

Covcas Bulletin

Conflits et Droits de l'Homme au Caucase
Conflicts & Human Rights in the Caucasus

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Covcas Bulletin is the monthly and bilingual (English/French) publication of Covcas Center for Conflict Resolution and Human Rights. Its purpose is to alert the international community about early warning news on Human Rights in the Caucasus region. All financial contributions would be appreciated to help spread information on Human Rights. Covcas Bulletin is available by electronic mail. Please see details on the last page.

NOTE DE L'EDITEUR

Covcas Bulletin est la publication mensuelle et bilingue (Anglais/Français) du Centre Covcas pour la Résolution des conflits et les Droits de l'Homme. Sa mission est de porter à l'attention de la Communauté Internationale les informations de pré-alerte sur les Droits de l'Homme au Caucase. Votre participation financière nous permettra de poursuivre l'action de diffusion des informations. Voir modalités en dernière page de ce numéro.

SUMMARY NOTES

ABKHAZIA

While American Special Forces were arriving in Georgia, the verbal war between Tbilisi on one side, and Sokhumi and Moscow on the other side, was intensifying. The Georgian interior minister Valeri Khaburdzania accused Abkhazia of sheltering Al-Qaeda related groups. In a resolution voted on March 20th, the Georgian parliament described this break-away republic as an "international terrorism safe-haven", pointing out its leaders' lack of will to cooperate with international instances. The demand for Russian peace-keeping forces to withdraw was reiterated. The Georgians consider these forces to be border keepers, preventing displaced Georgian populations from returning.

In Russia, the minister of foreign affairs denounced Tbilisi's "hypocrisy" and "irresponsibility", accusing Georgia of arming paramilitary groups such as the "Forest Brothers" and of having

contributed to Chechen groups' guerilla actions in Abkhazia. The minister ended his speech by emphasizing the necessity to consider Tbilisi "fully responsible for the consequences of such provocation". This verbal escalation came after four Russian soldiers from the peace-keeping force had been abducted in Abkhazia. However, the Russian parliament removed from its agenda the debate over the recognizing by Russia of Abkhazia's independence.

On April 25th, talks involving Georgian and Abkhaz representatives failed to reach an agreement on the withdrawal of 900 armed Georgians from the Kodori gorge. Finally, the parliamentary elections, held on March 2nd with 63 candidates for 35 seats, were unanimously condemned by the international instances. This condemnation, like the condemnation of elections held in other self declared states, raises the essential question of the right of the populations to comply with the universal rules of democratic life. Not condemning them is considered to be equivalent to recognizing these states.

Nevertheless, condemnation means denial of the authorities' right to organize themselves states against anarchy and violence.

JAVAKHK

Answering the Armenian population of Javakhh's concern about its economic survival after the Russian forces withdrawal from Akhalkalak, the Georgian authorities have drawn the outlines of a strategic development plan for this region. This project includes

economic development measures and greater integration of Javakhk with the rest of Georgia.

The language barrier is considered by some to be partly responsible for Javakhk's isolation (in Javakhk the Georgian language is used only by the inhabitants). This plan aims to help the spreading of Georgian in Javakhk by introducing the teaching of Georgian and by broadcasting Georgian television channels. But one can question the Georgian authorities' good will: no dates have been set for the fulfillment of this plan other than the Russian withdrawal from Akhalkalak. The Georgian authorities constantly push back Armenian organizations' demands for local autonomy which would offer a safer framework for Armenian Diaspora investment.

During a conference organized by the Caucasian Institute for Peace and Democracy, in Akhalkalak in April, it was noted that Georgian legislation had shortcomings in the areas of election and jurisdiction of local government bodies.

GEORGIA

As the first American military were arriving in Georgia, officially to train Georgian troops for anti-terrorist actions, some local journalistic sources reported the presence of US military in the Pankisi gorge. The sporadic nature of the American presence in Georgia and its limitation to anti-terrorist actions alone (focused on Chechen Islamic guerilleros who supposedly occupy the Pankisi) can be questioned. President Shevarnadze said the American decision to start military cooperation with Georgia was linked to the fact that Georgia's military weakness could compromise its sovereignty. Later, he mentioned the impossibility of a separation between the Georgians and the Abkhaz, adding that it was the same with the Ossets. These statements strangely contrast with Mr. Shevarnadze's promise that the American aide would not be used in the conflict opposing Georgia and Abkhazia. The Americans are not the only ones deploying military forces in Georgia: according to Russian sources, Turkish military are participating! in the modernization of the Georgian army.

It seems that there is a joint military investment in Georgia by the two main beneficiaries of the Bakou-Ceyhan oil pipeline. The planning for thi pipeline has been significantly slowed down these last years by the threat of local conflicts.

It can be feared that this step forward for the USA-Turkey partnership, for which security in energy supplies is not the only concern, might reignite conflicts in Abkhazia and Ossetia (but also in Nagorno-Kharabagh).

RUSSIA

In Russia, xenophobia has taken unprecedented proportions in the Krasnodar territory: fifty Armenian tombs were desecrated in Krasnodar city. The desecrations, for which extremist Russian and Cossack groups have been blamed, came after Governor Alexander Tkatchev declared his intention to deport Armenian and Meskhet populations. Russian central authorities showed their understanding of the fears of the Armenians living in Russia, without, however, taking any concrete measures. The authorities' discrimination policy and, to a lesser extent, the local press, are responsible for the worsening of tensions.

In the republic of Ingushetia, after President Aushev resigned from his position as a Federal Council MP, Murat Zyazilov, a federal security services general backed by Moscow, was elected president. The previous president, while staying faithful to Kremlin, criticized Russia's policies on Human Rights and humanitarian affairs, especially in Chechnya. He was a strong man but, in spite of his balanced attitude towards the authorities, he failed to reach to a solution to the Ingushetia-North Ossetia conflict. His successor will have to deal with a complex political and humanitarian situation, too tough for the capabilities of this little republic stuck between Chechnya and Russia.

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RESUMES

ABKHAZIE

Alors que les troupes spéciales américaines arrivaient en Géorgie, la guerre des mots s'est intensifiée entre Tbilissi d'une part, et Soukhoumi et Moscou d'autre part. Le ministre de l'intérieur géorgien Valeri Khaburdzania accusait ainsi l'Abkhazie d'héberger des groupes proches d'Al Qaida. Dans une résolution votée le 20 Mars, le parlement géorgien décrivait cette république sécessionniste comme un " havre du terrorisme international ", soulignant la mauvaise volonté de ses dirigeants à coopérer avec les instances internationales. La demande de retrait des forces russes de maintien de la paix a été réitérée, ces dernières étant considérées par les Géorgiens comme des gardes-frontières empêchant le retour des populations géorgiennes déplacées. En Russie, le ministère des affaires étrangères dénonçait " l'hypocrisie " et " l'irresponsabilité " de Tbilissi, accusé d'armer des formations paramilitaires comme les " Frères de la forêt ", et d'avoir contribué aux actions de guerrilla menées par des formations tchétchènes en Abkhazie. La déclaration concluait sur la nécessité de tenir Tbilissi " pleinement responsable des conséquences de telles provocations ". Cette escalade verbale intervenait à la suite de l'enlèvement de quatre soldats du contingent russe de maintien de la paix en Abkhazie.

La Douma a néanmoins retiré de l'agenda des débats la question de la reconnaissance par la Russie de l'indépendance de l'Abkhazie.

Le 25 avril, des entretiens réunissant représentants géorgiens et abkhazes n'ont pas réussi à aboutir à un accord sur le retrait de la gorge de Kodori de près de 900 géorgiens armés.

Enfin, les élections législatives tenues le 2 mars avec 63 candidats pour 35 sièges, ont été condamnées unanimement par les instances internationales.

Cette condamnation, comme celle des élections d'autres entités autoproclamées induit la question fondamentale du droit des populations de ces républiques de se conformer aux règles universelles de la vie démocratique. On considère que ne pas

condamner ces scrutins équivaut à reconnaître l'état en question; il n'en reste pas moins que la condamnation est porteuse de la négation du droit légitime des responsables de s'organiser contre l'anarchie et la violence.

JAVAKHK

En réponse aux inquiétudes de la population arménienne du Javakhk quant à leur survie économique après le départ des militaires russes de la base d'Akhalkalaki, les autorités géorgiennes ont dressé les grandes lignes d'un plan de développement stratégique pour cette région. Ce projet comprendrait des mesures de développement économique et une plus grande intégration du Javakhk avec le reste de la Géorgie. Le rôle joué par la barrière de la langue ayant été évoqué par certains comme participant à l'isolement du Javakhk - où l'usage de la langue géorgienne est minoritaire -, ce plan vise à favoriser la diffusion du géorgien au Djavakh au moyen de l'extension à cette région de l'enseignement du géorgien et de la diffusion des chaînes géorgiennes. Que penser cependant de la bonne volonté des autorités géorgiennes qui ne fixent pas d'autre calendrier à la réalisation de ce plan que celui du problème russe d'Akhalkalak, alors qu'elles repoussent constamment les demandes actuelles des organisations arméniennes locales pour l'autonomie régionale, qui permettrait d'offrir un cadre plus sécurisé aux investissements de la diaspora arménienne. Comme il a été noté lors d'une conférence organisée début Avril à Akhalkalak par l'Institut Caucasien pour la Paix et la Démocratie, la législation géorgienne comporte des lacunes certaines concernant les élections et la juridiction des organes de gouvernement local.

GEORGIE

Alors que les premiers militaires américains arrivaient en Géorgie, officiellement pour l'entraînement de troupes géorgiennes à la lutte anti-terroriste, certaines sources journalistiques locales faisaient état

de la présence de militaires US dans la gorge de Pankisi même. On peut néanmoins douter du caractère épisodique de la présence américaine en Géorgie et de sa limitation aux seules fins de la lutte anti-terroriste, focalisée sur les guerrilleros islamistes tchéchènes censés occuper la gorge de Pankisi. Le président Shevardnadze liait ainsi la décision américaine d'engager une coopération militaire avec la Géorgie avec le risque que la faiblesse militaire de ce pays compromette sa souveraineté. Plus tard, il évoquait l'impossibilité d'une séparation des Abkhazes et des Géorgiens, ajoutant qu'il en était de même des Ossètes. Déclarations qui contrastent étrangement avec l'engagement pris par Mr Shevardnadze que l'aide américaine ne sera pas engagée dans une reprise du conflit géorgéo-abkhaze. Les américains ne sont pas les seuls à se déployer sur le plan militaire en Géorgie : selon des sources russes, des militaires turcs participent à la modernisation de l'armée géorgienne. Il se dessinerait ainsi un investissement conjoint de la Géorgie sur le plan militaire par les deux principaux bénéficiaires de l'oléoduc Bakou-Ceyhan, dont la gestation était significativement ralentie ces dernières années notamment par la menace que font peser les conflits loco-régionaux en suspens. Il est cependant à craindre que cette avancée de l'axe américano-turc - dont la sécurisation de l'approvisionnement énergétique n'est pas le seul et unique déterminant - conduise à une réactivation des conflits en Abkhazie et Ossétie (mais aussi au Nagorny-Karabagh).

RUSSIE

En Russie, la montée de la xénophobie a pris une dimension jusqu'ici inégalée dans le territoire de Krasnodar, par la profanation d'une cinquantaine de tombes arméniennes de la ville du même nom. Les faits, attribués aux groupes extrémistes russes et cosaques, trouvent leur légitimation dans les déclarations tonitruantes du gouverneur, Alexander Tkatchev, à propos de son intention de soumettre les populations arméniennes et meskhètes à la déportation.

Les autorités centrales russes ont donné un écho favorable à l'inquiétude des Arméniens de Russie sans toutefois prendre des mesures concrètes dans ce sens.

On a pu noter le rôle néfaste joué par la presse locale dans l'aggravation des tensions qui sont cependant attribuées en majeure partie à la politique de discrimination pratiquée par les autorités.

En république d'Ingouchie la démission du Président Aushev de son poste de député du Conseil Fédéral a donné lieu à l'élection d'un nouveau Président, Murat Zyazilov, un général des services de sécurité fédéraux soutenu par Moscou. Le précédent Président, qui tout en restant fidèle au Kremlin ne se privait pas de critiquer la politique russe dans les questions des Droits de l'Homme et des affaires humanitaires notamment en ce qui concerne le conflit de la Tchétchénie, était un homme fort mais qui, cependant, a échoué à aboutir à une issue au conflit Ingouchie-Ossétie du Nord, en dépit de son attitude nuancée envers les autorités. Son successeur aura à assumer la responsabilité de gérer une situation politique et humanitaire complexe, bien au dessus des capacités de cette petite république, coincée entre la Tchétchénie et la Russie.

DEVELOPPING EVENTS / REVUE DE PRESSE

AZERBAIJAN / AZERBAIDJAN

03/04/02 - Azeri-Turkish relations again threatened - Caspian News Agency

Yet another diplomatic scandal ripens presently between allied Turkey and Azerbaijan. (...) Ankara officially presented to Baku several close notes of protest, according to which the present political course of Azerbaijan "by no means meet the spirit of brotherhood and cooperation." According to the Turkish side the Administration of Heydar Aliyev was obliged to hold preliminary consultations with Turkish side before making final decision on Gabala radio location station, which was given to Russia for rent. However, the Turkish side was more discontent over the fact

that Baku even did not come forward with proper statement over the recent "pro-Armenian resolution" resolution of the European Parliament. It worth, reminding that the latter obliges Turkey to recognize and condemn the Armenian Genocide of 1915, to lift the blockade from Armenia and create necessary conditions for the Armenian-Turkish reconciliation. The behavior of Azerbaijan, as Turkey think, "reminds the situation formed after the recognition of the Armenian Genocide by France."(...)

03/07/02 - Azerbaijan praises OSCE Minsk Group activity - Itar-Tass via COMTEX

Azerbaijani President Geidar Aliyev urged the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to use all possibilities to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2002. (...)

Aliyev stressed that Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani public pin great hopes on the OSCE and the Minsk Group co-chairmen. At the same time, he regretted that despite all efforts the Nagorno-Karabakh problem became unsolved.

Aliyev believes that the Minsk Group can play the positive role in ensuring peace in the region. The Azerbaijani president said that he waits for a visit to Baku by the Minsk Group co-chairmen. Azerbaijan is committed to peaceful settlement of the conflict.(...)

3/07/02 - U.S. military in Georgia will increase Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline security - Turkish Daily News

(...) According to experts, the insurance companies were demanding a security guarantee for the pipeline. Georgia was the short-term route for Caspian oil reserves, while Afghanistan was the long-term route for energy reserves, authorities have stated that every step taken in these two states has been linked to oil-politics.

The most important mission of the U.S. military deployment will be the enhancement of the security of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan route, analysts say, while the Armenian route for the pipeline has been completely shelved.

The Armenian diaspora has been pressing for the transportation of Caspian oil through Armenia, an option which has been strongly opposed by Ankara and Baku.(...)

British Petroleum (BP) and British insurance companies are involved in the Baku-Ceyhan project and have put pressure on governments to lift barriers to the pipeline.(...)

03/14/02 - Azerbaijani President declares new amnesty - RFE/RL

President Heidar Aliyev signed a decree on 13 March pardoning or reducing the sentences of 89 prisoners, including some considered to be political prisoners. (...) Also released were Azerbaijan Popular Front Party members Faradj Guliev and Asaf Guliev, and former Interior Ministry official Nizami Godjaev(...). Azerbaijani human rights activists welcomed the amnesty, but stressed that some political prisoners still remain incarcerated.

03/17/02 - Iranian ethnic Azeri dissident arrives in Baku - Space TV

[Correspondent, over video of people welcoming Cohraqani at airport]

The leader of the national revival movement of Southern Azerbaijan [northwestern Iran], Dr Mahmudali Cohraqani (...) said that during his European visit he had made speeches about the problems of Southern Azerbaijanis and called on all Azerbaijanis who lived with an idea of a united Azerbaijan to struggle for this. Touching upon Armenia's aggressive policy, Cohraqani said that during their history Armenians had been against the improvement of the Azerbaijani Turks' material and moral welfare. In his interview with journalists at Bina airport Cohraqani also expressed his attitude to Armenia-Iran relations.

(...) Cohraqani said that Karabakh is a part of united Azerbaijan without division between South and North. He said that brave nations determined their borders themselves. Cohraqani noted that the Southern Azerbaijanis are always ready to liberate Azerbaijani lands.

(...) Touching upon the violation of Azerbaijan's borders by Iran, Cohraqani said that the Southern Azerbaijanis protested against this aggressive policy conducted by Iran. After the briefing, Cohraqani met a group of intellectuals and politicians who came to welcome him.

