



WASHINGTON, D.C. February 15, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

**FROM: Edward B. Robin, Chairman;
Lesley Israel, NCSJ President;
Mark B. Levin, NCSJ Executive Director**

In Brief: Mission to Georgia; Mourning Lantos

Dear Friend:

I am writing you from Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, where NCSJ Chairman Ed Robin and I are on a mission organized by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish organizations. The Conference of Presidents, which visits a different Jewish community every year, is in Georgia to applaud its government and people for their strong pro-Israel and pro-Western policies, and record of tolerance. The Jewish community here is over 2,600 years old, and Georgia has never had a history of anti-Semitism.

It has been an incredible trip so far. We've seen vibrant Jewish communal life, and held meetings with the president, prime minister, foreign minister, U.S. ambassador and other senior government officials. For more details, I've included a JTA brief on the trip.

Also included is our statement on the passing of Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA), who died at age 80 on Monday, after a battle with cancer. Congressman Lantos, who chaired the House Foreign Affairs committee, was the only Holocaust survivor ever to serve in the House of Representatives. He and his wife Annette were true friends of the Soviet Jewry movement. Chairman Lantos was a tireless advocate for the rights of oppressed people everywhere. NCSJ mourns his loss; he will be sorely missed.

Next week we will be in Israel, continuing on the Conference of Presidents mission, and I will be participating in the second Global Forum on Anti-Semitism.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. February 15, 2008

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#1

Conference of Presidents to focus on Iran

By Haviv Rettig

Jerusalem Post, February 12, 2008

American Jews seem to agree on very little this year. From the possibility that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert may be negotiating secretly on Jerusalem, to the difficult choice of Sen. John McCain - immensely popular among Jews - and two Democrats who are just as popular, to conversions and halachic observance, the Jews in America and elsewhere are deeply divided on a wide array of issues.

The exception, it seems, is Iran.

One of the weathervanes of consensus among American Jews is its senior political umbrella, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Composed of 51 organizations - from the ZOA on the Right to Americans for Peace Now on the Left, the Orthodox and Reform, Jewish War Veterans of the USA and the Friends of the IDF - the Conference represents the broadest consensus among organized American Jewry.

Each year, the Conference visits a country in order to meet its leaders and lobby them on issues relevant to American Jewry. The list of recent visits is telling: Qatar, Azerbaijan, the Czech Republic (a diplomatic lynchpin of NATO), Kazakhstan, Turkey, and, this year, Georgia.

A Christian country on the eastern shores of the Black Sea, Georgia borders Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia. It's a stone's throw from (and an airspace corridor to) Iran, and a conduit for the Caspian oil that reaches Israel. It is seeking strengthened ties to Israel and the US, in part to offset the influence of Russia, with which it has strained relations. It has deployed troops to Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo.

"Georgia is a pro-US and pro-Israel country that has resisted anti-Semitism for 2,600 years," explains Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents. "They're demonstrably looking for better relations with the US and Israel."

Georgia has also sought economic integration with the European Union. To facilitate this, its government has conducted a major drive to combat widespread corruption, which has apparently experienced a steep decline. Ranked 130th in the world in the Corruption Perceptions Index of Transparency International in 2005, the country rose to 99th in 2006 and 79th in 2007, a figure showing a drastic decline in the population's perception of corruption in government.

Though the country's January elections were rancorous, with concerns raised, particularly in Europe, over their conduct, they were also nonviolent.

"There is no question there are problems," agrees Hoenlein, who spoke to The Jerusalem Post ahead of this week's visit to the country. "You can't expect these countries to go from zero to 60 in no time." But the country is moving in the right direction, he adds.

Georgia's political situation will not top the agenda of the Conference visit, which will include meetings with President Mikhail Saakashvili and other senior officials. According to Hoenlein, "we're not there to get involved in the domestic situation, although we are there to encourage democracy. We'll meet with opposition figures, religious figures."

