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Newly Independent States: Caucasus

By Robyn Angley

ARMENIA

Genocide resolution?

On 4 March, the foreign affairs committee of the US House of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution that described the widespread killing of ethnic Armenians in Turkey in 1915 as “genocide.” (1) The resolution urges President Barack Obama to use the upcoming 95th anniversary of the beginning of the massacres on 24 April to recognize the event as genocide. (2) The resolution is opposed by Obama and Secretary of State Hilary Clinton because of its potential to obstruct a rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia and, more importantly, because of the possible ramifications for Washington’s relationship with Turkey (including the possible loss of access to military bases).

The measure’s possible adoption by the full House is staunchly opposed by the Turkish government, which denies that the events constituted genocide. Ankara withdrew its ambassador for a month, following the initial announcement of the committee’s resolution. However, the ambassador’s return to Washington this week and Prime Minister Recep Tanya Rogan’s decision to attend the upcoming American summit on nuclear issues seem to indicate that Turkish-American relations are on the mend. (3)

American lawmakers’ support for the resolution further complicates stalled negotiations between Ankara and Yerevan, which had appeared to make at least minor progress after Turkish President Abdullah Gull’s initiation of “football (soccer) diplomacy” in September 2008. That the process should encounter roadblocks is hardly surprising, given the deep enmity that exists between the

two groups. Two issues have proven to be particularly difficult – the aforementioned dispute over the classification of the 1915 events and the status of Nagorno-Karabakh, a separatist enclave within (Turkish-allied) Azerbaijan that depends almost entirely on Armenia for external support.

Though understandable in light of the massacre’s upcoming 95th anniversary, the broader context of relations between the two countries involved makes the House committee’s resolution ill timed, as it threatens the progress in negotiations. Almost a year ago, Yerevan and Ankara agreed on a “roadmap” of steps to be taken to normalize relations between the two countries. (4) The roadmap remains unimplemented, although Armenia’s constitutional court has approved it. Highlighting the ongoing tension between the Turkish and Armenian governments despite the continued negotiations, Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian recently characterized one of the steps of the roadmap—the formation of a joint historical commission to investigate the 1915 events—as only “mak[ing] sense if Turkey finally confessed its guilt.” He concluded, “Then historians could work together to uncover the causes that led to this tragedy.” (5) Such a stipulation obviously would be highly objectionable to the Turkish government, which generally considers references to the 1915 massacres as attacks on the Turkish state. Statements like these notwithstanding, Sarkisian is outwardly in favor of furthering the rapprochement, denying, for instance, that Armenia is making Turkish recognition of the genocide a condition for further progress on opening the shared border between the two states. (6)

The perennial issue of US recognition of the 1915 events as genocide has been advocated consistently by the powerful US-based Armenian diaspora and just as consistently opposed by Turkey. The subject has surfaced yet again, in part, because of the significance of this anniversary and because of Obama’s initial campaign commitments to recognize the genocide. However, it seems unwise to add further tension to the delicate process of Armenian-Turkish negotiations by raising the issue now.

Congressional support for the resolution is due largely to the advocacy efforts of ethnic Armenians in the United States. Many members of the American-Armenian diaspora oppose Armenia's rapprochement with Turkey, (7) fearing (rightly) that recognition of the genocide may be sacrificed for the sake of achieving more pragmatic political and economic goals, such as reopening the closed border between Turkey and Armenia. Armenia's diaspora holds considerable sway in Yerevan as a result of the financial support that flows into the country from its ethnic population abroad and it is possible that members of the US-based diaspora are taking measures to scuttle the small steps achieved by the Turkish-Armenian negotiations. Consequently, leaders within the American-Armenian community may be using their influence in Washington to persuade legislators to support the genocide resolution in the hopes of obstructing further progress between Ankara and Yerevan.

If this is the case, it highlights the difference in priorities that can exist between a nation's diaspora and those who continue to live in their homeland. It appears that Armenia's diaspora is willing to contribute to Armenia's continued regional isolation and economic underdevelopment for the sake of international recognition of a historical grievance. It is unclear what proportion of Armenia's domestic population supports this strategy.

One conclusion is clear, however; if the US House of Representatives adopts the resolution, any hopes for the implementation of the agreed upon roadmap will be at an end.