03/18/02 - Azerbaijani opposition stages new protest - RFE/RL

An estimated 5,000-6,000 people participated in a demonstration in Baku on 16 March convened by the reformers' wing of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (AHCP). Participants blamed the current Azerbaijani leadership for the economic hardship in which most of the population lives and called for the government to resign. Ali Kerimov, who heads the AHCP reformers' wing, appealed to the opposition and the population to join forces against the ruling regime, arguing that "we have nothing left to lose."

03/18/02 - Azerbaijani President approves amendments to media law - RFE/RL

President Aliyev signed amendments to Azerbaijan's media law that were published in the press the following day. Under those amendments, media outlets must no longer obtain formal registration before beginning operations, nor is the government empowered to close or suspend the operation of media outlets, which may receive funding from any source not prohibited by law. Only in a very few cases may courts oblige journalists to reveal their sources of information. (...)

03/19/02 - Azerbaijan: « don't complain to foreigners », religion chief tells believers - Keston Institute, Oxford / Summaries of recent reporting on violations of religious liberty and on religion in communist and post-communist lands.

Rafik Aliyev, chairman of the State Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations, has repeatedly warned believers who claim their rights have been violated by the state authorities not to take their complaints to foreigners(...).

(...) Religious minority leaders told Keston they doubted Aliyev's good intentions, as the State Committee is often the cause of violations and has failed to respond to complaints. Many incidents of fines, beatings, confiscation of religious literature or closure of places of worship have gone unreported because leaders fear the consequences of publicity for local believers.

03/19/02 – The rise and rise of the State religion committee – Keston Institute, Oxford / Summaries of recent reporting on violations of religious liberty and on religion in communist and post-communist lands

Since the establishment of the State Committee for Relations with Religious Organisations last June, its chairman, Rafik Aliyev, has become arguably the most important figure in determining Azerbaijan's religious policy. The State Committee has a much larger staff than its predecessor, and extensive powers almost unchecked by any other arm of government. Keston News Service found a largely "wait-and-see" attitude to the committee among religious communities in and around Baku. Only when the compulsory process of re-registration is complete will they discover whether the State Committee's secrecy, arbitrariness and at times illegal activities are aberrations or an integral part of how religious policy will now be determined.

03/27/02 - Azeri opposition MPs refuse to vote for Azeri genocide bill - news agency

At today's plenary session of the Milli Maclis, deputies started debating a draft resolution "On genocide of Azerbaijanis in the town of Xocali".

The Bilik Duniyasi news agency has already reported about the bloody events, which happened in this small town in Nagornyy Karabakh on the night of 25 to 26 February 1992. Milli Maclis deputies reminded those present of the atrocities committed by Armenian separatists and their patronizers. On that night, the town of Xocali was razed to the ground and its population was killed and taken prisoner. About 5,000 people lived in Xocali. The fate of many is still unknown. [Azerbaijani ex-President] Ayaz Mutallibov, [Azerbaijan's ex-Soviet leader] Abdurrahman Vazirov, [Soviet ex-President] Mikhail Gorbachev, [former commander of Azerbaijani internal troops] Fahmin Hacıyev, [ex-deputy speaker] Tamerlan Qarayev, [ex-army chief of staff] Sahin Musayev and many others are among the culprits.

But when it came to voting on the issue, the opposition deputies refused to support the final document, with one vote. It became

known that it is mainly Azerbaijanis themselves that are to blame for the Xocali tragedy and Azerbaijani genocide. That's why there was not a single Armenian surname on the list. For this reason, they reminded the participants in the session of the remarks by [Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev's brother] to MP Calal Aliyev: the culprits on both sides of the genocide of Xocali's Azerbaijani population should be made answerable to an international court.

03/29/02 – Azerbaijan, U.S discuss military cooperation - RFE/RL

Mira Ricardeli, who is deputy assistant to the U.S. Secretary of Defense, held talks in Baku on 27-28 March with Azerbaijani Defense Minister Colonel General Safar Abiev and deputy Chief of General Staff Eyvaz Djafarov. Ricardeli told a press conference on 28 March that the U.S. attaches great importance to Azerbaijan's national security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. During talks with Abiev the previous day, she similarly said that the main priorities for bilateral cooperation are ensuring the inviolability of Azerbaijan's airspace and territorial waters, implying that Washington perceives the main threats to be Iran and Turkmenistan, both of which dispute the borders of Azerbaijan's sector of the Caspian Sea. To that end, Ricardeli said, the two countries signed an agreement on measures to increase the level of alertness of Azerbaijan's armed forces; to improve the Azerbaijani navy's capacity to protect territorial waters and that of the air force to prevent violations of Azerbaijani airspace; and to expand English-language instruction for the armed forces. Washington will provide Azerbaijan with \$4.4 million in military aid, the same amount that it will give Armenia.

03/31/02 - U.S. lifts Armenia, Azerbaijan weapons sales ban - CNN

The Bush administration has lifted a ban on weapons sales to the Caucasus countries of Armenia and Azerbaijan, citing "positive developments" in the two countries.

The countries were banned from such sales under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations since 1993 for their armed conflict over the ethnic territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Under the regulations, the United States was forced to deny licenses and approval of other exports and imports of defense materials and services to the feuding countries.

Deputy State Department spokesman Phil Reeker said that removing the restrictions will "help deepen our military cooperation with both countries, which will contribute to peace and stability in the Caucasus."

(...)The Bush administration lifted restrictions on U.S. aid to Azerbaijan in January in appreciation for Baku's support in the U.S.-led war on terrorism.

04/24/02 - The Annual Survey of Press Freedom 2002

The government campaign against the country's independent media intensified during 2001, particularly during the last few months of the year. Numerous journalists were attacked by police or unknown assailants, including Zamin Haji of the opposition Azadliq daily paper. In July, the independent ABA TV station announced its immediate closure because of continued pressure by the state authorities. In August and September, a number of independent newspapers were ordered to cease publication by court order or forced to close because of heavy court-imposed fines for alleged defamation of senior state officials. Shahbaz Huduglu, the editor of Milletin Sesi, and Elmar Huseinov, the founder of Bakinski Bulvard, were sentenced to six months in prison in mid-September in separate cases for insulting the honor and dignity of the president's chief of staff and the mayor of Baku, respectively. Pressure by domestic and international groups led to their release from prison a month later, although both of their papers remain banned. At a November meeting of the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party, participants accused the independent publications Yeni Musavat, Azadliq, and Hurriyet of anti-state activities; the state publishing house subsequently refused to print them. Police broke up demonstrations held in November and December by representatives from several independent newspapers who were protesting the government's restrictions on press freedom. Several journalists were beaten or arrested. In a year-end positive development, parliament adopted

amendments to the laws on the mass media limiting the government's power to shut down newspapers or strip journalists of their accreditation. The legislation also abolished a requirement for media outlets to register with the ministry of justice before beginning publication. Most of Azerbaijan's print media praised the passage of the amendments, which some attributed to pressure from the Council of Europe.

ARMENIA / ARMENIE

04/03/02 - Le Pentagone étudie une coopération militaire accrue avec Erevan - AFP

Une délégation du Pentagone a étudié à Erevan les moyens d'accroître la coopération militaire des Etats-Unis avec l'Arménie a indiqué vendredi le ministre arménien de la Défense Serge Sarkissian.(...)

"Nous allons approfondir les questions de l'activation et du développement de la coopération militaire arméno-américaine lors de la visite d'une délégation du ministère arménien de la Défense aux Etats-Unis du 17 au 21 mars", a indiqué M. Sarkissian à des journalistes.(...)

L'Arménie est le plus fidèle allié militaire de la Russie dans le Caucase, mais les autorités d'Erevan ont entamé un rapprochement avec les Etats-Unis et l'Otan.

03/04/02 - OSCE experts disapprove Bill on mass media - ArmenPress News Agency

Senior experts from the OSCE voiced today their concern over an Armenian-government drafted bill on mass media.(...)

The OSCE experts said there were clauses in the bill which ran counter to the European Convention on free press.

The OSCE experts did not know that the new bill was drafted to meet one of Armenia's commitments towards the Council of Europe. (...) They claimed the Council of Europe did not propose to Armenia to draft a new bill on mass media.

03/07/02 - Armenia : Jehovah's witnesses, OSCE welcome acquittal - Keston news service

Armenia's Appeal Court upheld today (7 March) the not guilty verdict handed down to Jehovah's Witness Levon Markaryan last September by a regional court.(...)

The head of the Yerevan office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also welcomed the ruling (...). The chairman of the State Council on Religious Affairs (which is in the process of being wound up)(...) declined to comment either on the verdict or on whether it was time for Armenia to remove the Khrushchev-era article of the Criminal Code under which prosecutors had attempted to imprison Markaryan.

03/08/02 - Turkish-Armenian Commission « Not Dead » - RFE/RL

Members of the controversial Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation Commission (TARC) are maintaining unofficial contacts in a last-ditch attempt to salvage the U.S.-backed initiative which all but collapsed in December, it was claimed on Friday.

"I would say that neither the TARC process nor TARC itself is dead," a source close to the commission told RFE/RL. (...)

The source, which preferred to remain anonymous, said the two sides are "making some progress" and will soon take a final decision on the fate of the effort.

(...)

The TARC source said on Friday that the controversy over the planned ICTJ study remains "the most difficult problem to overcome," adding that the Armenians are ready to show some flexibility on the issue. However, one of them, Moscow-based political scientist Andranik Migranian, was quoted on Friday by the A1 Plus television in Yerevan as saying that the reconciliation effort will not move forward without such a study.

(...)

03/14/02 - Armenia's human rights commission report stresses end to death penalty - Arminfo

The human rights commission under the Armenian president today unanimously endorsed a report on issues of human rights in Armenia in 2001.

The report focuses mainly on cases of torture and other illegal actions by the country's law-enforcement agencies. Apart from that, the report notes the need to abolish the death penalty; introduce alternative service in the army; observe the rights of refugees, women, national minorities and other categories of people; and set up an institute of a human rights (ombudsman).(...)

03/14/02 - Trial of former Armenian prison Director begins - RFE/RL

Former Armenian prison service head Mushegh Saghatelian went on trial in Yerevan on 13 March on multiple charges of mistreatment or torture of detainees. He is also accused of offering a \$50,000 bribe to one of the suspects in the October 1999 Armenian parliament shootings if he claimed that the killings were masterminded by President Robert Kocharian and Defense Minister Serzh Sarkisian, and of then manufacturing evidence to substantiate that claim. Saghatelian, who is close to the opposition Hanrapetutian party, pleaded not guilty, claiming that the charges against him are politically motivated.

03/14/02 - Armenian President anticipates increase in foreign investment - RFE/RL

President Kocharian told journalists in Yerevan on 13 March following a meeting with Armenian Development Agency officials that, thanks to the government's efforts to improve the business environment, there is likely to be a sizeable increase in foreign investment this year. Foreign investment in 2001 was slightly under \$100 million, just over half the \$190 million registered the previous year.

03/14/02 - Armenian Doctors demand salary arrears - RFE/RL

Several dozen doctors staged a picket on 13 March outside the Armenian government building in Yerevan to demand payment of their back wages for the past 18 months(...).

Yerevan Mayor Robert Nazarian announced later the same day that the doctors will receive four months' back salary on 14 March. He did not indicate when the remaining arrears will be paid(...). [Estimation of] the total wage backlog within that sector

at close to 10 billion drams (\$17.7 million), most of which dates back prior to 2001.

03/15/02 - Review court rejects appeal against Armenian cafe death verdict - RFE/RL

Armenia's Review Court on 13 March rejected an appeal by the family of Poghos Poghosian, an Armenian from Georgia who died after being assaulted and beaten last September in a Yerevan cafe by men believed to be members of President Kocharian's bodyguard, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. The dead man's family argued that the two-year suspended sentence handed down to bodyguard Aghamal Harutiunian on charges of involuntary manslaughter is too lenient. The Review Court ruled that it cannot consider the appeal because the Armenian Code of Procedural Justice empowers only the prosecution, but not the family of the victim, to appeal an entire court verdict.

03/15/02 - Armenia accuses Georgia of encroaching on its frontier zone - RFE/RL

Speakers at a joint meeting of the National Academy of Science and the Armenian Ecology Ministry expressed concern that over the past few years the Georgian side has progressively moved the border between the two countries in the Djiliz forest further into Armenian territory (...). Academicians urged that the border be formally demarcated and a buffer zone established.

03/19/02 - Over 48,000 refugees adopt Armenian citizenship - Arminfo

Over the past 1.5 years, 38,000 refugees from Azerbaijan and other regions of the former USSR have adopted Armenian citizenship. A total of over 48,000 refugees have become citizens of Armenia. This was stated yesterday by Head of the Department for Migration and Refugees of Armenia Gagik Yeganyan as he was presenting the draft law on amendments and addenda to the Law on Citizenship at the Armenian National Assembly. According to Yeganyan, the current law which sets the deadline for adopting Armenian citizenship at 31 December 2001 [as published], has caused numerous problems. In this

connection, the government suggested that the term ought to be extended by another two years. The MPs accepted the government's initiative and adopted the draft law in the first hearing. (...)

03/21/02 - Armenian defence minister, US officials discuss military, political issues - Mediamax news agency

Armenian Defence Minister and Secretary of the National Security Council under the Armenian president, Serzh Sarkisyan, held talks in Washington with US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and other high-ranking representatives of the Pentagon. (...)

The regional situation, the issues of the Armenian-US military-political cooperation and the US military assistance to Armenia were discussed at the talks with the American side. (...)

03/22/02 - Armenia's Parliament Ratified Russian-Armenian Agreement on Long-term Cooperation - Ria oreanda

The National Assembly of Armenia has ratified the Russian-Armenian agreement on long-term cooperation till 2010.

The agreement is meant for expanding the bilateral economic relations, - said Tigran Davtyan, the deputy minister of trade. "The cooperation with Russia is very important to Armenia, and the ratification will lead to the further development of the Russian-Armenian relations", he said.

Nowadays, 499 Russian-Armenian joint ventures are registered in Armenia, the volume of Russian investments in Armenia's economy makes up \$180 million, the turnover exceeds \$60 million.

03/25/02 - Armenian Defense Minister says US visits successful - ArmenPress News Agency

In an interview with the Voice of America Armenian defense minister Serzh Sarkisian, who was visiting USA last week, said his talks with US military officials were centered on US-Armenian military cooperation. "After repeal of Section 907 (which prohibited US aid to Azerbaijan unless it lifted its blockade of Karabakh and Armenia)

there is such a possibility and we are trying to take advantage of it," he said.

Serzh Sarkisian said that the agreement signed with the US defense ministry involves three areas of military cooperation-retraining of Armenian officers in the USA, helping to modernize the communication system of the Armenian armed forces and US assistance to Armenia in formation of a peacekeeping battalion. "As regards time frames of the cooperation I do not think that it must be placed in any time limits. We believe that this cooperation is a component of Armenia's security system and the question is the volumes of this cooperation," he said. (...)

03/26/02- Natioanal press-club of Armenia demand to waive the bill on mass information - ARKA News Agency

National press-club of Armenia addressed the note of protest to the government with the demand to waive the bill on Mass Information. A range of political parties, including Democratic Party, Peoples Party, National Unity, joined the protest of the representatives of the Armenian mass media. Armenian journalists think that the bill restrains freedom of word and constitutional right of citizens to get information. The position of the government towards the bill on Mass Information confirms its desire to keep control over mass media by all means, said Vardan Vardanyan, the member of National press-club board. (...)

Vardanyan emphasized necessity to work on the conception which would regulate the relationship state-press and public-press by respecting the freedom of word. The chairman of parliamentary commission on state-legal issues of RA Victor Dallakyan in turn offered to create working group including representatives of mass media, government and parliament to improve the law.

It should be reminded that Andranik Markaryan, RA prime minister, excluded the possibility of the draft law on "Mass media" withdrawal. (...) The government is ready to rework it, according to him.

In their turn, CE experts said that most of the articles of the draft law on "Mass media" approved by the RA government do not correspond the statements of CE. At the same time the CE experts expressed

satisfaction with the work with mass media representatives and management while working on the legislation.

It should be reminded that the government of Armenia approved the draft law on Mass Media February 7.

According to the government estimations, the law will allow to regulate legal field and rights for the freedom of word and information dissemination.

03/28/02 - Armen Khachatryan: Armenia Expresses Concern over Azerbaijan's Bellicose Statement - Ria oreanda

Armenia expresses concern over Azerbaijan's bellicose statement, - Armen Khachatryan, the chairman of Armenia's National Assembly said when speaking at the 19th plenary session of the inter-Parliamentary Assembly of the CIS.