More than anything else, this visit, which the Post will accompany as a guest of the Georgian government, will be about Iran. "Iran is on the agenda everywhere we go. These countries, which are closer to Iran, feel it more, the possibility that Iran will go nuclear."

What exactly will the Jewish visitors say on Iran? "We'll say that Iran is a leading state sponsor of terrorism, that it's a barbaric regime that executes people in barbaric ways"; that "after the NIE, the Europeans are now pushing the Americans" on Iran, rather than the reverse; that, "as the NIE showed, sanctions work and they're already having an impact. Ten percent of the population has left, including 250,000 members of the intelligentsia each year, because of the economic situation."

And, adds Hoenlein, they will say that "a military strike would be a sign of a failed policy, because it would show we didn't do everything we could have done."

#2

NCSJ Mourns Passing of Congressman Lantos Holocaust survivor, Soviet Jewry's friend dies at 80 NCSJ Press Release, February 11, 2008

NCSJ mourns the passing of Congressman Tom Lantos, who died today of esophageal cancer, at age 80.

A member of the U.S. House of Representatives since 1980, Lantos was a champion of Jewish interests and human rights. He and his wife were instrumental in the fight to free Soviet Jewry in the 1980s. Lantos founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus (CHRC) in 1983, and recently served as chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs.

"As a Holocaust survivor, he provided a unique perspective and was able to articulate a commitment to human rights that few others could," said NCSJ Executive Director Mark Levin.

"Through his work on the Foreign Affairs Committee and the CHRC, Congress was deeply impacted by his tenure. His focus on human rights forever changed how the U.S. government responds to modern tragedies. Human rights activists will miss his presence, but he will not be forgotten."

#3

Tom Lantos Left Behind Human Rights Legacy By Ron Kampeas JTA, February 11, 2008

The flags dipped at half-staff over the Capitol, the warm remembrances flooded e-mail inboxes, the "Have you heard?" phone calls took a solemn tone.

U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) earned all these tributes. He died Monday of esophageal cancer at the age of 80.

The mourning was not just for a man but for the unique voice of the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to Congress.

“We lose a voice for human rights, which was in his case unique,” Elie Wiesel, the novelist whose own writings have become icons of Holocaust remembrance, told JTA. “He spoke always against oppression, against persecution, against racism.”

Lantos died at the Naval Medical Center in suburban Bethesda, Md., surrounded by his wife, Annette, two daughters and many of his 18 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

“As the only Holocaust survivor to serve in Congress, Tom was a living reminder that we must never turn a blind eye to the suffering of the innocent at the hands of evil men,” President Bush said.

“Having lived through the worst evil known to mankind, Tom Lantos translated the experience into a lifetime commitment to the fight against anti-Semitism, Holocaust education, and a commitment to the State of Israel,” U.S. Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), the speaker of the House of Representatives, said in a statement.

Sallai Meridor, Israel’s ambassador to Washington, said Israel “lost one of our greatest friends.”

The remembrances of Lantos, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, were a kaleidoscope of the human rights causes he championed since his election to the House in 1980.

Wiesel remembered Lantos’ contributions to the building of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which Wiesel helped found.

“From the very beginning in Washington he was with us, involved in every step leading to the building of the museum, developing it into a source for archives, learning and teaching,” he said.

Mark Levin, the executive director of NCSJ: Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, the Baltic States and Eurasia, focused on Lantos’ role in the 1980s in pressing the Soviet Union to release its Jews. Lantos made several trips to Russia to meet with refuseniks and championed them in Congress.

“He was forthright, compassionate and deeply committed to the cause of freeing Jews from the former Soviet Union,” Levin told JTA.

In 2003 he would found the House’s Human Rights Caucus.

Other encomiums came from The American Jewish World Service, which has led the Jewish community in pressing for an end to the genocide in Sudan; the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which praised his steadfast support for Israel and his tough stance on Iran; and the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, which commemorated his contributions to social welfare at home.

