further and say that, far from stamping down on the illegal trade, the Russian military and pro-Moscow police are actively colluding in it. In what is supposedly one of the most heavily policed and guarded regions in the world, every day long convoys of trucks carry the oil cargo out of the republic unimpeded.

"The military and the police actually facilitate the business," said a Chechen "oil refiner" named Adlan. "They provide security escorts for tankers, help us sell our petrol and render many other services. We have to split our profit equally with them. We've been 'boiling' oil not because we are criminals. We are just trying to survive in these horrible times."

The allegations made by a number of Chechens suggest that large numbers of security forces are involved, while the scale of the trade suggests that this is one strong - if little acknowledged -- reason why the Russian military is reluctant to pull out of Chechnya.

A makeshift micro-oil refinery is a very basic contraption, reminiscent of a moonshine kit, consisting of two vessels connected by a long pipe, which should, ideally, be water-cooled but never is. Oil is poured in the larger vessel, and a primitive burner is started underneath it. The natural gas for the burner is usually pilfered from a nearby gas pipe.

As the oil reaches a certain temperature, petrol vaporises and travels through the pipe into the smaller vessel, where it accumulates. The resultant cheap, inferior petrol with an octane number 50 or 55 is highly sought after both inside and outside Chechnya.

"The oil industry in Chechnya goes back to the 19th century," said Denilbek Zumaev, chief engineer at Grozneft. "One of its founders was Nobel himself. Upwards of 1,500 oil wells have been drilled in Chechnya. In Soviet times, Chechnya's oil industry was very powerful, producing millions of tons of quality oil that sold well in the international market. The output peaked in 1971 at 21 million tons a year."

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Chechnya's annual petroleum output dropped to five million tons. Oil theft was never a problem until after the 1994-1996 Chechen war, when the republic's warring factions divided up its wells and started up the micro-refineries.

The hubs of the micro-refinery industry became Dolinskoe, the neighbouring villages of Pervomaiskoe, Pobedinskoe, Goragorsk, Kalas to the north, as well as the more distant Tsotsan-Yurt and Mesker-Yurt in eastern Chechnya.

Zumaev said Chechnya's petroleum industry has not improved much since. Last year, the republic officially generated some 700,000 tons of oil. At the same time, about as much - 500,000 to 600,000 tons - was produced illegally. This year, official output is targeted to reach 1.2 million tons, but continuing massive theft may interfere with these plans.

Oil workers told IWPR the republic's official petroleum sector is in crisis because of the flourishing illegal trade. Recurrent raids of underground refineries by Russian troops and Chechen police are, if anything, only a palliative. In fact, locals say, both frequently engage in extortion, demanding kickbacks in exchange for letting the shadow oil refiners continue their business.

In a typical raid, Russian military or local militia will sweep into a village where underground oil businesses are known to operate, blow up the refineries, destroy the makeshift tanker trucks and detain the "refiners", only to let them go a few hours later in exchange for a pay-off.

In late September and early October, there were a series of raids on Pervomaiskoe, Pobedinskoe and Dolinskoe, all near Grozny, supposedly to identify and destroy underground refineries. The locals, who have grown accustomed to the operations by now, took it in their stride.

"We've seen it all before," said Said-Hussain Magomadov, a truck-driver from Dolinskoe. "They swooped down on us like locusts, surrounded the village with their armoured vehicles, scared the women and children, burned down a couple of 'samovars' and cars, kicked up a lot of noise and left. What's the big idea? That's not going to stop oil theft. I've been driving oil trucks since 1997. What else is there to do? Got a family and my old parents to feed... There are no other jobs here."

A key reason the illegal oil trade continues to flourish is that it is virtually the only source of income for the residents of Grozny and most of the northern part of Chechnya.

In a recent interview published in *Amerika* magazine, the head of the Chechen government, Stanislav Ilyasov, admitted that the economy is in ruins, and there are no jobs. "How do you deal with people who have no other source of livelihood except stealing oil and making petrol illegally," he said, "We need to give them jobs, let them use the skills that they have to make money."

One way or another, the illegal oil business involves most sections of the population. "The

system is very basic," a policeman in the southern village of Shatoi told IWPR. "A person with some money to invest and the right connections in the local military commander's office and law enforcement agencies sets up a 'samovar' and hires some workers, usually two or three, to operate this makeshift refinery.

"They don't get paid a lot for this nightmarishly hard work, only from 5,000 to 10,000 roubles (160 to 320 US dollars) a month. The lion's share goes to the owner. The military and the police get their share, too, usually 50 per cent. The police claim they are doing what they can to stop the illegal oil trade, but the truth is, too many people -- some of them very high-ranking -- have their fingers in the pie."

"If the business goes well, the owner of an underground micro-refinery will be able to afford a new domestic or a used imported truck in three to four weeks," a senior Chechen local official told IWPR. "That means big money. In just a month or a month and a half they make more than a regular worker makes in a year. Fighting the illegal oil trade is like Hercules fighting the Hydra. It grows two new heads to replace each one that's been cut off."

Two years ago, the pro-Moscow government in Grozny tried to pull the plug on illegal refineries, and not without some success. The gnarled carcasses of huge oil tanks on the outskirts of many Chechen flatland communities are a mute reminder of that well-intended effort.

The era of "gigantism" is long gone, muses Judaev. "Enormous tanks from 30 to 80 tons are too easy to find and destroy," he said. "Small tanks, which hold no more than two tons, are easy to hide in a ditch, the trees or your own backyard. It takes about an hour to assemble, and can be dismantled very quickly."

Rows of five to ten-litre tanks of "homemade" petrol and oil line the roadsides in all communities and even along major highways. These are the products of the underground refineries. According to vendors, soldiers and police are paid not to interfere. "Plus they can always fill the tank of their private or service car for free," said Razet Edilsultanova, who sells petrol on the Staropromyslovskaya highway. At a rock-bottom price of four to six roubles (about 12 to 18 cents) per litre, the temptation is hard to resist.

The roadside petrol-mongers sometimes get raided, too, but mostly by soldiers and police from other areas. In the worst case, they will arrest the vendor and seize the goods. However, the next morning you see the same people standing at exactly the same places, selling their wares to passing motorists.

"We are monitoring the situation very closely," said Vladimir Ivanov of the Chechen FSB (Federal Security Service) office. "We know there have been cases when our military, especially area commanders, allowed the locals to engage in illegal oil trade for bribes. Sometimes, soldiers would escort oil transports to the borders of Ingushetia, Stavropol Province and Dagestan, and help them get through the checkpoints. We are working on this now. Military and police servicemen engaging in or facilitating illegal oil business face tough punishment, including dismissal. We have reduced instances of this practice to a minimum."

Vitaly, a police officer manning a checkpoint in northern Chechnya, is less optimistic. "Oil transports cross the border all the time, as they always have," he said, "They usually drive early in the morning, before the traffic gets busy. Sometimes, we escort them for a thousand roubles a truck. That's pretty decent money."

Chechens believe if the civilian and military authorities set their mind to it, they could get rid of all underground oil refineries in a matter of weeks. "Do you really think they don't have the manpower and resources to wipe out all those 'Samovars?'" said Khava Temirsultanova from the village of Tsotsan-Yurt, who is staying with her friends in Pobedinskoe.

But the locals are in no doubt that the military has another vested interest in keeping the business going. They point out that, more often than not, in their notorious "mop-up" operations (or *zachistki* in Russian), Russian troops are deliberately targeting villages with micro-refineries, in order to extort more money.

"They want them up and running," said Temirsultanova. "They live off of them. They raid my home village, Tsotsan-Yurt, three times every month just because it is jam-packed with 'samovars'. The Russians take our men hostage, and demand a ransom of 3,000 to 5,000 roubles per person. 'You guys are gorging on Russian oil here,' they tell us, 'and never pay a penny in tax. So we'll take your men.'"

Most Chechens do not deny that oil theft and underground trade is a crime deserving the most severe punishment, and doing severe damage to both human health and the environment. Thick smog hangs over Chechen communities at all times. After downpours, the ground is covered with oily blotches, and the water in the rivers is no longer safe to drink.

"The environmental situation was already critical in Chechnya before the first war," said Fatima Kovraeva, head of the NGO Ecofront. "Today, Chechnya is a veritable environmental disaster zone. The underground mini-refineries alone are responsible for tonnes of aerial pollution daily. We are killing ourselves, and everyone seems to think nothing of it."

By Umal DUDAYEV. CRS No.150, October 10

Moscow tragedy: more questions than answers

Moscow, October 2002

Who was Movsar Barayev and why did he embark on a desperate hostage-taking mission in Moscow?

The tragic aftermath of the mass hostage-taking in the Russian capital has left many unanswered questions as to who was behind the operation.

As the death toll from the October 26 rescue operation climbed to 120, a former intelligence officer who had watched the whole drama, revealed some of the methods his colleagues are using to investigate it.

"In these cases we first of all try to understand who benefited from this act of terror and who is standing behind the terrorists," he said. "The next step is to locate them and try to put them under pressure. And finally we take an interest in the personalities of the terrorists themselves, as generally they are just pawns carrying out someone else's orders."

On October 23, more than 750 theatregoers and actors were taken hostage at the Moscow House of Culture on Dubrovka Street, which was showing the musical "Nord-Ost." The leader of the extremists, Movsar Barayev, told the British journalist Mark Franchetti of the Sunday Times that he was acting on the orders of Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov and the notorious Chechen warrior Shamil Basayev.

Maskhadov's involvement - or lack of it - has become central to the aftermath of the drama. Other members of the group gave Anna Politkovskaya of Novaya Gazeta a different version, suggesting that Maskhadov was merely their "president" not the leader of the operation itself; while Maskhadov himself has strongly condemned the hostage-taking in Moscow in interviews to Chechenpress news agency.

However, the Russian authorities have accused the rebel leader of complicity and on October 30, the Danish police detained Akhmed Zakayev, Maskhadov's special representative, following a Russian request.

Movsar Barayev's assertion that he was following the orders of Maskhadov and Basayev raises a host of questions for anyone who is familiar with the activities of Arbi Barayev, the late uncle of the militant leader.

Arbi Barayev was a sworn enemy of Maskhadov. Early in his career, Barayev was close to the Chechen vice-president (and later acting president) Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and to the chief Chechen separatist ideologue Movladi Udugov.

In the first Chechen war of 1994-6, Arbi Barayev, who was then in his early twenties, served as a bodyguard to Yandarbiev. He became a field commander in his own right only after Yandarbiev gave him 200,000 US dollars to form a "Shariah Battalion". The battalion turned into the "Special Islamic Regiment" which was based in the town of Urus-Martan and several villages near Grozny.

Barayev was a leading exponent of Wahhabism, the extreme form of fundamentalist Islam founded in Saudi Arabia and imported to Chechnya by Arab volunteers. He and his Wahhabi comrades-in-arms were among the first to practice kidnapping in Chechnya. As nephew of Arbi Barayev, the young Movsar could claim a privileged place in this group.

In 1997, President Maskhadov signed a decree putting the regiment under the command of the Chechen interior ministry. However, Barayev refused to submit and in the summer of 1998 his battalion fought a battle with Maskhadov's men outside the town of Gudermes, in which around 80 people were killed and more than a hundred were wounded. "General" Barayev was reduced to the ranks.

However, the Islamic regiment was not disarmed and Barayev continued to buy weapons. He kidnapped a string of Russian journalists and the two British aid workers Camilla Carr and Jon James. His reputation for brutality grew.

At the end of 1998, Chechen deputy prime minister Turpal Atgeriev (who died a few months ago in a Russian prison) openly accused Barayev and his group of the kidnapping and murder of four telecommunications workers, three from Britain and one from New Zealand. Their severed heads were left by a road in western Chechnya.

After the murders, Maskhadov declared a partial mobilisation of Chechen forces, but did not dare to arrest the powerful kidnapper or his followers. An investigation carried out by this reporter for Moscow News in 2000 revealed that by this time Barayev senior had amassed a fortune of several million dollars from ransoms and many were already suspecting that he had powerful patrons in Moscow, without whom his bloody business could not have flourished.

These suspicions grew, as the second Chechen conflict began at the end of 1999. In sharp contrast to Maskhadov and other commanders, Barayev did not hide from the Russians. He bought his nephew Movsar a house in his home village of Alkhan-Kala (before that Movsar lived in the town of Argun.) Arbi Barayev married twice and celebrated his weddings in great style - just 10 km from the federal forces in Grozny. Most extraordinarily, he moved freely about Chechnya, showing documents of an officer of the Russian interior ministry at checkpoints.

A Chechen journalist who took an interest in Barayev and who managed to record the number of his Russian interior ministry document, was detained by the federal authorities, interrogated and detained for three days. He was released only with the help of relatives who worked for another branch of the military.

The journalist was warned not to divulge the details of his detention and all his notes, including Barayev's ID number, were confiscated from him. The episode further strengthened suspicions that Barayev had a very strong "roof" - a powerful protector outside Chechnya.

Arbi Barayev's death was as mysterious as his life. Extremely reliable sources in Chechnya have told IWPR that he was not killed in battle, as the Russian military claimed. These sources say that on June 23, 2001 Barayev was seized in his home village of Alkhan-Kala, 10 km from Grozny by Chechen enemies, who were working for Russian military intelligence, or GRU. These Chechens assaulted the military headquarters in Alkhan-Kala, where Barayev and his men had taken refuge to resist capture. Barayev and four of his men were interrogated by these GRU offices for 11 hours (the interrogation was filmed on videotape) and then shot.

In a further brutal twist to the story, the sources go on to say, the Chechens who had captured and taken part in the interrogation were themselves killed, even though they had been sworn to secrecy. The interrogation tapes themselves disappeared.

After his uncle's death, Movsar Barayev and several of his followers began to act independently. The nephew controlled the town of Argun, where he was declared emir of the Islamist movement known as Jamaat. According to Chechen police sources, they murdered officials in the pro-Moscow administration of Akhmad Kadyrov.

Those who knew Movsar said that, like his uncle, he had a reputation for exceptional brutality but was not well known as a field commander. He had only five or six fighters under his control and lacked the fighting skills or organisational abilities needed to be a proper warrior. He never took part in any operations against Russian forces.

This is one reason Said-Selim Peshkoyev, head of the police force in Chechnya, has told several Russian news agencies that the leader of the extremist group in Moscow was not Movsar Barayev, but someone else. According to Peshkoyev, Barayev does not possess the professional training and was not capable of carrying out an operation as sophisticated as the one to seize the theatre.

Other analysts who watched the siege noted that the gang which seized the theatre broke down into groups, who took different actions when Russian special forces stormed the building: one group tried to break out of the theatre and the other opened fire to try and stop their comrades leaving.

Which group did Movsar Barayev belong to? Until the hostage drama began, he had never been thought of as a man who was ready to die for the freedom of Chechnya. So why was he the one to lead the raid on Moscow?

One explanation could be that the organisers of the attack were using a well-known trick, which had served kidnappers in Chechnya in the past -- whereby groups of the latter, who wanted to conceal their identity, would suggest that the elder Barayev, Arbi, was involved.

The kidnappers secured Barayev's assent to say that he was holding their hostages and the relatives of the victim readily agreed to pay large ransoms, because they knew of Barayev's reputation for cruelty. Then the two sides shared out the ransom payment.

So it is possible that the Moscow extremists were continuing to use the Barayev trademark to frighten the Russian authorities and persuade them to accept their terms. Yet another striking aspect of the raid is that the attackers put forward a demand, which was virtually impossi-

ble to meet - the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. Barayev himself was by no means naive and would have understood that there was no way his demand would be met. So why was he sent to Moscow?

Well-informed Chechens in Moscow have suggested to IWPR that the seizure of the theatre was part of a well-planned manoeuvre with many steps and that an appeal for Russian withdrawal from Chechnya was probably a diversionary tactic. It is very likely, they say, that Barayev himself was not fully informed of the whole plan. Rather he was selected because he could make use of his uncle's Moscow connections to plan the raid.

Neither Maskhadov nor Barayev was capable of organising an operation like this in the centre of Moscow, analysts say, and the trail is more likely to lead to people close to Yandarbiev and Udugov, both of whom are now believed to be resident in the Gulf state of Qatar. Udugov called the BBC Moscow office shortly after Barayev had seized the building and kept up telephone contacts with the hijackers, which he published on his Kavkaz Centre website.

If those two were behind the raid, one of their aims was undoubtedly to remove Maskhadov (who probably knew about the plan but only in general terms) as a potential negotiator with Moscow. The alliance that he struck with Yandarbiev, Udugov and Basayev this summer was evidently a marriage of convenience. If real negotiations had begun, then these three would instantly have been declared *persona non grata*.

As soon as Barayev said that he was obeying Maskhadov that spelled a death sentence for the Chechen president. It is hard to imagine that any Russian politician will now have the courage to sit down and negotiate with him.

By Sanobar SHERMATOVA. CRS No.153, October 31

Tangerine fever grips Abkhazia

Psou River, November 2002

The citrus fruit trade is the main means of survival for the Abkhaz since they broke away from Georgia.