Mr. Armen Khachatryan declared for the peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict.

Chairmen of the Parliaments of the Caucasian Group of Four Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia met in St.Petersburg. The high-ranking officials discussed the issue of liquidating the railway blockade of Armenia. In this connection, Russia's State Duma Chairman Gennadiy Seleznyov said that the Russian formula from trust to cooperation would be applied to settle the transport issues.

The speakers of the Caucasian Group of Four emphasized that periodical meetings of Presidents of the two countries and mission of the OSCE Minsk Group were of primary importance in the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.

04/01/02 - Armenian-Turkish reconciliation commission renamed - Arminfo

The Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation Commission has been renamed Group for Armenian-Turkish Contacts, member of the Ay Dat [Armenian cause] commission Karo Armenyan has told a press conference at the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutyun. According to him, the composition and key tasks of the group will be determined soon. [Passage omitted: Turkey refuses to recognize Armenian genocide] "We shall fight against it as we did against the previous one," if the

Group for Armenian-Turkish Contacts also hinders the stabilization of Armenian-Turkish relations, Karo Armenyan said.

04/02/02 - Director of « A1 + » TV company sues TV & Radio commission - Arminfo

Director of the "A1+" TV company Mesrob Movsessian has lodged a claim against the National Commission for Television and Radio, which deprived the TV company of the air today. According to him, the Commission grossly violated the terms of the contest. (...). In his turn, Director General of the "Noyan Tapan" TV channel Tigran Harutiunian told ARMINFO that by preferring the "Shohakat" TV channel the Commission violated points 15 and 17 of the Law "On telecommunications", in conformity with which the contest was held. The law prohibits the broadcasting of religious organizations, such as "Shohakat", as well as prohibits sponsorship of any TV channel by a religious organization, such as the Mother See of Echmiadzin, which is overtly backing up "Shohakat", Harutiunian said. The Commission member Shamiram Aghabekian, in turn, stated that the reason for the Commission's decision on giving the 37th frequency to the "A1+" to the "Sharm" company was that the project submitted by the "A1+" company did not meet the terms of the contest. This summer a new contest for free frequencies will be announced, and the "A1+" company will be able to participate in it.

04/04/02 - Yerevan Confirms Pro-Western Tilt in Policy - Asbarez online

Armenia's top foreign policy makers on Thursday officially confirmed that recent geopolitical changes in the south Caucasus have led official Yerevan to seek closer defense and security ties with major Western powers. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian and Defense Minister Serge Sarkisian indicated Armenia should boost military cooperation with NATO, and the United States in particular, to avoid regional isolation.

The two men spoke to journalists after three-hour special hearings held in the Armenian parliament behind the closed doors. Deputies said they were briefed on possible implications of Russia's declining influence in neighboring Georgia

and Azerbaijan. Oskanian said Armenia will continue to rely on its "strategic partnership" with Russia but will at the same time step up its security links with "European structures" and the US. He said that will "minimize negative consequences for Armenia in the event of any development."

The minister argued that Yerevan must take note of the changes resulting from the US-led anti-terror campaign, including the impending American military presence in Georgia, Washington's decision to embark on military cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan, and "additional tensions" in US-Iranian relations.

Sarkisian, who paid an official visit to Washington last month, said the US has vowed to be even-handed in its drive to forge military links between the two conflicting states. "The United States is well aware that that balance is vital for regional stability," he said.

The administration of President George W. Bush announced last week that it will provide \$4.4 million in military assistance to Azerbaijan this year roughly as much as it allocated to Armenia. The move was immediately followed by the formal lifting of a 9-year ban on arms sales to Baku and Yerevan.

Agreement on the use of the American military aid was reached during Sarkisian's talks with US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top Pentagon officials. According to Oskanian, Armenia will also be seeking "closer contacts" with Georgia which is awaiting the arrival of US special forces tasked with training Georgian troops. Stability in Georgia is vital for Armenia, he said.

Sarkisian, for his part, expressed concern at possible Turkish military presence in Georgia. "Turkey's penetration into Georgia is very undesirable for us," he said.

Still, Oskanian noted that Armenia will continue its efforts to normalize relations with Turkey. "Armenia should also keep open its channels of communication with Turkey and try to reach progress in our relations," he said.

04/05/02 - Armenia wants nuclear plant to operate until 2016 - ArmenPress News Agency

Vartan Movsisian, chairman of the state energy regulatory commission argued today that the Armenian

Nuclear power plant in Metamor is able to run safely far beyond 2004, the date, set by the European Commission for decommissioning the plant.(...) According to him, the plant's available resources are sufficient to prolong its operation until 2016 and even beyond this date in case of regular increase of its safety.

Movsian said that until now only the European Union has pledged some 100 million Euros in aid for developing alternative energy generating capacities given the nuclear plant is closed down, but he argued that this sum is not enough to develop equal capacities. He also said that putting into operation the second unit of the plant was not feasible as some \$200 million would be required for it.(...) Finding adequate alternative sources of energy to make up for Metamor's closure appears difficult at present. As the energy crisis in the 1990s showed, hydroelectric plants cannot generate enough power. Increasing fuel imports for gas-fired power stations is possible, but Armenia already has a large debt to Russia. Solar energy is another option, but that would require more investment and could not make up the electricity shortfall. The decision to mothball Metamor was made under pressure from the EU in September 1999. However, Armenia agreed only on the condition that new power-generating units with a capacity equivalent to that of the nuclear plant be installed. So far, there has been no mention of the possible costs of decommissioning. (...)

04/05/02 – Armenia wants a stable Georgia, Defense Minister says - ArmenPress News Agency

Armenian defense minister Serzh Sarkisian said on Thursday that Armenia wants to start a "serious military cooperation with Georgia." Speaking to reporters after closed parliamentary hearings on the regional developments, the defense minister said he was negotiating the terms of the future collaboration between the defense ministries of the two countries with a visiting Georgian delegation. In a reference to the presence of US military experts in Georgia he said it was not raising concerns. "It is very important for us what form the future presence will take," he said, adding that Georgia's stability was vital for Armenia.

Sarkisian said Armenia welcomed Tbilis's announcement to resolve the conflict with the breakaway Abkhazia peacefully. "The only railway connecting Armenia with the world runs across Abkhazia and besides there is a strong Armenian community in Abkhazia and their security is also important for us," he said.

04/05/02 – Thousands rally in Yerevan to condemn A1 plus closure - RFE/RL

More than ten thousand people rallied Friday in Yerevan to condemn the closure of Armenia's main independent television station. Fourteen opposition parties that organized the demonstration warned that President Robert Kocharian should ensure the A1 Plus channel's return to the air within a week or face a nationwide campaign of "civil disobedience."

"The regime of Robert Kocharian has unleashed an all-out assault on freedom of speech in order to silence its opponents," said a joint opposition statement read out to the protesters.(...)

The opposition statement warned that failure to allow A1 Plus to resume its broadcasts by next Friday will set off a wave of street protests across the country. Its signatories -- which also include the People's Party (HZhK), the National Democratic Union (AZhM) and the Socialist Armenia alliance -- accused the Kocharian administration of seeking to establish "a monopoly on influencing public opinion."(...)

The [state] commission [on broadcasting] granted a tender for the frequency to an entertainment company with reported government links on the grounds that it submitted a stronger bid. It says it faced no pressure to do so from Kocharian. The Armenian leader, in turn, has denied any involvement in the bidding, while indicating that he was unhappy with A1 Plus's often critical coverage of his administration.(...)

Representatives of two civic groups, the National Press Club and the Armenian Helsinki Committee, also spoke at the demonstration. "They want us to stop talking about vote rigging," said Press Club chairwoman Narine Mkrtchian.(...) The United States has criticized the authorities for pulling the plug on A1 Plus. The U.S. embassy in Yerevan said in an extraordinary

statement that the channel's closure "raises serious questions about the future of free and independent media in Armenia."

04/05/02 – Armenia, Georgia to press ahead with military ties - RFE/RL

The Armenian and Georgian militaries reaffirmed on Friday plans to forge closer ties, saying that their joint "working groups" are already exploring possibilities for cooperation. The chief of staff of the Armenian army, General Mikael Harutiunian, and his visiting Georgian counterpart, General Joni Pirtskhalaishvili, said the two neighboring states want to extend their relations into the area of defense and security.(...)

Speaking at a joint news conference with Harutiunian after the talks Pirtskhalaishvili said Georgian-Armenian military cooperation "has already begun." He said the signing of a memorandum of understanding by the two army chiefs marked an "historic moment" in bilateral relations.

Harutiunian, for his part, said the two militaries are planning "joint activities," but added that they have still to decide what concrete forms they will take. "Our working groups must look very carefully into existing possibilities," he explained. "We will make a decision very soon."(...)

Premier Markarian also voiced concern at the plight of ethnic Armenians in Abkhazia and another Georgian region, Javakhetia. Markarian was quoted by his press service as telling Pirtskhalaishvili

on Friday that he hopes the Georgian government "will not allow certain forces" to destabilize the situation there. "Our wish is to see Georgia as a stable, economically developed and strong state," he said. (...)

Pirtskhalaishvili replied that the Georgian authorities "take into account interests of [ethnic] Armenian citizens."(...)

04/11/02 – Oskanian calls for « package approach » for Karabakh mediation - RFE/RL

Armenian Foreign Minister Oskanian called for the application of the so-called "package approach" to the mediation effort for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenpress reported on 10 April, as cited by Groong. The foreign minister expressed optimism that the recent

appointment of Armenian and Azerbaijani deputy foreign ministers as special envoys for the Karabakh conflict would help to restart the stalled talks. He also announced that the Armenian and Azerbaijani envoys would hold their first meeting under the auspices of the OSCE Minsk Group sometime in May.

04/24/02 - The Annual Survey of Press Freedom 2002

Radio and television, all privately owned, must register with a government commission which issues and withdraws licenses. Commission members are appointed solely by the president. TV and radio stations must produce at least 65 percent of their own programming, a financial burden which most media cannot meet. In 2001, a government daily newspaper's license was not renewed because it did not comply with the registration law. Many radio and TV stations suspended broadcasting to protest the law. As of January 2001, 1083 media enterprises were registered, according to the Ministry of Justice. While most print media are privately owned, they are small and unprofitable, and depend on economic and political interest groups for survival. The distribution of newsprint, formerly run by the government, was privatized. A 1999 civil code punishes libel with imprisonment, and is frequently enforced. Journalists often practice self-censorship when covering the insurgency in Nagorno-Karabakh, national security, or corruption issues. Although direct threats and intimidation by government officials are rare, journalists are routinely assaulted and the government usually fails to bring perpetrators to account.

GEORGIA / GEORGIE

03/01/02 - Armenian News Network

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze said on Thursday his former Soviet state's decision to accept U.S. military training and hardware was part of a longstanding plan to strengthen its independence. The comments were his first since Washington promised elite troops to train and equip Georgia's army. Russia has denounced the U.S.

move as liable to aggravate an already volatile situation in the sensitive Transcaucasus region, which straddles export routes for oil from big new fields in the Caspian Sea. (...)

The 74-year-old Georgian leader, who has survived several attempts on his life in the chaotic past decade, indicated there was more at stake for his strategic Black Sea state than an operation to deal with Islamist militants said to be entrenched in a remote gorge close to the mountain border with Russia. "We have been working toward this for eight years. Step by step we have been trying, against the background of great American assistance, to establish factors of time and trust," he told reporters. "We also tried to establish good neighbourly relations with Russia. But nothing much came of it." Washington says it is sending the instructors and equipment to help Georgia fight Islamists in the remote Pankisi Gorge near Russia's breakaway Chechnya region as part of its response to the September 11 attacks on the United States. U.S. officials say its forces will not be involved in combat. (...) But Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov issued a fresh broadside against the proposal in a telephone conversation on Wednesday with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"Moscow has well-founded concerns that the direct involvement of U.S. military in the fight against terrorism in Georgia could further complicate the situation in the region," the Foreign Ministry said he told Powell. (...)

"With the assistance of the American specialists, military units will be trained, one or two, which will be the elite. This will be the basis to create an up-to-date army."

03/01/02 - AP

Three years ago, the villagers of northeastern Georgia never bothered to lock their doors. Now they're so afraid of kidnapping, sheep-rustling and other crime emanating from the neighboring Pankisi Gorge that they've embraced a police crackdown. (...) The Pankisi Gorge's slide into chaos reflects the downward spiral of this Caucasus Mountains country, awash in corruption and crime a decade after the Soviet collapse. President Eduard Shevardnadze's government has virtually ceded

control of the gorge to criminal gangs. "This is the result of the shortsightedness and venality of our government structures, some of whose officials are profiting from the drug trade. And there's been talk of the involvement of high-ranking Interior Ministry officials in kidnapping," alleged Ivlian Khaindrava, a Georgian political analyst.

(...)Up to 40,000 refugees entered Georgia, and most made their way to Turkey and other predominantly Muslim nations, said Khizri Aldamov, the leader of the Chechen Diaspora in Georgia and a representative of Chechen rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov. Some 7,000 refugees remain in the Pankisi Gorge, he said.

Russian officials have long alleged that Chechen fighters were hiding among the refugees and using the gorge as a transit route to send men, money and equipment into Chechnya. Like their comrades inside Chechnya, Russia says, the rebels in the gorge are fighting Russian authority on the one hand and terrorizing civilians on the other.

Georgia long denied the accusations of a rebel presence, but in June, Shevardnadze conceded that 200-300 Chechen fighters might be in the Pankisi Gorge.

Following the Sept. 11 terror attacks in the United States and the new Western sympathy for Russia's campaign against international terrorists in Chechnya, his government has come under increased pressure to tighten security in the gorge.

(...) The government launched its security operation in January. The region is now dotted by police roadblocks built of cinderblocks and sandbags. Officers stop every car coming in or out of the gorge, recording the documents of every passenger. Their orders are to prevent anyone who is not a resident of the gorge from entering.

The government has launched similar operations before, with no result. Still, residents of villages like Duisi, which lies at the entrance of the gorge, about 150 miles northeast of Tbilisi, say they are hopeful the newest crackdown will bring results.

(...)Georgians are less hopeful that U.S. training can eradicate the problem.

"It's an illusion that with American involvement this problem will be solved immediately," said Khaindrava, the Georgian analyst.

"Imagine how America would react to having even one coffin come back from Pankisi."

03/01/02 - Armenian News Network

Two US Air Force planes brought forty American military personnel to Tbilisi, capital of the former Soviet republic of Georgia, on February 21, marking the first deployment of US combat forces in the Caucasus region, adjacent to one of the world's largest oilfields.(...)

The deployment was confirmed at press briefings by Pentagon officials February 26. They said the 40 soldiers were members of an evaluation team sent from the military's European Command to assess Georgia's military needs. All but a handful have now returned to their base in Stuttgart, Germany, but they will be replaced by up to 200 Special Operations troops who will provide training and tactical direction to Georgian forces.(...)

The Pentagon has already provided Georgia with ten UH-1H Huey helicopters, and Georgian personnel are being trained in how to operate and maintain the aircraft, which would be used for attacks on guerrilla positions.(...)

In an interview with a Georgian weekly magazine February 11, US chargé d'affaires and acting ambassador Philip Remler issued the first US endorsement of Russian complaints about Pankisi Gorge. He claimed that dozens of former Afghan mujahadin had fled that country and joined the Chechen guerrillas in Georgia, and announced that the US would work with the Georgian defense ministry to train anti-terrorist forces.

A US think tank, the Central Asia Caucasus Institute, issued a report the same week suggesting that the collapse of the Taliban regime could produce a spillover into Georgia. The institute wrote, If illegal groups dealing with international terrorism, narcotics trade and other forms of activities that shun government control are forced to leave Afghanistan and look for new countries with a weak government, Georgia may be an option.

(...) According to the analysis by STRATFOR, the deployment of American troops in Georgia is a big strategic victory for the United States. The publication cited increased US pressure on the entire western and southern border of

Russia, the possible role of Georgia as a base for US attacks on Iraq, the proximity of that location to the pipelines planned for bringing Caspian oil and gas to the world market, and the increased influence of Washington over Georgia's neighbors, especially oil-rich Azerbaijan.

The US military presence will help ensure that a majority of oil and gas from the Caspian basin will go westward, STRATFOR wrote, bypassing the United States geopolitical rivals, Russia and China.

There are other strategic implications, especially the diminution of Russian power in the region and the expanded role of Turkey, a key US ally.

