

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'ÉDITEUR

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

AZERBAIJAN

Alarming news about the systematic destruction of the Joulfa Armenian cemetery in Nakhitchevan, currently in Azerbaijan, went nearly unnoticed to international organizations. There is proof that this is not a case of vandalism but is a programmed destruction of this XIIIth century armenian heritage. At the beginning of the XXth century, before the region was attached to Azerbaïdjan by Stalin, the cemetery included nearly 12000 sculpted stone crosses (« Khatchkars »). These Khatchkars are masterpieces of Armenian medieval art. With the programmed expulsion of the Armenian population during the soviet era, the number of Khatchkars went down to less than 2000. These last 2000 World Heritage monuments have just disappeared, in total lack of interest by the international community for these barbarous activities, for which Azerbaijan used its states logistics. A first attempt to annihilate these unique monuments was prevented by pressure from the international community on Azerbaijan in 1998. This time it seems that it is too late to save even the smallest fraction of this heritage. One could call upon international organisations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, to carry

out sanctions against Azerbaijan for its cultural crimes. These crimes remind us of the destruction of the statues of Buddha carried out by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The international community remained silent on this issue, but the American State Department's Democracy and Human Rights Bureau denounced in a report the arrest and persecution of « non-traditional » religious minority members. Non-traditional religious minorities include Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Molokans, Adventists, Evangelists and others, traditional religions in this country being Islam, Orthodoxy and Judaism. The State Department's report shows proof that the state committee in charge of religious organizations, which is supposed to protect the rights of all believers, does not act against the persecution of the members of these religious minorities by the authorities.

ARMENIA

The murder of Tigran Naghdalian, president of Armenian Public Television, on December 29th 2002, was a shock for armenian public opinion. Politicians unanimously considered the murder of the famous journalist to be politically motivated, and resemblance with the 1999 parliament killings was put forward. After the parliament attack, president Kotcharian's opponents had asked for Naghdalian's resignation (Naghdalian was considered to be close to the president). After having been cleared, Naghdalian was not fired : he was promoted to president of the board of directors of Public Television.

Two months before the presidential elections for which Kotcharian is the uncontested

favorite, the murder of a prominent figure of Armenian press could, if not destabilize the country, at least consolidate the idea that, since the independence, Armenia has seen a number of murders of figureheads. Some of these murders remain unresolved.

Since Kotcharian came to power in 1998, observers have been satisfied with the liberalization of Armenian politics. If nothing is done to find and prosecute the assassins, the murder of the journalist will inevitably be put on the president's record.

Only a few days before Naghdalian's murder, Parliament had approved the penal code reform, with a restriction for death penalty for paedophile and terrorist murder cases. The Council of Europe had required that Armenia comply, before June 2003, with its commitment to abolish death penalty. It seems that the final decision to abolish death penalty will be pushed back to after the election period (February 2003 for the presidential elections and May 2003 for the parliamentary elections).

ABKHAZIA

The UN Security Council session devoted to the Abkhaz conflict held on December 9th did not succeed in creating a consensus on the way to restart the peace process. The document entitled « Basic Principles for a Distribution of Competencies Between Tbilissi and Sukhumi », presented by the UN, was accepted by Georgia but refused by Abkhazia according to the 1999 referendum on the independence of Abkhazia.

Three recent events may push back an Abkhaz agreement to this document :

- Russia interrupting its support for the project
- A new proposal for « confidence building » measures, made by the Ajar president, Aslan Abashidze, which has the Russian authorities' approval and focuses on economic aspects, starting with the reopening of the Russia-Tbilissi railway which goes through Abkhazia and reaches Armenia
- The questions raised by the sudden sacking of the Abkhaz Prime Minister, Anri Jergenia, who, some analysts suggested, was on the verge of making major concession to Georgia over Abkhazia future

statues within the « asymmetrical federation » of Georgia.

RESUMES

AZERBAÏDJAN

Des informations alarmantes concernant la destruction systématique du cimetière arménien de Joufa dans le Nakhitchevan, actuellement en Azerbaïdjan, sont presque passées inaperçues dans les organisations internationales. Tout concourt à prouver qu'il ne s'agit pas d'actes de vandalisme isolés, mais d'une destruction programmée du patrimoine arménien datant du XIIème siècle. A la veille du rattachement de la région à l'Azerbaïdjan par Staline, au début du Xxème siècle, le cimetière comptait près de 12 000 croix sculptées en pierre, dites « Khatchkars », chefs d'œuvre de l'art médiéval arménien. Avec l'expulsion programmée de la population arménienne pendant la période soviétique, ce nombre a été réduit à moins de 2000, et ce sont ces derniers 2000 monuments, patrimoine de l'Humanité, qui viennent de disparaître dans l'indifférence générale. De toute évidence, cette barbarie culturelle a bénéficié de moyens logistiques de l'état azeri. Une première tentative d'anéantir ces monuments uniques en leur genre avait été déjouée par les pressions de la communauté internationale sur l'Azerbaïdjan en 1998 ; cette fois il semble qu'il soit trop tard pour sauver ne serait - ce qu'une partie infime de ce patrimoine. Reste à demander aux instances internationales telles que l'UNESCO et le Conseil de l'Europe d'appliquer des sanctions à l'encontre de l'Azerbaïdjan pour ces crimes culturels qui ne sont pas sans rappeler la destruction des statues de Bouddha dans l'Afghanistan des Talebans.

Si la communauté internationale est restée silencieuse sur cette affaire, en revanche, le bureau de la Démocratie et des Droits de l'Homme du Département d'état américain a dénoncé dans un rapport les arrestations et la persécution des membres des minorités religieuses « non traditionnelles », à savoir les Catholiques, les Luthériens, les

Baptistes, les Molokans, les Adventistes, les Evangélistes, etc. (les religions traditionnelles étant l'Islam, l'Orthodoxie et le Judaïsme). Le rapport du Département d'état apporte des preuves tangibles pour souligner que dans les faits, le Comité d'état chargé des organisations religieuses, sensé protéger les droits de tous les croyants, n'empêche aucunement les persécutions des membres de ces minorités religieuses par les autorités.

ARMENIE

L'assassinat, le 29 décembre dernier de Tigran Naghdalian, président de la télévision publique d'Arménie, a été un choc pour l'opinion arménienne. La classe politique a été unanime à considérer le meurtre du célèbre journaliste comme un assassinat politique dont on n'a pas manqué d'établir la relation avec la tuerie du Parlement en 1999. En effet, après l'attentat du Parlement, les opposants du Président Kotcharian avaient réclamé la démission de Naghdalian, considéré alors comme un proche du Président. Or, après avoir été innocenté, non seulement Naghdalian n'avait pas été évincé, mais promu président du Conseil d'administration de cette dernière. A deux mois des élections présidentielles dont Kotcharian est le favori incontesté, ce meurtre d'une figure marquante de la presse arménienne est susceptible sinon de déstabiliser le pays, du moins de conforter l'idée que depuis le début de l'indépendance, l'Arménie a connu plusieurs assassinats de personnalités dont un certain nombre est resté non élucidé. Or, depuis l'arrivée au pouvoir de Kotcharian en 1998 la libéralisation de la vie politique avait été accueillie avec satisfaction par les observateurs. L'assassinat d'un journaliste dans ce climat d'impunité qui caractérise l'Arménie figurera forcément au passif du président si de vrais efforts ne sont pas fournis pour trouver les assassins de ce meurtre et les traduire en justice. Quelques jours à peine avant l'assassinat de Naghdalian, le Parlement avait approuvé la réforme du code pénal, avec une réserve relative à l'application de la peine de mort maintenue pour les cas de meurtres terroristes et pédophiles.

Alors que le Conseil de l'Europe exige de l'Arménie de se conformer avant juin 2003 à ses engagements pris en la matière lors de son adhésion en 2001, la décision finale d'abolir la peine de mort semble repoussé à la période post - électorale de février pour les présidentielles et de mai 2003 pour les législatives.