The "yellow fever" season has begun in Abkhazia.

That is what Abkhaz call the time of year when the tangerine harvest is ripe and thousands of residents of the unrecognised republic flock to its northern border with Russia to trade them.

Since the end of the war with Georgia in 1993, the tangerine trade has become the main source of income for Abkhaz families. With the region's chronic lack of employment, the money they earn in the three months of the season must be enough to sustain them over the rest of the year.

With the border closed to the south, the tangerine traders all head north to the river Psou that divides Abkhazia from Russia. Here on either side of a narrow bridge, the respective customs services have set up posts.

Last week, an impressive column of trucks had already built up and a two-kilometre-long queue of people, pushing trolleys and carts piled high with tangerines, stretched back into Abkhazia. To cross the bridge and reach the Russian side of the border can take up to ten hours on a weekday and even longer at weekends.

Most of the traders are ordinary people, who harvest their own tangerines and come back repeatedly to the border, until the season ends.

"I could trade my tangerines on the Abkhaz side too, but the price here is much lower than on the Russian side and my family badly needs the extra roubles," said Nadezhda, a woman in her fifties, standing in the long queue.

She said the salary she earned after 30 years teaching as a maths teacher was not enough to live on, which is why she has to spend her weekends ferrying up to 50 kilogrammes of tangerines in a small cart, made out of an old child's pram. When she has sold her cargo, she generally uses the money to buy food, which is cheaper in Russia.

"My daughter-in-law used to come here," Nadezhda said. "But she developed health problems and the doctors told her that if she did not stop dragging heavy loads, she could not have children. So I took over the tangerines. Otherwise we would have nothing to feed the family."

This hand-to-mouth existence is a far cry from Soviet times, when the Abkhaz owner of a small citrus orchard could afford to have a large two-storey house and at least one car - a rare privilege in the communist era.

Abkhazia used to have a virtual monopoly on citrus fruit production in the Soviet Union. Eighty five per cent of the country's tangerines - which were an essential part of New Year

celebrations in every Soviet household - came from the Black Sea republic, helping to give the region one of the highest standards of living in the country.

In 1991 the end of the Soviet Union and the move to a market economy brought a flood of citrus fruits from around the world. Despite this, Russia's taste for Abkhazian tangerines has remained - the only problem is the difficulty of getting them out of the republic. Even though the sanctions regime imposed on the entity by the CIS has weakened, ordinary traders still have enormous difficulties getting their product to market.

Currently, the bridge across the Psou can cope with 7-8,000 pedestrians and about 200 cars a day. The Abkhaz authorities have long been trying to persuade the Russians to build another and the regional governor on the other side of the water - Alexander Tkachev, head of Krasnodar Region - said last year that he supported the idea.

Since then nothing has happened. "Whatever decisions are taken at a political level to improve the situation on the Russian-Abkhaz border, the situation is practically not changing, since everything depends on middle- and lower-ranking bureaucrats who work at the post on the River Psou and for whom it's not profitable to change the existing situation," said the entity's prime minister Anri Djergenia.

Djergenia recently reported a meeting he had with a senior unnamed Russian official on the border in which the two men discussed ways of improving cross-border cooperation.

"I was asked what the biggest problem was with the border-post and I named Mr Kozlov, which prompted the puzzled senior official to ask 'Who's that?'" Djergenia said. "There's no way he could have guessed that I was talking about an ordinary private who does what he pleases, regardless of the decisions and instructions that come down from above. And there are plenty of private Kozlovs on the River Psou."

There is plenty of money to be made on the border. A good half of the Abkhaz "tachetniki" or trolley-pushers, do not leave the Psou for the entire season. They buy tangerines on the Abkhaz side, drag them across the border and resell them on the Russian side, pocketing the difference in price.

The most industrious of these traders earn up to 300 roubles (a little less than ten dollars) a day, which in Abkhazia is regarded as a good wage. Over the last two years, they have been joined by people from the North Caucasus and places as far a field as Moldova and Ukraine.

"When I was a child, tangerines were a fantastic treat, but now I can't bear the sight of them," said Svetlana Koditsa, from the town of Beltsy in Moldova.

Svetlana makes three trips across the border a day before she has something left over from what she pays to cover her accommodation, food and bribes to the police, who, she complains, demand money even from those standing patiently in line.

"You try not to give it to them and they might not let you through," she said angrily.

Saida, a young Abkhaz woman, standing next to her in the queue, is one of tens of thousands of people from the republic who acquired Russian citizenship this summer. This had only made things worse, she lamented, as the Russian police were now fining visiting Abkhaz for not being properly registered in the Black Sea coastal towns.

The mad rush of activity, caused by the tangerine trade, lasts until mid-February, when the second part of the "yellow fever" season begins, and Abkhaz begin trading mimosa, a much sought-after flower in Russia. Around March 8, International Women's Day, the queues on the border thin out and a time begins, which Abkhaz prefer to call the "season of curses and hopes."

By Inal KHASHIG. CRS No.56, November 21

Abkhaz prime minister ousted

Sukhum, December 2002

The surprise dismissal of the prime minister and de facto leader of Abkhazia has transformed the political landscape in the breakaway republic.

The unexpected sacking last week of Anri Djergenia, the prime minister of Abkhazia who was also the leading contender to be its next president, has shaken up the political scene here.

The dismissal on November 29 of the prime minister by Abkhazia's ailing head of state Vladislav Ardzinba evidently came as a shock even to Djergenia himself. On that day, the premier was planning to hold a press conference to report back on a two-week visit to Moscow.

That trip had apparently been a success, as Djergenia signed a contract on supplying electricity from Abkhazia to the Krasnodar region to the north. For the first time, Russia also backed Abkhazia's claim to be represented at talks on the future of the republic at the United Nations.

The television news and other official media reported Djergenia's dismissal without any commentary, along with the news that his replacement is to be Gennady Gagulia, currently head of the republic's chamber of commerce.

In some of the few official comments on the event, the breakaway republic's vice-president, Valery Arshba, later insisted nothing dramatic had happened. "Premiers come and go, but it is President Ardzinba and the people who define Abkhazia's policy direction towards greater closeness with Russia," he said.

The official reason for Djergenia's removal was his alleged failure to implement the budget and make adequate preparations for the winter. But this looks improbable, as the budget has been fully implemented, according to figures from the first nine months of this year, and winter poses no big problem for a subtropical region where the average temperature in January is 12 degrees centigrade.

Everyone, therefore, sees a political reason in the fall of Djergenia.

Djergenia, a Soviet-era official, who was appointed to the top government job in May 2001, was Abkhazia's first "political" prime minister - his predecessors had concentrated solely on economic policy. He represented Abkhazia in its peace negotiations with the Georgians - a job that he has not yet formally lost. As Ardzinba increasingly vanished from public view due to illness, Djergenia began to act as the unrecognised republic's de facto leader.

The premier was widely considered the favourite to succeed Ardzinba as leader, when the next presidential elections are held in two years' time, or even earlier. He was even tied by marriage to Ardzinba: the president's wife, Svetlana, is Djergenia's first cousin - something that carries great weight in Abkhaz society.

However, Leonid Lakerbaia, a former close associate of Ardzinba who is now leader of the opposition, said he believed Djergenia had been felled by his "barely concealed presidential ambitions".

There was a widespread perception that he was lobbying for support for his leadership bid in Moscow. Djergenia had talked of the idea of Abkhazia having "associated relations" with the Russian Federation.

"He was building up authority in Russia, but not in Abkhazia and that could only have raised the suspicions of Ardzinba, who is a mistrustful person," Lakerbaia said. "Maybe Djergenia's extreme lobbying on behalf of Russian interests, which often diverge from Abkhaz ones, went too far and angered the president, who thought that the prime minister was plotting against him."

Djergenia's departure strengthens the leadership chances of two other official candidates, the current foreign minister Sergei Shamba and the defence minister Raul Khajimba.

Without the prime ministerial job, Djergenia himself can have very little hope of claiming the top job, as he enjoys little popularity amongst the Abkhaz public.

Lakerbaia, who was once Ardzinba's heir apparent, said the head of state had won himself some time, during which he can look for a suitable successor "in a calm situation or even - it is not impossible - seek a third presidential term".

Currently, Ardzinba, who has problems with his speech, has not come to his presidential palace for more than a year and has remained in his residence on the edge of Sukhum. Abkhaz television periodically shows his meetings with officials, although without his voice being heard.

Nonetheless, observers say that Ardzinba still keeps his finger on the pulse of events and follows what is happening closely. Those who have seen him say that he still has an excellent memory and is the same man they have always known. The sacking of Djergenia is a reminder that he is still a force to be reckoned with.

The new prime minister is not a political figure at all and will not play a major part in the jockeying for power. Gagulia has already been head of the government once before, between 1995 and 1998, during which time he focussed exclusively on economic issues.

"Political issues will become the exclusive preserve of the president," said analyst Tamaz Ketsba. "However, it's unlikely that Sukhum's foreign policy with its focus on greater closeness to Russia will change at all."

"The situation in Abkhazia is such that anyone who comes to power here, will not be able to think of another path except one that runs parallel with Russia. The republic has no other option."

By Inal KHASHIG. CRS No.58, December 05

Armenia: Assembly killings trial stumbles on

Yerevan, December 05 2002

Three years after eight high-ranking officials were murdered in the Armenian parliament, many important questions remain unanswered.

It was the most shocking crime in the history of post-Soviet Armenia. Five attackers broke into the chamber of parliament and shot eight people dead - Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, speaker Karen Demirchian, his two deputies, three assembly members and one government minister.

Yet more than three years after the October 27 parliamentary killings, almost nothing has been resolved.

The suspects - led by the former journalist and extreme nationalist Nairi Hunanian - are still on trial, no verdict has been handed down and the public is no nearer to understanding why its former political elite was annihilated in one day.

All those present in the room - besides the parliamentary deputies, the government was also in attendance - were taken hostage. Some of them were freed later in the day, while 40 people remained captive until the next morning when Hunanian's group surrendered after negotiations with President Robert Kocharian.

Overnight, Hunanian and his associates destroyed the new political leadership that had been taking shape after the parliamentary elections that May.

The Unity bloc, forged by the iron will of then-defence minister Sarkisian and the political experience of the 67-year-old former Communist Party boss Demirchian, won a majority and formed a new government. The former became prime minister and the latter was appointed speaker of parliament.

The political crisis that followed the killings was so severe that, for a while, it seemed Armenian statehood itself was under threat.

During the winter of 1999-2000 the president was on the brink of resignation, one government replaced another (three governments came and went within the space of seven months) and the army was close to a split.

The president managed to consolidate power. But the price of that has been ongoing public speculation that he was somehow complicit in the tragedy.

"It's him, I know," claimed Anoush, a middle-aged bread vendor in the northern city of Spitak, accusing Kocharian of having planned the whole thing. "But I'm not a politician and I don't want to talk about it."

However, the opposition does talk. While stopping short of accusing the president of murder, David Shakhnazarian - one of the leaders of the opposition Armenian National Movement, ANM - suggests that there is every reason to presume Kocharian personally stood to gain from the killings, for he received virtually unlimited power in the country after the event.

"The murder of the two leaders who assumed political responsibility for the country's future was in Robert Kocharian's immediate interest because he again became the country's sole leader," Shakhnazarian claimed.

Sarkisian and Demirchian had reduced the president's role to that of a figurehead, argued the ANM leader, "How long could Kocharian be content with the role of the Queen of England?"

Others believe that the mastermind of the killings - whoever he was - is still pulling strings. According to Anayit Bakhshian, the widow of murdered deputy speaker Yury Bakhshian, "One gets the impression that a certain organiser stands behind the court proceedings, and the participants simply do what they are told."

Not everyone shares her opinion. An interior ministry official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, claims that Hunanian's behaviour under interrogation suggested that he organised the attack alone. "He behaved like someone who wouldn't tolerate others telling him what to do," the official said.

When the trial of Hunanian and his group opened in February 2001, the legal authorities faced a challenge unique in the modern history of Armenia.

More than 90 people were listed as victims - including the prime minister and speaker - while another 129 were material witnesses, among them employees of the parliament, journalists, and security guards.

The case has attracted enormous media and public attention and Hunanian has used this opportunity to address the public directly, expounding his views on life and politics. No one else in Armenia, with the possible exception of the president, can boast of having such a privilege.

Hunanian ensured even more notoriety for himself when he dramatically declared that he wanted to run for president.

Assembly members, party leaders and government officials reacted with dismay, while Prime Minister Andranik Markarian publicly regretted that the electoral code could not be amended before the ballot to prevent Hunanian from running.

This statement - like everything else to do with October 27 - was used by the opposition for political ends.

Naira Mamikonian, a commentator with Aravot newspaper, wrote that there would be "little difference between Hunanian and the acting president - one is accused of a terrorist act, the other suspected of involvement in it. If Hunanian can register as a candidate, he will be a worthier rival for Kocharian than anyone else".

The president's office has reacted calmly to these provocative statements. "Yes, the case of October 27 is politicised," said the president's spokesman Vahe Gabrielian, "and the closer we get to the elections the more politicised it is going to get." Armenia's presidential elections are scheduled for February 19 and the campaign is already underway.

The case also has international implications for Armenia. Amnesty International has recognised Hunanian and his associates as political prisoners, and is monitoring the investigation to ensure that it follows acceptable standards and respects the ban on torture and beating.

"These extremists shouldn't hope that someone from the outside can protect them," prime

minister Markarian - himself a victim of the October 27 attack - told the court. "They deserve the most severe punishment."

Many politicians are demanding the death sentence should the Hunanian group be found guilty - even though that may cost Armenia its place in the Council of Europe.

Viktor Dallakian, head of the parliamentary commission on public law, admits that the draft new criminal code would allow for Hunanian and his associates to be executed if found guilty.

The trial remains at the centre of public attention. It is still unclear when it will end - and how society will take the verdict.

"Armenia's modern history falls into two periods - before and after October 27, 1999," Anayit Bakhshian told IWPR. It is hard to argue with her.

By Mark GRIGORIAN. CRS No.158, December 05

HAKOP BERBERYAN



Nairi Hunanian

Armenian media law sparks protest

Yerevan, January 2001

Media experts say the government's Television and Radio Law is an open attack on democracy and freedom of speech.

TV and radio stations across Armenia went off the air for 45 minutes last week in protest against a controversial new law giving the state increased control over local broadcast media.

Under the Television and Radio Law, which was adopted by the National Assembly last October, all licensing questions will be decided by two regulatory bodies, both appointed by the president.

A statement released by the mutinous TV and radio stations expressed "deep concern over the new law" which would "do little to help build a fourth estate in Armenia". The statement continued, "Insofar as all attempts by local media to overturn the law have been fruitless, we have no alternative but to organise a joint act of protest."

Astkhik Gevorkian, chairman of the Union of Journalists, commented, "We have taken this extreme measure to make the authorities understand that they have journalists, journalistic organisations and the media to reckon with."

Even Armenian National Television - a state-run station - took part in the January 12 industrial action which lasted from 8pm to 8.45pm.

However, the official reaction to the strike gave the protestors little cause for optimism. Galust Saakian, chairman of the Miasnution faction in the National Assembly, said the stations were going the wrong way about changing the legislation.

He commented that deputies were always ready to enter into a dialogue with the press and discuss relevant points of law.

But his words were belied by recent calls in the National Assembly for John Balian, head of the United States Information Service in Armenia, to be branded a persona non grata after he delivered a blistering attack on the Television and Radio Law at a January seminar.

This is a far cry from Armenia's recent pledge to the Council of Europe to uphold democratic standards in the realm of press freedom.

In a recent TV interview, Mark Grigorian, a political analyst, pointed out that the National Assembly had adopted the Television and Radio Law in response to political pressure from the Council of Europe.

"The way things have worked out, the Council of Europe has actually become the stimulus for this undemocratic law being adopted," said Grigorian. "It's absurd."

Media experts are particularly concerned by the proposed creation of two regulatory bodies - the National Commission, which will control private broadcast media, and the Public Council, which will focus on the state sector. The members of both bodies will be appointed by the president.

The two bodies have the power to revoke a station's broadcasting licence or put a stop to specific broadcasts without first seeking a court injunction.

Levon Barsegian, chairman of the Shant radio company in Gyumri, believes that the law could threaten the continued existence of dozens of radio stations which are hard pushed to survive in today's harsh economic and social conditions. The law, he claims, contains a number of fundamental inconsistencies and rides roughshod over democratic principles.

The Television and Radio Law was first proposed in 1997 by Sergo Yeritsian, a member of the Reforms faction and a prominent journalist with Armenian National Television. Many observers speculated that the bill was actually designed to ensure that its author was chosen to head the state TV station - however, these hopes were dashed by the death of his mentor, Telman Ter-Petrosian, chairman of Reforms and brother of the then president.

Council of Europe experts subsequently found more than 50 contradictory articles in Yeritsian's law and proposed a complete revision. However, the Armenian government politely thanked the European legal team and published the bill in the local press without any changes.