American forces are likely to be stationed at the Vaziani airbase near Tbilisi, which Russia abandoned last year. The Russian general staff has reportedly issued orders to close down the Georgian headquarters of the Group of Russian Forces in Transcaucasus, which controls all Russian military operations south of the Caucasus Mountains. The liquidation of this military headquarters would leave the Russian forces now stationed in Armenia dangerously isolated, separated by Georgian territory from their logistical support structure in Russia itself.

Turkish influence in the region has been steadily increasing, both in Azerbaijan, which is predominantly Turkish-speaking, and in Georgia, where Turkey has now surpassed Russia as the largest trading partner.

According to a report from Istanbul last month, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey have finalized work on a tripartite agreement on regional security.

The document reportedly includes provisions on combating terrorism and organized crime as well as protecting a number of oil pipelines, especially the US-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project, which would bring Caspian oil through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean.

The agreement is said to include Turkish use of air bases in Azerbaijan, which would mark the first deployment of Turkish troops in the Caucasus since World War I. According to Russian press reports, Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit discussed the bases in Azerbaijan during a recent visit to Washington. Turkish personnel are

also being sent to Georgia to work on modernizing that country's military infrastructure.

The tripartite pact pointedly does not include Armenia, which has common borders with all three countries. Armenian officials have expressed concern that the new agreement on military cooperation may encourage Azerbaijan to revive its claims to the disputed Armenian-controlled enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (...).

03/01/02 - Sajala death stuns Georgians - "Institute for War & Peace Reporting"

(...)The violent death of the secretary of the National Security Council, Nugzar Sajaia, has shaken up the Georgian political establishment. Sajaia, a close ally of President Eduard Shevardnadze, was in overall charge of the Georgian security services. The president is struggling to both explain his ally's apparent suicide and to appoint a successor.(...). Sajaia (...) is the latest former Communist Party associate of the president to die violently, since Shevardnadze returned to Georgia in 1992. The others were Zhiuli Shartava and Suliko Khabeishvili. (...)Shevardnadze called Sajaia the "victim of moral terror", declaring that Georgian politicians who had been waging a smear campaign against Sajaia were responsible for his death.

His enemies included: parliamentary deputy Boris Kakubava, who accused Sajaia of being behind an assassination attempt on the leader of the autonomous republic of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze; the ex defence minister Tengiz Kitovani, now living in Moscow, who claimed in the press that Sajaia was a homosexual; and the former interior minister, Kakha Targamadze, who also has Russian connections.

At the time of his death, Sajaia and a group of other ministers, known as Sajaia's team, had just finished work on national security plans. The group comprises the new interior and security ministers, the head of the government guards, the president's press secretary and the powerful chairman of the supreme court, Lado Chanturia.

What these men all have in common is that they are fairly young, have a reputation for not being noticeably corrupt and are strongly loyal to Shevardnadze. (...)

03/02/02 - Georgia Plunged Into Security Crisis - AP Online

(...)The security breakdown has brought Georgia to the breaking point it faces today: The United States is planning to train and equip Georgian troops as a new front in the anti-terrorist campaign.

Russia said Friday it will support the American operation, but remains wary of U.S. military action on its southern border, its most sensitive and volatile flank.

(...)Shevardnadze blames Moscow for its most pressing security problem -- the troubles in the Pankisi Gorge, which is next to Russia's breakaway Chechnya region. (...)

Russia resents Shevardnadze for wooing the West and snubbing Moscow. Russian officials have accused him of turning a blind eye to Pankisi's troubles to annoy Russia.

Russia's military claims its opponents in Chechnya are Islamic terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, not freedom-minded separatists. Washington recently said rebels with al-Qaida ties are operating from Pankisi.

But Georgia's security forces have been unable to deal with a host of troubles, from Pankisi to the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the impoverished area has plunged into lawlessness.

Shevardnadze hinted Thursday that his country was in danger of crumbling.

U.S. officials "understand perfectly that if a country from the military point of view is not strong and cannot defend itself, its sovereignty could become a fiction. Therefore they made a decision to activate cooperation in the military sphere," he said.(...)

Abkhazia and South Ossetia border Russia and have cultivated ties with Moscow. They were buoyed Thursday when Russia's lower house of parliament suggested Russia could recognize them as independent.

Shevardnadze dismissed the possibility. "The Abkhazians have nowhere to go. Abkhazians and Georgians should live together," he said. "That goes for the Ossetians, too."(...)

03/04/02 - Georgian leader savours triumph on U.S. forces - Reuters World Report

Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, enjoying a diplomatic triumph over Russia, said on Monday that President Vladimir Putin had shown courage by backing down in a feud over U.S. military aid to his country.

Iran's defence minister, meanwhile, underlined the strategic sensitivity of the issue by expressing opposition to an American deployment in Georgia after arriving in the Transcaucasus.

Putin abandoned Moscow's objections to U.S. plans to send elite special troops to train and equip Georgia's army -- but only after an embarrassing row had exposed cracks in the U.S.-led anti-terror alliance.(...)

Russia [...] had offered to help the former Soviet republic fight rebels from across the border in Chechnya who it says are hiding in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.

The U.S. aid effectively closed the door on that prospect, a clear snub for Moscow.

(...) Washington says its experts will help Georgia's army to deal with foreign Islamic militants, possibly linked to Osama bin Laden, who have sheltered in the gorge along with Chechens.

But the strategic location of the Transcaucasus region, where Russia, Iran and NATO-member Turkey are vying for influence over oil and gas export routes from the Caspian Sea, has made this mission more sensitive than others. Iranian defence minister Admiral Ali Shamkhani, whose country shares borders with Georgia's neighbours Azerbaijan and Armenia, said after arriving in the Armenian capital Yerevan:

"Tehran's policy has always rejected the participation of external military forces in the countries near Iran's borders."(...)

After meeting Shevardnadze on Friday, Putin said the U.S. planned was "no tragedy" for Russia and that Moscow only wished it had been informed sooner.

The American mission to Georgia, to begin later this month, is modest in comparison with the deployments of U.S. troops in Central Asian ex-Soviet states, where they are participating in combat operations in Afghanistan.

The United States has provided equipment and training for Georgia's border guards for years, and last year sent a handful of helicopters with instructors.

But the offer of anti-terrorism training and equipment amounts to a lifting of a policy of not supplying Tbilisi with so-called lethal military aid.

03/06/02 - Russian Duma Voices Concern Over Situation in Georgia - AP WorldSources Online

The Russian State Duma or lower house of the parliament released a statement Wednesday to express "serious concern" over the latest developments in Georgia after U.S. army servicemen's entered the ex-Soviet republic.

The international terrorists and Chechen separatists hidden in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge near the Russian republic of Chechnya have posed a real threat to Russia's security, and may aggravate the conflicts between Georgia and its breakaway autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia says the statement.

It expressed the hope that "after Georgia strengthens its military potential at the U.S. expense, the Georgian leadership will not be inclined to military settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts."

It regretted that Tbilisi turned to Washington for military support regardless of Russia's intention to provide aid in Georgia's anti-terrorist operations.

The Duma urged the leaderships of Russia and Georgia to make joint efforts to fight terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge, and proposed the United Nations consider the anti-terror actions there. Russia cannot be a passive observer of the operation for liquidation of international terrorists, and the question arises whether Russian military forces should be involved in the operation, the statement said.

On the same day, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said that Russia can participate in an anti-terrorist operation in Georgia if it is asked to do so.

04/04/02 - Georgia's Azerbaijani minority airs grievances - Armenian News Network

Media coverage, both Armenian and international, of the rising tensions among the Armenian population of Djavakheti has tended to eclipse the grievances of Georgia's estimated 500,000-strong Azerbaijani minority. But some of

the Azerbaijanis appear to have been monitoring the ongoing demands by the Djavakheti Armenians for improved economic and social conditions and employment opportunities and have recently raised their grievances in a bid to wrest comparable concessions from the Georgian government.

The Azerbaijanis in Georgia, who live compactly in four raions southeast of Tbilisi, have been complaining of discrimination since at least the early 1980s. But since the collapse of the USSR, the Georgian leadership has consistently argued that the problems which the Azerbaijani minority faces are no different from, and no greater than, the socioeconomic problems facing the country's population as a whole. In recent months, however, the Azerbaijanis have raised several specific issues that, they say, constitute discrimination. First, they complained in December that Mikhail Makhmudov, an Azerbaijani who was in line to become a Georgian parliament deputy by virtue of his placement on the list of candidates elected under the proportional principle from the former ruling Union of Citizens of Georgia (SMK), was passed over in favor of a Georgian placed directly below him on that list. On 8 February, Georgia's Central Election Commission annulled the decision of former SMK General Secretary Eduard Surmanidze sidelining Makhmudov, and on 28 February he was formally inducted as a parliamentary deputy, raising the number of Azerbaijani deputies to six.

Also in late February, the Georgian parliament's commission for civil integration met with members of the unofficial Azerbaijani organization Heyrat, which represents the interests of the Azerbaijani minority. The Azerbaijanis complained that there is no provision for teaching the Georgian language in Azerbaijani schools and asked that the upcoming ruling requiring that any candidate for a civil service position be fluent in Georgian be suspended. They also asked that the history and geography of Azerbaijan be taught in schools where the majority of pupils are Azerbaijanis.

A third grievance, raised by Azerbaijani activists both at that meeting and at a demonstration in Tbilisi on 27 March, was

discrimination against Azerbaijanis in the allocation of plots of land.

The six Azerbaijani parliamentary deputies issued a statement in Tbilisi in late February categorically denying that the Azerbaijani minority is demanding territorial autonomy. But they may not be speaking for all their co-ethnics(...)

04/05/02 - Georgian Television

The Tbilisi garrison commandant's office has detained two Russian military vehicles for moving across Georgian territory illegally. According to the Georgian side, the two vehicles arrived from Gyumri [Armenia], were loaded in Georgia and intended to move to Armenia via Akhalkalaki [...]. Representatives of the Georgian Defence Ministry and law-enforcement agencies do not rule out the possibility of weapons being carried in the vehicle. Though, the lorries have not been opened as yet. According to information received from the garrison commandants' office, the drivers of the lorries have failed to provide any relevant documents. An investigation is under way. The case has been transferred to the Counterintelligence Service of the Georgian Ministry of State Security. According to garrison sources, it is illegal for the Russian military to make major movements in Georgia without reaching a prior agreement with the Georgian authorities and the vehicles involved are to be confiscated. At the moment, the detained lorries are sealed and parked in the garrison territory...

04/19/02 - COMTEX

Russia interrupted supplies of electricity to Georgian on April 17, including electricity supplies to Turkey via Georgia (...) Georgia had broken the schedule of payments for electricity more than once this year. The last payment was conducted in December 2001. Moreover, Georgia was illegally using some electricity delivered to Turkey via Georgia. (...)

04/22/02 - Georgia lukewarm over Russian offer to speed up closure of military bases - RFE/RL

In his traditional Monday radio broadcast, President Shevardnadze said on 22 April that Tbilisi still wants Russia to close its two remaining military bases in Georgia

(in Akhalkalaki and Batumi) within three years (...)

Russian Deputy Defense Minister Aleksandr Kosovan had suggested on 18 April that Moscow might manage to do so within 10 years, rather than 14, which Russian officials earlier claimed was the minimum period required. Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagharishvili told journalists in Tbilisi on 19 April that he does not believe the Russian withdrawal will take 10 years, and that negotiations on the optimum timeframe will continue.

04/24/02 - The Annual Survey of Press Freedom 2002

Two national television channels are state-controlled, favor government points of view, and reach audiences larger than those of radio stations or newspapers. Independent newspapers and television stations face harassment by the authorities, while journalists in government-controlled media frequently practice self-censorship. Anti-defamation laws are used by public figures to challenge journalists, but court proceedings are often dropped.

Police frequently harass journalists seeking information. In July, a journalist of independent television station Rustavi-2 was shot dead, his slaying attributed to his work as an investigative reporter. Tens of thousands of mourners attended his funeral. While competitive commercial TV has developed in the capital, there is little independent print or broadcast information outside Tbilisi. When attempted, financial limitations make private journalism difficult to sustain. Most independent radio programming provides only music, not news. The president's press center, which has privileged access to official information, overwhelms five other information agencies.

04/24/02 - Arminfo

A scandal took place today in Georgian parliament between Armenian and Azeri deputies. During the plenary session of the parliament the deputy Van Bayburt offered to pay homage to the memory of victims of Armenians' genocide in Ottoman Turkey in 1915.

This suggestion evoke indignation of the representatives of the Azeri deputation. The deputies Azer

Suleymanov and Ramiz Bakirov stated that similar offers are inadmissible in the Georgian parliament and are directed against the Georgian state system. The Azeri deputies think that the attempts to achieve official recognition of Armenians' genocide in Turkey may aggravate the relations with Azeris, being Georgia's citizens. The vice speaker of the parliament Gigi Tsereteli put a stop to the argument, which could become a quarrel between the Azeri and Armenian deputies. He removed the proposal from the further consideration.(...)

04/29/02 - COMTEX

According to preliminary information, there are 3,680 Chechen refugees in the Pankisi gorge in the territory of Georgia, Otari Keinashvili, first deputy minister for refugees and settlement of Georgia, reported.

He pointed out that this data was received during a re-registration of refugees from Chechnya in the Pankisi gorge, conducted on April 15-27. According to him, there are people in the gorge who are also claiming a refugee status but have not documents. Additionally, some Chechens were absent as of the moment of the re-registration. Keinashvili underlined that the Russian party had requested that Georgia make a list of refugees wishing to return to Chechnya. "The refugees were notified (of this opportunity), and several people got interested in the opportunity of returning home," the deputy minister pointed out, the Black Sea Press news agency reported. As it was reported earlier, this was the third re-registration of refugees from Chechnya in Georgia. About 8,000 refugees were registered in 2001, of whom 7,500 lived in the Pankisi gorge. According to official information, about 2,000 Chechen refugees left Georgia in 2001. Some of them returned to Russia, and others moved to other CIS countries.

04/30/02 - First US military personnel arrive in Georgia - RFE/RL

A group of 18 U.S. military personnel arrived in Tbilisi late on 29 April, the first of some 150-200 U.S. Special Forces instructors who are to launch training programs for Georgian army, border, and security

services personnel. According to "The New York Times" on 30 April, the vanguard are logistics, contracting, and communications personnel; the main group of military instructors will arrive at a later, as yet unspecified date. Caspian News Agency on 29 April quoted U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as telling journalists in Moscow that Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze has given a written pledge that the Georgian units who benefit from the U.S. training courses will not be used in a new war to restore Tbilisi's control over Abkhazia.

05/03/02 - U.S Officer defines role Georgia - RFE/RL

U.S. Army Colonel Scott Thein, one of the first group of U.S. military personnel to arrive in Tbilisi earlier this week within the parameters of the "Train and Equip" program, told journalists in Tbilisi on 2 May that he and his fellow instructors will conduct four stages of antiterrorist training for Georgian forces, after which they will return to the U.S., rather than establish a permanent military presence in Georgia. He also stressed that, "It is not the intention of my government, nor do I know of any plans for U.S.

forces to be involved at all in the internal security issues of Georgia." But the "Georgian Times,"(...) reported the same day quoting an unidentified "reliable source" that 20 U.S. military personnel landed in the Pankisi Gorge hours before the newspaper went to press (...). "They will comb the mountains and find and destroy Chechen fighters if any are present in the region," the "Georgian Times" quoted its source as saying.

DAGHESTAN / DAGHESTAN

03/15/2002 - Landless Protests - The Independent Information Centre Glasnost -

The residents of the nine villages of Magaramkentski district and four villages of Akhtynski district of Southern Dagestan are going to hold protect actions patterned after those of several villages of Magaramkentski on March 6. (...) The peoples' patience is at an end because the majority of the able-bodied population cannot cultivate

the fertile lands of Southern Dagestan. They are left without any means of subsistence and survive only on the pensions of their elderly relatives. (...) Brought to a state of despair, they are addressing their complaints to various state institutions. The letters with hundreds of signatures have been sent to the State Council, the cabinet, and administration of President Putin. The people are asking for a small land allotment which they could cultivate, collect their harvest, and thus survive. (...). So far nothing has been done, and an outbreak of a serious conflict is inevitable soon.

03/15/2002 - Dagestani Police Work Examined - The Independent Information Centre Glasnost

The results of a month-long inspection carried out by a large team from the Central Office of the Interior Ministry of the Russian Federation have been released. The check of a five-year term of Dagestani police work revealed that the crime situation in the republic has deteriorated during this period, while the inspectors continuously assessed the work as satisfactory. (...) Drug abuse is growing and those addicted to drugs are continuously younger. About 4,000 firearms were issued in 1999 to civilians who repelled the Chechen rebels' incursion in Dagestan, but the weapons haven't been collected yet. (...)