ABKHAZIE

La session à huis clos du Conseil de Sécurité de l'ONU du 9 décembre consacrée au conflit Abkhaz n'a pas réussi à créer un consensus entre les parties sur la manière de relancer le processus de paix. Le document « principes de base pour une redistribution des compétences entre Tbilissi et Sukhumi », présenté par l'ONU, a été accepté par la Géorgie, mais refusé par l'Abkhazie en vertu du référendum sur l'indépendance de l'Abkhazie de 1999.

Il faut noter trois nouveaux développements intervenus depuis peu et susceptibles de repousser l'échéance d'un accord des abkhazes pour ce document :

Il s'agit d'une part du retrait par la Russie de son appui pour ce projet ; d'autre part, d'une nouvelle proposition de mesures pour « bâtir la confiance », faite par le Président adjar, Aslan Abashidze et bénéficiant de l'aval des autorités russes, qui met l'accent sur les moyens économiques, à commencer par la réouverture du chemin de fer de la Russie à Tbilissi, passant par l'Abkhazie et se prolongeant jusqu'en Arménie. Enfin, reste l'incertitude provoquée par la soudaine destitution du Premier Ministre abkhaze, Anri Jergenia, dont certains analystes pensent qu'il aurait accepté de négocier autour de la « fédération asymétrique » proposée par Tbilissi.

DEVELOPPING EVENTS / REVUE DE PRESSE

AZERBAIJAN/AZERBAIDJAN

11/24/02 - More than 6.000 protesters call on Azerbaijan President to resign - Associated Press Worldstream

More than 6,000 opposition protesters took to the streets of the Azerbaijani capital Baku on Sunday to demand that President Geidar Aliev resign.

The protesters said Aliev should step down because of his "inability to free occupied Azerbaijani land seized by Armenians." They were referring to Nagorno-Karabakh, an ethnically Armenian enclave inside Azerbaijan that has been under the control of pro-Armenian forces for most of the past decade.

They also demanded that the government create conditions for free and fair elections, cease pressure on independent media, and release residents of Nardaran, a village outside Baku that has become a flashpoint for anti-government rallies.(.../...)

11/28/02 - Residents of Nardaran Azeri settlement going to give up citizenship - PanArmenian

The residents of Nardaran Azeri settlement have resolved to refuse Azeri citizenship as a sign of protest against the unresolved condition of their social and economic problems and oppression of their countrymen. A number of political parties of Azerbaijan have expressed concern with this. Deputy chairman of the Islamic party of Azerbaijan Rovshan Ahmedli noted that Nardaran residents had appealed to various international bodies asking for asylum. In Ahmedli's opinion, the social problems present in Nardaran are typical not only for the mentioned settlement: almost all of the regions of the country are in a hard situation. "Thus, the only way out of the created situation is resignation of the present authorities," - Ahmedli concluded.

11/29/02 - Azeri police arrest imam for sedition - Ayna

(...)The imam of a mosque in Ganca, Kazim Aliyev, has dreamed of staging a state coup. His plans

were exposed by the law-enforcement bodies. The investigation into the case has already ended but will also be considered by the military court for serious crimes. Participants in the criminal case under Article 278 of the Criminal Code (forcible seizure of power), which will be considered today, are the imam of the Ganca mosque, Kazim Aliyev, who is also known as Salahaddin and members of his group - soldier Huseynbala Aliyev and Ganca residents Ramin Aliyev and Zaur Cafarov.

According to the investigation, Kazim Aliyev, who belongs to the Shafi sect which is a branch of Sunni Islam one of the four orthodox law schools and practised in Zaqatala and Balakan Districts) intended to stage a state coup by creating a religious group and aiming to increase the number of its adherents to 500. He planned to have the constitution amended, seize power and establish an Islamic state in Azerbaijan.

According to the investigation, Aliyev was waiting for a convenient moment to carry out his plans. He thought that the best moment for this end would be if the state was engaged in fighting for Karabakh.

(.../...)

11/30/02 - Azeri illegal residents to be evicted from districts near Moscow after Tajiks - PanArmenian

Azeris illegally residing in districts near Moscow will be evicted after the Tajiks. (...) It is noted that the Azeri embassy has expressed concern over the possible mass evictions of citizens of Azerbaijan. "We hope for the action not to become a source of income for militiamen of the localities near Moscow," - press attache of the embassy Farhad Agamaliyev said. The terms of the next eviction are not reported yet, but the authorities of the districts gave to understand that they "will not calm down until all delinquents are deported".

12/02/02 - Azerbaijan may lose U.S aid within millennium challenge account program due to corruptibility of authorities - PanArmenian

Azerbaijan and Ukraine will hardly be covered by the US Millennium Challenge Account program aiming at contribution to developing

countries in overcoming the social and economic problems experienced by them. As reported by "Arminfo" agency referring to the BBC, this may happen, as in the opinion of the US Department of State the authorities of the aforementioned countries are too much corrupted. According to the data possessed by the radio station, a special fund of \$5 billion is created by US president George W. Bush to realize the program. At the same time, Bush stated that Washington was not going to finance "foreign corrupted administrations" and "the transparency of local authorities' activities and absence of corruption at governmental level" are the main criteria for providing aid within the framework of the program. Within the next two years countries with average annual per capita income not exceeding \$1500 may expect to receive aid.

12/04/02 – Armenian cultural values vandalized and destroyed in Azerbaijan - ArmenPress News Agency

Following reports that Armenian cemeteries in historic Jugha (presently Julfa) in Azerbaijani exclave Nakhichevan, bordering upon Iran are being vandalized, the National Council of Armenians of Nakhichevan has convened a meeting today in Yerevan and called on President of Armenia Robert Kocharian, Catholicos of All Armenians Karekin II, the Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia Aram I, the National Assembly and the Government of Armenia, as well as Diaspora organizations to raise their voice against the cultural genocide committed by Azerbaijan. The Council has also applied to UNESCO asking that an international commission be formed to examine the damaged historical monuments on location, as well as to ask that the Jugha cemetery be turned into an international historical and cultural neutral zone.

The Council said, citing a France-based Country and Culture organization, that a cemetery-church was recently destroyed, witnessed by Iranian border guards on the other bank of the River Arax. The historic cemetery, located 10-km from Julfa (Iran) and across the northern bank of the Arax River, has three hills, each representing different eras from the 12-th to 17-th centuries. (...)

At the beginning of 20-th century, the cemetery in which ancestors of former Nor Jugha Armenians were buried, had some 12,000 khachkars (cross stones). Due to premeditated destruction by the Azeri government, the cemetery now has less than 2000 unique khachkars, most of them vandalized. Apparently the Azeris, who had stopped the vandalism under the pressure of the international community more than five years ago, have decided to complete their initial plan to thoroughly cleanse the site.

12/07/02 – Ukrainian envoy denies Kiev deporting Azeris – Baku Paper Yeni Musavat

The Ukrainian envoy to Azerbaijan, Boris Aleksenko, has denied reports on the deportation of Azeris from this country. Despite the fact that the envoy told a news conference yesterday that the Azeris had not been deported from Ukraine, he explained the reasons for the deportation of some people. The envoy said that he would be grateful to journalists if they investigated the reasons for the deportation of these Azeris from Ukraine. "Let me note that the Azerbaijani embassy's activities in Ukraine are intensive. Even an Azerbaijani Interior Ministry representative is working at the embassy and Ukraine's relevant bodies cooperate with him. The issues regarding Azeris are being examined by both sides." (...)
The Ukrainian diplomat said that his country's cooperation with Armenia was not directed against third states. (...) Let us recall that Ukrainian Defence Minister Volodymyr Shkidchenko is expected to visit Azerbaijan at the beginning of next year and numerous new documents are scheduled to be signed.

12/09/02 – Azerbaijani official downplays editors' complaint of harassment- RFE/RL

Presidential administration official Ali Hasanov told Turan on 7 December he considers the appeals addressed by the Union of Editors to the Council of Europe and the OSCE in connection with a wave of law suits against opposition media outlets "a storm in a teacup." The editors appealed on 4 December to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to intervene on their behalf with the Azerbaijani authorities (see "RFE/RL Newslines,"

5 December 2002). A similar appeal was addressed to OSCE representative for media freedom Freimut Duve on 6 December, Turan reported.