The project was reanimated in 2000 when a parliamentary commission invited comments and criticisms from local media experts.

However, Boris Navasardian, chairman of the Yerevan Press Club, said the lawmakers ignored repeated attempts to express the interests of society and the journalistic community whilst an alternative version of the bill, submitted by the Press Club, was dismissed out of hand.

Navasardian warned, "If society's opinion is simply going to be ignored, then we can only resort to more radical measures to ensure that the law doesn't cause real damage not just to the media but to the development of Armenia as a democratic state."

By David PETROSIAN. CRS No.66, January 19

Georgia considers the “zero option”

Tbilisi, January 2001

Moscow is putting increasing pressure on Tbilisi to repay its \$158 million debt.

President Eduard Shevardnadze is facing bitter opposition over proposals to renounce Georgia's Soviet-era assets in return for a restructuring of its debt to Russia.

Shevardnadze argues that ratification of the so-called "zero option" will put Georgia in line for a \$141 million loan from the International Monetary Fund.

However, opposition politicians claim that Georgia stands to lose around \$2 billion in assets whilst its debt to Russia stands at just \$158 million.

The IMF approved a new initiative aimed at "helping Georgia out of its poverty trap" on January 13. Under the terms of the programme, the fund will allocate \$141 million to the former Soviet republic between 2001 and 2003.

However, the IMF wants guarantees that the money won't be used to pay off Georgia's foreign debts and has demanded that Tbilisi settles its ongoing financial dispute with Moscow.

But relations between Russia and Georgia have never been so tense. In December, Moscow imposed a visa regime on the former Soviet republic following claims that Georgia was allowing Chechen rebel fighters to take refuge in the notorious Pankisi Gorge. Russia has also cut supplies of natural gas to Georgia which is currently locked in a crippling energy crisis.

However, Moscow has agreed to restructure the \$158 million debt if the Georgian parliament ratifies the "zero option" under which it will forfeit its claim to 1.62 per cent of former Soviet assets. Otherwise, Georgia will be obliged to make a payment of \$45 million of its debt over the coming year.

The Georgian parliament will consider the "zero option" bill in its spring session which begins next month. President Shevardnadze claims that Georgia will renounce only "ephemeral assets" which would be impossible to realise as hard cash in the next 20-30 years. Foreign debts, he argues, have to be paid here and now.

The government insists that, if the "zero option" is not ratified, Russia may persuade the Paris Club group of creditors to refuse any restructuring of Georgia's debts.

Georgy Baramidze, chairman of the parliamentary committee for defence and security, said the Paris Club was currently considering proposals to restructure a total of \$80 million - a move which would free up desperately needed funds in the 2001 budget.

Roman Gotsiridze, head of the government's budgetary office, said that Georgia was on the

brink of defaulting on its foreign debt repayments which currently stand at over \$2 billion.

However, many leading Georgian politicians remain unconvinced. Yelena Tevdoradze, chairman of the parliamentary committee on human rights, said the proposed bill had "no substance whatsoever". She added that it gave the impression the government was deliberately concealing the real facts of the matter.

And Irakly Gogava, chairman of the parliamentary subcommittee on ties with other CIS countries, agreed that it was impossible to make a final decision until definitive figures had been produced.

Others remain suspicious of any dealings with Russia. Zaza Shatirishvili, a lecturer in Western languages and cultures at Tbilisi State University, said, "Our executive powers are more concerned with smoothing relations with Russia than with protecting the interests of the country."

His opinion was shared by Emzar Dzhgerenaya, deputy director of the Georgian National Library, who said, "While the West continues to offer considerable financial and psychological support, our government lets Moscow call the shots."

And Levan Kelauradze, political analyst for the daily newspaper *Rezonans*, added, "It's time to put an end to the 'politics of concession' in our dealings with Russia. Especially since, after each concession, Moscow just responds by imposing new demands [on Tbilisi]."

However, Georgia can apparently count on a measure of support from the United States. Bill Clinton's recent moves to strengthen trade links between the USA and Georgia can be seen as a clear backlash against Moscow's aggressive economic policies.

The US government is also planning to send a special consultant to Tbilisi who will advise the Georgian president on fiscal issues and the proposed ratification of the "zero option".

Opinion polls published in the Georgian media show that most people are strongly opposed to the idea of renouncing Soviet assets in a bid to secure a comparatively modest IMF loan.

National Democratic Alliance leader Ivlian Khaindrava says, "Having pushed the nation deeper and deeper into debt, the Georgian leadership is now renouncing billions of dollars just to pay off \$158 million."

Khaindrava claimed the move was simply aimed at ensuring that the "bankrupted Georgian government survived another winter" and called on Shevardnadze to "raise \$158 million from amongst his relatives and at least give the next generation the chance to keep what is theirs by right."

Meanwhile, Ukraine - which has a claim on 17 per cent of the assets and liabilities of the former USSR -- is urging Tbilisi not to ratify the "zero option" until it has settled its own disputes with Moscow.

The Ukrainian government believes that any decisions by the Georgian government to support the Russian proposal would constitute a gross infringement of international law.

Furthermore, leading Georgian politicians are looking towards Ukraine for support over the question of Soviet military assets which were removed from Georgia between 1991 and 1993.

Georgy Baramidze said that Tbilisi should never renounce its claim to part of the Black Sea fleet "even if the chances of getting our dues are minimal".

A Georgian parliamentary delegation under vice-speaker Eldar Shengelaya flew to Moscow last week to air these grievances with President Putin, the State Duma and the Russian foreign ministry.

By Zurab TCHIABERASHVILI. CRS No.67, January 29

Shevardnadze hounds corrupt ministers

Tbilisi, March 2001

Experts have estimated that corruption costs the Georgian government more than \$500 million a year in lost revenue

Georgia's minister for state property, Mikhail Ukleba, has become the first victim in a sweeping anti-corruption drive launched by President Eduard Shevardnadze.

The campaign -- which the president has described as his "priority task" for 2001 -- enjoys considerable financial and technical backing from the United States.

But opposition MPs claim the initiative is little more than a showpiece aimed at boosting Georgia's credibility abroad and encouraging foreign investment.

When announcing Ukleba's dismissal this month, Shevardnadze said the former deputy foreign minister had failed to unmask the "predators of privatisation" within his own department.

Ukleba should have tendered his own resignation, said the president, but "lacked the courage" to do so. Shevardnadze added, "In his report on anti-corruption measures, Ukleba painted such a [rosy] picture that I got the impression I was living in a different country."

Both Sulkhan Molashvili, chairman of the Chamber of Controls, and prosecutor general Georgy Menarishvili told a recent session of parliament that Ukleba's immediate deputies -- Merab Gabunia and Shot Kvedishvili -- were among those guilty of breaking privatisation laws.

However, opposition leaders have greeted the news with caution. Pikria Chikhradze, deputy chairman of the New Faction party, said, "The government's entire economic team should take responsibility for the current situation, not just Mikhail Ukleba."

She called for the dismissal of finance minister Zurab Nogaideli and tax minister Mikhail Machavarani who, she claimed, were equally responsible for the economic crisis. "The dismissal of Mikhail Ukleba changes nothing," added Chikhradze. "This is just another cosmetic change in the political line-up."

And Beso Dzhugeli, former industry minister and now chairman of the Liberal-Economic Party, described the latest initiatives as "ephemeral" explaining that "these plans are doomed to failure because there are no executive powers in this country and the government lacks any political will." Plans for the anti-corruption drive were first unveiled in the summer of last year when the scale of the problem became public knowledge.

Ivane Chkhartishvili, minister for economics, industry and trade, said that the average Georgian businessman pays 233 lari (\$115) in bribes every month - a total of around 10 million lari across the country.

Chkhartishvili said that corrupt officials took around half the monthly profits of an average Georgian business - effectively robbing the state budget of more than one billion lari a year.

Last autumn, President Shevardnadze appointed a seven-strong working committee headed by Vladimir Chanturia, head of the Supreme Court, to develop a National Anti-Corruption Programme. The committee's findings are currently being examined by a panel of international experts.

In the meantime, the Georgian leadership has unveiled a package of "preliminary measures". These include plans for a modern tax collection system - to be introduced by January 2002 - and new controls over the state customs office.

Furthermore, the justice minister, Mikhal Saakashvili, has been asked to present the government with radical reforms to the Criminal Code aimed at fighting corruption in line with Georgia's international obligations.

And Irakly Menagarishvili, head of the interior ministry, has been charged with developing anti-corruption recommendations in the framework of a Council of Europe initiative.

All government institutions have been told to publish detailed reports of their expenditure in 2000 while ministries, state departments and local administrations are obliged to submit a detailed breakdown of trading licenses issued over the past year.

Officials affected by the latest presidential decree are to hold regular press conferences reporting on their progress and to encourage the work of civil monitoring groups comprising members of the public.

On May 1, the Minister of State, Georgy Arsenishvili, will present President Shevardnadze with a list of officials who have failed to comply with the demands of the presidential decree.

Arsenishvili has announced that he will postpone a planned visit to the United States in order to give the anti-corruption drive his full attention.

The campaign enjoys enthusiastic support from the American financier George Soros, who is backing the launch of a coordinating council in Georgia. President Shevardnadze told Georgian National Radio last month that the Soros Foundation had developed a new strategy aimed at combating corruption and at creating a "middle class" of businessmen in the former Soviet republic.

The American government is also taking an active part in the anti-corruption programme. A recent visit to Tbilisi by Louis Freeh, director of the FBI, has prompted speculation that the Georgian authorities are planning to form a special task force focusing on investigating corrupt officials.

Parliamentary chairman Zurab Zhvania said the Georgian prosecutor general's office would work closely with FBI advisors. He added, "Louis Freeh has given his seal of approval to the anti-corruption programme developed by our head of state."

Prior to his visit to Georgia, Freeh met with Vice-President Dick Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security advisor - an indication of the US government's high level of commitment to the anti-corruption drive.

By Tina TSKHOVREBASHVILI. CRS No.77, March 30

War-mongers blight peace talks

Yerevan, Baku, March 2001

Opposition leaders in Baku believe that Azerbaijan's lost territories can only be recovered by force

While the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan prepare for another round of Nagorny Karabakh peace talks, a new mood of pessimism is creeping over the South Caucasus.

President Robert Kocharian and his Azeri counterpart, Heidar Aliiev, are to meet in Florida's Key West this week to discuss a lasting solution to the conflict.

In the West, observers are hoping for the long awaited breakthrough but, in Armenia and Azerbaijan, there is gloomy talk of another war.

The April 3 summit will mark the 16th meeting between Kocharian and Aliiev in the seven years since a ceasefire was called in Nagorny Karabakh, suspending the armed conflict which claimed an estimated 30,000 lives.

America, Russia and France - all co-chairs of the OSCE's Minsk Group -- have taken an active role in brokering a peace deal but, despite their efforts, a signed agreement has remained elusive.

Armenian analyst Gagik Avakian commented, "The two presidents met in Paris and now they are to meet in the USA. All the political indicators point towards a third meeting in Moscow where we can expect some serious results, under the aegis of Vladimir Putin."

However, the past two months have seen significant developments. On the eve of the Paris meeting on February 21, several state newspapers in Azerbaijan published details of the three peace proposals currently being discussed by the Minsk Group.

Despite claims by Armenian foreign minister Vardan Oskanian that these proposals had already been abandoned, they became the subject of fierce debate in the Azeri parliament. In fact, during one speech, President Aliiev called on all political parties and social organisations to present their proposals for a peace settlement in Nagorny Karabakh.

It was the first time in eight years that Aliiev had sought a second opinion, prompting speculation that he was attempting to share responsibility for a potentially unpopular decision.

But the proposals flooded in, most notably a radical peace plan devised by two well-known political figures -- Tofik Zulfugarov, the ex-foreign minister, and Eldar Namazov, formerly head of the president's secretariat.

They argued that the conflict could not be resolved by negotiations alone. It was essential, they said, that the peace process went hand in hand with an anti-corruption campaign, economic reforms and increased defence spending.

The plan also called for a "humanitarian initiative" to return Azeri refugees to the occupied territories. This operation, said the authors, should be conducted by the police and military "outside the administrative borders of Nagorny Karabakh".

The Zulfugarov-Namazov plan enjoyed widespread support amongst the opposition parties as well as some pro-government factions and newspapers.

The most active champions of a military solution are Araz Alizade, co-chairman of the Social Democratic Party, and Lala Shovkat Gadzhieva, chairman of the Liberal Party. Back in 1994, it was Alizade who urged Aliiev to declare a "Patriotic War", imposing martial law on the former Soviet republic and uniting the people in an all-out drive for victory.

And Etibar Mamedov, chairman of the National Independence Party, has called on the Azeri leader to follow the example of former Armenian president Levon Ter-Petrosian who resigned over his failure to solve the Nagorny Karabakh problem.

Mamedov has proposed an "anti-terrorist operation" in the breakaway Armenian enclave. "This is our internal affair," he said. "There is no need to even have it discussed by parliament."

Most opposition politicians consider that any negotiations with Armenia should be "frozen" until Azerbaijan is in a stronger bargaining position. Popular Front chairman Ali Kerimov said, "A fair peace is only possible if Azerbaijan is much stronger than it is today."

Surveys of the Azeri population show that most people still believe the Nagorny Karabakh conflict can only be solved by military action.

An old man selling sunflower seeds in Baku's central market said, "My son was killed. Now at least I hear people saying that we should go and win back the lands we lost. Before that there were only empty calls for peace."

But others fear the authorities could use a war as an excuse for repression. A girl on Baku's Fountain Square said, "I don't want there to be a war whatever happens. I can't believe that people are calling for war, saying this is the only way to get our lands back. Where were they during the last war? What stopped them from fighting for their country back then?"

She added, "I'm certain that these same people will never go and fight themselves. Neither will their children."

Meanwhile, in Armenia, the Zulfugarov-Namazov plan has been interpreted as a call to arms. Defence minister Serzh Sarkisian told the *Golos Armenii* newspaper that the Armenian armed forces were well prepared for a renewal of hostilities, adding that the Azeri war-mongers were not members of the ruling party.

"It's easy for them," commented Sarkisian. "They won't have to take responsibility for a war. And fresh fighting could mean victories for Azerbaijan as well as defeat."

President Kocharian's reaction was unequivocal. He said Armenia had no intention of throwing down the gauntlet, adding, "Whoever starts a war will lose."

And David Shakhnazarian, leader of the 21st Century opposition party, warned that the Key West

meeting could become a Camp David for the South Caucasus. When the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations in Camp David collapsed, he said, there was a sharp escalation of tension in the near East.

Certainly, there is little sign of sabre-rattling amongst the Armenian population at large.

Aram, 30, a resident of Yerevan, said, "I don't want war. I hope they sign a peace agreement as soon as possible so that we can freely mix with the Azeris once again. Then the roads will open up and life will get better." But Aram added that if Armenia were under threat, then he would not hesitate to defend his homeland.

Anait, a waitress in a Yerevan cafe, commented, "I hope there won't be a war. We've already lived through one and it was terrible. I don't know if this is right from the political point of view but I want Kocharian to do everything he can to ensure there won't be another conflict."

There can be little doubt that the peace-makers are faced with a monumental task - and one that is well illustrated by two recent comments from the Armenian and Azeri camps.

In Baku, the president's son, Ilkham Aliiev, commented, "Heider Aliiev will never sign a peace treaty that is not in the interests of Azerbaijan because such a peace will destabilise the country and it will be the regime first and foremost which suffers the consequences. We should all prepare ourselves for war."

And, in Yerevan, President Kocharian said, "Since 1987, the Karabakh conflict has become the most important issue in my life. It has never given me a moment's peace. I have lived with one idea, one dream - to do all I can to secure independence for Nagorny Karabakh. I have no intention of rejecting everything that has been gained by the blood of our people."

By Mark Grigorian and Shahin Rzaev. CRS No. 76, March 30

Security clampdown across north Caucasus

Nalchik, April 2001

Bomb attacks in neighbouring republics have cast a long shadow over Kabardino-Balkaria

Security forces across the North Caucasus remain on a state of high alert following three terrorist bomb attacks which killed 23 people and injured more than 140.

No terrorist group has yet claimed responsibility for last month's blasts in Mineralnii Vody, Yessentuki and Cherkessk but four suspects have been arrested.

Meanwhile both residents and visitors have resigned themselves to the relentless document checks and door-to-door searches prompted by the attacks.

Lieutenant-General Khachim Shogenov, interior minister for Kabardino-Balkaria, said, "It's terrible to imagine such atrocities taking place in this republic but unfortunately we are not insured against them. And we are obliged to do everything we can to ensure they do not take place."

Shogenov said the police were on high alert and were working in 12-hour shifts. Road blocks had been set up across the republic with extra security measures at markets, department stores, schools, universities and hospitals as well as railway stations and airports.

Passport checks had been introduced on roads leading into Kabardino-Balkaria while non-residents could expect to be stopped and searched.

"Foreigners should not take offence," said the interior minister, "but we can't allow terrorists to come into our republic posing as guests."