03/29/2002 - Arms cache found in Dagestan - Itar-Tass via COMTEX

An arms cache has been found in the Novolaksky District of Dagestan close to the administrative border with Chechnya. 24 projectiles for under-barrel grenade launchers, 11 mortar shells, two Mukha grenade launchers, seven hand grenades of various modifications, four magazines for Kalashnikov assault rifles and a machine-gun belt with cartridges were found in the arms cache. (...) According to Lieutenant Colonel Muslim Dakhayev, head of the Novolaksky police department, the gangs operating on the adjacent territory have become more active of late. The area of deployment of a special police (OMON) unit from Tula in the Chechen village of Zandak, near the border with Dagestan, was brought under fire

several days ago. They were fired at from 12 positions, with the use of automatic weapons and sharpshooter rifles. (...)

04/22/02 - Road department attacked in Daghestan - COMTEX

A group of criminals attacked the state road inspection of Daghestan today, the press service of the local interior department reported. The criminals open fired at the guards. Two of them were killed and four were wounded. The wounded guards were taken to the hospital. According to preliminary data, this assault was aimed at deputy head of the road department Magomed Omarov, who is also a deputy of the Daghestan parliament.

ABKHAZIA / ABKHAZIE

03/02/02 - COMTEX Newswire

Russian Security Council Secretary Vladimir Rushailo met with the Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze earlier on Saturday. Rushailo is in Tbilisi on instructions from president Putin to attend funeral ceremonies following the tragic death of Georgian Security Council Secretary Nugzar Sadzhaya. The Russian Security Council's press-service said the two men discussed joint struggle against terrorism and the return home of Chechen refugees from Georgia. Shevardnadze expressed the readiness to cooperate with Russia along these lines. He also voiced satisfaction with his meeting with the Russian president.

A Georgian Foreign Ministry official has declared Saturday's elections to the parliament of Abkhazia as unlawful. "The elections are unlawful and the Georgian authorities declare them null and void," Kakha Sikharulidze told reporters. "At a time when two-thirds of the indigenous population has been expelled from Abkhazia, the rights of the remaining population are systematically abused and there is no freedom to exercise electoral rights any elections in the territory of Abkhazia shall be regarded as void," he said. The Georgian official recalled that several authoritative international organisations, including the United Nations, had declared unlawful all elections and referendums held in Abkhazia over

the recent years, including the March 2 election.

03/03/02 - Abkhazia holds elections to its parliament, People's Assembly, this Saturday - ITAR-TASS

Competing for the 35 seats in the parliament are 63 contenders of various nationalities: 45 Abkhazians, seven Russians, five Armenians, three Georgians, one Greek, one Kabardian and one Circassian. The elections are supervised by observers from the Russian Karachayevo-Cherkessian, Kabardino-Balkarian and Adyge republics, the Rostov region, the Krasnodar territory and the South Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh republics. Russian State Duma member Georgy Tikhonov also arrived in Abkhazia as an observer. The chairman of the central electoral commission, Sergei Smyr, told Itar-Tass that there were some minor violations in the elections.

03/05/02 - Duma backtracks over Abkhazia - RFE/RL

State Duma Speaker Gennadii Seleznev said on 4 March that the possibility of recognizing Abkhazia's independence would not be placed on the agenda for the Duma's 6 March session (...). Seleznev explained that Duma deputies had initially demanded such a debate in an "emotional" reaction to the news that the U.S. planned to send troops to Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, but that it subsequently became clear that neither U.S. nor Russian troops will participate directly in antiterrorist operations in Georgia. The Duma's Committees for International Affairs and for CIS Affairs will, however, discuss the situation on the Russian-Georgian border during a joint session on 5 March, International Affairs Committee Chairman Dmitrii Rogozin told Ekho Moskvyy radio(...).

03/06/02 - AP WorldStream

The state security minister of Georgia on Wednesday claimed that Muslim extremists affiliated with a radical group tantamount to al-Qaida are present in the separatist territory of Abkhazia.

But the foreign affairs minister of Abkhazia's internationally unrecognized government rejected the claim, which came as concern

risers about the possibility of al-Qaida fighters in the Pankisi Gorge region of Georgia. The United States plans to send hundreds of troops to Georgia to help train the country's military in fighting terrorists.(...)

"In Abkhazia, there are some members of the Islamic Brotherhood organization, which is no less extremist than al-Qaida," security minister Valeri Khaburdzania told journalists Wednesday.

Khaburdzania previously has claimed that extremists were in Abkhazia, but this was the first time he has specified with what organization they were allegedly affiliated.

He also claimed that al-Qaida members have been able to infiltrate into Europe via Abkhazia.

"I refuse to comment on absurd assertions," Abkhazia's foreign minister Sergei Shamba said.

03/21/02 - AP WorldStream

In one of the harshest attacks yet in the war of words between Moscow and Tbilisi, Russia's Foreign Ministry on Thursday accused Georgia's government of aiding militants and fomenting unrest in Georgia's breakaway province of Abkhazia.

Georgia's "ambiguous position causes doubts about the sincerity of its intentions concerning not only the fight against terrorism, but issues relating to the political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict," the ministry said.

The statement came in response to the abduction Monday of four Russian servicemen in Abkhazia, which Moscow blamed on guerrillas linked to the Georgian government. The four soldiers were freed

Tuesday in exchange for two Georgians who had been arrested by Abkhazian authorities last week.

The ministry pointed to other alleged attacks by Georgian guerrillas in Abkhazia, and accused Georgia's government of failing to meet the United Nations' request to disband them.

The ministry accused the Georgian government of supporting militants in order to "foment tension, build up unfounded accusations against Russian peacekeepers and thwart the negotiation process."(...) Georgia's parliament on Wednesday unanimously adopted a resolution urging the Russian peacekeepers' immediate withdrawal, saying they effectively act as a border guard

force keeping Georgian refugees out of Abkhazia.(...)

Some Georgian officials alleged recently that al-Qaida-linked terrorists from Chechnya had entered Abkhazia. The Russian Foreign Ministry responded that such statements were intended to prepare public opinion for "new attempts to solve the Abkhazian problem by force."

03/21/02 - Georgian Parliament adopts resolution on Abkhazia... - RFE/RL

Following two days of inconclusive debate on 14-15 March, deputies voted unanimously on 20 March in favor of a toughly worded 13-point resolution on Abkhazia (...). The preamble accused the Russian peacekeeping force deployed in the Abkhaz conflict zone under the CIS aegis of failing to fulfill its mandate, and of functioning instead as "frontier guards" between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia; claimed Abkhazia has become "a haven for international terrorists" and a base for drugs and arms trafficking; and accused the Abkhaz leadership of refusing to cooperate with the UN and OSCE. The resolution repeats the parliament's demand of 11 October 2001 that the Russian peacekeepers be withdrawn; that those persons guilty of the "genocide" of the Georgian population of Abkhazia be brought to justice; that the international community inspect the Russian military base at Gudauta to determine whether Russia has complied with its commitments to withdraw weaponry from there; and condemns Russia's waiving for residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia of the visa requirement that obtains for all other Georgian citizens. At the same time, it calls on the parliament's Provisional Committee to draft a resolution by 30 June on how to resolve the Abkhaz conflict; calls on the Georgian president and government to assess compliance with previously signed decrees and agreements on Abkhazia; and affirms that "Georgia will not resort to military force as long as the possibility of a peaceful solution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict exists."

03/21/02 - Russia accuses Georgia of arming militants - Reuters

Russia unleashed its most aggressive rhetoric yet at its tiny neighbour Georgia on Thursday, accusing it of arming nationalist militants, helping Chechen rebels and plotting a new war against separatists.

Moscow did not mention Washington in the broadside, but the foreign ministry's accusations also amounted to a warning shot across the bows of the United States, which is sending military instructors to help train and arm the Georgian army. The statement was prompted by the brief kidnapping and release on Tuesday of four Russian peacekeepers from the unstable border area that divides Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region from the rest of the country. [...]

Russia's comments on Abkhazia -- among the most tense of the unresolved ethnic conflicts simmering on the ex-Soviet Union's fringes -- have grown ever more alarmist in the weeks since Washington promised Georgia military aid.

Abkhaz separatists [...] fear a U.S. trained and equipped Georgian army may be turned against them.

"Georgia has clearly taken the course of seeking to prepare its own and world public opinion for new attempts to resolve the Abkhazia issue by force," the Russian ministry statement said. It accused Georgia of arming the "White Legions" and "Forest Brotherhood" nationalist militia, which have clashed with Russian peacekeepers and Abkhaz forces and which Moscow said were behind this week's kidnapping.[...]

It also said Georgian officials had helped Chechen guerrilla leader Ruslan Gelayev launch a raid on Abkhazia last year, and said Tbilisi had turned a blind eye to "Chechen terrorists" who shot down a U.N. helicopter, killing nine people.

"Such hypocrisy on the part of Tbilisi makes one doubt its sincerity, not only in the fight against terrorism, but also on the issue of a political settlement in Abkhazia," it said.

"Tbilisi must be held to full account for the consequences of such provocations and irresponsible actions."

03/22/02 - Russia Takes Abkhazia Away from Georgia - Nezavisimaya Gazeta

The breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia became part of Russia de facto on Tuesday. No other explanation can be given to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov's actions. He ordered all roads blocked off connecting the rebel autonomy with Georgia after four Russian peacekeepers were kidnapped on the resistance line. Concurrently, the headquarters of the Russian ground troops sent a high-ranking military delegation to Sukhumi. This means, Moscow still regards Abkhazia as its "own" territory where it can act as it wants without consultations with Tbilisi.

Abkhazia's representative in Moscow Igor Akhba said that although Abkhazia was an independent state both de jure and de facto, the Russian military has the right to undertake any actions in their zone of responsibility.

The head of the Georgian Parliament's Security and Defense Committee, Georgy Baramidze, described the actions of Russian military as a direct aggression against a sovereign state.

In addition, the commander of a Georgian guerrilla group that calls itself "The Wood Brothers" and operates in the conflict zone said that Russian troops had allegedly launched a "punitive action" against civilians in the Georgian village of Pichori. The Russian peacekeepers were abducted near this village. This is another clear sign that Georgia and Russia have found themselves on the brink of war. (...)

Sukhumi is sure that the "latest provocation is aimed at driving Russian peacekeepers from the conflict zone." Abkhazian Vice President Valery Arshba said that Abkhazia was ready to contribute to the Russian servicemen's release.(...)

03/27/02 - Russia demands Chechen field commander's extradition from Georgia - RFE/RL

The Russian Foreign Ministry has sent a formal request to the Georgian Prosecutor-General's Office demanding the extradition of Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelaev, Russian and Georgian agencies reported. The Russian Prosecutor-General's Office had made a similar request for Gelaev's extradition last November following

the incursion into Abkhazia's Kodori Gorge of a band of fighters believed to include Gelaev and his men. Gelaev is believed to have undergone hospital treatment in Georgia for wounds received during that abortive attack. The timing of the new extradition request raises the question of whether Tbilisi intends to use Gelaev again in a new attack on Abkhazia, which Abkhaz officials believe is imminent. The Georgian Prosecutor-General's Office, Interior Ministry, and State Security Ministry responded on 26 March to the Russian extradition request by saying they have no information about Gelaev's whereabouts(...).

Georgian Defense Minister claims attack on Russian peacekeepers imminent...

David Tevzadze told journalists in Tbilisi on 26 March that the special forces of foreign countries that he declined to identify are preparing to attack Russian peacekeepers' posts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the aim of provoking a counterattack by Russian forces that would lead to wider hostilities(...). Interfax and ITAR-TASS quoted him as saying that the rationale for provoking new hostilities is to sabotage the planned Georgian-U.S. military cooperation. He apparently did not evaluate the likelihood that the Russian leadership would resort to an attack on its own peacekeepers in order to achieve this. Also on 26 March, a Russian military spokesman denied media reports that units of the 58th Army deployed on the border with Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been placed on combat alert (...).

---Says Georgian troops will withdraw from Kodori.

Tevzadze also told journalists on 26 March that the 350 Georgian troops deployed in the Kodori Gorge last fall will be withdrawn and replaced by border guards (...). The UN has repeatedly called for Tbilisi to comply with a commitment it signed in January to withdraw those troops, as have the Abkhaz authorities.

One killed, 15 injured in Bombings in Abkhazia

An elderly Russian woman was killed and at least 15 people were injured when a bomb exploded in a local train near Sukhum early on 27 March. Two further explosions were

reported, one in the port of Ochamchira. A Georgian State Security Ministry official rejected as "absurd" claims by Abkhaz Premier Anri Djergenja and Security Council Secretary Astamur Tarba that the explosions were the work of Georgian guerrillas acting at the behest of the Georgian secret services.

Abkhazia signals readiness to return to confidence-building talks

Caucasus Press on 27 March quoted Abkhaz Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba as saying that as a goodwill gesture Abkhazia is ready to resume UN-sponsored talks with Georgia on confidence-building measures even before the withdrawal of the Georgian troops from Kodori. Abkhaz officials had previously pegged their participation in any further such talks to a Georgian withdrawal.

Russia denies peacekeepers opened fire on Georgian civilians

The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 26 March categorically denying Georgian reports that members of the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone opened fire on 25 March on residents of the village of Anaklia in Georgia's Zugdidi Raion, wounding one of them. The agency quoted an unidentified military spokesman as saying that 12 drunken villagers attacked three Russian peacekeepers but retreated before a Russian armored personnel carrier dispatched to the scene arrived.

03/29/02 - Russian Defense Minister warns that Abkhaz tensions may delay Russian troop withdrawal - RFE/RL

Sergei Ivanov told journalists in Moscow on 28 March that the rising tensions in Abkhazia may delay the closure of the Russian military bases in Georgia (...). He again described the Transcaucasus as a foreign policy priority for Russia. Ivanov also suggested that the vehemence of Russia's stated objections to U.S. plans to send military instructors to Georgia may deter Washington from doing so. But visiting U.S.

Senator John Bingman told journalists in Tbilisi on 28 March that

although no date has yet been set for those instructors' arrival in Georgia, "nothing will prevent" them from coming. Earlier this month, Georgian officials said the instructors would arrive in Georgia during the last week in March.

Alors que les troupes spéciales américaines arrivaient en Géorgie, la guerre des mots s'est intensifiée entre Tbilissi et Soukhoumi d'une part, et Moscou d'autre part. Le ministre de l'intérieur géorgien Valeri Khaburdzania accusait ainsi l'Abkhazie d'héberger des groupes proches d'Al Qaida. Dans une résolution votée le 20 Mars, le parlement géorgien décrivait cette république sécessionniste comme un « havre du terrorisme international », soulignant la mauvaise volonté de ses dirigeants à coopérer avec les instances internationales. La demande de retrait des forces russes de maintien de la paix a été réitérée, ces dernières étant considérées par les géorgiens comme des gardes-frontières empêchant le retour des populations géorgiennes déplacées. En Russie, le ministère des affaires étrangères dénonçait « l'hypocrisie » et « l'irresponsabilité » de Tbilissi, accusé d'armer des formations paramilitaires comme les « Frères de la forêt », et d'avoir contribué aux actions de guérilla menées par des formations tchétchènes en Abkhazie. La déclaration concluait sur la nécessité de tenir Tbilissi « pleinement responsable des conséquences de telles provocations ». Cette escalade verbale intervenait à la suite de l'enlèvement de quatre soldats du contingent russe de maintien de la paix en Abkhazie. Le ministre de la défense La Douma a néanmoins retiré de l'agenda des débats la question de la reconnaissance par la Russie de l'indépendance de l'Abkhazie.

04/04/02 - New Abkhaz Parliament elects speaker - RFE/RL

At its first session on 2 April, the newly elected Abkhaz parliament elected as its speaker former Culture Minister Nugzar Ashuba, Caucasus Press reported. Ashuba, who is 30, spent the last few years in Moscow as a businessman.

04/08/02 - CIS Peacekeepers attacked in Abkhazia... - RFE/RL

Unidentified gunmen opened fire on three observation posts and three reserve posts manned by CIS peacekeepers in Abkhazia's Gali Raion over a period of five hours during the night of 6-7 April. (...) Reuters on 7 April quoted Major General Aleksandr Yevteev, who was appointed commander of the CIS peacekeeping force three days earlier, as telling journalists in Sukhum that it was "the first time in the last few years that such a massive firearms attack has been launched along the entire separation line between the two sides." He suggested the attack was intended to thwart the ongoing withdrawal of Georgian army troops from the Kodori Gorge. Although the Georgian leadership denies any links to or leverage over the Georgian guerrillas who have frequently targeted Russian peacekeepers in the past, Georgian Minister for Special Assignments Malkhaz Kakabadze categorically denied on 8 April that the guerrillas were responsible for the 6-7 April attacks. (...) An unnamed representative of the guerrillas similarly told Caucasus Press on 8 April that they will abide by their moratorium on violence until 1 August in order to give the Georgian leadership one final chance to resolve the conflict peacefully.