12/09/02 – Azeri expert urges expansion of military ties with Georgia - Bizim Asr

(...) Azerbaijani Defence Minister Col-Gen Safar Abiyev will pay an official visit to Georgia in the second half of December. The sides are expected to sign a bilateral agreement on the expansion of military cooperation between the two countries.

Commenting to Bizim Asr paper on the expected signing of the military agreement between Azerbaijan and Georgia, the head of the Centre for Political Innovations and Technologies, political analyst Mubariz Ahmadoglu, said that such a document would be of significant importance for the national interests of both states. Our nations have reached a strategic level of partnership in terms of bilateral relations, the political expert said, adding that the military cooperation required a special attention. (...) In Ahmadoglu's view, the expansion of the Azerbaijani-Georgian military cooperation meets the interests of the West and the USA. He believes that NATO will provide a comprehensive support to the cooperation between the two South Caucasus states. Moreover, the expert views such a cooperation in the context of maintaining the security of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

12/09/02 – « Christian population of Azerbaijan is subject to repressions » -PanArmenian News

(...)The repressions against religious minorities become tougher in Azerbaijan. Recently the authorities prohibited the activity of the Baptist church on the territory of the country. Concerned with the situation, the Secretary General of the World Baptist Alliance, Denton Lots sent a message to U.S. President George Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and other high-ranking U.S. officials urging them to intervene and to prevent the repressions towards citizens with untraditional for Azerbaijan religion.

The spiritual leader of the Baptist world asks the U.S. political

authorities to make Heydar Aliyev change his policy towards the religious minorities. (.../...)

Not long ago the Bureau on Democracy and Human Rights of the U.S. State Department spread a document where the fact that in Azerbaijan «the members of untraditional religious organizations are being arrested and persecuted» was fixed. The report dedicated to the freedom of religion reads about the hostile attitude of the official Azerbaijan towards the missionary groups and evangelists. It also reads that «the Muslims adopting other religion are being condemned». This concerns first of all the Baptists, among which there are lot of ethnic Azerbaijanis. The document notes that the Baptists are one of the most unprotected religious confessions.

According to the experts of the Department of State, the Azerbaijani force structures put pressure upon the leaders of untraditional religious groups (in this country the untraditional religious groups are the organizations of Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Molokans, Adventists, Evangelists, etc.). The report contains facts proving that the police regularly examine the members of Christian religious organizations. Everyone who practices any religion apart from Islam, Orthodoxy and Judaism is under the control of the special services.

(Only these three religions are considered traditional by the Azerbaijani authorities). The document describes an incident when an employer of law-enforcement structure was dismissed only for being noticed at a Christian ceremony.

The report of the U.S. Department of State emphasizes that the state committee working with religious organizations, which is aimed at protection of the rights of all the believers, in fact does not impede the activity of the authorities persecuting the members of religious minorities. Concrete facts are brought concerning repressions and discrimination towards the representatives of untraditional Christian confessions. Such cases, particularly, where fixed in Baku, Gyandja, Nakhichevan, Sumgait, Khachmaz, Ismailla, Neftchal.

12/12/02 – Azeri Defence Ministry denies cease-fire violation on Armenian Border – Ekho

Yerevan has said that Armenian territory came under artillery fire on the border with Azerbaijan on Monday morning 9 December. Yerevan officials reported this on Tuesday. A detailed report said that an Armenian unit deployed between the villages of Voskevan and Voskepar had been attacked. A 23-year-old soldier was taken to military hospital with serious injuries, the local authorities informed Yerevan. Apart from this, Armenian officials reported, quoting soldiers, about several similar artillery attacks from Azerbaijan, which had been carried out 48 hours before the mentioned incident.

Commenting on the report, the head of the press service of the Azerbaijani Defence Ministry, Col Ramiz Malikov, said yesterday: "The Armenians are lying as always, out of habit."

12/14/02 – « Hundreds injured » as Iranian police, army clash with ethnic Azeris – Azadliq

The mullah regime has assaulted NRMSA members" During a gathering in front of Mammadtagi Zehtabi's grave to mark of the 57th anniversary of the 21 Azar movement in the southern Azerbaijani northwestern Iranian city of Shabustar, the Persian chauvinist security forces, thousands of armed policemen and revolutionary guards launched an armed attack on the participants in the gathering, the Baku office of the National Revival Movement of Southern Azerbaijan (NRMSA) has learned. (...)

When the police failed to disperse the rally after encircling Zehtabi's grave, the authorities sent troops to Shabustar. The action voiced the following slogans: "Down with the reaction!", "Down with Persian chauvinism!", "Down with the dictatorship!", "Long live Azerbaijan!", "Azerbaijan is awakened and backs Cohraqani!", "Russians, Persians and Armenians are enemies of the Turks!" and so on. (...) An information and international communication blockade was imposed on a number of Azerbaijani cities(...).

ARMENIA / ARMENIE

12/04/02 - Turks Infiltrate British Imperial War Museum - Noyan Tapan

The Imperial War Museum has bowed to Turkish pressure and has inserted a denial of the Armenian Genocide in its exhibit, "Crimes Against Humanity," which opened today. (...)

The permanent exhibit is comprised of two parts: a 30-minute film and a half-dozen inter-active displays, including and "Armenian" one, discussing Genocides of the 20th century. The story is told in 14 parts; the last contains the Turkish addition. When asked why the segment was inserted, a spokesman for the Museum said "we are reporting the latest developments." The film contains only one reference to the Armenians"such as what happened to the Armenians in 1915"during a commentary of one of four "experts" who discuss the "deeper" meanings of Genocide.

12/07/02 – United Nations ranks Armenia's "Human development" level - AZG Armenian Daily

Armenia is more developed than all of its neighbors, but lags behind Russia, Belarus and the Baltic States in terms of social and economic development, a United Nations study released last week reported. The Human Development Index (HDI) compares countries according to life expectancy, education level, productivity and income. Norway, Sweden, Canada, Belgium and Australia are at the top of the index and together with fifty other countries have what the UN terms as "high human development." Armenia is 76th, Georgia - 81st, Turkey - 85th, Azerbaijan - 88th and Iran - 98th on the scale. Their designation is defined as achieving "medium human development."

12/09/02 – Bill censuring Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey rejected in Canada - PanARMENIAN.Net

The committee on external relations of the House of Commons of Canada has rejected the resolution censuring the Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey (with ratio of 5:6). As reported by "Azg" Armenian newspaper, the resolution rejection

means that it will not be submitted for discussion at the House of Commons. Thereupon, Canadian parliament deputy Sargis Asadurian called the committee members to declare the vote results invalid.

12/09/02 – Fifteen candidates nominated for Armenian Presidency - RFE/RL

A total of 15 candidates were nominated to contest the February 2003 presidential ballot by the 6 December deadline, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported on 7 December. They must now collect and submit to the Central Election Commission by 31 December at least 35,000 signatures in their support. Contrary to some observers' expectations, former President Levon Ter-Petrosian did not register as a candidate. Petros Makeyan, chairman of the Democratic Fatherland party that is close to Ter-Petrosian's Armenian Pan-National Movement, said he decided to run after it became clear that Ter-Petrosian would not do so.

12/09/02 – Armenian foreign Minister condemns Azerbaijan... - RFE/RL

In his address to the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Porto, Portugal, on 6 December, Vartan Oskanian harshly criticized Azerbaijan's approach to resolving the Karabakh conflict, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reported. Expressing appreciation of the "flexibility and wisdom" shown by the OSCE Minsk Group in its efforts to mediate a solution to the conflict, Oskanian at the same time said that Azerbaijan "scandalously and ungratefully denigrates any initiative or solution proposed by any international entity that does not correspond to its maximalist rhetoric." Oskanian again affirmed that at a time when "new borders are being drawn and redrawn in Europe," there are no grounds for Karabakh, which belonged to Azerbaijan only during the Soviet period and is not currently controlled by the Azerbaijani government, "to be part of Azerbaijan tomorrow." He further accused Baku of "aggressive and bellicose statements," of reneging on agreements reached during negotiations on Karabakh, and of continuing to subject Armenia to "economic blackmail."