Shogenov went on to say that bomb disposal experts had been stationed in all interior ministry bases, many of which were equipped with specialist equipment and sniffer dogs.

He explained that the bomb at Mineralnii Vody had been detonated by traffic police attempting to defuse the device before the experts arrived.

Meanwhile, the Russian interior ministry has taken the opportunity to conduct wide-ranging inspections of all police facilities in the North Caucasus region. "We don't mind these checks," said Shogenov, "and we understand that they are necessary. It helps us to keep discipline among our officers."

Local residents, horrified by the events in the two neighbouring republics, fully support the security clampdown.

Zarema Sonova, a primary school teacher, said, "The explosions really terrified me. I'm afraid for my own children as well as our pupils. But it's not only the children - we adults feel

just as helpless. I'm pinning my hopes on our police force and the measures being taken by our president at this time."

Nalchik pensioner Safarbi Nakov said he was keeping away from markets and shops. "I'm afraid to leave the house. I'm afraid of being crippled by a bomb attack. There's no one to look after me -- my children have all left home. It's hard enough to live on the pension but now there's war on one side and bombs on the other."

A doctor, Roza Temmoeva, agreed that the shadow of fear had come to dominate everyday life in Kabardino-Balkaria. "For many people, this fear grows into depression and that's likely to make things worse," she said.

But there are those who sympathise with the terrorists - widely thought to be Chechens - and claim that Russian brutality has forced minority groups to take desperate measures.

Yuri Bakov, a jobless resident of Nalchik, said, "There have been plenty of cases of federal troops committing atrocities in Chechnya, but no one talks about it and no one cares. Even us, their closest neighbours.

"The same could happen here. While you're alive, you must fight for your life, for your rights. We have few enough rights ourselves, and the Chechens have none at all."

By Musa ALIBEKOV. CRS No.78, April 13

Azeri papers "threatened" by language decree

Baku, June 29 2001

The Azeri media fear the compulsory transition from Cyrillic to Latin letters will cost them readers

The people of Azerbaijan will wake up on August 1 to find their newspapers printed in a language many may struggle to understand.

The print media will no longer be published in Cyrillic but Latin - one of the consequences of a language decree President Heidar Aliev recently signed.

The reform was not unexpected, as a law on the transition to the Latin script was adopted back in 1991. But little progress has been made since then, and with the exception of 'Ayne' (The Mirror) and two children newspapers, the press all continued using Cyrillic, not least because most people over 30 remain unfamiliar with Latin letters.

Changes to the alphabet are not new to Azerbaijan. This is the fourth alteration in a century. Before the Russian Revolution, Arabic was generally employed. In the 1920s this gave way to Latin. Stalin then imposed Cyrillic in the 1930s, which remained in use until the collapse of Soviet Union.

Public opinion is generally hostile to the compulsory nature of the change. 'At school I easily read books in Latin but I am against such a swift transition,' said Ajdin Badalov, 50, a company manager. "The business of reading will become strenuous and time-consuming. The reform should be introduced gradually."

Pensioner Zeinab Khalilova agrees. "This is an insult to the elderly," she said. "How can I start learning the new alphabet at 63? Pensioners spend much of their time reading papers. Now we will be deprived of that as well."

Many younger people sympathise with her plight. 'Reading Latin is no problem for me,' said Shovgi Safarov, 31, "but you cannot force people to give up something they have known for their whole life."

The stance of the politicians inevitably reflects the agendas of their parties. The pro-government parties of the National Democratic bloc mostly support the decree, while those in the opposition Union of Pro-Azerbaijan Forces do not.

Sabir Rustamkhanli, chairman of the Civic Solidarity Party and a former minister of press and information, says a swift transition will be less painful in the long term. "Stalin changed the alphabet in one day," he said. 'Ataturk, the first president of Turkish Republic, in three months. We have been marking time for 10 years and without the [presidential] decree, it would go on for another 10 years.'

Sceptics complain that changing the alphabet ranks very low on the list of country's priorities and is a waste of money. "We will need to spend about \$4 million to carry out this reform," said Araz Alizade, one of the chairmen of the Social Democratic Party. "We would be better off spending this money on the army. If adopting Latin is so important, the transition period should be about 25 years, not one month."

The Azerbaijani intelligentsia is as divided as the politicians, although Baku university professor Shirmamed Huseinov claims the change will open Azerbaijan to the world. "The newspapers may have some difficulties but the number of foreign readers will increase," he said. "Our schools have been using Latin-printed textbooks for several years. This decision serves the interests of the young generation."

The poet Vakhid Azimov is less certain. "People are always talking about how Atatürk switched Turkey to the Latin alphabet in one year," he said. "They forget that 80 per cent of Turkish population was illiterate!"

Behind the arguments, a consensus is emerging that Cyrillic will eventually give way to Latin. Most of the quarrels revolve around the time, capital investment and measures that will be required to teach the population the new alphabet.

But the print media is especially worried. It says it needs both time and financial support from the government if it is not to suffer unduly from the changeover. "The state must help the press solve this problem," said Arif Aliyev, president of the Baku Press Club. Gabil Abbasoglu, editor of the country's most popular daily, *Yeni Musavat*, wants the transition period extended and support for the print media from the budget.

"The whole store of knowledge of my generation is based on books printed in Cyrillic, as is that of the previous generation," said Mamed Suleymanov, 30, editor of the newspaper *7 Dnej*, (Seven Days). "If I have difficulties reading my own newspaper, what can I expect from the middle-aged people who form our core readers?"

Despite the widespread criticism, the language reform is underway. And after August 1 Azerbaijan's press - inevitably - faces the prospect of losing a portion of its readers. One consequence is that the electronic media, which is more directly controlled by the authorities, will become the main source of information for much of the population.

By Shahin RZAEV. CRS No.88, June 29

Yerevan sceptical over Ankara dialogue bid

Yerevan, July 2001

A body has been set up to try to bridge the long-standing rift between Armenia and Turkey.

The setting up of an Armenian-Turkish reconciliation commission has been roundly criticised in Yerevan. Described by some as a 'dangerous adventure', the body aims to encourage communication and dialogue between the neighbouring countries.

The group of prominent public figures who comprise the body announced their initiative on July 9 in Geneva, expressing their hope that it would lead to direct inter-government negotiations. The commission has the support of the US State Department which has acted as a mediator in Armenian-Turkish relations since 1999.

Diplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia are blocked by two main issues. Ankara refuses to countenance any rapprochement until Yerevan recognises Azeri sovereignty over Nagorny Karabakh - contested by the two countries since the early 1990s. Armenia, for its part, insists that Turkey must admit responsibility for the Armenian genocide between 1915 and 1923.

Officials from both Ankara and Yerevan have said that if these problems were resolved, direct governmental talks could commence. Meanwhile, the border between the two countries remains closed, with Turkish sanctions in effect.

"This is the first attempt to open an official dialogue," said commission member Ilter Turkmen, a former Turkish foreign minister. But there remains some confusion over how 'official' the proposed talks actually are. The respective governments have both explicitly distanced themselves from the body. A few days after the Geneva meeting, the Armenian foreign ministry denied the government had been in any way involved in the commission. Spokesman Dziunik Aghadjanian said that such an initiative "cannot substitute inter-governmental discussions".

The authorities in Yerevan are concerned what effect the body could have on its attempts to secure international recognition of the genocide. Its political opponents are of a similar mind.

"No-one should buck responsibility for the Turkish genocide of Armenians through 'reconciliation'," said the nationalist Dashnaksutyun party. "Without admitting to this historical fact, there can be no reconciliation. Armenian-Turkish talks cannot be realistic until Turkey owns up."

The views of the Turkish historians on the 1915 mass killings of Armenians range from

outright denial that they ever took place to a refusal to accept that the atrocities had been planned.

France's lower house of parliament officially recognised the killings as an act of genocide in May 1998, but the government and the presidency opposed the vote, concerned that it might offend Turkey.

The US House of Representatives shelved a similar resolution last year after then president Bill Clinton declared that it could severely undermine relations with Ankara.

Given Turkish reluctance to come to terms with the crime, Communist party representative Gagik Tadevosian is sceptical that such a reconciliation body can have any value. "If the Turks are going to become hysterical after every mention of the Armenian genocide, how can a commission bring about normal relations between the two countries?"

Other Armenian politicians have described the initiative as a 'dangerous adventure' and questioned the competence of reconciliation commission members. "Clearly, those in the commission are simply representing their own interests," said Arthur Baghdasarian, head of the Orinats Erki party. "They have no authorization to speak on behalf of Armenia or the Armenian diaspora."

Azerbaijan's '525-gazeti' newspaper has speculated that the body would be used to generate international interest in the genocide issue. The paper quotes Ozdem Sanberk, a former Turkish ambassador to the UK, as saying that it is hoping to move the debate along both in the US Congress and other international legislatures in an effort to get them to eventually recognise the crime.

According to commission member Andranik Migranian, further meetings have been planned in Istanbul and Yerevan. Whether these receive official blessings remains to be seen.

By Ara TADEVOSIAN. CRS No.92, July 31

Cudgels and crutches

Baku, August 2001

President Aliiev has cracked down hard on Karabakh war invalids who dared to ask for more

The closing moments of the war veterans' trial that ended July 19 were sensational. After the judge pronounced a sentence of imprisonment, one defendant, Alizamin Dargiakhov, slashed himself with a razor-blade, shouting, "You wanted our blood: here it is."

Other defendants banged their heads against the bars of the cage they were held in, while mothers struggled to console their children. The judge read his verdict through to the end before rushing from the court, pursued by his guards and the cries of shocked relatives.

The prosecutor general had demanded prison terms of up to six years for the 16 handicapped men in the dock. He was not disappointed.

Last January, Azeri invalids from the Nagorno-Karabakh war of 1991-94 went on hunger strike to demand a substantial increase in their monthly pensions, which range from 15 to 26 US dollars. The strike was unprecedented in its size, with 500-600 members of the Karabakh Invalid Society, OKI, participating.

The strikers claimed that their very survival was threatened. Until recently, they could start a small business or a shop, or drive one of the minibuses in the public transport fleet, earning sufficient income to feed the whole family.

But these privileges have gradually been revoked. The authorities are miserly in general in social payments, and relations with the invalids have spiralled from bad to worse, radicalising the OKI against the government.

Now, not only are pension rises rejected, but municipal authorities had begun to close down their shops. Local officials keen to take over the transport business, began harassing invalids. The pension is roughly equivalent to the average consumer's minimum monthly expenditure of 97 US dollars, as estimated by the Confederation of Trade Unions. In any case, invalids often do not receive their benefits, as officials, for example, seek to extract bribes for allowing them to take advantage of certain privileges that are supposed to be granted. As a result of these pressures over the past few years, there have been several dozens of cases of suicide and attempted suicide among invalids.

The OKI press secretary, Rei Kerimoglu, told Radio Free Europe on May 1 that 56 war invalids had died during the past three years, and a further 15 committed suicide, due to deteriorating social conditions and medical neglect.

The entire country followed the two-month strike, with the media publishing daily reports from doctors monitoring the participants' physical condition. The streets leading to their association's headquarters in Baku, the capital, were blocked to all except the strikers' doctors. Later, even they were prevented from crossing the police line.

The authorities were unbowed. President Heidar Aliev turned his back on journalists seeking to shed some light on the strike. He said he had received no appeal from the invalids, a statement denied by the OKI association. Meanwhile, the public mood heated up: it seemed that the death of a single hunger striker might spark a flame.

In early February, the government convinced the invalids to halt the strike, promising to look into their demands. A state commission was set up by members of Association of Veterans of Karabakh War and Shekhid Families, an organisation with close government links, that was formed when the registration of the OKI was suspended.

The virtual dissolution of the OKI, in late January, led 19 Karabakh invalids to launch a second hunger strike on February 15, in which they demanded the registration of their organisation and the resignation of Ramiz Mehtiev, chief of the presidential staff. Supportive members of the public and relatives of the strikers gathered in front of the associations headquarters. Four days later, the government sent in the police. Armed with cudgels and wearing helmets, they attacked and beat hundreds of war veterans, many in wheel chairs and on crutches, arresting 30. Several cars were set on fire.

After a lengthy investigation, 16 of the hunger strikers were charged with organising or participating in actions against public order, resisting arrest and the use of force against police or conspiracy to commit crime. Meanwhile, the pro-government media launched a campaign of disinformation aimed at discrediting the OKI. Allegations of embezzlement against Unix, a company founded by OKI to commercialize the small businesses run by Karabakh invalids, turned out to be groundless.

The Council of Europe, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and Amnesty International closely monitored the trial of the invalids, which opened on June 20. The court's bias was clear from the outset. Statements by police "victims" about the demonstration, which spoke of alleged injuries to officers resulting from catalogued the backs or arms allegedly injured by invalids wildly swinging their crutches, caused embarrassment and some laughter in the court.

On one of the trial's closing days, several policemen refused to submit any further statements, switching their support to the invalids' demands instead. And a video of the disturbance, shown to the court, confirmed the violence used by the police in dealing with the demonstrators and their supporters.

The chances for a fair trial were reduced further by the defendants' refusal to have legal representation, convinced that the outcome of the trial would be rigged. When the Council of Europe monitoring group arrived in Baku, court sessions were interrupted and the verdict only

returned after group had left. Meanwhile, the defendants' health deteriorated from the long stay in prison: one collapsed several times and was diagnosed with heart disease.

The fears of human rights activists and the media were fully justified on July 19 when the court returned its verdict. The judge sentenced eight OKI invalids to one to six years in prison, while the remaining eight received suspended sentences. The defendants can appeal, but even their lawyers admit that there is little hope.

With the trial over, an OKI support committee, composed of politicians, lawyers and journalists, is gathering all the investigative evidence, court transcripts and other documents for publication, alongside media coverage of the invalids' case.

But a more urgent concern is for the welfare of the jailed veterans. With 30 prisoners confined in a ten-bed cell, the invalids are forced to sleep in shifts. Warm in winter, the cells are unbearable in summer, and disease - including tuberculosis - is rife. And their families outside have also been stripped of the meagre pensions they enjoyed before the hunger strike.

Life for the OKI invalids who remain free is also getting worse. The pro-government veterans' organisation that replaced the OKI victimises former strikers by making it hard for them to claim their pensions, regular health checks and other privileges. The OKI, still in existence, faces overwhelming pressure from the authorities, which have seized its assets and closed its regional offices. The association has been forced to move its headquarters four times in the past few months.

"It is not easy legally to struggle against the government of Heidar Aliev," said the OKI chairman, Etimad Asadov.

By Zarema VELIKHANOVA. CRS No. 96, August 31

Hiding in history

Akhalkalaki, September 2001

Conflict is brewing in southern Georgia - not that you would know from reading the local press.

Many in Samtskhe-Djavakheti are unready to admit that the Soviet Union broke up a decade ago. Travel down to this south Georgian region and you'll step back in time.

Only one cracked, rutted, pot-holed road joins the region with the rest of the country. Besides the bus from Tbilisi, which runs alongside the River Kura to Georgia's southern border with Armenia, few travel along the 250 km artery.

In Djavakheti, you'll find banners draped across the streets, and decorating the fronts of hotels and municipal buildings, singing the praises of the USSR, "Glory to the Soviet peoples - builders of Communism!", "Glory to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union".

In keeping with the general myopia, the local paper, Arghalujts, based in the administrative centre of Ninotsminda, hardly addresses the issues of the day. News to Djavakheti's hacks - a gaggle of elderly men in linen suits and straw hats sitting in a sea of old newspapers and broken typewriters - are stories about events of 1945. Other features go back further - to 1918.

Granted there are pieces on characters still alive - profiles of the two leading lights in regional agriculture. But if you didn't know this, Arghalujts could just as well have come out in the days of Stalin. The Soviet Union is gone but no one has told the journalists here.

With their head buried so deeply in the sand, prospects of any sort of real journalism are grim.

The fact that the majority ethnic Armenian population in the area is leaving in droves - partly because of the privations suffered here but mainly out of fear that returning Turks will trigger off a conflict - barely gets a mention.

Armenians flooded into the region to escape Turkish pogroms in 1918. Now that Georgia plans to reintroduce Meskhetian Turks - forcibly deported by Stalin in 1944 - they fear they'll be surrounded and afforded no protection by the Tbilisi authorities.

"If they return, we will be surrounded by Turks," said an Armenian in Akhalkalaki. A Russian military base there gives local Armenians a sense of security. Moscow's influence is evident everywhere. People pay with Russian roubles; they smoke Russian cigarettes; and car registration plates are in Russian.

But with Moscow under pressure to pull its forces out of the region, Armenians are edgy.

"People are afraid that if the Russians leave they will have no protection against the Turks," said Karine Khodikian, editor of a newspaper in Armenia's capital Yerevan.

"We are not armed," said a grey-haired man talking to his friends in front of a local museum in Akhalkalaki. "When the Russian soldiers are gone one Turk with a machine gun could shoot up half the town."