04/09/02 - Georgian officials make contradictory statements on troop withdrawal from Kodori - RFE/RL

Meeting in Sukhum on 8 April with Abkhaz Prime Minister Anri Djergenia, Georgian Minister for Special Assignments Malkhaz Kakabadze pledged that Georgia will withdraw the last of its 350 troops from the Kodori Gorge by the 10 April deadline. But Georgian Defense Minister David Tevzadze told journalists in Tbilisi the same day that the withdrawal is already complete[...]. Meanwhile, President Shevardnadze denied that the Georgian withdrawal may result in Georgia losing control of the upper reaches of the gorge. (...)

04/12/02 - COMTEX Newswire

Georgia demanded withdrawal of additional peacekeeping forces from the Kodori gorge, "which had taken up the upper part of the gorge breaking all the existing agreements

and without concordance with the Georgian government", Georgian Foreign Minister Irakly Menagarishvili said. He expressed indignation in connection with the actions of Russian peacekeepers and pointed out that Georgia had interrupted the negotiations with a Russian delegation on the development of a new frame agreement between Russia and Georgia held in Tbilisi and was not going to proceed before Moscow provided corresponding explanation of the fact. The Georgian Foreign Minister also said that 60 Russian peacekeepers had entered the Kodori gorge today. According to him, the protocol on stabilization in the zone of the Abkhazian conflict signed in Tbilisi on April 2, suggested that Russian peacekeepers were to provide security of the Kodori gorge and were not supposed to relocate(...).

04/19/02 - COMTEX

Abkhazia will not agree to start political negotiations with Georgia until Georgian military forces are withdrawn from the Kodori gorge, Abkhazian Prime Minister Anri Dzhergeniya announced at a press conference in Moscow today. At the same time, he stressed they were not going to conduct any military operations in Kodori or any other part of Abkhazia in the near future. Moreover, Abkhazia is ready to allow international military observers in its territory, including observers from the CIS collective peacekeeping forces. Commenting on the recent incident in the Kodori gorge, when a new check-point of Russian peacekeepers was established, Dzhergeniya noted that these peacekeepers had the right to patrol Kodori and, in fact, their actions were correct. According to the Prime Minister, it was wrong to hamper such patrolling. He linked these counteractions to Georgian plans to have a base for military operations.

04/19/02 - AP

Leaders of Georgia and its breakaway republic of Abkhazia toned down their confrontation over a disputed gorge Friday and said they had no plans to launch military action against each other.

"It's time to leave behind this language of ultimatums," said Abkhazian Prime Minister Anri Dzhergeniya, who met with officials at

Russia's Foreign Ministry on Friday. [...]

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze also downplayed the confrontation after a meeting of the Georgian Security Council in Tbilisi.

"Georgia is not developing any plans to attack or begin military action," he said. "Georgia does not want war in Abkhazia and is doing everything to settle the conflict peacefully."(...)

Abkhazia has accused Georgia of keeping military forces in the [Kodori] gorge, in violation of an U.N.-brokered protocol that required Georgia to withdraw its troops by April 10.

Georgia has denied breaking the protocol and says it has deployed only border guards and reservists, who are not technically part of the armed forces and are legally allowed to be there.

Meanwhile, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov denied an accusation by his Georgian counterpart David Tevzadze that Russia was beefing up its presence in the Kodori Gorge under the guise of rotating peacekeeping troops in the conflict zone.(...)

04/22/02 - Both sides (...) fail to reach agreement on resuming patrols - RFE/RL

(...)on 19 April, Boden chaired a session in Gali Raion of the Coordinating Council for security issues that was originally scheduled for 17 April (...). Abkhaz First Deputy Defense Minister Givi Agrba and Georgian Minister for Special Assignments Malkhaz Kakabadze reportedly exchanged recriminations, with Agrba claiming that Georgian troops still remain in Kodori. No agreement was reached on whether and on what conditions patrols of the Kodori Gorge by UN observers and Russian peacekeepers will resume. Georgia wants only UN observers to have access to the gorge.

04/25/02 - UN, Russian officials deny Georgian claims of Abkhaz, Russian troop buildup - RFE/RL

Dieter Boden, who is UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special envoy for Abkhazia, and Major General Anis Ahmed Bajwa, who is Chief Military Observer of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia, both rejected on 24 April Georgian media claims that Abkhazia and Russia

continue to build up troops and weapons in Tkvarcheli Raion and the lower reaches of the Kodori Gorge[...]. Bajwa told Apsni Press after a meeting in Sukhum with Abkhaz President Anri Djergenia that the UN has informed Georgia that no accumulation of forces has been registered in those districts. Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin, whom President Vladimir Putin recently named his special envoy for the Abkhaz conflict, similarly denied in Moscow on 24 April that Russia is providing Abkhazia with military hardware.

04/25/02 - Russian diplomat suggests peacekeepers' mandate could be expanded.. - RFE/RL

Loshchinin also suggested that the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping force deployed under the CIS aegis in the Abkhaz conflict zone could theoretically be expanded (...). But he added that this could be done only as a result of talks between Georgia and Russia "with the unconditional participation of the Abkhaz side." He also commented that Tbilisi has not informed Russia what specific changes it wants. After the Georgian parliament voted last fall to demand the peacekeepers' withdrawal, Georgian officials suggested augmenting the 100 percent Russian force with contingents from other CIS states, redeploying the peacekeepers along the Galidzga River, which forms the northern boundary of Abkhazia's southernmost Gali Raion, and amending their mandate to give them broader powers to protect Georgian displaced persons who wish to return to Gali.

... as Abkhazia registers opposition...

Speaking in Sukhum on 24 April, Abkhaz Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba said the Abkhaz leadership categorically opposes any change in the peacekeepers' mandate(...). He argued that no changes are possible without the consent of the Abkhaz side. Deploying peacekeepers along the Galidzga River would effectively result in the loss of Abkhaz control over the unrecognized republic's southernmost Gali Raion.

... And Georgian displaced persons demand their withdrawal

Major General Aleksandr Yevteev, who is acting commander of the Russian peacekeeping force in the Abkhaz conflict zone, met on 24 April in the west Georgian town of Zugdidi with Georgian displaced persons from Abkhazia (...). The displaced persons had earlier threatened to block the border bridge over the Inguri River if Yevteev refused to meet with them. They demanded the withdrawal of the peacekeeping force by 31 July. Yevteev explained that as a military man he is not qualified to take such decisions, and advised the displaced persons to address their demand to the Georgian government.

04/26/02 - Georgian, Abkhaz officials fail to reach agreement on Kodori withdrawal - RFE/RL

Talks in Sukhum on 25 April between top Georgian and Abkhaz government officials failed to make the slightest progress toward overcoming the tensions generated by the continued presence of armed Georgians in the Kodori Gorge. The Abkhaz are apparently insisting that all armed Georgians, including border guards and local volunteers, be withdrawn from the upper reaches of Kodori, while the Georgians argue that the 2 April protocol under which Tbilisi pledged to withdraw the 350 army troops it sent to the gorge last fall makes no mention of the need to withdraw other Georgian detachments. The protocol has not yet been published in the Georgian press; Aleksandre Chachia, leader of the opposition movement Ertoba, called on 24 April for its promulgation. The number of armed Georgians currently in Kodori was estimated at 900. But on 26 April, Major General Aleksandr Evteev, the acting commander of the Russian peacekeeping force, said that a Georgian military buildup is underway in the upper reaches of the gorge and that the total number of armed men has reached 1,500.

...As Georgian side thwarts joint Russian-UN patrol

A routine planned 25 April patrol of the upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge by members of the UN Observer Mission and the Russian peacekeeping force failed to take

place because the Georgian side declined to provide the required security guarantees.

NORTH OSSETIA / OSSETIE DU NORD

04/28/02 - Blast at Vladikavkaz market kills seven people - Reuters

A bomb in a busy outdoor market killed at least seven people on Sunday and injured another 41 in a province on Russia's turbulent southern rim, officials said. The bomb, which officials said appeared to have been equipped with a timer, went off shortly before midday near the entrance to the market in the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz as it was filling up with Sunday shoppers. (...) The police spokesman said the blast seemed to have all the signs of an act of terror but it was too early to judge. (...)

CHECHNYA / TCHETCHENIE

03/05/2002 - Rebels torturing and killing -AP US & World

Four corpses bearing signs of torture have been found at a military commandant's office in Chechnya. (...) Local officials say they were civilians detained in a Russian security sweep, while the military says they were rebels. The bodies of the four men, aged 17 to 28, were found in Argun. (...) They had bullet wounds in the chest and head, their hands were tied and they showed signs of torture (.../...). Russian troops conducted sweep operations in Argun for several days last month. The raids have become a dominant part of the war two years after Russian troops claimed to be in control of most of the breakaway republic. They have also come under fierce criticism from international human rights groups and western governments -- including the United States. A State Department report on Monday accused Russian forces of torturing rebels, killing them in summary executions and arbitrarily arresting Chechens without sufficient proof of wrongdoing. Russian officials say abuses are rare and insist the raids are necessary to root out rebels who conduct daily hit-and-run raids on federal forces. (...)

03/07/2002 - Russia criticises "odious" US rights report - Reuters

Russia said on Thursday that U.S. criticism of its human rights record in Chechnya was "odious" and part of a plot to scupper cooperation in the fight against terrorism. (...) "The basic contents of the report evoke, to put it mildly, surprise," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement. "The passages on Chechnya are especially odious. And this doesn't seem to be a coincidence." "In certain circles in the USA, forces have been activated who oppose the constructive development in Russian-American relations, and especially the unprecedented level of cooperation achieved in the joint struggle against new threats, including international terrorism," it said. (...) Moscow says they are fighting terrorism and Western countries have generally agreed that Chechen separatists have had ties to international Islamic militants. (...) Russia has been a strong supporter of the U.S. war on terrorism since September 11 and Washington appeared to tone down some its criticism of Russian behaviour in Chechnya in the wake of the suicide airliner attacks. But U.S. criticism increased again this year after the Kremlin abandoned an attempt to open dialogue with Chechen rebels and resumed the military sweeps of Chechen towns and villages. (...)

03/08/2002 - Chechen rebel leader wants war crimes tribunal - Reuters

The Chechen rebel leadership is pushing for the creation of a war crimes tribunal like that for the former Yugoslavia to try alleged atrocities by Russian forces, a senior Chechen representative said on Friday. "Those who committed genocide against the Chechen people must answer for their crimes. A forum for this is our key goal." (...) "No matter what the war's outcome is and whether or not we are acknowledged as an independent state, the Chechen people must be guaranteed the same human rights as anyone else in Europe," said Zakayev, a bearded, soft-spoken former actor. (...) Chechens have long called for a greater international role in a conflict that Moscow says is a purely internal matter. (...) Zakayev said he was heartened by the fact the

Hague tribunal was now trying former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic for genocide and crimes against humanity in the 1990s. (...) That really gave me hope about what tomorrow might bring," he said. (...)

03/20/2002 - Rebels mount new attacks in Chechnya; European delegation - AP World

A car carrying a group of Moscow-appointed prosecutors blew up on a rebel-controlled landmine Wednesday in Chechnya's capital Grozny, in the latest evidence of the military's inability to uproot resistance after 30 months of war. Prosecutors were targeted while rushing to the site where two civilian women had been killed by unidentified attackers, who also fatally wounded a pro-Moscow policeman who tried to pursue them, according to an official with the Moscow-appointed administration for Chechnya. All five prosecutors were wounded in Wednesday's attack, the official said on condition of anonymity. (...) On Tuesday, rebels blew up two military vehicles in Grozny in separate attacks, killing four federal soldiers and wounding six others. Another two servicemen have been killed in other attacks throughout Chechnya over the last 24 hours. (...)

03/21/2002 - Russian troops launch large sweep of Chechen capital Grozny - AP World

Russian troops on Thursday launched their largest military sweep of the Chechen capital Grozny in six months, while Russia's top auditor met with Chechen officials to discuss alleged mismanagement of federal funds. Troops blocked off the capital on Thursday morning, erecting extra checkpoints and fanning out through the city in search of suspected rebels. (...) Meanwhile, the Moscow-appointed Chechen leader, Akhmad Kadyrov, predicted in an interview published Thursday that the war in Chechnya would end by the fall. He heaped criticism on the rebel leadership, but accused some in the Russian military of keeping the war going so they could profit from the illegal sale of the republic's oil outside its borders. (...)

03/22/2002 - Unknown gunmen kill mayor of Chechen town of Karat - Itar-Tass via COMTEX

Unknown gunmen on Friday shot and killed Akhmed Bokov, the mayor of the town of Karat-Yurt in Chechnya's Achkhoy-Martan district. His small car came under fire on the outskirts of the town, a source at the local interior department said. A girl who was riding in Bokov's car also died in the accident. Bokov, 45, left his home early morning and was heading for the district center, Achkhoy-Martan. (...)

03/25/2002 - Rights groups reject official Chechnya death toll - Reuters

(...) A Defence Ministry spokesman said 12,760 "confirmed rebels" had been killed since the three-and-a-half year conflict began. "This excludes wounded and civilian casualties," the spokesman told Reuters. Oleg Orlov at human rights group Memorial said: "These figures have no link to reality, they are pulled out of a hat." (...) Rights groups frequently complain of excessive violence during sweep operations to flush rebel fighters from Chechnya's towns and villages, particularly detentions, beatings and summary executions of young men. Moscow denies its troops carry out systematic abuses, saying any excessive use of force is investigated and punished. Earlier this month hundreds of villagers dragged the charred bodies of what they said were victims of rampages by Russian soldiers to the headquarters of Chechnya's pro-Moscow administration in the capital Grozny. (...) President Vladimir Putin and other top officials say troops control the entire region, but servicemen and pro-Moscow officials die almost daily from rebel attacks. (...)

03/27/02 - Russian troops conduct new search operations in Chechnya - RFE/RL

Russian troops cordoned off and searched Grozny's central market early on 26 March but apparently failed to detain any suspected fighters, Interfax reported. Also on 26 March, Russian forces cordoned off the village of Tsotan-Yurt where one Russian serviceman was killed and 17 injured in fighting with Chechen militants the previous day, RFE/RL's Russian Service reported.

Meanwhile, the three dead Chechen boys whose bodies were discovered on 22 March in Shelkovskii Raion have still not been identified .

Human rights watch appeals to UN to condemn human rights violations in Chechnya

. In a briefing paper released on 26 March, Human Rights Watch urged the UN Commission on Human Rights to adopt a resolution condemning human rights violations in Chechnya and demanding that Russia investigate them. The resolution lists several instances in recent months in which Chechen civilians were arbitrarily murdered, noting that the authorities have not taken adequate steps to investigate any of those cases.

Russian officials rule out creation of Chechen war crimes tribunal

Speaking in St. Petersburg on 26 March, Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov dismissed as "a provocation" calls for establishing an international tribunal to investigate war crimes in Chechnya, Interfax reported. Former Foreign Minister Yevgenii Primakov similarly criticized that proposal as a "crazy idea."

Russian prosecutor-general protests verdict in « friendly fire trial ».

The Russian Prosecutor-General's Office has formally challenged the verdict of not guilty handed down last week on two Russian Interior Ministry officers involved in the exchange of fire in Grozny in March 2000 in which 20 servicemen were killed, a lawyer for one of the two officers told journalists in Moscow on 26 March.

04/02/2002 - Watchdog says Russian troops abuse Chechen women- Reuters

A human rights watchdog group asked the U.N. Commission on Human Rights on Tuesday to condemn alleged abuses by Russian troops in separatist Chechnya, saying five Chechen women had reported rapes and sexual assaults. The women said the sexual abuses occurred during Russian military sweeps through Chechnya this past winter, as soldiers went house to house in search of rebels, according to New York- based Human Rights Watch.

(...). In the past two years, the commission has adopted resolutions condemning alleged rights violations and urging Moscow to establish a national commission of inquiry. But the Russian government has rejected the resolutions. Russia said last month it would crack down on rights abuses committed by its forces in anti- rebel special operations in Chechnya, but rights campaigners dismissed the move as an empty propaganda step. (...)