12/10/02 - General Council approves accession of Armenia - WTO NEWS: 2002 PRESS RELEASES

The WTO's General Council today (10 December) approved the accession package of Armenia to the World Trade Organization. In his address to the Council, Armenian Prime Minister Andranik Margaryan said that acceding to the WTO was a historic occasion. WTO Director-General Dr. Supachai welcomed the conclusion of Armenia's negotiations which started in 1993 and said he was looking forward to Armenia becoming a full and active Member of the Organization.

"This is a very significant event for Armenia and for the multilateral trading system", the Director-General said. "Since achieving independence, Armenia embarked on a comprehensive process of democratisation, economic liberalization and market reform in which membership of the WTO is a decisive milestone. With Armenia's accession, the WTO makes another important step in the goal of embracing all nations engaged in international trade".

Armenia's foreign exports in 2001 totaled US\$343 million, while it imported US\$874 million in goods and services. The Armenian economy is expected to grow by 12 percent in 2002.

The Protocol of Accession is now subject to the ratification of Armenia's Parliament. Thirty days after the Secretariat receives official notification of this ratification, the country will become a Member of the WTO.

12/10/02 – Military serviceman wounded by shot from Azeri side on Noyemberyan sector of border - Noyan Tapan

Zorair Nersisian, a military serviceman of the active service of the RA Armed Forces, a 23-year-old resident of the town of Kajaran, was wounded by a shot from the Azeri side on the Noyemberyan sector of the Armenian-Azeri border of Voskevan-Voskepar on December 9 morning. (...)

According to the correspondent from Noyemberyan, a fire-fight is being registered on the indicated sector of the border for two days in succession.

12/11/02 – OSCE urges Armenian government to allow independent TV station to resume broadcasting - RFE/RL

Ambassador Roy Reeve, who heads the OSCE office in Yerevan, urged the Armenian authorities on 10 December to permit the A1+ television station to resume broadcasting before the presidential elections scheduled for 19 February 2003, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau reported. The station was forced off the air in early April after losing a tender for its broadcast frequency. A November tender it contested has been suspended (see "RFE/RL Newsline," 2 and 3 April and 20 November 2002). Reeve said the OSCE has informed the Armenian leadership it would like all television companies operational before the ballot and would prefer that the tender outcome not be further delayed by court proceedings. (...)

12/11/02 - European Citizens Mobilize to Oppose Turkey Accession – Asbarez online

The European Armenian federation revealed that the number of associations, organizations and institutions (from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and United-Kingdom) that have jointly signed a call to the European Union to refuse Turkey's accession, has now reached 180.

"Beyond geographical considerations or Turkish propaganda of a Christian club, we just think that we have nothing in common with this country that professes and practices a mode of relation radically opposed to European values and specializes in threats, coercion, ethnic purification, worship of racial superiority, generalized culture of violence and impunity," commented Laurent Leylekian, Executive Director of the European Armenian Federation.

He continued by stressing: "A shift in Ankara's anti-Armenian policy from would be genuine proof of its commitments, but that seems to be a very distant prospect. That is why the European Armenian Federation reiterates its position on Turkey's accession. That is to say no date should be set before the recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey, abolishment of anti-Armenian laws still in effect, renunciation of denialist practices,

and an end to all aggressive, offensive policies toward Armenia." (...) The Armenian community of Europe continues to mobilize. Various demonstrations will take place in various European cities. National representatives of Armenian organizations have sent letters to their respective officials attending the European Council to convey their opposition.

12/14/02 – More than 10,000 unexploded land mines in Karabakh - British NGO – Interfax news agency

A British bomb disposal group has said there are 10,000 unexploded land mines in Azerbaijan's disputed territory of Nagornyy Karabakh, over a total area of 1.5m sq.m., the Russian news agency Interfax reported on 14 December.

A spokesman for the nongovernmental organization Halo Trust told Interfax that 80 t of ammunition and more than 1,500 mines had been disposed of between January 1995 and June 1996.

In July 2000, Halo Trust resumed work in Nagornyy Karabakh, and has cleared an area of 31m sq.m. from explosives, in the form of 16,000 cluster bombs, mortar shells, grenades and rockets, the agency said.

12/17/02 – Ankara can arrange relations with Yerevan in spite of Baku dissatisfaction, Turkish foreign Minister stated - PanARMENIAN.Net

In spite of Azerbaijan's dissatisfaction Turkey can arrange relations with Armenia. Turkish foreign minister Yasar Yakis came out with such statement. In his words, as reported by "Mediamax" agency, Ankara intends to develop relations with Russia, Iran and Armenia. "We will have in view Azerbaijan's dissatisfaction, but if for the sake of our economic interest it is necessary to arrange relations with Armenia, we will do it," – the Turkish minister said.

12/17/02 – Oppression of Christians continues in Turkey - PanARMENIAN.Net

Record on the situation in Turkey was prepared at the meeting of the episcopacy of the Roman Catholic Church the other day saying that the

Christians residing in the country underwent oppression. As reported by "Arminfo" agency, the report in particular notes that Christians are not considered as citizens of the country enjoying full rights. For example, they are marked with special code number "31" in their identity cards. Moreover, Christians are virtually deprived of any opportunities of taking top offices within administrative or military institutions of the country. The law and the legal practice have "two sides" in Turkey, the episcopacy meeting document says. On the one hand, the Christians formally have the same rights as the Muslims, but in practice they do not have opportunities to exercise them. The impossibility of building or restoring Christian churches in Turkey was also mentioned at the meeting. By the end of the XIX century Christians made 20% of the total population in Turkey, while today the number does not exceed 1%. 1.5 million Armenian Christians became victims of the Genocide in 1915-1923 and this topic is prohibited in Turkey today, the document says. The continuing oppression of Christians in Turkey makes them emigrate from the country. As a result over 50 thousand followers of the Christianity found shelter in Germany and other European countries, the report notes.

12/20/02 – Shortcomings in Armenian Human Rights highlighted - RFE/RL

In a report presented at the 19 December close of a three-day seminar in Yerevan, Helsinki Committee of Armenia President Avetik Ishkhanian noted shortcomings in the uniform observance and protection of human rights in Armenia, with the government failing to achieve any significant improvements in recent years, according to Noyan Tapan. Speakers at the seminar organized by several nongovernmental organizations and local human rights groups to examine the state of human rights in Armenia expressed criticism of the lamentable state of the penal system and recommended further reforms to supplement the government's transfer of penal oversight from the Interior Ministry to the Justice Ministry. The seminar also addressed the serious – although improving -- human rights record of the military, as well as the

politically charged issue of capital punishment.

12/27/02 – Armenian parliament reaffirms death-penalty exemption - RFE/RL

The Armenian parliament voted on 25 December to approve a new Criminal Code that maintains a controversial provision retroactively authorizing capital punishment for those convicted of terrorism or pedophilia, RFE/RL's Yerevan bureau and Noyan Tapan reported. The retroactive application of the death penalty has been an emotionally charged issue, widely seen as a move stemming from the case of the five gunmen on trial for attacking the Armenian parliament and killing several senior officials in October 1999. The move is at odds with the Council of Europe, however, which has consistently demanded that Armenia fully and unconditionally outlaw capital punishment. The Council of Europe has set a June 2003 deadline for Armenian conformity, providing an opportunity for the new Armenian parliament to be elected in May 2003 to revise the law.

12/29/02 - Television chief murder shocks Armenia - Reuters

The murder of Armenia's main television channel chief – the highest-profile assassination in the ex-Soviet state since 1999 – was condemned on Sunday by politicians who demanded severe punishment for the perpetrators. Tigran Nagdalyan, council chairman at Armenia's Public Television and Radio, was gunned down late on Saturday with a single bullet to the head in an attack that bore all the hallmarks of a contract killing. (...) Nagdalyan, who after the 1991 break-up of the Soviet Union worked for Radio Liberty before pursuing an independent career, was appointed head of Armenia's state television in 1998. (...) There were no immediate claims of responsibility and investigators refrained from comment on their enquiries. Attacks on journalists are rare in Armenia, though the country is no stranger to political violence. In 1999, a group of radicals bent on ridding the country of "bloodsuckers" burst their way into parliament and killed the prime minister, parliament speaker and six other officials.