Besides fears of ethnic conflict, the miserable life people lead here is driving away the young. Electricity, for instance, is on for just three hours a day. If you want more then you have to pay 20 US dollars to local mafia for more.

Gesturing to his two friends, the man outside the Akhalkalaki regional museum said, "Of the three of us here, one has two daughters in Russia, the other's only son has also gone. My daughter is in Moscow, and now my son is going to join her. Only the dead in their graves are left here, and us ..."

A Yerevan-based analyst feels radicals in Armenia may exploit the exodus of their ethnic kin to call for the Djavakheti's secession from Georgia. "I am afraid we'll have a repeat of Karabakh there," he said.

As a result of the abysmal economic conditions and the escalating ethnic tensions, the region appears to be becoming increasingly unstable. The local newspaper may choose to ignore what's going on but the authorities in Tbilisi cannot afford to - unless they're prepared to see it turn into the next Caucasian conflict zone.

By Mark GRIGORIAN. CRS No. 99, September 25

MISHAKTOYAN



Intersection in Ninotsminda

Georgia: Chechen transfer operation exposed

Tbilisi, London, October 2001

Fearing a Russian invasion, Tbilisi attempted to ferry hundreds of Chechen rebels out of the country last month.

Russian threats to flush out Chechen insurgents trapped in the Pankisi gorge in northeast Georgia prompted the interior ministry last month to escort hundreds of the rebels across the country into Abkhazian territory, where they have been practically surrounded by Abkhaz and Russian troops, an IWPR investigation reveals.

The insurgents, who have been stuck in the Pankisi since 1999, apparently believed they could make their way back into Chechnya via Abkhaz territory and the southern Russian republics of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia.

But they would only be able to do so if Tbilisi granted them safe passage through the country - which is precisely what appears to have happened.

Tbilisi has consistently refused to cooperate with Moscow on any military operation against the Chechens in the Pankisi, and may have calculated that by dumping them over the border in the self-styled Abkhaz republic they would wash their hands of the fighters and avert Russian intervention.

The unwanted Chechen guests have been a sticking point in Russian-Georgian relations since they arrived two years ago.

The fighters, however, are now trapped in the Kodori gorge - a lawless area through which they had hoped to pass unnoticed to get to the Russian border - as Russian troops have gathered on the frontier to prevent them crossing. The Chechens' attempt to get back to their homeland seems to have been thwarted and their fate remains unclear.

IWPR has heard eyewitness accounts from several villagers in the northwest of Georgia who say they saw interior ministry lorries transporting hundreds of soldiers they believed to be Chechens in early September. One customs official on the Abkhaz border said the Tbilisi authorities had told him to ignore the vehicles which were passing into the Kodori region. "That has nothing to do with you," an interior ministry official told him on the phone.

The reports were backed by Georgian government sources and international officials who've confirmed that the trucks were ferrying Chechens. One source close to senior officials in the Tbilisi administration told IWPR the operation was the work of President Eduard Shevardnadze and Interior Minister Kakha Targamadze. "This was planned by Shevardnadze and Targamadze," the source said.

The reports confirm concerns raised by the chairman of Georgia's parliamentary committee for defence and security, Giorgi Baramidze, who last month accused Targamadze of involvement in a clandestine plan to ship the Chechens from the Pankisi gorge to Abkhaz territory. His claims were denied by the authorities.

Since the outbreak of the second Chechen war in 1999, Moscow has repeatedly urged Tbilisi to cooperate in rooting out rebels who crossed over the border with refugees shortly after the fighting broke out.

Georgia has long denied the presence of Chechen rebels in the Pankisi area - just south of the border with Chechnya - fearing that it would be dragged into a conflict if it admitted that they were there. The authorities effectively turned a blind eye to the insurgents' activities until a month ago, when they seemed to have been alerted that Moscow had run out of patience and was about to intervene militarily.

The Chechen fighters had effectively been trapped in the gorge as soon as, after their exodus from Chechnya, OSCE monitors and Russian soldiers began patrolling the frontier making it more or less impenetrable. As a consequence, the only way the rebels could return to their homeland was to trek to the northwest of Georgia and smuggle themselves across the three southern Russian republics.

International officials in Tbilisi are saying that Georgia was, literally, caught between a rock and a hard place. With the Russians threatening to attack positions on Georgian territory, Tbilisi was forced to do something about the Chechen menace. But because the government was opposed to confronting the rebels militarily - as Moscow wanted it to - the only real option left was to help them escape.

"It's a no-win situation," said one Western diplomat, who confirmed that the authorities had transferred the rebels across the country. "Georgia had a difficult dilemma on its hands - either risk Russian intervention in Pankisi or take the (fighters) to Abkhazia."

The relocation of the Chechen rebels has, predictably, provoked a hostile response from the Abkhaz and their Russian allies.

Russian defence minister Sergei Ivanov has accused Tbilisi of refusing to fight "bandits" and "terrorists" and announced that Russian forces were being sent to the Abkhaz border to ensure the Chechen fighters don't cross.

The Russian foreign ministry has upped the ante further, warning that the presence of Chechens on Abkhaz territory could trigger a re-run of the early Nineties war between Abkhazia and Georgia.

There has been a significant rise in tensions in the Kodori gorge, which straddles Abkhaz and Georgian territory, since the Chechens were transferred there last month. The area was already unstable because of the long-standing presence of Georgian partisans, who have pledged to regain control of Abkhazia since the war ended in 1993.

Over the last week or so, Abkhaz rebels say they have clashed with Chechens and Georgians on several occasions - most recently on October 9 when 14 civilians were reportedly killed in fighting around the village of Naa, close to the gorge.

The clash came a day after the shooting down of a UN helicopter in the same region, with

the loss of nine passengers and crew. A UN investigation into the incident is underway. Abkhaz officials, meanwhile, have been quick to blame the Chechens in the Kodori gorge.

At the same time, several jets and helicopters have bombed villages in the gorge. The Abkhaz and Russian authorities pointed the finger of blame at Georgia, which countered that intercepted radio messages indicated the aircraft were Russian.

Tensions in the area escalated on Thursday when Abkhaz officials said their forces had launched air strikes against Georgians and Chechens in the gorge. This came shortly after Tbilisi had said it was sending troops to parts of Abkhazia still under its control. The Sukhumi authorities denounced the move as a "step towards war".

By Eka ANDJAPARIDZE and Philip O'NEIL. CRS No. 101, October 12

Bursting Baku's oil bubble

Baku, January 2000

As Baku revels in a much-publicised "oil rush", questions are being asked about the true extent of the legendary reserves awaiting exploitation in the Caspian Sea basin.

After languishing for years in the Soviet doldrums, Baku's oil industry is poised for a dramatic comeback on the international stage. A sheaf of lucrative contracts with Western oil companies has fuelled hopes that the Azerbaijani capital may soon shrug off its troubled past and enjoy a second heyday. However, experts are pouring cold water over heated claims that vast untapped resources lie deep under the Caspian seabed.

In the early 1900s, Baku stood at the heart of the world's first oil-producing region. But, with the discovery of larger or more accessible oil deposits in other parts of the globe, the city lost much of its strategic significance. Soviet industrial policies ensured its eventual decline with a massive shift of emphasis from the Caspian basin to the heavy oil deposits of Siberia.

It is unlikely that Soviet marine engineers were unequal to the problems of extracting oil from the Caspian. On several occasions, long-term research plans examined the development of deep-water fields but proposals were always rejected on the grounds of poor potential returns.

Lukewarm Soviet interest in the Caspian Sea can be ascribed to disparate economic, ecological and political factors. The most important of these are, however, economic. The lack of sufficient resources and the high cost of extraction conspired to leave the Caspian oil fields largely unexploited.

There is no shortage of documentary evidence to support this theory. In 1988 Elm scientific book publishers released a report by the Soviet Union's leading oil geologists who concluded that existing and explored fields in the Azerbaijan sector of the Caspian Sea could yield an estimated 27 billion barrels of crude oil.

The US Energy Information Administration has put the region's proven oil reserves at somewhere between 3.6 and 12.5 billion. These figures pale in comparison to the reserves of the current world leader, Saudi Arabia, which are thought to total around 260 billion barrels (US EIA). Figures released by the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC), an international consortium, predict peak production will reach 800,000 barrels per day within 15 years. Saudi Arabian oil fields produced an average of 7.8 million barrels per day throughout 1999.

Furthermore, extracting oil from the Caspian Sea is an expensive business. Heavy soil, deep seas and the complicated geological nature of the deposits themselves make alternative oil resources more attractive.

Subsequent events have effectively demonstrated that much of the talk of Caspian oil is

pure bluff. Large-scale geological exploration has as yet failed to find proof of sufficiently large deposits in any of the existing fields. The so-called "Deal of the Century" signed in 1994 by the AIOC introduced the "myth of Azerbaijan oil extraction". This pompous title together with the involvement of the world's leading economic powers and oil companies was designed to give credence to tales of super-rich oil fields in the Caucasus. But, if reserves are not so extensive, how can this level of Western interest be explained?

The first reason is, predictably, political. The South Caucasus represents a significant geopolitical region, linking the Black and Caspian Seas and providing a "key" to Central Asia. Moreover, the West is trying to limit Russia's influence in Europe while at the same time restricting the number of potential allies for Iran. Investment in Azerbaijan's economy and natural resources offers a reliable shortcut to achieving both these goals.

The interest of the foreign oil companies - the driving-force behind the creation of the "Caspian Phantom-Region" - is easily explained. These oil companies are, after all, commercial entities dependent on profit for success. Their massive investment in Azerbaijan's oil industry is principally motivated by profit. All of the ventures are joint-stock companies and shareholders of these companies derive their main profit not from increasing dividends based on successful commercial activity, but from the rising price of the shares themselves. Share prices are dictated not by real economic indicators but by encouraging forecasts.

This is the very essence of Western business investment in Azerbaijan. By participating in high-profile Caspian Sea projects and issuing rosy reports of "great resources", such companies improve their stock image, generating an instant profit without pumping a single barrel of oil. In fact, one could argue that to begin seriously extracting oil would be counter-productive given the danger that the true extent of oil reserves would then be exposed.

So how do the Azerbaijani partners benefit from the contracts they are only too willing to sign? Their interests fall into two categories: the interests of the country and the concerns of the ruling elite.

Azerbaijan desperately needed these contracts. Only two or three years ago, the country was poverty stricken, racked by internal divisions and defeated militarily in the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. The new political leadership quickly realised that success would come not on the battlefield but through diplomacy. And to exert leverage in the diplomatic arena requires strong allies. Russia clearly would not fulfill this role, so Azerbaijan's only source of wealth - her oil - was sacrificed to ensure a closer relationship with the West. Of course, large-scale inward investment into the oil industry would also assist Azerbaijan's economic recovery.

Initially, national interest coincided with the interests of the political elite in Azerbaijan, but some unscrupulous government officials have since focused on exploiting their bureaucratic positions for maximum short-term profit, overlooking the long-term interests of the country in the development of the oil industry.

Claims that the Caspian Sea will one day become a major player in the global oil market are at best erroneous. Beyond the technical difficulties still hindering full exploitation of existing oil fields, the fact remains that those reserves are simply not as extensive as people - including the Azerbaijanis - want to believe. The reserves are sufficient to provide the country with energy for a long time ahead and to ensure the development of a large-scale oil industry. But they are not sufficient to secure Azerbaijan a leading role on the international stage.

By Elmar GUSSEINOV. CRS No.13, January 7

Trouble brewing in the north

Nalchik, January 2000

Pork barrel politics in the isolated the North Caucasian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria is fermenting serious opposition to the government as well as unrest among the ethnic groups.

Storm clouds are gathering over Kabardino-Balkaria. Often dismissed as a sleepy corner of the Northern Caucasus, the remote "banana republic" is currently seething with rumours of corruption and widespread misappropriation of the national wealth. Meanwhile, inter-tribal rivalries between ethnic Kabardinians, Balkars and Russians are heating up markedly.

The roots of the conflict are lodged deep in the economic and social make-up of the Kabardino-Balkarian republic. Here a rigid hierarchy continues to dominate the status quo: the Kabardinian elite, headed by President Valery Kokov, remains the most powerful social cabal while the Balkars consider they have preferred status over the Russian Cossacks. Each national group has its own agenda and spheres of interest, both commercial and political.

The legitimacy of Valery Kokov's presidency is still disputed by various sectors of the population. The Balkars claim that they were barred from the democratic election process and never actually voted for a presidential candidate. Many consider the existing government to be little more than a sanctuary for indigenous criminal elements.

Speculation reached fever pitch when a brewery director, Maremukov, was arrested in connection with the murder of his wife, who had been gunned down at point-blank range. Maremukov - a personal friend of leading Kabardinian political figures - was released several days later and charges against him were mysteriously dropped.

A similar outcry erupted over the assassination of businessman Takhir Uyanaev in the centre of Nalchik, the republic's capital. The police's chief suspect, Betrozov, was released from custody after members of the Kabardinian cabal intervened on his behalf. Uyanaev's mother, Marzhan Ulbasheva, has been campaigning for justice for the past three years. However, in October, her 17-year-old son, Renat Nasretidinov, the youngest imam in the republic, was arrested on suspicion of Wahhabism (Islamic fundamentalism) and detained indefinitely in a special investigation cell.

Much of the anti-government invective is pointed at Violetta Kokova, the president's wife, who allegedly holds the republic's purse strings. Kokova's admirers refer to her as Evita, after the wife of Argentinian premier Juan Peron, whilst her detractors have dubbed her "starukha" - "the old battle-axe" - which was Stalin's nickname for Lenin's wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya. Opposition factions are demanding an investigation into Kokova's alleged involvement in a

network of petrol stations scattered across the Caucasian republic which police believe to be dealing in contraband Chechen oil.

However, the region has proven unusually resistant to the depredations of Caucasian mafia cartels. In the past year, Kabardino-Balkaria has witnessed a succession of brutal hire-killings which are thought to be gang-related. One mafia boss was shot in his barber's chair whilst another was gunned down outside his apartment block. A suspected gang leader was seriously injured by a mortar shell which was fired through the window of his prison cell. As a result, the criminal landscape has changed dramatically. Most observers agree that the majority of small-time traders are now paying state law-enforcement bodies for protection.

Meanwhile, leaders of the Balkar clan have donned sheep's clothing in a bid to secure seats in the republic's Parliament. Lieutenant-General Sufyan Veppaev, once a prominent campaigner for Balkar independence and an associate of the late Chechen premier Djokhar Dudaev, now occupies an office in the presidential palace. A former colleague, Hussein Chechenov, was recently appointed prime-minister despite disturbing revelations that he had accepted a large house in Nalchik's most prestigious district as a gift from the ruling party.

At the same time, Balkar nationalists claim that the government has effectively privatised the republic's tourist industry - largely located in traditional Balkar enclaves - despite assurances that it would remain in state hands. Responsibility for local tourism has been entrusted to Balkar Kuanch Babaev, whom nationalists have dubbed a renegade.

Vice-president Gennady Gubin is the acknowledged leader of the ethnic Russian minority. The Russian heartland, spread across the Maisky and Prokhladnensky regions, boasts the bulk of the republic's industrial infrastructure. Nationalist factions within the Russian community are campaigning to break away from the Kabardino-Balkarian republic and secede to the Stavropol Region. On several occasions, Gubin has been called upon to deal with outbreaks of civil violence amongst his compatriots.

The disparate nationalist movements within Kabardino-Balkaria pose the single greatest threat to the Kokov regime. Members of the international Islamic movement have proved to be the most militant: a number of activists have been seized from local mosques and sentenced to lengthy jail terms. Other groups include Kabardinian nationalist organisation Adige Khasa, led by Valery Khatazhukov, and the Balkar nationalists represented by Tere Bagautdin Eteзов.

However, much of the discontent simmering in Kabardino-Balkaria has far more prosaic origins. People feel betrayed by a government which, they believe, has appropriated millions of rubles paid by Moscow into local coffers. Earlier this year, the Russian state TV channel ORT broadcast a meeting between President Kokov and Boris Yeltsin during which the Russian leader stated, "We've given you everything you have asked for. And you pledged to stabilise your economy within two years. I want to know why you've broken your promises." For once, Valery Kokov seemed lost for words.

By Khasen LAIPANOV. CRS No.13, January 7

Georgia's open wound

Tbilisi, January 2000

A reluctance to admit past mistakes and seal a dignified peace with the Abkhaz is a dangerous symptom of Georgian malaise.

Abkhazia remains a raw nerve in Georgian political circles. After six trouble-dogged years, the peace process has reached a deadlock: this year a Georgian delegation returned from talks in New York with nothing to show for their efforts. A meeting between Georgian ministers and Abkhazian leaders in Moscow was equally inconclusive. On January 31, the future of Russian peacekeeping forces on the Georgia-Abkhazia border will be reviewed. There is little doubt that their mandate--and that of the United Nations (UN) observers--will be extended.

Latent conflicts only surfaced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the Russian Federation has continued to intervene in all territorial disputes, blaming all participants and refusing to discuss their individual duties and responsibilities.

The relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia has been tense for decades, with Georgia failing to recognize their bid for self-identification and Abkhazians determined to unite with Russia. On August 14, 1992, under the pretext of guarding railway connections, Georgia's State Council (still unrecognized legally) sent troops into the region, which were confronted by the ethnic Abkhazians (only about 17 per cent of the population). By October 1993 the Abkhazian separatists, who enjoyed Russian military support, had forced Georgian troops out of their territory.

Casualties on both sides are estimated at 8,000 while 270,000 refugees flooded out of the region and tens of thousands more were left homeless by the conflict. The UN Security Council sent observers into the region before the end of military operations, increasing the number after the hostilities ceased. On August 22, 1994, the Council of Commonwealth of Independent States leaders ruled that peacekeeping troops should enter the conflict zone.

Few attempts have been made to reevaluate the origins and consequences of armed conflict in Abkhazia. Although the crisis was triggered by the Georgian government's attempt to protect vital railway tracks, few politicians are prepared to admit their mistakes. The majority still prefers to take refuge in popular mythology and refuses to take responsibility for the conflict.

Today, Georgian propaganda continues its smear campaign against Abkhazia in a bid to widen the gulf between the two nations. Both in Abkhazia and Georgia, only a small minority actually support the ongoing peace talks. In Abkhazia, extremists are devoting considerable efforts to renewing hostilities in the region.

Moves to settle the conflict were the first steps towards founding a new Georgian state. Many blame the government's initial failure on the activities of Abkhazian separatists but in fact this early experiment in democracy was undermined by old-fashioned state-craft and an entrenched Soviet mentality.

For the Georgian state to continue its natural growth, it is essential to admit the mistakes made in Abkhazia. The regime failed to take advantage of the opportunity granted to it by the international community and failed to find a common language with its own people. As a result, thousands of people lost their lives and hundreds of thousands more were left homeless. The infrastructure of a once prosperous region was left in ruins.

This reluctance to admit past mistakes and seal a dignified peace with the Abkhazian people is a dangerous symptom of Georgian malaise. Breaking with the past is essential to future development. History is full of similar examples: Germany rising from the ashes of the Second World War; America's emphasis on civic responsibilities in the aftermath of Vietnam. Georgia, however, refuses to draw the obvious conclusions from its defeat in Abkhazia. Instead, it prefers to wallow in injured pride and wait for someone else to solve its problems. From the very outset, it rejected any positive peace initiatives, relying on international organisations and other mediator countries.

The defeat itself was only part due to military incompetence: the war was lost as soon as the Georgian government decided to punish its own population for so-called disobedience. Abkhazia's bid for ethnic recognition and social security arouses little sympathy in Tbilisi - certainly no efforts have been made to assess the origins of the conflict and reach an acceptable compromise. Georgia's home and foreign policies continue to hark back to age-old concepts of displaced minorities and territorial integrity. On occasion, they smack of genocide. The war of words will serve to erode Abkhazia's determination in the long term but meanwhile the chances of compromise become increasingly remote.

The separatist movement in Abkhazia was not born of itself. The bid for independence was triggered by Georgian xenophobia and intolerance. Either through reluctance or incompetence, the government in Tbilisi proved itself incapable of driving a wedge between the separatist leaders and the population at large. It then proceeded to adopt short-sighted and even criminal policies towards the Abkhazian people, forging a new solidarity among the breakaway factions.

It was unsurprising that the Abkhazians should choose to flock to separatist banners when the Georgians continued to remind them of their "guest status" in the newly formed republic. The separatists, on the other hand, promised a secure and dignified future in their historical homeland. The Georgian government refused to differentiate between the people and the separatist leaders.

If Georgia is committed to reasserting its jurisdiction in Abkhazia, it must find a way of bridging the gulf between the two peoples and avoid increasing the tension. The politicians in Tbilisi are adamant that responsibilities should be divided between the warring factions. Entrenched thinking refuses to contemplate reform or compromise of any kind. Unfortunately, Abkhazia is unlikely to make any concessions until the separatists are convinced the Georgian position is showing signs of radical change. So far, Tbilisi seems unwilling to take the initiative.

By Paata ZAKAREISHVILI. CRS No. 15, January 21

Chechen civilians perish in Russian bombing

Nazran, January 2000

Chechen families sheltering in basements fall victim to the latest Russian onslaught on Grozny.

Dozens of Chechen civilians are reported to have been buried alive after a blizzard of Russian rockets pummelled central Grozny.

Rebel leaders say the tragedy took place Tuesday, January 25, during the build-up to a two-pronged armoured attack mounted by federal troops.

The civilians were sheltering in basements near Minutka Square when the Russians launched salvos of Grad and Uragan rockets at surrounding Chechen strongholds. Entrances to the cellars were blocked by huge slabs of reinforced concrete from collapsed buildings. Attempts to dig through the rubble proved futile.

The use of multiple-rocket systems at this stage in the fighting reflects the Russian army's growing frustration at the loss of momentum in its all-out attack on the city centre.

A barrage of 40 Grad ("Hail") rockets is capable of destroying an entire block whilst 16 Uragan ("Hurricane") missiles fired simultaneously have a saturation area of 400,000 square metres.

Launched from federal positions on the Tersky and Sunzhensky ridges, the weapons are notoriously inaccurate. Chechen sources claim that Russian front-line positions were shattered by friendly-fire while Moscow puts rebel losses at a record 500 during the missile attack.

Said Abumuslimov, aide to Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, reported in a telephone interview that the rocket strike had failed to break the deadlock on Minutka Square.

The strategically important position was still held by rebel units, Abumuslimov claimed - although Moscow has been boasting that it controlled the city centre since January 23.

The presidential aide said it was impossible to estimate how many civilians had been buried by the rocket blasts: some cellars were home to as many as 40 people who survived on siege rations or by bartering their possessions for food during lulls in the bombardment.

Just over two metres deep, the basements are damp and airless. To reach trapped occupants, rescuers have to run the gauntlet of Russian mortar-fire and artillery shells. Often the rubble is too heavy to move by hand.

The rocket attack was the prelude to two concerted armoured assaults on Minutka Square. In the evening of January 26, around 300 federal troops made a cautious advance from the east, moving through streets choked with debris and shattered vehicles.

Abumuslimov said the rebels allowed the armoured personnel carriers (APCs) to reach the

Yuzhnaya ("South") bus station before strafing them with machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

Five APCs were destroyed and 60 Russian servicemen killed, according to Chechen estimates, although the attacking force is said to have retreated, dragging wounded soldiers from the battlefield.

The rebels say they lost five men during the assault, which continued until the early hours of Thursday morning.

Fighting raged from building to building and even from floor to floor, with combatants pouring machine-gunfire down stairwells and lift-shafts.

Meanwhile another thrust towards Minutka was launched from the north of Grozny, cutting through the Kalinin district. Chechen field commander Aslanbek Ismailov reported that the force of around 100 Russians was beaten back after crossing the River Sunzha.

He went on to say that the vital bridge across the river was still not wholly controlled by the federal troops and soldiers venturing into open ground were easy targets for Chechen snipers concealed in nearby buildings.

But despite their street-fighting skills, the Chechen units defending Grozny, believed to total between 2,500 and 4,500 men, are hard pressed.

City Hospital No. 9 in the Leninsky region is operating in desperate conditions, with wounded fighters crowding the filthy cellars and power provided by decrepit generators. The rows of graves in the makeshift cemetery at the Kirov Park of Culture grow longer by the day.

Ismailov announced that the Grozny defence force had finally been purged of Wahhabi extremists. The militants, trained in Emir Khattab's secret camps before the war, are "better suited to mountain warfare", Ismailov explained.

However the Chechen leadership will no doubt be relieved that the "Islamic Cossacks" - who have previously threatened to divide the Chechen ranks - have been banished to the hills.

It was a dismal end to a dismal week for Russian generals, who, by Wednesday, were forced to reveal that overall casualty figures for the five-month campaign were much higher than previously reported - 1,055 rather than just over 500.

They have also grudgingly admitted that resistance is still fierce in the Staropromyslovsky and Zavodskoy regions, around the Lenin and Anisimov oil refineries and west of the chemical factory. Heavy snowfalls have slowed down progress on the ground and made aerial bombardment problematic.

Bislan Gantamirov, former mayor of Grozny and leader of the pro-Russian Chechen militia, said that consolidating federal gains in the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th districts was proving to be tougher than anticipated. He claims that rebel units are using a network of underground tunnels to outflank his troops and attack them from the rear.

According to Gantamirov, militiamen "liberating" the 3rd and 4th districts last week discovered thousands of civilians who had been hiding in basements since the beginning of the federal assault on Grozny.

They were escorted through the settlement of Staraya Sunzha to the Nadterechny region and to Urus-Martan.

By Ruslan ISAEV. CRS No.16, January 28

Ex-minister in Armenian “show trial”

Yerevan, February 2000

The trial in Armenia of a former interior minister appears to be satisfying the public's hunger for political scapegoats.

Flanked by two impassive security guards as he sits in the dock, Vano Siradeghian, 52, is pale and subdued - barely recognisable as the flamboyant interior minister, who, just two years ago, was one of Armenia's most powerful men.

His hands tremble visibly and his voice falters under the relentless cross-examinations. Occasionally, he flinches at the muttered insults hurled across from the public benches.

Behind Siradeghian, 11 co-defendants stare out between the bars of their iron cage. They seem grimly aware that public opinion is set firmly against them in a largely one-sided trial seen as part of a drive by President Robert Kocharian's government to discredit the previous regime, headed by Levon Ter-Petrosian from 1991-98.

The 12 men stand accused of conspiring to murder two police officers, Karen Rafaelian and Artur Hovannisian, in 1994. Prosecutors also claim that Siradeghian ordered the deaths of five prominent figures including Hovanes Sukiasian, a local government dignitary, and railway chief Hambartsum Ghandilian, shot dead in 1992 and 1993, respectively.

In a nation desperately searching for political scapegoats, the Vano trial has been the focus of intense public interest for the past four months. It comes as Kocharian himself struggles for political survival as an investigation into the assassination of eight Armenian politicians last October looks set to implicate members of his inner circle. [See "Armenian President Faces Resignation Calls," Mark Grigorian, CRS No. 16, 28-Jan-00]

The Yerevan court has been told that, in January 1994, Siradeghian, ordered two serving police officers to assassinate Serge Jilavian, a wealthy Armenian living in Moscow who had previously crossed swords with Ter-Petrosian's administration. According to the prosecution, the murder plot was foiled when the hitmen were arrested by Russian police and flown back to Yerevan.

It was then that Siradeghian allegedly instructed his deputy, Vahan Harutiunian, commander of the Interior Ministry troops, to "execute" the would-be assassins in punishment for the fiasco. Harutiunian and a squad of 10 men are said to have shot the two police officers in a country dacha outside the Armenian capital.

Last week, Harutiunian confirmed this version of events under cross-examination. But Siradeghian dismissed the testimony on the grounds that it was "extracted under duress" by police investigators.

A leading light in the Armenian National Movement (ANM), the former interior minister has claimed the charges against him are politically motivated since investigators asked the National Assembly to waive his immunity from prosecution a year ago. Three weeks before a ruling was made, Siradeghian left Armenia for Dubai, ostensibly to receive medical treatment, and was arrested on his return to Yerevan in May.

Former President Ter-Petrosian has also condemned the case against Siradeghian, who was one of his most trusted associates.

But the prosecution has brought a stream of persuasive witnesses to the stand.

"I'm scared of Vano, I'm sure he killed my son," said Mayis Rafaelian, father of one of the dead policemen.

Seated a few yards behind Siradeghian, Rafaelian has been a permanent fixture at the court proceedings, volubly joining in the hostile chorus of insults directed at the former minister.

Media coverage of the Vano Trial has been largely one-sided, with pro-Kocharian state television taking every opportunity to reiterate the charges levelled at the 12 defendants. The press bias has come under fire from Tigran Janoyan, until recently Siradeghian's defence counsel, who complains that the accused have little chance of getting a fair trial.

"As a specialist, I would say that the trial of Vano Siradeghian is bordering on the absurd," he said.

However, Siradeghian still enjoys unquestioning support from his own ANM party and from members of his Noyemberian constituency in northern Armenia. When Siradeghian was re-elected to parliament in May 1998, Noyemberi villagers feted his campaign victory by slaughtering sheep and holding a celebratory feast.

Siradeghian's most powerful ally, Armenian prime-minister Vazgen Sarkisian, was among the political figures gunned down when five assassins burst into the parliament building in October last year.

Siradeghian first came to prominence in Yerevan's intellectual circles as a talented fiction writer. His political career was launched on the back of the 1988 movement to unite Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia. By 1990, with the republic's first democratic elections, Siradeghian was a leading figure in the ANM, which embraced the unification issue at the heart of its manifesto.

Within two years, Siradeghian was Minister of the Interior, notorious across the country for his cynical rhetoric and parade-ground swagger. However, rumours of police oppression, fraud and corruption dogged his term of office with political rivals claiming that the minister built up a vast personal fortune at the expense of a downtrodden nation.

On one notorious occasion, Siradeghian threw a lavish party for army and police chiefs who had helped crush a riot in the streets of Yerevan. The demonstrators were protesting against the results of the 1996 presidential election, which saw Ter-Petrosian score a dramatic victory over rival Vazgen Manukian. The interior minister was later to admit openly that the vote was rigged in Ter-Petrosian's favour.

By Emil DANIELYAN. CRS No. 17, February 4

Karabakh shooting sparks witch-hunt

Yerevan, Stepanakert, March 2000

The attempted murder of president Arkady Ghukasian is expected to seriously disrupt the Nagorny Karabakh peace talks

Police in Nagorny Karabakh have arrested up to 30 people including the former minister of defence in connection with last week's assassination attempt on the enclave's de facto president.

Arkady Ghukasian was seriously wounded when two gunmen wielding Kalashnikov assault rifles fired at his Mercedes just before 1am on March 22. Bullets punched through the doors and windows, hitting driver Sergei Sarkisian who lost control of the car and crashed into a tree.

Ghukasian, who was being driven home from his Stepanakert office, was hit in the legs. He was taken to the Professor Mikaelyan Hospital in Yerevan, together with bodyguard Samvel Gabrielian who was also wounded in the hail of gunfire. Both are expected to make a full recovery. Sarkisian is still in a coma.

Nagorny Karabakh's attorney general, Mavrik Ghukasian, who has taken personal charge of the investigation, swiftly announced that Lieutenant-General Samvel Babayan, former minister of defence and commander-in-chief of the Karabakh army, had been arrested in connection with the shooting.

Babayan is one of an estimated 30 people to have been taken into police custody since the attack. The Armenian news agency, Armenpress, claims the total may be as high as 40. Sources close to the investigation say the detainees also include Babayan's brother, Karen, who is mayor of Stepanakert, civil servant Gurgen Nersesian, local businessman Eduard Verdian and a Lebanese national, Vardan Tashchian. None of the suspects have yet been charged.

Speculation over Babayan's arrest has been intense in Yerevan. The 35-year-old general, who has been outspoken in his criticism of Ghukasian's policies, was sacked as minister of defence in June 1999. Several of his allies were subsequently arrested on corruption charges. Until recently, Babayan controlled the import of cigarettes and oil into the disputed enclave.

However, the general's supporters have been quick to voice their outrage at his arrest. Hrant Khachatryan, head of the Right and Accord parliamentary bloc, said, "I have known Samvel Babayan for a long time and I am certain that he is devoted to Karabakh and Armenia. I don't believe he could do that." Right and Accord is thought to be financed by Lt.-Gen. Babayan.

Meanwhile, the government of Nagorny Karabakh has issued a statement condemning this

"unprecedented act of terrorism" which comes only five months after gunmen shot dead eight leading politicians in the Armenian parliament. The enclave's first president, Arthur Mkrtchian, was assassinated in 1992.

The statement said, "The government pledges that all the organisers and perpetrators of the crime will be punished to the full extent of the law. The situation in the country is completely under control, and law-enforcement bodies are doing everything possible to solve this monstrous crime."

Armenia's president, Robert Kocharian, who has visited Ghukasian in hospital, said, "I strongly condemn this terrorist action and express my support to the president of Nagorny Karabakh, his government and their policies." Kocharian has offered to help Karabakhi investigators to track down the would-be killers.

Paruir Hayrikian, head of the Presidential Human Rights Commission, commented, "Terrorism is becoming an integral part of our daily lives."

Nagorny Karabakh has been at the centre of a territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan since the late 1980s. Six years of fierce fighting ended with a string of Armenian victories and a 1994 ceasefire. The enclave now runs itself as a de facto independent state with political, economic and military ties to Armenia. It is still recognised internationally as part of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliiev told TV viewers last week that the attack on Ghukasian was "an internal affair" for Nagorny Karabakh. "We are not interfering in these issues and must not interfere," he said. "I am convinced that this incident has nothing to do with Armenian-Azerbaijani relations and our ongoing peace talks."

In a press conference in Tbilisi on March 23, Aliiev added, "The assassination attempt on the life of the president of the unrecognised Karabakh republic will not change Azerbaijan's stance over the resolution of the conflict."