“He has been a valiant voice demanding more action against the Darfur genocide and at the same time a valiant leader in the fight to stop the scourge of HIV/AIDS from devastating the developing world,” AJWS President Ruth Messinger told JTA from Uganda, where she was touring AIDS relief projects.

Lantos “blazed a trail in the United States Congress fighting for education, health care, human rights, and Israel,” said JCPA, the public-policy umbrella body for several influential national Jewish organizations, the synagogue movements and more than 100 local Jewish communities.

Adding their remembrances were the United Jewish Communities, B’nai B’rith International, the Anti-Defamation League, the World Jewish Congress, the Reform movement’s Religious Action Center, Hadassah and Americans for Peace Now.

The Democratic National Committee remembered Lantos’ service to his Silicon Valley district.

“In serving his constituents and his country, Tom never forgot the Democratic Party’s ideals of freedom, fairness and opportunity for all,” the chairman of the DNC, Howard Dean, said in a statement.

Lantos was not afraid to take on his allies. On the foreign affairs committee, he blasted Silicon Valley giants like Google and Yahoo for colluding with China's government in censorship. He authored tough Iran sanctions legislation, but broke with pro-Israel orthodoxy by offering to meet with the Islamic Republic's leaders.

Pro-Israel groups also opposed a nonbinding resolution that recognized the Ottoman-era massacres of Armenians as a genocide, worried that it would cause a rift between Israel and Turkey. Lantos pushed the measure through the committee, unwilling to countenance what he saw as genocide revisionism.

His appeal crossed political aisles: Both the National Jewish Democratic Council and the Republican Jewish Coalition issued statements mourning his passing.

Top Republicans on his committee recalled him fondly.

"An unfailingly gracious and courageous man, Tom was recognized by friends and colleagues alike as a leader who left an enviable legacy of service to his country," said Rep. Ileana Ros Lehtinen (R-Fla.), the committee's ranking member.

The campaigns of the two Democrats left in the presidential field, U.S. Sens. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) and Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) also released statements mourning his passing.

Lantos was 16 in 1944 when the Nazis invaded his native Hungary; his Web site tells of his fighting in the anti-Nazi underground.

In 1947 he came to the United States to study. Lantos was a noted economist and consultant prior to his House election in 1980.

Expressions of his love for his adopted country were as constant as his defenses of human rights.

"It is only in the United States that a penniless survivor of the Holocaust and a fighter in the anti-Nazi underground could have received an education, raised a family and had the privilege of serving the last three decades of his life as a member of Congress," he said in his statement last month announcing his retirement. "I will never be able to express fully my profoundly felt gratitude to this great country."

Lantos, said Wiesel, died too young – even at 80, even after serving nearly three decades in public office. He noted that Lantos only ascended to the committee chairmanship in 2006 after Democrats regained Congress.

"He had influence," Wiesel said. "He would have had more had he lived."

#4

Rice: US Naming Energy Envoy AP, February 13, 2008

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice says she will appoint a special envoy for energy issues to deal with the use of oil and gas for political means, particularly in Central Asia.

She made the announcement during a congressional hearing. And her comments come amid threats from Venezuela to cut off oil exports to the United States as well as several incidents in which Russia has threatened to cut off gas supplies to some of its neighbors, most recently Ukraine.

Rice broke the news while responding to a question from Sen. Richard Lugar, an Indiana Republican, who asked her about progress made on establishing such a post that was called for in legislation approved last year.

#5

Belarus Holocaust memorial vandalized JTA Brief, February 15, 2008

A Holocaust memorial in Belarus was vandalized for the fourth time in a little more than a year.

Vandals set fire Tuesday to flowers surrounding the memorial to the 34,000 Jews murdered by the Nazis in Brest, Belarus, according to the Russian Jewish Web site Jewish.ru.

Police are investigating the crime, but several vandalism incidents in the Jewish community in the last several years have not led to any arrests.

#6

Study: Many Russian textbooks anti-Semitic JTA Brief, February 14, 2008

Many Russian textbooks may be anti-Semitic, a study has found.