GEORGIA / GEORGIE**12/02/02 - Georgia agrees for Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline main route - Caspian News Agency**

Official Tbilisi agreed to allow Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main oil exportation pipeline to pass through Bordzomi valley, ANS reports. It should be noted that, divergence of opinions of Georgian side put the BTC project under suspicion. After the meeting of David Woodvord, president of bp-Azerbaijan and AIOC with Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgian president, the latter gathered the Security Council of nation and learned the position of ecologists.

According to the information of several news agencies, Nino Chxobadze, ecology minister of Georgia couldn't bear the high pressure of the governmental representatives and agreed to the bp offer. Although before the meeting, Nino Chxobadze was saying, he wouldn't change his position. Mamuka Khakaharadze, president of "Georgian Glass and Mineral waters" Company and producer of the Bordzomi water said bypass part of the pipeline was 20 km and it was inevitable to change the direction of the route. We are sure that there are other routes as well. Georgian scientists' and engineers' researches prove that we can pass Bordzomi valley by side. At that time Khakaharadze suggested to change the direction to Akhalkalaki region, where Armenian population mostly inhabited. Tado Japaridze, secretary of the security council said, after the gathering led by the President Akhalkalaki route was considered impossible since military bases of Russia still exist in that region.

12/03/02 - Georgia and Azerbaijan will cooperate in military sphere - Azerbaijan News Service

The agreement on military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia will be signed between Ministries of two states. Safar Abiyev, minister of defense of Azerbaijan will visit neighboring country in a few days. The agreement will reflect the military cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia. Gela Belujashvili, deputy defense minister of Georgia said Azerbaijan started to do the reforms on preparation of the military staff in

Turkish Military Academies earlier than Georgia and official Tbilisi is very interested on that. Gela Belujashvili said in spite of the difficulties in relations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the military training among the Ukrainian, Georgian, Azerbaijanian and Armenian militants was also possible.

12/05/02 - Georgian parliament votes to tax Russian military bases... - RFE/RL

Deputies addressed on 4 December the issue of requiring that the Russian military bases on Georgian territory adopt the Georgian law for all financial transactions, and pay rent and other appropriate taxes, Caucasus Press reported. Deputy Finance Minister Lasha Zhvania said that rent for the Russian bases amounts to \$38 million annually. On 5 December, deputies voted by 119 to one in favor of levying taxes on Russian bases, Caucasus Press reported. In the event that Moscow refuses to comply with that requirement, Georgia will automatically deduct the sums involved from its total \$117 million debt to Russia.

12/10/02 - Georgian parliament increases Defense funding for 2003 - RFE/RL

Deputies voted on 6 December to increase funding for the armed forces in 2003 from 56 million to 80 million laris (\$36.4 million), which constitutes some 11.1 percent of all planned budgetary spending, Caucasus Press reported. Deputies said that sum is needed for the successful completion of the ongoing reform of the armed forces. Defense Minister Lieutenant General David Tevzadze had asked for a total of 129 million laris for next year. The armed forces were allocated 36 million laris in the 2002 budget.

12/11/02 - Plans to assassinate Georgian President thwarted - RFE/RL

National Security Minister Valeri Khaburzania told Georgian state television on 10 December that a plan to assassinate President Eduard Shevardnadze has been uncovered, Interfax reported. He added that the Karachai militants apprehended on 6 December in the Pankisi Gorge might have been involved in the plan. Additional

security measures have been taken in Tbilisi, according to an Interior Ministry spokesman quoted by Interfax. Also on 10 December, ITAR-TASS quoted an unnamed Russian Interior Ministry official as stating that a number of Chechen militants remain in the Pankisi Gorge. Meanwhile Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin accused Georgia of failing to make good on Shevardnadze's promise to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the CIS summit in Chisinau in early October to crack down on Chechen "terrorists" in Pankisi, ITAR-TASS reported. Shevardnadze reportedly assured U.S. President George Bush at the NATO summit in Prague last month that the Pankisi problem "is practically solved."

12/12/02 - Abducted father of Lukoil executive found murdered in Georgia... - RFE/RL

The body of Sadi Sharipov, the 79-year-old father of LUKoil Vice President Vagit Sharipov, was found on 12 December by a roadside in Bolnisi Raion, Caucasus Press reported, quoting the Georgian Interior Ministry. Sharipov was snatched from his home in neighboring Dmanisi Raion on 1 December.

Georgian parliament Deputy Izumrud Gurbanov said a preliminary examination suggested that Sharipov died over a week ago of heart failure, Caucasus Press reported.

12/13/02 - Georgia opposes redeployment of Russian military hardware to Armenia - Prime-News news agency

Georgia considers it acceptable for the Russian troops in the Transcaucasus to be redeployed in Armenia, but it is opposed to the restationing of Russian military hardware and weapons in this country, Georgian Deputy Defence Minister Gela Bezhuashvili told Prime-News when commenting on the Russian troops' intention to relocate gradually to Armenia, which became known during the experts' consultations held in Tbilisi.

The restationing of the hardware and weapons in Armenia may trigger further increase in tension between Baku and Yerevan, Bezhuashvili said. "Georgia will find itself in a difficult situation with Azerbaijan if the Russian military

hardware from Georgia ends up in Armenia," Bezhuashvili said. Bezhuashvili said that according to information available to him, because most of the troops were to be deployed in Russia, only a small number would be available for relocation to Armenia.

12/16/02 – First U.S – Trained Georgian commando battalion graduates - RFE/RL

The first 558 Georgian commandos trained by U.S. instructors within the parameters of the U.S.-funded Train and Equip program graduated on 15 December in the presence of President Eduard Shevardnadze, U.S.

Ambassador Richard Miles, and Georgian Defense Minister Lieutenant-General David Tevzadze, AP and Russian news agencies reported. Shevardnadze again expressed his gratitude for the U.S. help in raising the efficiency of Georgia's armed forces. The instructors who conducted the first training course are to return to the United States, but U.S. Marines will take over the training program in February 2003, Interfax quoted Miles as saying. Georgian National Security Council Secretary Tedo Djaparidze said at the graduation ceremony on 15 December that the U.S.-trained Georgian commandos will be responsible for the security of the planned Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil export pipeline, Caucasus Press reported on 16 December.

Three detained in Georgia for kidnapping Lukoil executive's father

Georgian police detained three people on 13 December in connection with the abduction 12 days earlier of Sadi Sharipov, father of LuKoil Vice President Vagit Sharipov, from his home in Georgia's southern Dmanisi Raion, Caucasus Press and Russian news agencies reported. Two of the three men reportedly confessed to the kidnapping, telling police that the reason they did not demand a ransom was that their 79-year-old captive died of heart failure one hour after he was snatched from his home. The three men are reportedly all Svans who fled Abkhazia during the 1992-93 war.

12/23/02 - USA against Removing of Russian Troops from Georgia to Armenia - Economic News

Position of the Washington Administration concerned with settlement of the Karabakh conflict remains unchanged and involves support of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. US Ambassador to Baku Ross Wilson provided this information to journalists.

In his words, the Karabakh conflict is to be settled peacefully. The diplomat especially pointed out negative attitude to removing of Russian bases from Georgia to Armenia. In his opinion, this will unfavorably influence peaceful settlement of Armenian-Azeri conflict.

"Return of bases to Russia would meet interests of all countries of the region", - claimed the Ambassador. [...]

12/23/02 - Georgia asks Russia to extradite detainees suspecte... - AP WorldStream

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Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze said Monday that Georgia was asking Russia to extradite two Georgian citizens who were suspected of involvement in a February 1998 assassination attempt against him.

Russian forces recently detained Verphviya Durglishvili, 38, and Soso Toriya, 45, in the Gudermes region of Chechnya. Shevardnadze told reporters that the two should be brought to Georgia to face trial.

Noting that two of his bodyguards had been killed in the attack on his motorcade on a central Tbilisi thoroughfare, Shevardnadze said, "The crime must not go without punishment. Justice must have its say."

Shevardnadze hailed recent cooperation between Russian and Georgian special services, which was negotiated following furious Russian accusations that Georgia was abetting Chechen rebels and international terrorists. Georgia recently acceded to Moscow's demands for the extradition of several Chechen rebels caught on the border between the two countries.

Paata Mskhiladze, the head of the international department of the Georgian prosecutor-general's office, said all the necessary documents to request the two detainees' extradition had been prepared and were being sent to Moscow on Monday.