GEORGIA

Moscow accuses Tbilisi of links to metro bombing

Russia's NATO envoy Dmitri Rogozin has hinted that there could be connections between Georgian officials and the terrorists who bombed the Moscow subway on 29 March.

Rogozin speculated that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili may have ordered members of the Georgian security services to cause disruptions in Russia, adding: "I cannot tell you whether there are direct links between these measures and the recent terrorist attacks in Moscow....But it is a fact that Georgian special services have really been working on this issue, and that they are interested in distracting our attention through such tragic events." (8)

Rogozin's comments were supplemented by a statement from Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, who claimed that he did not eliminate the possibility of a "Georgian trace" in the bombings. (9) Given Chechen militant leader Dokka Umarov's recent claims of responsibility for the bombing, (10) these allegations of Georgian involvement may come to naught. However, such comments by high-level Russian officials highlight Moscow's continued interest in establishing possible pretexts for intervention in the South Caucasus by attempting to make Georgia appear complicit in domestic terrorism in Russia.

Russian authorities have failed to present any evidence linking Georgian security services to the attacks. Georgian representatives characterized the allegations as "created out of thin air," but expressed Tbilisi's willingness to cooperate in a possible investigation of the bombing. (11)

Source Notes:

(1) "Armenia welcomes nonbinding U.S. genocide resolution," Xinhua General News Service, 6 Mar 10 via Lexis-Nexis.

(2) Hughes, John, "Armenian Genocide Resolution: President Obama and the price of moral courage," Christian Science Monitor, 8 Mar 10 via Lexis-Nexis.

(3) "Embassy Row," Washington Times, 6 Apr 10 via Lexis-Nexis.

(4) See Robyn Anglely, "Caucasus," ISCIP Analyst, vol. XV, no. 12, 30 Apr 09 via <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/digest/vol15/ed1512.shtml#Caucasus>.

(5) "Serge Sarkisian on Armenian-Turkish Relations," Der Spiegel, 6 Apr 10 via <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,687387-2,00.html>.

(6) Ibid.

(7) "Turkey-Armenia rapprochement far from guaranteed," ArmeniaDiaspora.com, 14 Oct 09 via <http://www.armeniadiaspora.com/news/article-hits/751-turkey-armenia-rapprochement-far-from-guaranteed.html>.

(8) "Rogozin not ruling out 'Georgian trail' in Moscow Metro blasts (Part 2)," Russia & CIS Military Newswire, 31 Mar 10 via Lexis-Nexis.

(9) "Georgia offers cooperation to Russia in investigating metro attacks (Part 2)," Russia & CIS General Newswire, 31 Mar 10 via Lexis-Nexis.

(10) See Fabian Adami, "Security Services," ISCIP Analyst, vol. XVI, no. 11, Part I via <http://www.bu.edu/iscip/digest/vol16/ed1611a.shtml>.

(11) "Georgia offers cooperation to Russia in investigating metro attacks (Part 2)," Russia & CIS General Newswire, 31 Mar 10 via Lexis-Nexis.

Newly Independent States: Central Asia

By Monika Shepherd

KYRGYZSTAN

Regime change in Kyrgyzstan: A new beginning or more of the same?

On April 7, President Kurmanbek Bakiev was sent packing in much the same way that his predecessor, Askar Akaev, was driven from office, on a wave of deep-seated, popular dissatisfaction that had been building for a considerable period. Bakiev, along with his defense minister, at first were reported to have fled Bishkek for Osh, (1) although according to more recent information the president has sought refuge in his hometown of Jalalabad. (2)

A new interim government, headed by opposition figure Roza Otunbaeva (former Kyrgyz ambassador to the US, as well as a former foreign minister and one of

the most prominent opposition leaders) has been installed. Otunbaeva has stated that the interim government will stay in power for six months until elections can be held. (3) Prime Minister Daniyar Usenov handed in his resignation on April 7 and, during talks with Otunbaeva and Ak-Shumkar (an opposition party) leader Mars Sariev, promised that the Cabinet of Ministers would resign their positions, as well. (4) President Bakiev, however, has thus far refused to resign, despite calls from Otunbaeva, numerous other opposition leaders, (5) and even former President Askar Akaev, that he step down voluntarily and allow the new government to begin performing its duties. (6)