A joint study by the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Russian Jewish Congress found that many school history textbooks completely avoid the subject of the Holocaust, despite the fact that the Nazis and their collaborators killed millions of Soviet Jews.

Pogroms during the Russian Civil War were not mentioned in most textbooks. One textbook reportedly dramatically undercounted the number of Jews in the Russian empire in the 19th century, using the figure 175,000.

The researchers were unable to find a single textbook that adequately assesses the role of Jews in Russian history, and they plan to ask the Ministry of Education to review their recommendations, according to the Russian Jewish Web site Jewish.ru

#7

German ambassador meets Kiev Jews JTA Brief, February 14, 2008

The German ambassador to Ukraine met with Jews in Kiev.

During a meeting Tuesday at the Kinor Jewish Community Center, Ambassador Rayngard Shefers spoke about the emigration of 240,000 Jews from the counties of the former Soviet Union, including Ukraine, to Germany and about their integration into German society.

The ambassador said there was a renaissance within the German Jewish community, supported by the German government's financial support to help restore synagogues and reinvigorate other areas of Jewish life in the country.

#8

Renovated Israel cultural center opens in Kiev JTA Brief, February 13, 2008

Ukraine's Israeli Embassy reopened and dedicated a renovated Israel cultural center in Kiev.

Representatives of the Israeli Embassy, Nativ and the Jewish Agency joined with Ukrainian government officials at the Feb. 6 opening of the Itzhak Rabin Israel Cultural Center.

Ukrainian and Israeli officials spoke about the importance of strengthening Israeli-Ukrainian ties. They said the center's programs will provide opportunities for Jews and non-Jews to learn more about Jewish Israeli culture, the Hebrew language and Jewish history.

Pictures of Ukrainian artists devoted to Judaism and Israel decorate the walls of the center.

Felix Mindel, the head of the Nativ aliyah agency in Ukraine, told JTA that the renovated center will provide information on making aliyah.

#9

Russia Threatens to Target Missiles at Ukraine Associated Press/Moscow Times, February 13, 2008

Russia could aim nuclear missiles at Ukraine if it joins NATO and accepts the deployment of anti-missile defense elements on its territory, President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday.

Speaking at a news conference with Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko, Putin said Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO would restrict its sovereignty.

"That raises the question for Russia of the need for retaliatory actions," Putin said.

"It is frightening not only to talk about this, but even to think that, in response to such deployments ... and one can't theoretically exclude these deployments, Russia would have to point its warheads at Ukraine," he said.

Yushchenko responded by saying that Ukraine has the right to form its own foreign and defense policies, and noted that the Ukrainian constitution does not allow for the deployment of foreign bases on its territory.

"You understand well that everything Ukraine does in this direction is not in any way directed at any third country, including Russia," he said.

Putin and Yushchenko said they would continue talks about the legal status of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, which is stationed on Ukraine's Crimean peninsula. The two countries signed an agreement in 1997 allowing the fleet there for a rent of \$93 million per year. Ukraine has tried to increase the price.

#10

Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia to hold congress in Moscow Interfax Religion, February 13, 2008

The annual congress of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia (FJCR) will open at the Moscow Jewish Community Center on February 18.

This year's congress coincides with the Federation's 10th anniversary, a FJCR's spokesperson said. Its main task will be to chart the development of the country's Jewish community in the next decade.

The event's program will include conferences on the following subjects: searching for ways to encourage regional businessmen to play a more active role in the work of boards of trustees, confronting xenophobia and anti-Semitism, key efforts of Jewish communities in education, youth policy issues, the work of the Federation's department for liaison with the Army, law enforcement bodies and the Emergencies Ministry and many other important issues in the life of the Jewish community.

The congress will be attended by delegates from 178 Russian towns. The congress is also expecting guests from CIS and other foreign Jewish communities, representatives of charitable organizations and Russian authorities.