STAVROPOL REGION / REGION DE STAVROPOL

04/22/02 - Armenian and Greek diaspora in Russian Caucasus set up self-defence squads - RIA news agency

The Stavropol Territory Main Directorate for Internal Affairs told RIA that, worried by media reports that skinheads might be planning to attack them, the Armenian and Greek communities armed themselves with sticks and chains and went out onto the streets of Yessentuki, Kislovodsk and Pyatigorsk over the weekend. Fortunately, no skinheads were about and no bloodshed ensued. The only casualty was an automobile which over-excited "self-defence groups" overturned. There is no information about who owned the vehicle. The police have initiated a criminal damage case against the hooligans who damaged the car

NAGORNO KARABAKH / HAUT KARABAGH

03/01/02 - OSCE Minsk group co-chairs ' new proposals are not follow-up to key-west principles - Arminfo

The OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs' new proposals are not a follow-up to the "Key-West principles," Azeri President Haydar Aliiev said upon returning from the U.S.. (...) Aliiev evaded the question whether American military men may come to Azerbaijan just like they did in the case of the Pankisi Gorge (Georgia). (...) Commenting on Tehran's tough position on the development of oil

fields in the Caspian Sea, Aliiev said Iran may have its own claims. Answering the question whether Azerbaijan will support the U.S. if the latter launches an anti-terror operation against Iran, Aliiev said one should first wait until such an operation is launched.

03/06/02 - US mediator says Karabakh not drug transit point - Arminfo

The US cochairman of the OSCE Minsk Group, Rudolf Perina, has rejected reports that the territory controlled by the liberation army of the Nagorny Karabakh Republic [NKR] might be used for drug trafficking.(...)

03/11/02 - OSCE Minsk group chiefs meet with Nagorno Karabakh leader - ITAR-TASS

Nagorno-Karabakh is a reality causing a serious influence on the situation in the region and without taking into account the opinion of its authorities and people it would be impossible to achieve a lasting peace, the co- chairmen of the OSCE Minsk group for the Karabakh settlement said .(...) The OSCE Minsk group leaders told Gukasian they were prepared to exert efforts to normalize relations between the conflicting parties and to resume the negotiating process in the full format. The visiting officials welcomed the democratization of internal political life in Nagorno Karabakh and offered assistance in presenting Nagorno-Karabakh's position to other parties concerned and international organizations. The negotiators agreed that ignoring the existing configuration of the negotiating process may make a settlement of the conflict a more remote possibility.

03/15/02 - Land mine casualties increase among adults in Karabakh - Arminfo

The statistics on land mine casualties prove the effectiveness of the programmes in the Nagorny Karabakh Republic (NKR), the chairman of the NKR state committee on land mines, Mels Akopadzhanyan, said at a round table discussion on land mines in Stepanakert.

He said that there had been no casualties in the last four years among children. At the same time

the rise in casualties among adults, due to the careless handling of discovered ammunition and explosives, is disturbing, Akopadzhanian stressed.(...)

03/15/02 - State levying war to lose it, Armenian President Robert Kocharian Stated - Arminfo

Now it is definitely clear: the state levying war will lose it. President Robert Kocharian stated this to the "France-press" agency, while commenting the possible military settlement of the conflict. (...) A the same time the President said that Nagorno Karabakh had never been a part of the sovereign Republic of Azerbaijan and there was no legal basis for such a decision. (...)

03/19/02 - Opposition slams OSCE offer - AzerNews

The new OSCE proposals have triggered public outcry in Azerbaijan, as major opposition parties castigated OSCE approaches towards the peace process.

In a statement, the Garabagh Liberation Organization (GLO), an opposition-minded entity, opposed the change of the existing format of peace talks for the resolution of the Garabagh conflict, rejecting any negotiations with the puppet regime masterminded by Armenia in Upper Garabagh.

Earlier last week, the GLO filed an ultimatum to the OSCE chairman for Armenias being recognized as aggressor. The statement assessed the trip of the OSCE head Jaime Gama and the Minsk Group negotiators as 'another plot against Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty'. (...)The Azerbaijan people should depend on its forces and will, reject international meditation, especially the services of the OSCE Minsk Group, and say no to the incumbent authorities".The leading block of opposition parties, Democratic Congress-1, slammed the Minsk Group for what they believe are ignoring international principles.

03/23/02 - Massacre of Armenians in Shushi in 1920 is nothing but Genocide - Arminfo

The massacre of Armenians in Shushi in 1920 is nothing but a genocide, Chairman of the

parliamentary Commission for Foreign Relations of Karabakh, Vahram Atanesyan, said at a press-conference today. He said the massacre was perpetrated by Azerbaijan with the support of the Turkish expeditionary corps. (...) Atanesyan said Mar 23 1920 was the climax of the anti-Armenian campaign of 1918-1920 - hundreds of Shushi-Armenians were killed and deported.(...) Chairman of the parliamentary Financial and Budgetary Commission of Karabakh Mayor Danielyan, representing Shushi in parliament, said his commission was going to raise the issue for recognizing Mar 23 as the Day of the Massacre of Armenians in Shushi.

03/26/02 - Karabakh President meets with French officials - RFE/RL

Arkadii Ghukasian, the president of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic who is on a private visit to France, met in Paris on 22 March with French Foreign Ministry officials to discuss the prospects for resolving the Karabakh conflict, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. (...)

INGUSHETIA / INGOUCHIE

04/09/02 - Ingushetia Presidential Poll Goes Into Runoff -AP

The controversial race for the Ingush presidency will be decided by a runoff after none of the eight contenders managed to collect the 50 percent plus one vote needed to win the first round of voting.(...) The runoff will be held between Alikhan Amirkhanov, Ingushetia's representative in the State Duma, who won 33 percent of the vote Sunday, and Kremlin-backed FSB General Murat Zyazikov, who garnered 19 percent of the vote(...). The election campaign has been dogged by mutual recriminations and courtroom scandals, culminating last week in a decision by the Supreme Court to oust Khamzat Gutseriyev, the candidate backed by former Ingush President Ruslan Aushev, from the race. Political analysts said that the move reflected the intervention of the Kremlin, which they say has tried to sideline Aushev and his allies in an attempt to put its own man in charge

of the sensitive region neighboring Chechnya.(...) Alexander Veshnyakov, head of the Central Elections Commission, told Interfax on Monday that the second round must be held by April 28. Veshnyakov also said that despite "strong political tension," the election in Ingushetia went ahead without significant violations.

04/24/02 - Ingushetia : Ruslan Aushev Resigns In Protest - The Independent Information Centre Glasnost

Former Ingush republic leader Ruslan Aushev has publicly resigned from his post as Deputy of the Federation Council, complaining of the lack of progress in the settlement of the Ingush - North Ossetia conflict. In Aushev's words, the Federation Council hasn't done enough to solve the problem. He also added that the upper chamber of the Russian parliament should have at least tried to solve the current deadlock in Chechnya where servicemen and peaceful civilians continue to exist under conditions of neither peace nor war. He also accused his colleagues of doing nothing to help Chechnya refugees, who are living in appalling conditions.

04/29/02 - Election results in Ingushetia - AP

A Kremlin-backed security agent has been elected president of the restive southern Russian republic of Ingushetia, the main refuge for those fleeing the war in next-door Chechnya (...). Murat Zyazikov, a Federal Security Service general backed by President Vladimir Putin's envoy to southern Russia, won 53 percent of the vote in Sunday's runoff election, (...) Alikhan Amirkhanov, a member of the Russian parliament, won 42 percent. Four percent of voters cast ballots against both candidates (...). Despite high tensions in the region, no violence or major violations were reported. (...) Ingushetia has absorbed hundreds of thousands of refugees from Russia's military campaign in Chechnya over the past two and a half years. Many live in dilapidated tent camps and survive on humanitarian aid. Several thousand refugees who are registered with Ingush authorities were allowed to vote in the election.

KRASNODAR REGION / REGION DE KRASNODAR

04/04/02 - Meskhetians face yet another deportation - Armenian News Network

Last month the leadership of Krasnodar Krai tightened residence requirements for the region in a move that human rights organizations fear may lead to pressure for the deportation of an estimated 13,000 Meskhetians who settled in Krasnodar after being evacuated from the Ferghana Valley in 1989 to escape violence at the hands of local Uzbeks.

"Vremya novostei" reported on 2 April that two Meskhetian families have already been forced to leave the village of Nizhnebakanskaya. The paper quoted one local human rights activist as saying that the krai government is deliberately escalating the conflict between local Cossacks and Meskhetians. (Krasnodar Krai Governor Aleksandr Tkachev has been quoted as affirming that "Krasnodar is Cossack land.") But krai officials insist they are simply implementing the federal government's directive on combating illegal immigration. That argument fails to convince, however, insofar as most of the Meskhetians hold Soviet passports and settled in Krasnodar prior to the demise of the USSR(...)

04/16/02 - Latvian Nationals Raise Deportation Question- The Independent Information Centre Glasnost

The leader of Latvian National Front Aivars Gardas has addressed a letter to Krasnodar Region Gov. A. Tkachev regarding his plans to repatriate one million Russian-speaking residents of Latvia. Gardas cited Governor Tkachev's recent interview in which he spoke in favor of deportation of illegal immigrants from the region, mainly Armenians and Turks. Gardas said Latvia also has about one million illegal Russian immigrants and that the majority of Latvian nationals were in favor of their deportation. Gardas expressed hope in his letter that both "Russian and Latvian people could cooperate in their desire to live on their ethnic land without the intrusion of hostile aliens."

04/18/02 - Armenian Graves Profaned In Krasnodar's City Graveyard - PanARMENIAN.Net

The graves of the Armenians buried in Krasnodar's city graveyard were profaned on April 17. Gravestones of 30 Armenian graves were destroyed completely or partly. As representatives of the local Armenian community think skinheads, who were inspired to do this deed of vandalism by the policy carried out by Kuban's authorities, did this. As it is known the administration of Krasnodar Territory has an aim to deport all the migrants and as it is known there are many Armenians among them. The action regarding this barbaric deed is brought. The police is not going to consider this action as something turned to Armenians especially as there are Gypsy and Russian graves among the defiled ones. The governor of Krasnodar Territory Alexander Tkachev in connection with this graveyard incident has stated «he will not allow to sow international discord under the pretext of the campaign on deportation of illegal migrants».

04/19/02 - Russian officials share the concern of Armenian party on the situation in Krasnodar region - ARKA

Russian officials share the concern of Armenian party on the situation in Krasnodar region,... this was stated by Vyacheslav Trubnikov, RF first deputy minister of foreign affairs and Sergey Prihodko, RF president press-office head. Both collocutors assured that RF authorities do everything possible to stop vandalism. Note that some 50 Armenian graves were destroyed yesterday in a Slavonic graveyard of the Krasnodar region. (...) Some cases of violent deportation, of Armenian citizens as well, have been registered. Note that earlier Alexander Tkachev stated to Moscovskie Novosti that "there are more than million Armenians in the Krasnodar region. Plus turkish, gypsies, tadjiks, georgians and others. We will increase the penalty for the registration absence up to 6 thousands rubles and will look at the end of the last names. Last names that ends of "yan", "dze", "shvili" or "ogly" are illegal just as their owners".

04/23/02 - Krasnodar : Protest Against Governor's National Policy - The Independent Information Centre Glasnost

About a dozen prominent public figures have signed an appeal to President Putin, protesting the national policy of Governor Tkachev, who is denying the basic rights of Armenians, Turks, Kurds and Gypsies and harassing those people belonging to non-Orthodox denominations. The authors also noted that a negative role is played by the local media, which creates a negative image of the immigrants.

JAVAKHK / JAVAKHK

02/28/02 - Georgia's constitution must reflect Javakhk autonomy, ARF official says - ArmenPress News Agency

The recent political developments in Georgia promoted the vice chairman of the parliament's standing commission on foreign affairs Armen Rustamian Wednesday to urge that the autonomy of Javakhk be incorporated into the Georgian constitution.

During a press conference, Rustamian said that according to its constitution Georgia is already a federation. "There are already three 'subjects' (regions) that have asserted their position (as autonomous entities within the federation), thus there would be nothing wrong to accept the will of the people of Javakhk, who find it an imperative to become an administrative unit within Georgia's constitution," said Rustamian.

The parliamentary leader emphasized that such a categorization does not signify separatism, since that issue has never been discussed nor, in his opinion, it should become a topic of discussion. He clarified by saying that the aforementioned variable would mean that Javakhk will become an autonomous self-governing unit within Georgia. "As to how that autonomy will work, that must be determined within the framework of the Georgian constitution, based on ability and Georgia's responsibilities within the international community," explained Rustamian. (...) Rustamian added that the current tensions in Georgia signal that issues and problems with its citizens have never been

discussed and a lengthy evaluation is an imperative in resolving this crisis, in order to ensure that outside forces do not take advantage of instability in Georgia, an aspect which would not benefit Armenia.(...)

03/15/02 - Turkey plots large-scale provocation in Georgia, Russian agency claims - Azg

"Turkish special services are planning a large-scale provocations in Georgia's regions with predominantly Armenian population," a Moscow-based Caspian News agency reported, citing sources in Russia's capital. "Taking advantage of internal weakness of Georgia, Turkey strives to reinforce its military and political presence in the South Caucasus," the source was quoted by the agency as saying. The provocation in the region of Javakheti, designed by Turkish special services is expected to sharply aggravate Georgian-Armenian relations on the one hand and Georgian-Russian relations on the other hand. This, according to the scheme, must lead to increase of pressure by the USA on Russia and withdrawal of the latter's troops from Georgia. The next step in the Turkish plan is inciting Georgian-Armenian military clash. Following this the region of Samtskhe-Javakheti with the active participation of USA would be declared as "the zone of international responsibility, the security of which should be ensured by Turkish troops. The Moscow source claimed that according to Ankara's plans, by 2003 the region would have no more Armenian population and would a protectorate of Turkey.

03/19/02 - Georgia to ensure the security of Georgian-Armenians ? - AZG Armenian Daily

'Turkish nation has the courage to recognize the committed tragic step'- said Georgian parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze. According to A-info news agency, Mrs. Burjanadze made the above statement at the meeting with representatives of Akhalkalak's Armenian community, when answering a question on intentions of Georgian parliament to recognize the 1915 Armenia Genocide.

Nino Burjanadze also said that the problems of Javakhk are similar to those that the whole country faces. She particularly distinguished the issue of roads, and stressed that all the roads must be reconstructed. It will take a long time, but the works should start and the process will be given a serious impetus to.

The chairman of Georgian parliament assured that nobody expects American troops in Georgia, at the same time confirming that Georgian-American military cooperation is a must.

Concerning the withdrawal of Russian military bases, Burjanadze said that in case the bases are pulled out Georgia will ensure the security of Armenian population of Samtskhe-Javakhk.

'Georgia is a state and it has to ensure the security of its citizens, irrespective of their national belonging',- said Mrs. Burjanadze.

03/28/02 - Agence France Presse

(...) when, as the Georgian government insists they must, the Russians pull out from Akhalkalaki, many warn it could lift the lid on ethnic tensions that have been simmering beneath the surface here for a century.

"I'll say this, it's an explosive situation," said one Georgian official who did not want to be named. "It's one of those ethnic time-bombs left behind from the Soviet Union." Akhalkalaki, cut off from the rest of Georgia by a mountain range, depends on the base for its economic survival (...).

There is no industry in the town, and the wages paid to the 1,500 local people who work at the base are the only reliable income most families get. The Russian servicemen also bring in goods and money.(...)

On the face of it, the problems facing Akhalkalaki once the Russians pull out are purely economic. In reality they run much deeper.

Ethnic Armenians make up some 96 percent of the town's 12,000 population, many having fled to southern Georgia from the Ottoman Empire's programs against Armenians at the start of the 20th century.

They trust the Russian garrison to defend them from Turkey, whose northern border is just 35 kilometres (20 miles) away and which they still fear. They have no such faith in the Georgian military doing the job when the Russians are gone.

"For us the Russians mean peace. They are our guarantee of security," said Nurik Deboyen, deputy head of the Akhalkalaki town council.

"What will happen if the Russians leave? We have to consider that even today (Turkey) has not acknowledged the genocide. That means there is something there, doesn't it?"

Further fuelling the tension, local people fear that the so-called Meskhetian Turks, deported from their homes in the region by Stalin, will be invited to resettle there by the Georgian government, displacing the Armenian population.

The government in Armenia is sufficiently concerned about its countrymen in Akhalkalaki to have raised the issue several times with the Georgian government. (...)

In response to this pressure, the Georgian government has promised a programme of investment to create new jobs in the town after the Russian army withdraws.

"We are taking measures so that the removal of the Russian base is as painless as possible," said Teimuraz Mosiashvili, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze's representative in the region. (...)