Alexander Iskandarian, a Moscow-based political analyst and the director of the Institute of Caucasian Studies, said that, together with the October 1999 killings in Yerevan, the terrorist attack pointed towards a serious imbalance within Armenian and Karabakhi political ca-bals.

He explained, "Any shift from a rigid power structure to a democratic government is likely to have disturbing consequences. The ruling parties lack the traditions of political and economic struggle within the framework of the law."

The attempt on Arkady Ghukasian is likely to seriously disrupt the Karabakh peace talks. Local leaders will inevitably have to devote considerable efforts to quelling any political mutinies which may arise from the incident. This will in turn weaken their forces at the negotiating table and lead to concessions. Concessions of any description will certainly be unpopular.

By Mark GRIGORIAN and Vahram AGHAJANIAN. CRS No. 24, March 24

Electoral skullduggery mars Georgian poll

Tbilisi, April 2000

A shady political deal may have helped secure Eduard Shevardnadze's overwhelming presidential election victory

In the week before the Georgian presidential election, Djumber Patiashvili, Georgia's last Communist boss, held a rally in Tbilisi's main cinema, packed mostly with elderly supporters. Patiashvili, grave voice and knitted brows, rattled out a slew of stock phrases -- none of which were worth quoting. During his speech there were occasional bursts of applause as the babushki beat their hands together fervently. In all it was pretty amazing that any enthusiasm for the race existed at all, given that the incumbent Eduard Shevardnadze was widely predicted to win overwhelmingly.

Shevardnadze ran on the same promises that he ran with during his last election, essentially saying - just give me five more years and I will bring electricity and jobs just like I promised you five years ago. Foreign leaders flew in before the poll to underline his international stature. He reminded the electorate of the stability that he has brought to Georgia, after two disastrous separatist conflicts and the civil war of the early nineties.

But to the many impoverished, unemployed Georgians forced to endure power cuts which, last winter restricted electricity in Tbilisi to four hours a day, Shevardnadze's boasts were so much boring rhetoric. In the days running up to the election last Sunday, it looked like the problem was less to do with getting Shevardnadze re-elected, than getting more than 50 per cent of the 3 million electorate into the polling stations to make the ballot valid.

Polls were difficult to come by, but it appeared that Shevardnadze was hovering just above the 50 per cent he needed to win outright and avoid a second round. Patiashvili was said to be 15 or more points behind him and Aslan Abashidze, the head of the Adjarian region, was always going to carry almost all of his local constituency which accounted for 10 per cent of the national vote.

After listening to all the hype from the Shevardnadze camp, it seemed that the vote might be closer than his activists would have had people think. Anecdotally, there seemed to be plenty of voters scattered about who thought Patiashvili was a viable option. Bolnisi, for example, was a Patiashvili stronghold and most of the 250,000 Abkhaz refugees -- Georgians displaced from Abkhazia after the separatist war there -- were convinced that only Patiashvili could get them home again.

Then three days before the election, a curious thing happened. Shevardnadze flew to Batumi, the capital of Adjara, to talk to Abashidze. Why? Some kind of deal was touted, in return for which Abashidze would withdraw from the race. Shevardnadze was, perhaps, more worried about the final result than his propaganda was letting on.

Abashidze runs Adjara, a rich region on the Black Sea with a lucrative border with Turkey, as his personal fiefdom. Clearly, there were things to be discussed: Adjarian status within Georgia, as yet undefined in the Georgian constitution, and Adjara's contribution to the national budget being top of the list.

But still the episode seemed odd. If Shevardnadze was so sure of his re-election why the need to bargain? And why would he allow Abashidze to play the kingmaker, handing him political capital? From Abashidze's side the motives for the meeting on the eve of the election were also unclear. Why would he want to do anything for Shevardnadze, a man he had often accused publicly of trying to have him assassinated?

The content of the talks were secret, but the outcome clearly favoured Shevardnadze, because on Saturday afternoon, less than 24 hours before the polls were due to open, Abashidze resigned his candidacy. But he didn't publicise his withdrawal in the Adjarian media. Late on polling day it became clear that some voters in Batumi were still voting for him. What happened next? The ballots were spoiled but they were still counted. Thus Shevardnadze boosted the overall turnout, which he was desperate to do, without having to lose votes to Patiashvili. Shevardnadze, the great politician, had out-manoeuvred his rivals with his usual uncanny agility. By Monday morning, Shevardnadze claimed 80 per cent of the vote, Patiashvili had a mere 17 per cent. Turnout was generously put at 66 per cent.

By Wendell STEAVENSON. CRS No.27, April 14

Massacres still haunt Azerbaijan's armenians

Baku, April 2000

Just a decade after bloody pogroms in the streets of Baku, Armenians resident in Azerbaijan live in an atmosphere of fear and discrimination.

Tamara B. lives with the enemy. An ethnic Armenian, she was born in Baku, married a Russian and has two adult children who both live in the Azerbaijani capital. In 1990, when armed gangs launched a pogrom against local Armenians, the family fled to Moscow. They returned six months later. Baku is the only home they know.

Although she is past retirement age, Tamara doesn't get a pension. She has never applied for one. "I don't want to make a fuss," she says. "If I go and apply for a pension they'll ask for my passport, which proves that I'm an Armenian. Who knows what problems that could mean for me and my family?"

Tamara's husband was a highly placed Communist Party official during the Soviet era and the family lives in a special apartment block built for the nomenclature. The neighbours know of her nationality but, says Tamara, "they have never behaved badly towards me or the children and we still live on good terms."

Like most of the estimated 30,000 Armenians living in Azerbaijan, Tamara keeps a low profile. Memories of the recent pogroms are still fresh: in 1988, 26 Armenians were massacred in Sumgait, on the Caspian Sea, during two days of bloodshed. Two years later, at least 15 died when rampaging mobs took to the streets of Baku.

Recently, the Azerbaijani president, Heidar Aliiev, personally guaranteed the safety of all Armenians living in the former Soviet republic. He pledged that any state bureaucrats caught discriminating on the basis of nationality would be severely punished.

But, with 98 per cent of their community consisting of women, most Armenians remain unconvinced. They reason that, if the government is unable to protect the rights of its own people, there can be little hope for representatives of ethnic minorities.

Discrimination is certainly widespread and often Armenians are forced to fight bitterly for their rights. One Armenian, Asya Khydyrova, recently won a court battle over her claims to a Baku apartment.

In 1992, Khydyrova, who was married to an Azerbaijani, took her three children to visit relatives in Kislovodsk. She returned a month later to discover that her husband had not only

managed to process a divorce but had also removed her name and those of her children from the flat registration documents. To add insult to injury, he had moved his new fiancé into the property.

Supported by the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly and the Human Rights Centre of Azerbaijan, Khydyrova took the case to court. She and her children were eventually awarded half of the living space, which they are now trying to exchange for alternative accommodation. This is a rare case of an Armenian national scoring a victory - be it a modest one - over the system.

Often, Armenians are forced to disguise their identities for fear of discrimination. Yana and Roman Arutyunova were orphaned in 1990. With nowhere else to go, they stayed in Baku where they were brought up by neighbours. Yana, then 17, refused to let her eight-year-old brother go to school because she was afraid he would be bullied.

This year, Roman was called up for military service and Yana paid \$250 for a passport which gave him a Russian surname and Russian nationality. She was helped by an old friend of the family who had "good connections".

Yana explains, "Maybe the officers would have treated him normally, but I don't know how he would have got on with the other soldiers who belong to refugee families from the occupied territories."

Now Yana dreams of changing her own passport and getting a new surname and a new nationality. She says the situation is uncertain. "I'm afraid. There are a lot of people in Baku who know that my brother and I are Armenians, and they've helped us and still help us. But who knows what tomorrow will bring?"

Almost all Armenians in Azerbaijan live in the hope that the situation will change for the better. Their hopes have been further fuelled by recent peace talks between the presidents of the two warring countries.

Few, however, have the option of finding sanctuary in Armenia. There they are generally viewed with distrust and suspicion - in fact, one Azerbaijani journalist who recently visited Yerevan was astonished to hear the comment, "They [the Armenians in Azerbaijan] don't have the right to be called Armenians!"

But the number of Armenians prepared to fight for their rights as citizens of Azerbaijan is growing from year to year. To a large extent this has been made possible by the work carried out by non-governmental organisations which have called for people to stand up for their rights and join forces to fight discrimination.

By Alena MYASNIKOVA. CRS No.29, April 28

OSCE slams Azerbaijani elections

Baku, November 2000

Azerbaijani opposition parties are refusing to recognise the nation's second democratically elected parliament

Opposition leaders in Azerbaijan are set to stage a mass demonstration in Baku to protest against alleged infringements during this month's parliamentary elections which saw a sweeping victory for the presidential party.

Several opposition parties have already voted to boycott the new parliament, which was elected on November 5, and are demanding a fresh round of elections. The rally, scheduled for November 18, is aimed at lending support to these demands. More than 10,000 people are expected to attend.

Meanwhile, the Baku city authorities are refusing to grant organisers permission to stage the event and the Azerbaijani interior minister, Ramil Usubov, has warned that any protest meetings will be dispersed by police.

The moves come hard on the heels of claims by international observers that the voting was heavily rigged by the ruling party whilst both opposition politicians and voters were subjected to open harassment.

Gerhard Studmann, of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, said, "We were very disappointed with these elections. We expected that there would be infringements during the count but we didn't expect such a primitive falsification of the results."

His opinion was echoed by Andreas Gross, head of the Council of Europe delegation to Azerbaijan, who said, "Despite the positive changes observed in Azerbaijan in recent years, the scale of the infringements doesn't fit into any framework. We've never seen anything like it."

The Council of Europe has already warned Azerbaijan that the conduct of the elections could have a direct bearing on the former Soviet republic's ongoing membership bid.

Journalists covering the elections for the local press highlighted a wide range of alleged infringements which included votes made on behalf of relatives or friends, voter harassment and incidents of observers been prevented from entering polling stations.

At one polling station, a girl asked me, "How many ballot papers do you want?" On hearing my ironic reply ("Do you issue them by weight, then?"), she said quickly, "Oh it's you Shahin! Sorry, I didn't recognise you!"

In another district, according to OSCE mission head Paula Kokkonen, a member of the electoral commission was caught dumping 150 pre-prepared papers into the ballot box.

Meanwhile, the opposition can barely contain its fury. Preliminary results have shown that, in addition to winning the bulk of the 25 seats distributed by proportional representation, President Heidar Aliev's Yeni Azerbaijan party has won more than half of the 100 seats from single-seat constituencies.

Only one of the 12 other parties taking part in the elections - the Popular Front - was able to pass the 6 per cent barrier necessary to secure parliamentary seats.

Etibar Mamedov, chairman of the National Independence Party, said, "I cannot view the election results as being just and legal. They must be overturned. If not, the entire democratic world will turn away from us."

Isa Gambar, chairman of the Musavat Party, dubbed the new Milli Medzhlis a "toy parliament" which could not be considered legitimate.

The preliminary results were followed by a wave of protest meetings in the Kakhsky, Zakatalsky, Kusarsky and Geichaisky regions. Three protesters were arrested in Zakataly whilst, in Geichai, Ibragim Mamedov, deputy editor of the Azadlyg newspaper and a parliamentary candidate, was detained by police. The journalist was only freed after he had appealed to the demonstrators to disperse. He lost the seat to Anar Rzaev, chairman of the Union of Azerbaijani writers.

The hail of criticism has provoked a measured, non-committal response from the authorities. Mazakhir Panakhov, chairman of the Central Electoral Commission, commented, "If that's the way [the international monitors] are talking, then that means they saw something. They wouldn't lie to us, would they? But that doesn't mean the same is true of all the electoral districts."

Yeni Azerbaijan secretary Sivayush Novruzov said, "Azerbaijan has the best record for democratic elections of any country in the CIS. And the situation regarding human rights and social reforms is much better here than in other post-Soviet states."

However, there have been some signs of compromise. According to the Azadlyg newspaper, President Aliev has disciplined a number of officials over fraud claims while results in two electoral districts have already been declared null and void. Observers say Aliev is likely to sacrifice some seats in future rounds of voting in order to give the new parliament a semblance of legitimacy.

By Shahin RZAEV. CRS No.58, November 17

Talks spell hope for Karabakh accord

Yerevan, October 1999

Meetings this month between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan are raising expectations of a peace agreement over the disputed territory.

When the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met earlier this month, they did so without foreign mediation, a move which has raised hopes for a Nagorno-Karabakh peace accord by November 18, the date of a summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Istanbul.

Armenia's Robert Kocharian and Azerbaijan's Heydar Aliev met on October 11 near the village of Sadarak on the border between their two countries. Meanwhile, at the same time, their foreign ministers, Vartan Oskanian and Tofiq Zulfugarov, held talks in Luxembourg.

Although both Kocharian and Aliev remained tight-lipped after their two-hour negotiations, local political analysts interpret the location of the meeting - that is, in the region instead of in Western Europe or the United States - as a positive sign which may herald a political breakthrough.

The Sadarak meeting was the fourth occasion on which the two presidents had met without OSCE mediators present. As Kocharian explained to journalists: "The time comes when opposing parties in negotiations aim simply to demonstrate to mediators that they are right and the opposite side is wrong. This only hampers the process."

Both the United Nations and, since 1992, the OSCE have attempted in vain to mediate a political resolution of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which has dragged on for 11 years and killed an estimated 30,000 people.

In the wake of the meeting, the two presidents refused to give details of the substance of their talks, saying only that they had discussed the many elements of a peaceful settlement, but that there were no easy solutions. "These are delicate matters and we need more time, talks, and mutual compromises to find a solution," Aliev said. "So, we will continue our meetings."

The foreign ministers described their own talks as "encouraging", but were equally vague on details. "We talked about a methodology for ending the conflict and discussed how to define the parameters for its resolution," Azerbaijan's Zulfugarov said. Oskanian, his Armenian counterpart, said that the talks "centred on removing obstacles to the peace process".

The foreign ministers' talks in Luxembourg followed earlier talks in New York on September 28 and 29, where both attended a session of the UN General Assembly and met with US Secretary of State Madeline Albright.

While in the United States, Zulfugarov delivered a lecture at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington in which he said that the occupied Azeri territories must be returned so that refugees can return; that the status of Karabakh should be defined; and that the armed forces of Karabakh and Armenia are occupying almost a fifth of Azerbaijan.

In response, Ara Papian, spokesman of the Armenian foreign ministry, said that peace must be predicated on the principle of equality between Karabakh and Azerbaijan. "Karabakh cannot be subordinate to Azerbaijan," he said.

In advance of the OSCE's forthcoming summit, the United States appears to be increasing the pressure for a negotiated settlement. In a letter, Vice President Al Gore urged both countries' presidents to resolve their differences so that a peace accord could be signed in Istanbul.

As the talks progress, Karabakh's ethnic Armenian leadership appears optimistic. Foreign Minister Naira Melkumian said: "The leadership of Armenia has guaranteed the security of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, and outlined the limit of those concessions, which they can accept. At the same time, they have explained that we should agree certain mutually acceptable compromises to reach a common peace in the region."

Not everybody in Armenia is as prepared for compromise, however. Hrant Khachatrian of the nationalist Right and Accord parliamentary bloc said that he would only accept a peace agreement which either recognised Karabakh's full independence or its incorporation into Armenia. The bloc is the second largest in the parliament and is supported by Karabakh's hard-line former defence minister Samvel Babayan.

Meanwhile, in Baku, opposition to the talks appears to be growing. According to the local news agency Assa-Irada, the chairman of the opposition Democratic Congress alliance, Isa Gambar, wrote an open letter to Turkish President Suleyman Demirel on the eve of his October 18 visit complaining of pressure to agree terms in Karabakh at the expense of the country's national interests. He urged on-going Turkish support for Azerbaijan.

However, the co-chair of Azerbaijan's Social-Democratic Party and editor-in-chief of the newspaper Istiglal, Zardusht Alizadeh, told IWPR that Demirel came to Baku to pressure Azerbaijan into certain compromises in the negotiations with Armenia.

Local analysts believe that Turkey is pressurising Azerbaijan into an agreement in the hope that this may help it become a member of the Council of Europe.

By Ara TATEVOSIAN and Mark GRIGORIAN. CRS No.3, October 22

Divining the true motives of the calm killers of Vazgen Sarkisian

Tbilisi, October 1999

Observers struggle to discern the political objectives of Wednesday's attack on the Armenian parliament beyond the desire to kill Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian and send a bloody message to whoever follows him.

"Go tell the people of Armenia to come and take the building of the National Assembly. We have committed a coup." This call for an uprising came from the gunmen who had just shot dead Armenia's prime minister Vazgen Sarkisian and seven other top politicians and taken scores more hostage.

However, after the hostages were released following overnight negotiations with President Robert Kocharian, and the five gunmen were placed in custody at the Ministry of Security, claims that the gunmen really were spearheading a coup attempt were quickly dismissed.