#11

Ex-Minister Convicted of Hate Crime The Moscow Times, February 13, 2008

A Novosibirsk court on Tuesday convicted former Press Minister Boris Mironov of inciting ethnic hatred but released him because the statute of limitations had expired.

The charges against Mironov, 56, stem from two articles he contributed to a local election campaign pamphlet in 2003 that prosecutors said contained anti-Semitic remarks.

"In the opinion of experts, the publications were aimed at inciting hatred toward the Jewish nation," Judge Grigory Brakar said while delivering the verdict, Interfax reported.

Prosecutors had asked that Mironov be sentenced to two years in prison,

Mironov served as press minister under President Boris Yeltsin from December 1993 until September 1994. During his tenure, Izvestia and Moskovskiy Novosti campaigned against him for his nationalist, anti-Semitic remarks. In 2000 he helped arrange a news conference in Moscow for former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke.

#12

Poor Ukrainian kids get a lift JTA Brief, February 10, 2008

A Ukrainian Jewish community initiated a program for needy children.

Children from poor families in Uzhgorod, on the border with Slovakia and Hungary, will receive regular care packages containing kosher food products and sweets, as well as new clothes and footwear.

Along with the Uzhgorod Jewish community, the Viktor Pinchuk Fund and the Keren Yedidut Friendship Foundation contributed to the program's launch.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Taichman, the Chabad Lubavitch emissary to the city and Transcarpathian region, heads the Uzhgorod community, which is a member of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Ukraine.

The community made news last year when still-unknown vandals broke into the Chabad center in Uzhgorod on Oct. 5, during the holiday of Simchat Torah, and set fire to the rabbi's home.

#13

Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan Up For A Fight, But Armenia Unbowed By Ahto Lobjakas RFE/RL, February 8, 2008

EU officials touring the South Caucasus this week were confronted by heated words from President Ilham Aliyev, who told them Azerbaijan is ready to "wage war" with neighboring Armenia over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan's recent windfall of oil and gas revenues appears to have persuaded Aliyev that he could turn the tables on Armenia, which has long held the military upper hand in the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, a predominantly ethnic-Armenian territory located within Azerbaijan.

In talks on February 4 with Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, who was representing the current EU Presidency, Aliyev indicated Baku was contemplating waging war for control of the disputed territory, which

together with a strip of adjacent Azerbaijani territory has been under Yerevan's control since a 1988-94 war between the two countries.

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, the EU's external relations commissioner, tells RFE/RL that Brussels firmly rejected Baku's "inflammatory" rhetoric. "I clearly said, not only to the authorities, but also at the press conference, that I think it is highly important that they avoid any inflammatory speech at the moment of presidential elections," she says.

Both countries are holding a presidential vote this year -- Armenia on February 19, and Azerbaijan in October. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has spent more than 15 years mediating talks between the two sides, has indicated an election year is not likely to see major progress on the issue.

Baku, however, appears impatient. The Azerbaijani leadership, Rupel said, appears to feel that "time is not on Armenia's side." Nor is money. Azerbaijan's defense budget this year will exceed \$1 billion; Armenia's is just one-third of that figure.

Azerbaijan has enjoyed spectacular economic growth over the past few years. The country's GDP grew by 25 percent in 2007, almost exclusively on the strength of oil and gas exports.

Azerbaijan's minister for economic development, Heydar Babayev, says he expects his government to generate upward of \$150 billion in oil and gas revenues by 2015.

Armenia, meanwhile, has no lucrative natural resources. It is landlocked, blockaded by neighbors Turkey and Azerbaijan, and -- at Baku's behest -- bypassed by oil and gas pipelines, as well as rail and road projects, which originate in Azerbaijan.

'Winning The Peace'

But, as Rupel notes, Armenia has "alliances that speak for it." This is a reference to Russian backing. Throughout the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia is rumored to have given Armenia military equipment worth \$1 billion. Russia provides for most of Armenia's energy needs and has bought up most of its energy infrastructure.