The president's refusal to resign should come as no surprise; since first assuming power, Bakiev has stalled and ignored not only opposition leaders' demands, but also those of the public. This was a risky tactic for someone who rode into office on a wave of popular support for fundamental change to Kyrgyzstan's constitution and government bureaucracy. Bakiev took office based on a perception that he would be the antithesis of Akaev, a perception that has fallen far short. Far from living up to his pledges to root out corrupt government practices and establish more democratic, open and transparent practices in the Kyrgyz government, Bakiev only perpetuated the corruption. He brought a number of his family members into the government, most recently putting his son, Maksim, in charge of economic investments and, little by little, attempted to consolidate authority over the country's domestic, foreign, and security policy in his own hands.

Although at first the opposition protested and organized demonstrations and rallies to pressure the president to carry out his promised reforms, public support for these tactics waned. Once Bakiev's supporters managed to gain an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats, the president's path to exploit his country's resources for his own ends seemed clear. Unfortunately, Kyrgyzstan's economy, battered by fallout from the global financial collapse and the most severe energy crisis its citizens had experienced in decades, fanned popular

dissatisfaction and distrust for a president who seemed to be following in his predecessor's footsteps, just at a slightly faster pace.

Beset by chronic energy shortages, power blackouts nearly year-round, a significant dip in foreign remittances and rising unemployment, the Kyrgyz government's recent decision to raise electricity and natural gas prices by 200 percent resulted in widespread public discontent, to which opposition leaders responded by scheduling a number of demonstrations and public gatherings. (7) Bakiev, rather than trying to mitigate the situation by meeting with opposition leaders and at least providing them with an audience to air their main concerns, proceeded to crack down on media outlets, opposition members (and their families), and even human rights activists who dared to criticize his regime openly.

It is not yet clear precisely what precipitated the events that have led to Bakiev's (de facto) overthrow, but the catalyst was provided by an opposition rally in Talas to protest the increased electricity tariffs that turned violent, when law enforcement personnel attacked the crowd. Protesters fought back and eventually were able to take over the main government building, even holding the governor hostage for at least several hours. When authorities in Bishkek responded by arresting a number of prominent opposition leaders and attempting additional crackdowns, ostensibly to forestall further violence, public anger spilled over and a number of city and town administrations, including the capital, found themselves overrun by opposition supporters. (8)

Whether or not Bakiev concedes the presidency to Roza Otunbaeva's interim government within the next few days, weeks or months, it seems quite clear that his reign is over. The question now is whether the interim government will be able to extend its control into all of Kyrgyzstan's regions and major cities and re-establish order and calm. The 2005 Tulip Revolution brought prolonged chaos to Kyrgyzstan's regions, where lawlessness continued to reign long after Bishkek

had been brought back under control. With this new regime change, opposition leaders and lawmakers have a second chance to bring real reform to their country's power institutions. Unfortunately, they also have a new chance to exploit Kyrgyzstan's riches for their own ends – hopefully, this time they will choose the right path.

Source Notes:

- (1) “President Kyrgyzstana pribyl v Osh,” 8 Apr 10, Kabar new agency via <<http://www.kabar.kg/news/2010/04/08/15566.html>>.
- (2) Andrew Rettman, “EU officials foresee no further violence in Kyrgyztsan,” 10 Apr 10, EUobserver.com via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
- (3) Peter Leonard, “Kyrgyz president refuses to resign,” 8 Apr 10, The Associated Press via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
- (4) “Kyrgyzstan's prime minister resigns, says Opposition leader,” 7 Apr 10, ITAR-TASS via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
- (5) Peter Leonard, “Kyrgyz president refuses to resign,” 8 Apr 10, Ibid.
- (6) “Former Kyrgyz president calls on incumbent leader to resign,” 7 Apr 10, Interfax via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
- (7) Peter Leonard, “AP Exclusive: Kyrgyz uprising seizes security HQ,” 7 Apr 10, The Associated Press via Lexis-Nexis Academic.
- (8) Leila Saralayeva, “Kyrgyz unrest threatens to spread with new rallies,” 6 Apr 10, The Associated Press via Lexis-Nexis Academic.

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