12/24/02 - Talks stalled on Russian withdrawal from Georgian bases: Moscow - Agence France Presse

Russia and Georgia remain deadlocked over a Russian withdrawal from two military bases in Georgia two weeks after opening tense talks on the subject, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said Tuesday.

"Current negotiations on the subject are not moving forward," Ivanov said, as quoted by the Interfax news agency, adding that "there is no plan to immediately withdraw Russian bases from Georgia."

Tbilisi has been insisting that Moscow hand back the Russian-held bases at Akhalkaladi and Batumi, in southern and southwestern Georgia, within three years, rather than the 11-year time limit Moscow is seeking. The two sides launched fresh talks on the issue on December 11, ending five months of silence.

After the talks opened, Tbilisi warned Moscow that it would have to begin paying hundreds of millions of dollars (euros) in rent if the issue was not resolved within the next six months.

In 1999, then Russian president Boris Yeltsin agreed to hand back four bases in Georgia before July 1, 2001, but only two have so far been returned: Gudauta, in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia and an air base at Vaziani, near Tbilisi.

Negotiations on the subject broke down in July as relations plunged to a low over the conflict in Russia's breakaway republic of Chechnya, which borders Georgia.

Moscow has accused Georgia of turning a blind eye to Chechen rebel activities on its territory. (...)

12/25/02 - Russian communication battalion pulled out of Georgia to Armenia. By Tengiz Pachkoria - ITAR-TASS News Agency

A communication battalion of the Russian Army Group in the Transcaucasia, which was deployed in the Georgian capital was

transferred from Georgia to Armenia on Wednesday. The Russian army column comprising 71 trucks and hardware left the site of its previous stationing in the Varketili district of Tbilisi to Gyumri in Armenia. According to the information in Russia's Army Group, an agreement to withdraw three Russian communication battalions from Georgia was reached at the meeting of Georgian and Russian experts, which was held in Tbilisi on December 11. The first Russian communication battalion was pulled out of Georgia on December 21.

12/27/02 – OSCE to expand monitoring of Georgian border - RFE/RL

A spokesperson of the OSCE's Mission in Georgia, Volker Jacoby, announced on 24 December that the OSCE will expand its monitoring of Georgia's border areas to include the border with Daghestan and will increase its deployment to a total of 144 unarmed observers, according to the online Civil Georgia news agency. The OSCE has been monitoring the 82-kilometer border between Georgia and Chechnya since December 1999 and extended its deployment in December 2001 to encompass the 58-kilometer Ingush section of the Georgian-Russian border.

ABKHAZIA / ABKHAZIE

12/02/02 – Abkhaz Premier fired - RFE/RL

Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba dismissed Anri Djergenia as prime minister on 29 November, reportedly for his failure to ensure fulfillment of budget targets, Caucasus Press and Interfax reported. The previous day, however, Finance Minister Lili Bghanba had reported that the budget for the first 11 months of 2002 was fulfilled by 107 percent. Ardzinba appointed to succeed Djergenia Gennadii Gagulia, who served as prime minister from 1995-98 and most recently as chairman of Abkhazia's Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

Abkhaz Vice President Valerii Arshba said Gagulia's appointment does not herald any changes in the unrecognized republic's policy of close political and economic ties

with Russia. In Tbilisi, Georgian National Security Committee Chairman Tedo Djaparidze expressed the hope that Gagulia's appointment will expedite a settlement of the unresolved conflict, Interfax reported on 29 November.

12/05/02 – Georgia: further protests in the pipeline .Abkhaz Prime Minister ousted - Caucasus Reporting Service No. 158

The surprise dismissal of the prime minister and de facto leader of Abkhazia has transformed the political landscape in the breakaway republic.

By Inal Khashig in Sukhum

The unexpected sacking last week of Anri Djergenia, the prime minister of Abkhazia who was also the leading contender to be its next president, has shaken up the political scene here. [...]

The television news and other official media reported Djergenia's dismissal without any commentary, along with the news that his replacement is to be Gennady Gagulia, currently head of the republic's chamber of commerce. [...]

The official reason for Djergenia's removal was his alleged failure to implement the budget and make adequate preparations for the winter.

But this looks improbable, as the budget has been fully implemented, according to figures from the first nine months of this year, and winter poses no big problem for a subtropical region where the average temperature in January is 12 degrees centigrade.

Everyone, therefore, sees a political reason in the fall of Djergenia. Djergenia, a Soviet-era official, who was appointed to the top government job in May 2001, was Abkhazia's first "political" prime minister – his predecessors had concentrated solely on economic policy. He represented Abkhazia in its peace negotiations with the Georgians – a job that he has not yet formally lost. As Ardzinba increasingly vanished from public view due to illness, Djergenia began to act as the unrecognized republic's de facto leader.

The premier was widely considered the favourite to succeed Ardzinba as leader, when the next presidential elections are held in two years' time,

or even earlier. He was even tied by marriage to Ardzinba: the president's wife, Svetlana, is Djergenia's first cousin – something that carries great weight in Abkhaz society.

However, Leonid Lakerbaia, a former close associate of Ardzinba who is now leader of the opposition, said he believed Djergenia had been felled by

his "barely concealed presidential ambitions". [...]

The new prime minister is not a political figure at all and will not play a major part in the jockeying for power. Gagulia has already been head of the government once before, between 1995 and 1998, during which time he focussed exclusively on economic issues.

"Political issues will become the exclusive preserve of the president," said analyst Tamaz Ketsba. "However, it's unlikely that Sukhum's foreign policy with its focus on greater closeness to Russia will change at all."

"The situation in Abkhazia is such that anyone who comes to power here, will(not be able to think of another path except one that runs parallel with Russia. The republic has no other option."

05/12/02 – Géorgie Russie: Enlèvement de la mère d'un responsable de Slavneft en Abkhazie - AFP

La mère d'un vice-président du groupe pétrolier russe Slavneft, en cours de privatisation, a été enlevée le 11 novembre dernier dans la république géorgienne sécessionniste d'Abkhazie, a indiqué jeudi à l'AFP le vice-ministre de l'Intérieur abkhaze Valéry Lagvilava. "Elena Tkeboutchava a été enlevée à son domicile à Tkvarcheli par un groupe d'hommes armés le 11 novembre", a déclaré par téléphone M. Lagvilava.

"A ce jour il n'y a aucune nouvelle à son sujet. D'après nos informations les bandits ne sont pas entrés en contact avec la famille et n'ont fait aucune demande", selon le responsable abkhaze.

L'enlèvement de la mère de Djoumberi Tkeboutchava, vice-président chargé des questions administratives et sociales à Slavneft, coïncide avec celui, en Géorgie de Sadi Charifov, le père d'un des vice-présidents du premier producteur russe de pétrole

Loukoïl, Vaguit Charifov. Les ravisseurs de Sadi Charifov, enlevé dimanche dernier, ont demandé une rançon de 400.000 dollars, ont indiqué à l'AFP des sources parlementaires géorgiennes.

Mais selon la responsable du service de presse du ministère géorgien de l'Intérieur, Maïa Mossidzé, celui-ci "n'a aucune information officielle sur d'éventuelles demandes", des ravisseurs.

Slavneft, septième groupe pétrolier russe, est en voie de privatisation, mais l'enlèvement de Mme Tkeboutchava a un motif purement criminel, selon des sources proches de l'enquête en Abkhazie, citées par Ria-Novosti. [...]

12/06/02 – Abkhaz accuse Georgian authorities of abetting terrorism - RFE/RL Newslite

At the regular Thursday meeting of Abkhaz and Georgian officials and representatives of the UN Observer Mission and the CIS peacekeeping force deployed in the Abkhaz conflict zone, the Abkhaz accused the Georgian government of condoning terrorist acts by Georgian guerrillas against the Abkhaz, Caucasus Press reported. They cited three separate incidents over the past 10 days: the kidnapping of two Abkhaz on 24 November by Georgian guerrillas who seek to exchange the men for two of their fellow fighters, an explosion near the local administration building in Gali on 29 November, which an Abkhaz security official likewise blamed on Georgian guerrillas, and the deaths of three Abkhaz militiamen on 30 November when their car hit a landmine.