04/04/02 - Georgia Drafts Development Plan For Javakhk - ASBAREZ ONLINE

Georgian authorities have drafted a comprehensive strategic plan for development of southern Samtskhe-Javakhk province that has a predominately Armenian population. Gia Nodia, director of Peace, Democracy and Development Institute in Tbilisi, a co-author of the plan, was quoted by the Georgian Prime News agency saying that the plan allows for overcoming political and economic problems that may emerge after the pull out of the Russian military base, located in the province, that gives jobs to several thousand local inhabitants. Nodia said the plan may start this year, provided that sponsors from UN and OSCE help implement the ideas of the plan.

The strategy envisages business development and integration of the region with the rest of Georgia, teaching of Georgian language and retransmission of Georgian TV channels for the region.

04/05/02 - Mediamax news agency

Armenian Prime Minister Andranik Markaryan today expressed concern

at the fate of the Armenians of Javakheti [Samtskhe-Javakheti region in southern Georgia] and Abkhazia in a meeting with the chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, Lt-Gen Joni Pirtskhalaishvili.

As Mediamax news agency has learnt from Armenian governmental press service, Markaryan expressed his hope that "the Georgian authorities will not allow certain political forces to destabilize the situation and create new hotbeds of tension, and that, if necessary, they will take decisive steps."

"Armenia is interested in establishing goodneighbourly relations with all its neighbours. We want to see Georgia as a strong, stable and economically developed country," the prime minister said.

Andranik Markaryan stressed that Armenia and Georgia had to solve the problems first of all with their own resources.

04/09/02 - Mediamax

The newly appointed chairman of the Javakhk national movement, Norik Karapetyan, stated that the granting of self-government status to Javakheti will provide an investment influx to the region, "under the current circumstances, the representatives of the Armenian Diaspora are not given any guarantee by the Georgian authorities."

Norik Karapetyan stated that the Javakhk national movement has to restore its previous role and ability to influence the developments in Javakheti and the surrounding area. Speaking about the forthcoming local government election in Georgia, Norik Karapetyan said that the members of the Javakhk national movement by taking an active part will not allow it to be "deviated" from the right path.

04/15/02 - Armenians in Javakhk reiterate demands for autonomy - ArmenPress News Agency

Representatives of Armenian ethnic organizations in Javakhk [...] reconfirmed last week their pro-Russian orientation, stressing the role of the Russian base there as a guarantee of their national security. The move came as a response to a report by Gia Nodia, director of a Tbilisi-based Caucasian Institute for Peace and Democracy, by which he was trying to substantiate Georgia's pro-Western drive.

Nodia made the remarks during a two-day seminar in the administrative center of Javakhk Akhalkalaki, organized by the Caucasian Institute to discuss Georgia's foreign policy and the problems of Javakhk.

Armenian members of the seminar were quoted by the local A-Infonews agency as saying that granting the Armenian populated region autonomy status will create legal basis for resolution of many problems by self means.

Another official from Tbilisi pointed out the shortcomings in the Georgian legislation on local self-management bodies election, which actually keeps local Armenians away from electing their leader in addition to very limited frame of rights granted to local self-management bodies.

04/23/2002 - Armenian Organization to Change Name to Seek Registration - Armenpress

The Armenian ethnic organization "Virk," acting in the Georgian province of Javakhk is going to change the Armenian name to Georgian "Zarri" (Bell) within a month and hold a founding congress to declare itself as an all-country political organization. Until now the Georgian justice ministry has denied the organization's three registration attempts on grounds that it was a local organization and that its Armenian name was not clear to the majority of population. The leader of "Virk" David Restikian said in an interview with the Prime News agency that this decision was adopted by the organization's ruling board last Saturday. The leader said the appropriate documents will be sent to justice ministry to make the new organization eligible to run for the June 2nd elections to local management bodies.

04/27/02 - Separatist movement in south a threat to Georgia says paper - Dilis Gazeti

(...)The hard, and virtually unbearable socioeconomic situation, devastated infrastructure, lack of objective and comprehensive information about the processes in Georgia (the local population has not had access to the Georgian-language media for the past 10 years) and, most importantly, an utter indifference to the region's problems create favourable conditions for reinforcing and

intensifying separatism, says independent expert in Caucasus issues Mamuka Areshidze.

Guram Sharadze, a member of the Georgian Parliament, too, has expressed his concern over the likely exacerbation of the situation in Javakheti. In his opinion, the present fragile and illusory stability in Javakheti is likely to fall apart should the resettlement of the so-called Meskhetian Turks (...)

Armenians began to speak about separatism in Javakheti in 1991. It was this very year that the first serious incident occurred, when a group of armed local Armenians refused to let the prefects appointed by then Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia into the region. Later, the unification of Meskheti and Javakheti into one administrative unit became another reason for the Armenians' discontent. Javakhk leaders regarded this decision as an attempt to artificially balance the demographic picture of the region. As is known, in contrast to the Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda districts (historical Javakheti), Georgians constitute the majority of population in Aspindza and Akhaltsikhe (historical Meskheti), which has accounted for the fall of the share of the Armenian population in the unified Samtskhe-Javakheti region. Since 1991, no Georgian troops or military formations, except for a few dozen Georgian border guards who control the border between Turkey and Georgia, have crossed the administrative border of this predominantly Armenian-populated Georgian region.

Before the 1999 parliament election, a relatively radical branch of Javakhk founded a political party, Virk. ("Virk" means "Georgia" in old Armenian.) The founders and leaders of Virk hoped that if they were successful in the future election, they would manage to establish Javakheti as a legal independent political unit within Georgia. However, the Georgian authorities refused to register Virk as a political organization.

At present, up to 10,000 active members are united within Javakhk and a relatively new political union (formerly Virk). A semi-militarized organization, (?Parvents), which is functioning in the region, is also very influential.(...)It is suspected that fighters of the notorious terrorist organization ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of

Armenia), too, are feeling quite safe and secure in Javakheti. (...)

According to the Georgian Minister of Security Valeri Khaburdzania, the Georgian security has complete information about the forces pushing the Armenian population in Samtskhe-Javakheti towards destabilization. According to the minister, the situation is under control and no complications are expected in the near future. However, the chairman of the Georgian Parliament Defence and Security Committee Gia Baramidze is confident that Russia will invariably attempt to take advantage of the Armenian separatism in Javakheti to exert influence on Georgia. Mamuka Areshidze does not rule out the possibility of Russia carrying out acts of provocation of a military nature. If the point of confrontation were reached, Armenians would not have to go far to get arms. The Akhalkalaki military base No 62 is certainly not short of weapons (...), what is left is sufficient to jeopardize Georgia's integrity in Javakheti.

In contrast to Georgia, Armenia has a mighty army, too, which is hardly likely to remain indifferent to the processes in Javakheti.

Despite the fact that Armenia's economy is in a deplorable condition, military expenditure has still been rising year after year. In 1999, the defence spending totalled 79m dollars, while in 2000, the spending was 92m. This amount increased by another 10m by 2001 (in comparison, the Georgian army budget is 36m lari [about 17m dollars] at present). The Armenian army assets look quite impressive, too. Some 120 T-72 tanks, 228 armoured vehicles, 225 units of artillery equipment, 22 helicopters and seven fighter aircraft are granting the Armenian army the status of a force to be reckoned with. As is known, the Georgian authorities pin great hopes on the oil and gas pipelines that are to run across Georgia in the future. No doubt, given the situation where the Georgian army's annual funding is 36m lari, the army will find it very hard to protect either Georgia's territorial integrity or the pipelines.

DOCUMENTS

03/01/02 - US Presence in Georgia Eyed by Russian International Affairs Experts - Moscow Rossiyskaya Gazeta

In Moscow "there is justified concern that the direct involvement of American servicemen in combating terrorists on Georgian territory could further complicate the situation in the region."

According to ITAR-TASS, Russian Federation Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said this during a telephone conversation with US Secretary of State Colin Powell. "Washington should take this into account," he told his US counterpart, stressing that events in the Caucasus region directly affect Russia's interests, and that Russia is far from indifferent to the direction in which they develop." Powell "noted the Russian side's concern and gave assurances that it would be taken into account," the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

We asked international affairs experts to comment on the situation in Georgia.

Viktor Kremenyuk, Deputy Director of United States and Canada Institute:

We are dealing with things that it is hard to argue with. First, it is a demonstration of the independence of Georgia and of Georgian policy from Moscow.

The second thing is that it is a continuation of what was started in Afghanistan. If the Americans have gone into Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, one cannot help asking why they shouldn't go into Georgia. After all, we did not object to their going into Central Asia.

The third thing that it is also very hard to argue with is that, in the final analysis, everything is in Russia's interests. After all, the Americans are planning to conduct hostilities against the Chechens. The fact that they are planning to do this without us is another matter.

However, the essence of the problem is clear: Everything taking place is a challenge to Russia. Indeed, American subunits are suddenly being sent into a country bordering on Russia with which we

have much in common and are conducting operations there, whereas Russia has repeatedly offered its help to Georgia, which refused outright even to discuss the matter.

Alongside this there is a factor that people are trying not to talk about, although it does exist. The situation reminds us that things are going very badly in Chechnya, despite the president's statement about growing consolidation. There is no denying that the opposing side has not been crushed.

The fact that a military operation is now going to be conducted in a neighboring state is a reminder that Russia has not finished its "homework." We were left untouched for almost two years; although we were criticized, we were given the opportunity to sort everything out there quickly, but this was not done. Now another stage is beginning, linked to the stepping up of the antiterrorist operation, and we are annoyed that the United States is going to act against the Chechen separatists without Russia.

As a realistic politician, President Putin, unlike Yeltsin, knows what is possible and what is not. He does not want annoying episodes to cause damage. Good relations with the United States are more important to us. It would be foolish to complicate them on the eve of Bush's visit to Moscow. I believe the Americans themselves agree with this.

Sergey Shishkarev, deputy chairman of the Russian Federation State Duma International Affairs Committee:

At first sight, the Americans' "good" intention of eliminating once and for all the hotbeds of international terrorism looks pretty convincing and to a certain extent beneficial to Russia.

First, Georgia has indirectly not only admitted the seriousness of the problem of the Pankisi Gorge as a refuge for Chechen and international terrorists but also acknowledged its own incapability of resolving it. Second, Russia theoretically is obtaining another real opportunity -- following the US military operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan -- of resolving its own problems with American help and, if not of dealing

the final blow to the gunmen and terrorists in Chechnya, then at least of depriving them of additional room for maneuver and a major supply of weapons and money from a neighboring country.

However, in reality the situation is far bleaker for us. The Russian Foreign Ministry's belated response, expressing dissatisfaction with the Americans' excessively "imperious" behavior in former Soviet republics, is unlikely to be received favorably by the United States, let alone by Georgia, which has already declined a Russian peacekeeping contingent's help in fighting the terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge and which is making increasingly insistent demands for the urgent closure of the Russian military bases on its territory.

I repeat: In order to fully dominate the post-Soviet area, the United States needs a military presence in the Caucasus, and the best pretext for this is the fight against unlawful armed formations. Preparations are already under way in Georgia for NATO Partnership for Peace exercises, applications to take part in which were received from all the states of the South Caucasus, including Armenia.

Painful though it may be to admit it, Russia, having abandoned the idea of collective elaboration of policy in the post-Soviet area, is now reaping the bitter fruits of this decision.

04/09/02 - Tbilisi to blame for ethnic Armenian "separatism" - Iravunk

(...) Political analysts attentively watching the development of the new geopolitical-political situation formed in our region have come to the conclusion that the Russian military base in Akhalkalak (...) is an indicator of Russia's presence in the Transcaucasus: if the Russians leave Akhalkalak, they will leave the Transcaucasus as a whole.

Javakhhk is gradually coming into focus in the geopolitical struggle.

The most important communications of the West, more specifically the routes of transportation of mineral resources used as sources of power, will pass via this region or neighbouring areas, because the West is interested in maintaining stability in this region.

However this is Javakhhk with its dangerously explosive social and

economic situation, compactly populated by efficient people who can force Tbilisi to change the authority of the region, or push back [former Georgian President Zviad] Gamsakhurdia's group of robbers, who were recently trying to establish "law and order" in the Armenian region.

They understand this danger in Yerevan as well as in Tbilisi and interested Western countries. The provision of stability in Javakhhk is extremely significant for the authorities of Armenia. Yerevan does not need a second Karabakh. Armenian Defence Minister Serzh Sarkisyan announced recently in parliament that "the launching of military actions on the territory of Georgia may lead to a resumption of such actions in the entire region, particularly Nagorny Karabakh, which is not in the interests of Yerevan."

As we already mentioned, Western oil companies are also interested in maintaining stability in Javakhhk, as they do not intend to abandon their expensive programmes. Official Tbilisi also seems to be interested in maintaining the peace - Georgia does not need a fourth flashpoint on its territory, which could finally bury the unstable Georgian state.

On the other hand, we have the impression that official Tbilisi is doing everything it can to provoke the displeasure of the Armenians of Javakhhk. The press has lately been hysterically accusing the Armenians of Javakhhk of separatism, chauvinism and attacking Georgia's integrity. But it is clear that official Tbilisi is primarily to blame for Armenian "separatism".

Official Tbilisi is today conducting the same policy in Javakhhk that Turkey conducted in Western Armenia in 1914-20: in the direction of an artificial change of the situation in the Armenian regions. The calculation is clear: in the event of a referendum, the Armenians will hardly achieve their goal, especially as there is emigration from Javakhhk. The same Turkish policy is applied to the economic development of the region.

The advisor to the Armenian prime minister, member of the Armenian-Georgian inter-governmental commission, deputy chairman of the Mighty Homeland Party [Hzor Ayrenik] Stepan Markaryan noted in a talk with us that at least two members of every Armenian family in Javakhhk were working in Russia. There are no jobs in the region,

except the police and the administrative sector. The mechanisms of a feudal economy are flourishing - the so-called natural economy - people can even get a piano in exchange for a potato, as thanks to the fraternal authorities of Georgia people have forgotten such concepts as "salary".

According to Mr Markaryan, there are no opportunities for business. "Javakhhk is an agrarian region. But in the territory which produces very high-quality agricultural produce, there are no mechanisms by which the Armenians of Javakhhk can sell their products. Georgia's problem in Javakhhk is explained in this way.

"A village resident almost does not feel presence of the state. How is the Georgian state represented in Javakhhk? Of course, there is a police force which deals with its specialized activity. But a state cannot be represented only by the police. A state should assist the people, be interested in its problems, settle them. The tension is mainly linked to this problem.

"Social displeasure, connected to accumulated and unresolved problems, is finally turning into a political protest. In these conditions someone suddenly mentions autonomy, by which many problems will be settled. The Georgian press is particularly making passions run high and deepening the crisis by publishing hysterical articles on 'Armenian separatism'.

"But there is no separatist movement in Javakhhk. Even during Gamsakhurdia's tenure Javakhhk was the most peaceful region of Georgia and was not putting forward separatist demands. They have always been talking about autonomy, they thought that such a mechanism many problems could be settled," said Stepan Markaryan said.

He said that the problems besetting the Armenians of Javakhhk were raised almost throughout Georgia, but in case of the Armenians this was seen as separatism". The second reason for the Tbilisi-Javakhhk tension is the Russian military base in Akhalkalak. The Georgian authorities believe that the Russian military base is a factor of instability. The Armenian population, on the contrary, believe that it promotes stability. Besides, 1,600 Armenians work at the Russian military base, and according to Mr Markaryan, this is also an important economic factor, especially as many substructures in Javakhhk are

connected with the military base. "The people of Javakhk are also convinced that Russian soldiers are protecting them from Turkey, and the people living in this region is not ready to see Turkish soldiers," Mr Markaryan said.

In the most peaceful region of Georgia official Tbilisi is looking for chimeras of "separatism", whereas it is simply necessary to pay serious attention to the social problems of the people.

"Russian troops will not leave Georgia," Russian Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov said recently. According to information which is being clarified, the command of the Russian military base in Akhalkalak has confirmed that Russian troops would not leave the region until the social and economic problems of the Armenian population were settled.

The chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, Joni Pirtskhalaishvili, who recently visited Yerevan, said at a press conference that Georgia would take all necessary measures to provide the 1,600 Armenians working for the Russian military base with jobs. In another words, so the Russians can leave Akhalkalak. With such views Pirtskhalaishvili is evidently in disharmony with Sergey Ivanov's statement.

We hope that in the near future we shall know who will provide security for the Armenians of Javakhk and its social and economic development. Of course, if the Georgian side does not suddenly discover Usamah Bin Ladin's cousin in Javakhk.

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