At the time it did look like a real coup, but soon it became clear that the action was limited to the assembly chamber. There were no matching scenes at government agencies, airports and TV stations, no move by army and police units and no organised public demonstrations in support of the gunmen.

On the contrary, as events developed, the total isolation of the five terrorists became increasingly evident. In fact it seemed hard to discern any clear political objective in the attack beyond the immediate wish to kill Sarkisian and send a bloody message to whoever follows him.

"Today's murder is going to be a shock for people," said lead gunman Nairi Unanian, a onetime extreme nationalist and former journalist, speaking to local TV. "It was intended as a warning to the rest of the government. It doesn't matter who's going to replace those who died in the shootout today. From now on they will serve the people, because they see what can happen if they don't."

And Vazgen Manukian, chairman of the opposition National Democratic Union was one of many to dismiss speculation that the attack was a bid to sabotage ongoing talks to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute with Azerbaijan. Unanian himself told reporters that "this is not an issue of Karabakh!"

"There were no political motives behind the attack," deputy Galust Saakian told Reuters news agency as he was leaving the building, his jacket still stained with blood. "They were just schizophrenics who came to parliament and did their barbaric deed."

In fact many observers soon concluded that the ultimate beneficiary of this week's carnage

will be Kocharian. Before his assassination, Sarkisian was considered to be the most powerful politician in the country, with strong links with the military.

It was Sarkisian, as leader of the nationalist Republican Party who played a key role in forcing former president Levon Ter-Petrosian's resignation in 1998, and together with Karen Demirchian's People's Party, saw Kocharian into the presidency. But in May Sarkisian and Demirchian, then allied as the Miasnutun (Unity) bloc scored a landslide victory in parliamentary elections.

Since then Sarkisian's activities had began to overshadow the president, despite Kocharian's established presidential authority over the Armenian parliament.

As for Demirchian, he too was one of Kocharian's main potential opponents. A former first secretary of the communist party of Armenia from 1974 to 1988, he came second in the 1998 presidential election, with some 40 percent of votes. The murder of the two influential political leaders weakens the Miasnutun bloc's control of parliament and government dramatically and is bound to have serious consequences.

Considering the violence of the initial attack, Unanian's surrender was smoothly arranged under Kocharian's direct eye. He had stated publicly that the gunmen would "escape reprisal," and personally guaranteed that armed police would not try to storm the building.

Witnesses noted that Unanian seemed sane and well composed. He allowed reporters to be freed first, then allowed the minister of health Gayk Nikogossian to evacuate the wounded. Meanwhile the direct negotiations with Unanian were led by Alexan Harutiunian, chief of staff at the president's office, who knew Unanian from his days as a philology student at Yerevan State University before 1988, when they were both members of the activists of a student movement for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia.

Unanian and the others were then taken directly to the investigation insulator in the Ministry of National Defense of Armenia. As for his alleged extreme nationalism, Vahan Hovannisian, leader of the nationalist Dashnaksutyun party went on record saying that Unanian had been a member of his party, but for less than two years in 1991-92, when he was expelled. Hovannisian did not elaborate on the reasons why. He did describe the gunmen as "sick people".

The fortunes of Dashnaksutyun, a left wing and nationalist organisation active in Armenia since the pre-Soviet period took a boost when Kocharian came to power. Always influential both in Armenia and among the Armenian diaspora, it was banned in 1994 by then president Ter-Petrosian.

Ter-Petrosian accused Dashnaksutyun of running secret units, called Dro, which smuggled drugs and arms and killed political murders. That kept it out of the 1995 parliamentary and 1996 presidential elections, despite its popularity. This fact cast a doubt upon the legitimacy of the vote.

When Kocharian replaced Ter-Petrosian in 1998, Kocharian lifted the ban and released some Dashnaksutyun leaders imprisoned in 1995, accused of attempting a coup d'etat. Since then, Kocharian has enjoyed good relations with the party.

Dashnaksutyun has disowned Unanian, but the party has yet to disown its past calls

for the destruction of those it regards as enemies of Armenia. And Ter-Petrosian's charges that Dashnaktsutyun was a terrorist organisation were never fully refuted by the party leaders. In the event the Dashnak leader threw the party behind Kocharian. "It is very important not to allow emotions to rule us," he told journalists, "and to rally behind the president."

The angriest response came from Sarkisian's old friends among the military. They were close supporters of Sarkisian, a popular former defence minister and champion of the rights of veterans of the bitter 1991-94 war with Azerbaijan.

They persistently ask whether Unanian had outside help - particularly on how he got their weapons into the building, presumably hidden under the long trenchcoats worn by the gunmen - dress that would have normally drawn immediate suspicion from the parliamentary guards.

"The internal and external security of the state is in danger," said a statement from the defence ministry, repeatedly broadcast on state TV on Thursday. It called for the minister of the interior, the minister of national security, and the prosecutor general to quit.

"Under these conditions, the army cannot remain indifferent and demands the resignations," the statement said. "Those who allowed this crime to be perpetrated are guilty before the Armenian people. This was possible only because of a total absence of security."

By Mark GRIGORIAN. CRS No. 4, October 29

The silencing of Sara TV

Baku, November 1999

An independent TV station in Azerbaijan remains shut down and its staff on hunger strike a month after armed police stormed the studios after the showing of a programme critical of President Heydar Aliiev.

On October 9 armed police took over the premises of the Sara independent broadcasting company without warning or warrant and cut off the power while making a search of the studio.

Employees allege that the police confiscated a number of video cassettes and assaulted staff members Anar Shukurov and Farrukh Zarbaliyev. Moreover, the heavy-handed tactics were alleged to have caused one woman employee to have a miscarriage.

The 'Contact' political phone-in show has rapidly become a popular Friday night programme in Azerbaijan because of the lively debates that follow from having top politicians grilled live by the audience.

But it seems the October 8 broadcast was found to be a show too far by the authorities. The studio guests had included Democratic Party leader Ilyas Ismailov, and National Independence Party Chairman Eitbar Mamedov and the mood of the show was distinctly 'anti' President Heydar Aliiev.

Mamedov, runner-up to Aliiev in last year's elections, used the show to invite the audience to join a large opposition meeting planned for the following day at Baku's motodome stadium. The meeting, under the banner title 'Defence of Karabakh', had already been given a permit by the authorities, but the combination of the opposition call to protest and the general tone of the show proved the last straw. The state brought the curtain down on Sara.

However, four hours after the police shut the Sara station down, supporters from other media who had come to the studio to express support, were shown the order from the Justice Ministry which had demanded its closure.

That order was made under Article 7 of the Law On Mass Media which prohibits foreigners from owning media organisations in Azerbaijan. It was also issued on October 6 - two days before the offending programme was broadcast - suggesting that the closure had been planned in advance.

Rasul Rauf, head of the Sara company say that under Article 14 of the same media law, only the courts - not the Justice Ministry - are allowed to close a station. Rauf, who is a Turkish citizen, said he had applied for Azeri citizenship eight months ago.

Sara, which also runs a very popular FM radio station, was registered in January 1994 on the basis of laws then in place, he said, and in five years no complaint from the authorities had ever been lodged. Its closure must have been political, not legal, he surmised. The station and the staff enjoy a good deal of popular support; the police action precipitated a storm of protest from fellow journalists, opposition politicians and human rights activists. Within a day a Committee on the Protection of Sara's Rights was created, chaired by member of parliament and former Press and Information minister Sabir Rustamkhanly.

Democratic Party leader Ismailov, the other participant in the last Contact show says the station is a victim of "political pressure" and the general secretary of the Mussavat party said it was a violation of freedom of speech.

More than 20 newspaper editors have signed a petition addressed to President Aliev and asked him to examine these attacks on the media. The petition presently enjoys the wide support of artists, musicians and actors.

But the chairman of the Independent Trade Union of Journalists, Azer Hasrat, claimed that "the President of Azerbaijan is the real guilty person here. He doesn't wish to hear the voice of his people".

Meanwhile, Sara's employees are determined to protect their infringed rights. They have already launched a suit against the Justice Ministry and forwarded it to the Court of Arbitration, while launching a public appeal for international support for their case. One week after the station's licence was suspended, no fewer than 33 employees including company vice-president Shahriyar Rauf went on hunger strike in protest against the actions of the authorities. Rauf and three other staff have since suspended their hunger strike on advice of their doctors, but other have stepped up to take their place.

By Shahin RZAYEV. CRS, No.5, November 4

Maskhadov and Basaev - united in the face of a common enemy

Shali, December 1999

The second Chechen war has bridged the differences between Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov and his long-time political rival, Shamil Basaev, the most notorious Chechen field commander of recent times.

The second Chechen war has assuaged, if only temporarily, some contradictions between the Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev, the most notorious Chechen warlord of recent times.

After the first Chechen war ended in August 1996, the divide between Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev, the most powerful of the Chechen military leaders, widened to unbridgeable levels. The failure of Maskhadov's efforts to rein in Basaev and the lack of return on his attempts to coexist with Moscow alienated him from the major Chechen forces.

But the August Russian offensive caught both the population and the Chechen leadership unawares - and forced Basaev and the other field commanders to put aside their differences and unite in the face of a common enemy.

The two fought together against the Russians in 1994-95. As commander of the defence of Grozny, credit for which he largely placed on Basaev. It was thanks to Basaev's considerable talents that the Chechen armed units were able to inflict such damage on the Russians in the fighting of October 1994.

But Basaev had little enthusiasm for command structures. He disagreed with the strategies of Chechen resistance leader Djovkhar Dudaev and his lieutenant Maskhadov. Basaev instead urged the Chechens to take the war into Russia, an independent line that ultimately culminated in the hostage stand off at a hospital in the Russian town of Budennovsk in June 1995.

After the end of the first Chechen war that the friendship between Maskhadov and Basaev started to break down. Both men craved the presidency of Chechnya and left no stone unturned in their efforts to defeat one another. In the end, however, Maskhadov won by a clear majority, 60 per cent to 26 per cent.

Basaev remained, however, extremely influential. And Maskhadov, surrounded by weak ministers, took this fact into consideration and asked Basaev to rejoin the government team.

Basaev was appointed Deputy Prime Minister, despite some constitutional level objections, and immediately set to work trying to improve the economy and agriculture. His reform programme failed, however, and Basaev laid the blame at Maskhadov's door.

Basaev accused Maskhadov of surrounding himself with ineffectual people. On August 19, 1998 Basaev and his supporters held an unsanctioned rally in the center of Grozny calling for Maskhadov's resignation for violating more than 10 articles of the Constitution.

But though he has always presented himself as a man of discipline and a supporter of statehood and order, Basaev's efforts to transform himself after the last conflict failed for various reasons.

He would not accept that he is at least partly responsible for creating the environment that allowed the lawless combat units to run free across Chechnya and that by refusing to submit to central authority he fuelled the rise in kidnapping and other crimes.

The Islamic 'peacekeepers' of the armed brigades of the Congress of Chechnya and Dagestan provide a good example. Maskhadov never sanctioned these structures. In fact these brigades were formed against the president's will.

Yet post-war acting president Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and then his successor Maskhadov rewarded other commanders who followed the Congress' example.

This support later proved to be misplaced, particularly in the case of field commander Sulim Yamadaev, promoted to the rank of general and deputy commander of the Chechen National Guard after the war and who led the fighting against Islamists in the city of Gudermes during 1998.

Through Yamadaev's efforts the conflict was localised and Maskhadov promised to punish the Islamists, under Islamic Sharia traditional law. But fearful of civil war in Chechnya, Maskhadov again went gently against the Islamists, breaking his promise, infuriating Yamadaev and driving him into alliance with the pro-Russian Chechen religious leader, Mufti Akhmad Khadzhi Kadirov.

The president was left isolated and without the support he needed to stop Islamists accused of kidnapping, stealing oil and other crimes, and finally from moving against Dagestani and Russian forces in Botlikh and Tsumadin in Dagestan in August 1999.

Maskhadov tried to distance himself from Basaev, calling the action an 'adventure'. But he refused to enter into open confrontation with Basaev and Khatab. He merely said Basaev was a volunteer and an ordinary citizen of Chechnya with no links to the official authorities in Grozny.

But the second Chechen war has changed everything once more. Neither Maskhadov nor Basaev can survive alone and as the Russian army once more forces its way into Chechnya. The war is once more under way and Maskhadov has once more taken on the responsibility of leading the resistance against the invading federal troops.

Shamil Basaev, in his turn, has acknowledged the necessity of placing his units under a centralised Chechen military command. To remain an independent fighting force would reduce his army to the status of "Indian fighters", to use his own term.

Basaev has always resisted pressure to join a centrally commanded resistance force. His rather formal submission to Maskhadov is indeed an unwilling step. But nevertheless commander Shamil Basaev is once more sharing a map with Maskhadov, once more jointly planning the Chechen military response.

By Ruslan ISAEV. CRS No.10, December 10

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IWPR runs major programmes in Afghanistan, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iraq and Africa. Also we are managing a special reporting project on war crimes tribunals. The Institute maintains offices in Almaty, Baku, Belgrade, Bishkek, The Hague, Kabul, Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje, Tashkent, Tbilisi and Dushanbe with representatives in Tirana, Vladikavkaz, Nazran and Yerevan.

Field offices build local networks, engage in extensive training and editing, and host practical workshops and discussion sessions. IWPR's training, editing and logistics team, based in London, provides coordination and intensive expert support.

The overall programme toolbox is adapted for each country project based on local needs, problems and available resources, and includes investigative and cross-community reporting, training the trainers, collaboration with local human rights groups, regional conferences, and research and consultancy for international media and development agencies.

An international media development charity, IWPR is led by senior journalists and peace researchers, with staff drawn from established media such as the BBC, The Guardian and Reuters. The Institute is a partnership between the London-based charity established in 1991, and the recently formed IWPR (US), based in Washington DC.

IWPR LATEST PUBLICATIONS

REPORTING FOR CHANGE

A Handbook for Local Journalists in Crisis Areas By C Bickler, A Borden, Y Chazan, A Davis, S Jukes, J MacLeod, A Stroehlein, S Sullivan, J Vultee, J West

2004 © Institute for War & Peace Reporting

Reporters at the frontlines are at risk as never before. But with many countries moving towards democracy, the role of local journalists has never been more important. This book is a practical, hands-on manual to help local journalists contribute to positive change in societies undergoing major crises.

BLACK GARDEN

Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War By Thomas de Waal.

2003

In the beautiful hills of the Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan are still locked in a quarrel that has blighted the entire region between Russia and Iran, the Black and the Caspian Seas. In Black Garden, IWPR Caucasus Editor Thomas de Waal tells the full story of the tragic dispute over Nagorny Karabakh and its aftermath for the first time. He travels the length and breadth of Armenia and Azerbaijan, talking to veterans, refugees and the inhabitants of ruined towns and villages. He recreates the story of the descent into conflict of two former Soviet neighbours, its disastrous consequences and the confused efforts of the "Great Powers"-Russia, France and the United States-to bring peace to the Caucasus.

OHRID AND BEYOND

A cross-ethnic investigation into the Macedonian crisis.

2002 © Institute for War & Peace Reporting

In the end, the tinderbox did not blow. Throughout the tortured decade of the wars of Yugoslav secession, the logic of ethnically driven conflict - once launched and fuelled by the major capitals - tore its way through country by country, and village by village. The long fuse was always projected to lead inexorably to Macedonia, and a potential regional conflict that could surpass all others in violence.

Taken from introduction by Anthony Borden.

IWPR LATEST PUBLICATIONS

REPORTING THE FUTURE

A handbook for Afghan journalists

2002 © Institute for War & Peace Reporting

IWPR's new book is designed to help Afghan journalists in three ways. First, it serves as an explanation in their own language to many of the ideas and concepts behind international journalism. Second, it provides practical guidance, including twelve separate exercises, on many of the basic techniques of journalism. Third, the glossary at the back is intended to serve as a reference to explain and introduce many concepts which may be new to Afghan journalists. A wider range of reporting on economic and humanitarian issues is essential to strong public debate - and good government and international community strategies - if Afghanistan's bid for peace and development is to succeed.

The Handbook is published in print in English, Dari and Pashto.

PUBLIC RECORD OF AFGHANISTAN'S LOYA JIRGA

Full Transcript, 2002, 337 pages

© Institute for War & Peace Reporting

With support from the International Organisation of Migration, IOM, IWPR reported on every stage of the Loya Jirga.

From this recording, a transcript has been created in local languages (Dari & Pashto). This transcript is in the process of being edited and translated in a book and CD-ROM. In the meantime, IWPR in conjunction with IOM is happy to make available in PDF format a full and un-edited transcript of all 70 hours of the Loya Jirga proceedings.

REGIONAL MEDIA IN CONFLICT

Case studies in local war reporting

In an attempt to encourage greater professional awareness among local journalists who may find themselves reporting conflict in the course of their work, IWPR produced comparative study of recent media coverage in four conflict areas - Georgia, Cambodia, Bosnia and South Africa. Using journalists/researchers from each country, we sought to examine local perception of media behaviour.