12/17/02 – Abducted mother of slavneft official released - RFE/RL

Abkhaz security officials freed Elena Tkebuchava, the elderly mother of Slavneft Vice President Djumber Tkebuchava, during the night of 15-16 December and apprehended the persons who snatched her from her home in Tkvarcheli last month, Caucasus Press reported. No ransom was paid, according to Abkhaz Interior Minister Amazbey Kchach.

***SOUTH OSSETIA /
OSSETIE DU SUD***

12/05/02 – Is Georgia planning an incursion into South Ossetia ? - RFE/RL

Two Georgian ministers offered widely diverging prognoses on 4 December regarding the 1 December abduction of Sadi Sharifov, father of LUKoil Vice President Vagit Sharifov. Interfax quoted Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili as predicting that Sharifov might be freed within the next 24 hours. But the same agency also quoted Georgian National

Security Minister Valeri Khaburzania as suggesting that Sharifov might have been taken from his home in Dmanisi, southeast of Tbilisi, to the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, which borders on the Russian Federation. In recent months, Georgian officials have repeatedly raised the possibility of launching an "anticrime" operation in South Ossetia similar to that begun in September in the Pankisi Gorge. On 28 November, Giorgi Shervashidze, commander of the Georgian Interior Ministry troops, warned the operation in Pankisi might have to be abandoned for lack of funds, Caucasus Press reported.

12/16/02 – Prospects for resolving South Ossetian conflict improve - RFE/RL

Socialist Party leader Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, whom President Shevardnadze recently named his special envoy for the conflict with South Ossetia, held talks in Tskhinvali on 15 December with the unrecognized republic's President Eduard Kokoyty, to whom he presented unspecified proposals for resolving the region's decade-long standoff with the central Georgian government, Caucasus Press reported on 16 December. Interfax on 15 December quoted Rcheulishvili as saying that he has established good, business-like relations with the South Ossetian leadership and that the key to resolving the conflict lies in Moscow. Rcheulishvili's Socialist Party aligned last month with the former

ruling Union of Citizens of Georgia, Shevardnadze's erstwhile power base.

12/18/02 – South Ossetia vows to form new professional army - RFE/RL

Eduard Kokoyty, president of the unrecognized republic of South Ossetia, announced plans on 16 December to forge a "new, mobile" 6,000-strong professional army by the end of 2003, according to the Prime news agency. The leadership of the undeclared republic is bracing for a possible resumption of hostilities with the Georgian armed forces, although negotiations between South Ossetia and Georgia have made progress recently.

12/30/02 – South Ossetia anticipates new Georgian attack - RFE/RL

Eduard Kokoyty, president of the unrecognized Republic of South Ossetia, said on 27 December that he believes Georgia might launch a new offensive under the pretext of a crackdown against crime to bring the breakaway republic back under the control of the central authorities, Russian news agencies reported. The South Ossetian authorities launched their own crackdown on crime two months ago. Earlier this month, Kokoyty announced plans to create a 6,000-man South Ossetian army.

***NAGORNO KARABAGH /
HAUT / KARABAGH***

12/18/02 – Within next 10 years Nagorno Karabakh to be able to receive 70 thousand repatriates - PanARMENIAN.Net

For successful implementation of the program of settling refugees from Nagorno Karabakh in their fatherland the contribution by the Armenian diaspora will be necessary. As "Mediamax" agency was told at the Nagorno Karabakh Republic department of migration and refugees, according to the state refugee settling program designed for 10 years, within this period Nagorno Karabakh will be able to receive up to 70 thousand immigrants. At present the department has over 1200 written

requests from those wishing to come to NK for permanent residence. Some 24 thousand refugees are registered there at the moment.

12/18/02 - Karabakh conflict settlement is at hand : US co-chair of OSCE MG - Arminfo

The Karabakh conflict settlement is near at hand, but the final resolution will be reached only after the presidential elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan, the US co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group for the Karabakh Conflict Settlement, Rudolf Perina, told IZVESTIYA (Russia).

(...)Perina said that the parties to the Karabakh conflict seemed to be very close to a solution in Key-West 2001, but not close enough as it turned out later. (...) He explained that US, Russia and France were unable to settle the conflict for so many years mostly because the conflicting parties were hard to convince of the necessity of talks and compromises. (...)Perina said that US and Russia positively cooperated in the settlement process. Much more complicated are the moods worldwide: it's time to settle such conflicts and any slightest delay may divert the attention of the international community - and the necessary resources - from local problems to general issues, like fight against terrorism. Besides, the conflicts may get institutionalized, as was the case with the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As for Karabakh, here the situation is quite different. It lacks stability to be considered stuck in the sand. It is still dangerous and both the Armenian and Azeri presidents just like the peoples realize that something must be done to prevent its re-ignition, Perina said.

(...)

12/23/02 - Vast majority of UN member countries not approved of changes on Nagorno Karabakh issue proposed by Azerbaijan - PanARMENIAN.Net

In the course of the UN General Assembly 57-th session December 20 the 150 organization member countries in fact did not approve of changes in the resolution "On the UN cooperation with the OSCE" proposed by Azerbaijan. The document concerns issues of cooperation between these

international organizations on regional problems, including on the Nagorno Karabakh issue. Every year the Azeri party suggests making changes in the language of the resolution proposed by the OSCE presidium and pursues adding a wording on the Nagorno Karabakh question favorable for itself. This year, as well as during all of the previous ones, Azerbaijan suggested the respective change, which was turned down by the results of the vote. Although a small number of countries voted for (37), the Armenian party evaluates the vote results as positive, a press release of Armenian foreign ministry says, as the number of those who abstained (101 countries) and did not participate in the vote at all (48 countries) is evidence that the world community does not approve of the pro-Azeri stand on the Nagorno Karabakh issue. By the way, the number of countries supporting Azerbaijan diminishes every year and this time they were represented mainly by the GUUAM and Islamic Conference member states.

JAVAKHK / DJAVAKHK

12/09/02 - Russian base in southern Georgia scared off Baku-Ceyhan - ethnic Armenian leader - Arminfo

The leader of the Virk party, which is active in Georgia's Armenian-populated region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, David Rstakyan, believes that when considering the route of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Main Export Pipeline MEP, the project management took into account the existence of a Russian military base in Akhalkalaki and therefore decided to lay its Georgian section through the Borjomi Gorge. David Rstakyan has told Georgian Prime-News news agency that the presence of the Russian military in Akhalkalaki is assessed negatively by foreign companies participating in the project, which have unfounded fears of instability in the region and its explosive nature. He said that the situation around the region was deliberately exacerbated by certain forces that are not interested in a stable situation in the country, and that the separatist moods attributed to Armenians living there were exaggerated. He noted that certain resistance among residents to the MEP passing

through -Javakheti was caused only by uncertainty as the region is almost "in limbo" - it has not been given a definite administrative-territorial status, it has no electoral bodies, and its population is often in a complete information vacuum.

"Nobody has explained to the people what ecological consequences the of the pipeline might have, no explanation was given as to what kind of compensation is planned to be provided and to whom," he noted. Rstakyan said that the negative attitude of the population of the region to the withdrawal of the Russian military from Akhalkalaki did not mean that their mood was pro-Russian - it only means that they fear the Russians would be replaced by Turkish or NATO troops.

12/13/02 background details of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline - Asbarez Online

Javakhk Armenians and Georgians Oppose Return of Meskhetian Turks JAVAKHK (Yerkir)--Sponsored by the United Nations, a meeting between the non-governmental organizations of Meskhetian Turks, Armenians and Georgians took place in the Georgian town of Bakuriani, December 9-11. The meeting aimed to strengthen ties between Meskhetian Turks, Armenians and Georgians.

A representative of a Turkish NGO insisted that Turks be allowed to return to Samtskhe-Javakhk; claiming ethnic, religious and other reasons, Representatives of the Armenian and Georgian organizations categorically opposed the suggestion.

The sides decided to consider forming a council of the NGO's of Meskhetian Turks, Armenians and Georgians.

