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Newly Independent States: Caucasus

By Robyn Angley

GEORGIA

Russia, Georgia swap allegations regarding Al Qaeda presence in Caucasus

Russian officials have accused Georgia of colluding with terrorists against Russia. FSB Director Aleksandr Bortnikov said at a meeting of the National Antiterrorist Committee that the FSB had discovered evidence that “representatives of Georgian special services” are working with Al Qaeda to train and provide Islamic militants with weapons and financial support and then send them into Russia’s volatile North Caucasus in the order to further destabilize a region which seems to be slipping out from under Moscow’s control. (1) Bortnikov claimed that the FSB had discovered “audio reports” from local Islamic militants that confirmed their links with both Al Qaeda and the Georgian Special Services. (2)

Russia’s claims come in the midst of an escalation in Islamist insurgency throughout the troubled North Caucasus. Dagestan is perhaps the worst affected by violent incidents, but the ongoing low-level insurgency remains a threat throughout the region, and Moscow appears unable to contain the attacks effectively.

This is not the first time Moscow has made claims about a terrorist presence in Georgia. The Pankisi Gorge is home to an ethnic Chechen population (Kists), with whom many refugees from Chechnya found harbor during the Chechen wars. In 2001, Russia threatened to invade the gorge to rout out an alleged international terrorist and Chechen separatist presence there. In response, the
United States and Georgia agreed to launch the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP), which instructed Defense and Interior troops on how to handle with terrorist threats.

Russia’s more recent claims regarding a possible terrorist presence in Georgia began in July when Russian Deputy Interior Minister Arkadiy Yedelev announced that his ministry was investigating claims “that 60 rebels have been transferred to Georgia from a CIS country under false colors to be further deployed in North Caucasus.” (3) Yedelev did not specify where in Georgia; however, the Pankisi Gorge is the most likely location, given the former disputes over a possible terrorist presence in the gorge and its proximity to Chechnya and Dagestan.

Bortnikov’s allegations of connections between Al Qaeda and a Georgian government ministry have upped the political ante considerably, particularly given the already acrimonious relationship between the two countries following the August 2008 conflict.

The Georgian Foreign Ministry was quick to deny Bortnikov’s claims in a statement issued on its website. The statement provides the ministry’s interpretation of Russia’s allegations: “The Kremlin realizes that its efforts to bring the situation under control have been fruitless. It therefore resorts to Soviet methods and is trying to disguise its helplessness by emphasizing the external enemy factor.” (4)

While the Foreign Ministry is correct in its assessment of Georgia as a convenient scapegoat for North Caucasian ills, it misses what should be a larger concern – Russia previously has threatened to invade Georgia over issues involving the Pankisi Gorge. It is very possible that these allegations are an attempt to begin establishing a pretext for further armed incursions into Georgia.
One Georgian media source claims to have uncovered just such a plan. Georgia Online, citing Georgian news agency Express News, has asserted that Russian special forces are planning to install provocateurs in Pankisi, who then will carry out terrorist acts in the North Caucasus for which Georgia will receive the blame. Russia could respond by launching military actions against Georgia on the pretext of protecting its own sovereignty. (5) Not surprisingly, FSB officials have denied the allegations. (6)

Express News claimed sources in Chechnya had provided it with information regarding the purported plot. (7) Of the three militant groups allegedly making their way to Pankisi, Georgia Online reported that one currently is based in North Ossetia, while the other two are based in Chechnya. (8) Although the media outlets have not produced evidence of their allegations (though if, as they claim, they relied on informants in Chechnya, then revealing their sources clearly could have very negative ramifications for the informants), it takes no very great stretch of the imagination to picture such an operation taking place. Indeed, Russia’s current claims of a Georgia-Al Qaeda-North Caucasian insurgent connection would appear to be a step in that direction.