12/18/02 - Suspicious fire destroys Armenian cultural center in Southern Georgia - RFE/RL

An early morning fire destroyed the nearly 100-year-old Armenian Cultural Center in Akhalkalak on 15 December, the A-Info news agency reported. Located in the ethnic Armenian southern Georgian region of Djavakheti, the cultural center served as a community library and informal educational facility for local residents. Local Armenian leaders have expressed suspicion over the

fire's origins, citing a possible link between the fire and the fact that the center's director, Haig Rustakyan, is the brother of David Rustakyan, the co-chairman of the banned Virk political party.

12/26/02 - Leader of ethnic Armenian party in Georgia accuses authorities - AZG Daily

David Rstakian, the leader of an ethnic Armenian party Virk in the southern Georgian region of Javakhs with predominant Armenian population, accused Georgian authorities of refusing the party's registration, claiming that the reluctance to register it is induced by the authorities' fear to lose votes in the region in the 2003 parliamentary elections.

Rstakian was quoted by Georgian Prime News agency as saying that the pro-government parties were apprehensive that Virk could be their serious rival in Javakhs. Rstakian said that Virk would struggle on to get the Justice Ministry's registration in order to be able to stand in the parliamentary elections.

"There are no grounds for them to refuse the party's registration as its statutes does not contain anything illegal or against the state," he said, adding that in case of registration Virk would be able to overcome the 7 percent barrier.

12/26/02 - Ethnic Armenian party leader calls on Georgia to adopt federal system -Prime-News news agency

The Samtskhe-Javakheti region should be given autonomous status, the leader of the regional Virk Party, David Rstkyan, has said.

In his interview with Prime-News, Rstkyan also pointed out that without a federal system, Georgia would not be able to grant autonomy to the region.

The issue was quite pressing a few years ago and "the then chairman of the Georgian parliament, Zurab Zhvania, even visited the region to familiarize himself with the opinion of the local population," Rstkyan said. Soon after, parliament started to examine this issue, but it is was abandoned soon, he said.

Samtskhe-Javakheti, with its predominantly ethnic Armenian population, can logically be compared with Ajaria and Abkhazia, Rstkyan said.

"In principle, there is nothing wrong with autonomy, on the contrary, the population will have more rights, which could only benefit the central government," he said.

If Georgia adopts a federal system, the government will be able to solve even the problem of separatism, including the Abkhaz issue.

12/30/02 - Georgia Makes Big Mistake Refusing Consent To Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline's Running Via Akhalkalaki - Economic News

The government of Georgia has made a big mistake having refused its consent to the main export oil pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan running via Akhalkalaki, according to Gamlet Chipashvili, the head of the representative group of Adzharia, an autonomous republic of southeast Georgia, in Tbilisi.

As Mr. Chipashvili maintained at a press conference on Friday, the allegations made by the president of the Georgian International Oil Company (GIOC) that the decision to turn down the above mentioned route of the pipeline had been promoted by separatist moods of certain part of the population "have no foundations".

In Chipashvili's words, if the Georgia-based section of the pipeline ran through Akhalkalaki, one of the key problems, that is employment of the local population, would be resolved. Mr. Chipashvili doubts if in this case somebody would be "thinking about blasting the pipeline". He labeled the claims that a Russian military base situated in Akhalkalaki may pose a threat to the pipeline as absurd.

Mr. Chilashvili observed that some political forces in Georgia are deliberately enhancing tension in the region, whereas in reality the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (Georgia) with a population of no more than 200,000 people has great potential and needs support and aid from the center. "If such support is not provided and the situation is artificially escalated, one should not be surprised about emerging calls for autonomy or withdrawal of the Russian military base".

Previously, GIOC President Georgy Chanturia had claimed that investors into the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project found Russian military bases situated in the Georgian territory a risk to investments. That is why the base in Akhalkalaki became the reason for altering the pipeline's

route. A decision was made to run the pipeline via the Borzhomi Region.

DOCUMENTS

12/12/02 - UN ponders Abkhaz impasse - RFE/RL

The UN Security Council met in closed session on 9 December to discuss the Abkhaz conflict, but failed to reach a consensus on how best to revive the stalled peace process, RFE/RL's UN correspondent reported. For the past year, the international community has consistently argued that the optimum approach is for Georgia and Abkhazia to begin talks on the UN-drafted document "Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi." The Georgian leadership has endorsed that document, the text of which was made public only last month. But the Abkhaz leadership has consistently refused even to accept a copy of it, arguing that the population of Abkhazia voted in a referendum in 1999 to endorse the unrecognized republic's constitution, which defines Abkhazia as an independent sovereign state.

Moreover, two recent developments could create further obstacles to any formal discussion of the "Basic Principles." First, Russia reportedly withdrew its support for that document. Moscow had blocked discussion of it in the UN Security Council for most of. At the same time, Russian First Deputy Foreign Minister Valerii Loshchinin, whom Russian President Putin named in March as his special envoy for the Abkhaz conflict, has endorsed a proposal by Adjar Supreme Council Chairman Aslan Abashidze (named by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze late last year to perform analogous duties) to focus instead on economic restoration and other "confidence-building" measures in Abkhazia, including reopening railway communication from Russia via Abkhazia to Tbilisi and then on to Armenia.

Loshchinin discussed that approach on several occasions in October-November during talks with Abkhaz Prime Minister Anri Djergenia. Loshchinin also expressed support for Djergenia's proposal that an Abkhaz representative be permitted

to address the scheduled UN Security Council discussion of the Abkhaz. But on 29 November, ailing Abkhaz President Vladislav Ardzinba abruptly fired Djergenia, naming Gennadii Gagulia, who had served as premier in 1995-98, to succeed him.

No convincing explanation has been offered for Djergenia's dismissal. Some observers suggested that Ardzinba feared Djergenia was on the verge of making major concessions to Georgia over Abkhazia's future status within the "asymmetrical federation" Georgia wants. But in that case, how could he have secured Russia's backing? Why, in fact, should Russia have any interest in resolving the conflict, in the light of the slow but steady intensification of Russian economic interests in the Tbilisi has made clear that if it regains control of the breakaway republic, it will annul all sales of Abkhaz enterprises to Russian businessmen.

Some Western diplomats from the states that belong to the "Friends of the UN Secretary General" informal grouping that is seeking to expedite a solution to the Abkhaz conflict have expressed concern that the "Basic Principles" could become outdated if the Abkhaz leadership continues to refuse to discuss them. But Ambassador Heidi Tagliavini, who is UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's special envoy for the Abkhaz conflict, rejected those misgivings. She told RFE/RL in New York on 10 December that "we should not make this automatic assumption [that] not accepting the document means that at one stage we will abandon it and forget about it and Abkhazia will become independent."

Tagliavini and other Western diplomats endorsed Abashidze's proposal for "confidence-building measures," provided that they proceed in tandem with talks on Abkhazia's future status, rather than as a substitute for such talks, RFE/RL's UN correspondent reported. But one of Georgia's representatives to the UN stressed that such confidence-building measures and economic reconstruction are possible only after Abkhazia has agreed to talks on its status within Georgia. Gia Volskii, Georgia's deputy ambassador to the UN, said that "we're not against confidence

building measures, rehabilitation of the Abkhaz economy...but first we have to have something tangible towards political negotiations."

Gagulia, however, made it clear in an interview published in "Izvestiya" on 4 December that he is committed both to obtaining international recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state and to promoting further economic cooperation with Russia -- objectives that would seem to rule out any such negotiations.

Meanwhile, Georgian political figures are increasingly questioning whether the "Basic Principles" safeguard Georgia's interests. Georgian parliamentary Defense and Security Committee Chairman Irakli Batiashvili argued in October that the document is "amorphous" and fails to define clearly the separation of powers between the central and the Abkhaz government. Tamaz Nadareishvili, chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz parliament-in-exile, warned on 14 November that insofar as the "Basic Principles" provide for establishing a federal state, they risk precipitating the split of Georgia into two separate entities as was the case with Czechoslovakia. Nadareishvili is one of the most hawkish proponents of invoking Article 7 of the UN Charter, which stipulates the circumstances in which the UN may launch a "peace-enforcement" operation. But Georgian Ambassador to the UN Revaz Adamia told ITAR-TASS on 10 December that he considers such calls for armed UN intervention in Abkhazia "premature."

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