As for the real state of affairs in Pankisi, Georgian security analyst Irakli Sesiashvili asserts that while the influence of Wahhabist (radical Islamist) groups is growing again in the gorge, it does not approach what it was a decade ago. In recent years, those groups have managed to gain influence primarily through the acquisition of local businesses and a subsequent ability to weigh in on local economic and political issues. Sesiashvili downplayed the current threat emanating from Islamic groups in Pankisi, but recommended taking measures to check a further enlargement of Wahhabist influence. (9)

In addition to denying any collusion with Al Qaeda, Georgian politicians have taken immediate steps to disprove Russian allegations. A group of “opposition” Christian Democrat MPs (i.e. members of the relatively compliant parliamentary
opposition, in contrast to the radical non-parliamentary opposition parties) traveled to the Pankisi Gorge to investigate the situation. The party was accompanied by foreign diplomats and journalists. According to one diplomat, “[J]udging from what I saw, I can say that these allegations are groundless... After the statements we heard from the Russian side and what we have seen today, I am left with the impression that Russia is acting irresponsibly.” (10)

With allegations flying fast and heavy between Moscow and Tbilisi, Georgian Speaker David Bakradze paid a diplomatic visit to the United States. He described the reaction of Georgia’s American ally to Russia’s accusations as “unequivocal, brief, and very undiplomatic: ‘full nonsense.’” He concluded, “They know very well that nothing at all is happening in Pankisi.” (11)

If Russia decides to press the issue, the relatively minimal threat level in Pankisi may be irrelevant. One cannot rule out that a provocation on either side could reignite the military conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi that flamed so intensely last August.

Source Notes:
(2) Ibid.
(3) “Russian law-enforcers checking report on rebels in Georgia bound for N Caucasus,” Interfax, 10 Jul 09; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(6) Ibid.
(9) “Georgian pundit says Pankisi situation not "alarming" but demands attention,” Rezonansi, 27 Oct 09; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(10) “Georgian MP says no threats emanating from Pankisi Gorge,” Rustavi 2, 1100 gmt, 29 Oct 09; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.
(11) “Speaker says Russia creating ‘image of enemy out of Georgia,’ urges restraint,” Rustavi 2, 1745 gmt, 30 Oct 09; BBC Monitoring via Lexis-Nexis.

Newly Independent States: Central Asia
By Monika Shepherd

KYRGYZSTAN
Kyrgyz president turns government reform into a family affair
A little over two weeks ago, Kyrgyzstan’s President Kurmanbek Bakiev embarked on a radical program of government restructuring, designed to streamline his regime’s operations, as well as to concentrate most of the power over those operations almost exclusively in his own hands. Once parliament had approved his reform plan and the dust had settled a bit, Bakiev announced that he had decided to appoint his younger son, Maksim Bakiev, to head the Central Agency for Development, Investment and Innovations (CADII). (1) The CADII is one of the new agencies created in the president's reform plan and falls under the jurisdiction of the "Institute of the President," which has replaced the presidential administration. (2)
Although as yet it is unclear precisely what the CADII’s functions and responsibilities are, it seems to have been granted the power to implement wide-ranging national investment strategies, in such areas as agriculture and agribusiness, real estate, and the mortgage industry. (3) As the head of CADII, it seems that Maksim Bakiev will have virtually unfettered access to the country’s financial resources, as well as the authority to set policies for its industrial and business sectors, making him one of the most powerful men in Kyrgyzstan, accountable solely to his father.

Maksim is not the first of the president’s family members to be granted a government position – his uncle Janysh was the first deputy chairman of the National Security Service, his uncle Marat is the Kyrgyz ambassador to Germany, his uncle Adyl serves as an economic and investment advisor to the Kyrgyz ambassador to China, and his older brother (also named Marat) continues to serve in the National Security Service. Maksim was a well-known and influential “businessman” even before his father ascended to the presidency in 2005 and has been accused of maintaining connections to the infamous Boris Berezovsky. When confronted with questions regarding Maksim’s allegedly spurious business dealings, the president purportedly has replied that he told his son to cease conducting business in Kyrgyzstan, telling journalists, “All his businesses are abroad now. Will you let him alone?” (4)

Thus far, there has been little or no protest over the president’s latest move to put the country’s financial sector under his direct control. In fact, one of Bakiev’s staunchest and heretofore most vocal opponents, Feliks Kulov, seemed to approve of Maksim’s appointment, praising the younger Bakiev as “pragmatic and ambitious” and stating that “Maksim Bakiyev’s appointment to the post of the head of the Central Agency for Development, Investments and Innovations, will give him an opportunity to openly demonstrate his abilities.” Kulov even went so far as to grant cautious support for Maksim as a possible successor to the presidency: “President Bakiyev has already said that his current second term in
the post of the president is the last one. And leaving it he intends to hand over power to trustworthy hands, particularly taking into account the period of crisis. Therefore, his decision looks very serious and crucial. Because, if Maksim Bakiyev does not cope with his duties, this will cause irretrievable damage to the whole Bakieyv clan by undermining his prestige for generations to come.”

(5)

Kulov’s sentiments were echoed wholeheartedly by political scientist and pundit Mars Sariev, who told journalists: “An official appointment of Maksim Bakiyev is a positive step because it means that President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his son are taking full responsibility for the course of reforms and the country's future.” Another political scholar, Marat Kazakbaev, lauded Maksim’s appointment as a way to draw significant international investment revenue into the country: “Using his very close ties with potential investors he may start attracting huge investments into the country, and above all, huge private capital from transnational companies.” Neither Kulov, Sariev, or Kazakbaev seemed to have any concerns regarding the blatant, in-your-face nepotism inherent in Maksim’s appointment. (6)

Kulov’s lack of concern is entirely understandable, given the fact that it seems he will be working for Maksim, and thereby also for President Bakiev, in his new post as the head of the Directorate for Small and Medium Hydropower, a subentity of CADII. (7) Apparently the former Prime Minister has wearied of attempting to fight his way back into the government from the opposition’s ramparts and has decided to follow the wisdom imparted in that old adage, “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.” His new position certainly should allow him to fortify his war chest, should he ever decide to launch a new campaign to unseat the Bakiev administration. On the other hand, by accepting President Bakiev’s reorganization of the government so meekly, Kulov and the other opposition leaders have wasted the best opportunity they may ever have to challenge the president. Many of Bakiev’s “reforms” so brazenly contradict Kyrgyzstan’s
constitution that disputing their legality should have been a matter of course not only for the opposition, but for all of the parties in parliament. The fact that, instead, they rubber-stamped Bakiev’s plan into reality within a few days of receiving it is a sad commentary on how little has changed in Kyrgyzstan despite the “Tulip Revolution.”

In fact, Bakiev has implemented his own revolution, this one from the top down and with nary a drop of blood spilled. He has succeeded in putting virtually all the tools of state control directly into his own hands, as well as making one of his most bitter and outspoken political opponents accountable to himself. Furthermore, with Kulov on his side, Bakiev may have won allies in a powerful, rival crime organization, which should stand his son in good stead, should he be named the successor to the presidential throne.

Source Notes:
(1) “Kyrgyz president's son heads up investment agency,” 29 Oct 09, Central Asia General Newswire; Interfax via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(3) “Head of Central Agency for Development, Investments and Innovations names 4 top priority projects,” 2 Nov 09, AKIpress; Al Bawaba via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
(6) Ibid.
UKRAINE

Political hysteria infects Ukraine

What is going on in Ukraine? This question has been asked repeatedly in recent days, as the country’s leadership descended into what at times appeared to be near hysterical panic resulting from the first confirmed cases of the H1N1 ("swine flu") virus.

Over the past week, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko has banned travel and public gatherings, President Viktor Yushchenko has threatened to arrest those responsible for allowing the flu to spread, internet blogs have suggested that a western pharmaceutical company released a biological “plague” on Ukraine, and anti-Russian activists have suggested that Russian security services infected Ukraine, as a pretext for launching a military invasion.

Lost amid this furor is the fact that Ukraine’s infection rate, while serious, is not currently classified as unnaturally high. Moreover, its death rate—at around .03 percent—seems to be within the range of other countries, such as the United Kingdom. (1)

Even so, the H1N1 virus issue has been grabbed by politicians and sculpted into the biggest political football of the ongoing presidential campaign so far.
On October 30, the cabinet of ministers (CM) approved a number of drastic measures that it said are designed to stop the spread of the H1N1 virus. These included a “quarantine” of nine regions in western Ukraine, restrictions on travel in and out of the country, and a ban on all public gatherings for three weeks. (2) The restrictions have been met with puzzlement by international health officials; the World Health Organization (WHO) later suggested that travel restrictions are not recommended and have not been found to be effective in the past. (3)

Proving the WHO’s point, the travel restrictions and quarantine largely have been flouted, according to many within Ukraine. But, the public gathering ban is being observed – meaning that no presidential candidate may hold any gathering as part of his or her campaign. The “grassroots” election campaign essentially has been put on hold, and voters must depend on paid ads and television news to learn about their choices. This should provide a nice window of opportunity for both Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and President Viktor Yushchenko, who will enjoy the media and communication benefits provided by incumbency. Unless, of course, the flu epidemic spirals beyond the levels found in the rest of the world.

The government’s seemingly stern response and the overall focus on the flu situation have provided Tymoshenko with two important pre-election opportunities. First, she is able to remind voters of her preferred “Iron Lady” workaholic persona. Second—and most important—attention on the flu takes the focus off accusations that three MPs in her bloc allegedly were involved in a child molestation case at a state children’s camp.

If opposition leader and presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovych has his way, however, Tymoshenko will be blamed for every death that occurs as a result of the H1N1 virus. Yanukovych has criticized the government for its response to the crisis, suggesting that a number of early deaths were ignored, leading to a misunderstanding of the illness.
Statements from a number of officials seem to support at least part of Yanukovych’s theory. In the first days of the outbreak, officials all over the television media referred to the flu as an “unknown illness” – perhaps trying to downplay the existence of the H1N1 virus in Ukraine. In a country steeped in conspiracy theories, stories of plagues and intentional infection by Russian security services quickly erupted.

The heaviest criticism of Tymoshenko, however, came from her former Orange Revolution ally Yushchenko. The president was forced to abandon a rally scheduled for 1 November, after the public gathering ban went into effect. The rally was meant to mark the start of Yushchenko’s campaign. Both Tymoshenko and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovych held kick off rallies a week earlier.

For Yushchenko, though, the lack of public rallies is far from a loss, since his approval rating of less than five percent can make attendance problematic, while his public speaking skills have not found much acclaim.

So instead, the President did what he’s done best for five years – he attacked his prime minister using the most hyperbolic language possible.

“People are dying. The epidemic is killing doctors. This is absolutely unprecedented and inconceivable in the 21st century,” he said. Moreover, “the A/H1N1 virus is easily mutating…. This means that the virus has become particularly pathogenic.” (4)

And, he said, the spread of the virus is largely the government’s fault for holding election rallies. “Hundreds of thousands of people … were brought to Kyiv,” he said. “This greatly increased the risk of infection…. This directly reminds me of the May Day demonstration in Kyiv, held shortly after the accident at the
Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant.” This, he said, “is a display of criminal irresponsibility of politicians ….” (5)

The President then assured viewers that he had appealed to the Prosecutor General to investigate the criminal responsibility of officials. He emphasized that the impending “epidemic” was a “well-known thing” and that in April he had “addressed the government with a request” to “take all measures to protect the country against the flu.” (6)

In fact, the President is right to question the lack of preparations for the flu outbreak. It appears that the government’s main strategy was to cross its fingers. It didn’t work.

Furthermore, there’s certainly no denying the absolutely dismal state of Ukraine’s medical facilities and the chronic shortages of medical supplies. The country was unprepared for the onslaught at its hospitals.

However, given Ukraine’s continued submersion in the economic crisis, a drowning state gas company, difficult negotiations with the IMF and World Bank, continual drum-beating by Russia, and constant attacks from both the opposition and the Presidential Secretariat, perhaps the government could have used a little help from the country’s nominal leader. Perhaps, instead of waiting for something to be done, President Yushchenko should have done something himself. It seems that, other than requesting the government to prepare for the virus months ago, the President simply sat back and waited – perhaps with his fingers crossed, perhaps not.

Prime Minister Tymoshenko, meanwhile, is walking a tightrope in this crisis. On the one hand, she could be blamed for the lack of prompt and effective response to early warning signs of the virus. On the other, she may be able to use the
crisis to appear in charge and to force her primary opponent, Viktor Yanukovych, from the public eye.

Regardless, 86 people have been confirmed dead today. None of Ukraine’s politicians have talked much about them. And there are signs that a different sort of danger may be around the corner. Both Yushchenko and Tymoshenko seem to want to use the crisis to consolidate control. Will Tymoshenko be able to use it to manipulate the election season and the distribution of power? Will Yushchenko try to declare a state of emergency and cancel an election that he is expected to lose? Perhaps the conspiracy theorists are right and Ukraine has been infected by more than just the flu.

Source Notes:
(2) “Ukraine Shuts Schools, halts campaigning over H1N1,” UNIAN News Agency, 2 Nov 09 via www.unian.net.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Ibid.

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