The Armenian government did not appear cowed by Baku's fighting words. Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian tells RFE/RL that Armenia is confident of its military capability. "No matter how strong the Azeris will be in the next 15 years, even with this kind of spending, even [if it] doubled every year, to catch up with Armenia's commitment to defend itself and Karabakh, that will require [as a] minimum 15-20 years," he says.

Oskanian says that Armenia would not be intimidated in any event. More importantly, he adds, he does not believe there can be a military solution to Nagorno-Karabakh. "We fought twice with the Azeris, we prevailed, but we never claimed that we won the war," he says. "Unless we win the peace, we will never claim that we won the war."

Oskanian acknowledges, however, that the chances of "winning the peace" are receding and that Azerbaijan's positions in the OSCE-mediated peace talks have hardened.

Rupel -- an old OSCE hand, having chaired the organization in 2005 -- also fears the Minsk Group, which oversees the mediation efforts, may face increasing obstinacy from Baku.

Nagorno-Karabakh is a key issue in both countries' election campaigns, and establishment candidates are expected to win in both countries, meaning novel approaches to the problem are not likely to be forthcoming.

Taking a longer-term view, Rupel says the conflict is rooted in the region's Soviet past, when Josef Stalin arranged their borders in a way apparently designed to exacerbate ethnic strife.

Rupel says both Armenia and Azerbaijan need a "generational change." "You know, a new generation, younger people, [would] deal with problems like Nagorno-Karabakh in an easier way," he says. "I think we have to rely on a new generation of politicians on both sides. There has been some generational change in Azerbaijan, as you know. We'll see how it happens here [in Armenia]. Certainly, it is not a pleasant situation."

And what of the EU's role? Rupel says the EU's Neighborhood Policy is "as balanced as possible" between the two countries. The EU, he says, is "very careful not to upset one side or the other," with even its economic assistance being as "similar" as possible.

But money appears to be no object in this standoff. The EU has not been directly involved in the peace talks, and there appears to be little wish on either side for it to engage. As an ally in a conflict, meanwhile, the EU remains of little use.

#14

Armenia: OSCE Concerned By Election Campaign By Astghik Bedevian and Ruzanna Khachatrian RFE/RL, February 8, 2008

International observers expressed concern on February 7 about Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian's heavy reliance on government levers in the campaign for the February 19 presidential ballot and pledged to investigate a violent incident that nearly disrupted a campaign rally by opposition candidate and former President Levon Ter-Petrossian.

Ambassador Geert-Hinrich Ahrens, the Dutch diplomat who heads the international vote-monitoring mission deployed in Armenia by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), said Sarkisian's "use of the position of prime minister in the election campaign" could obstruct the proper conduct of the vote. "There is no international rule that would prevent a prime minister from participating as a candidate in a presidential race," Ahrens told RFE/RL in an interview. "But such a situation, of course, puts a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of the prime minister not to use his office to promote his candidacy." "Of course, it is a matter of concern when the line that should not be overstepped is being overstepped," he said.

Sarkisian has come under opposition fire for capitalizing on his personal control -- and that of the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK) which he heads -- over many government bodies to gain extensive coverage by leading television stations and ensure high turnout at his campaign rallies across the country. Speaking in parliament on February 6, Sarkisian argued that the Armenian Electoral Code does not explicitly bar him from combining his prime-ministerial duties with election-related activities.

"As you know, elections in Armenia are monitored by numerous observers," Sarkisian said in response to a question from an opposition parliamentarian. "And if the observers say that I, as you claim, have blatantly violated the law and inflicted great damage on the country, I will think about this issue."

Sarkisian went on to deny local media reports that schoolteachers, students, and other public-sector employees are forced to attend his campaign rallies. "You can try and meet those people [attending Sarkisian's rallies] and ask whether they are kept there by police or army cordons," he said. "The reputation of Armenia's future president is very dear to me and I will do everything in my power to ensure that Armenia's future president has a good reputation," a statement that seemingly reflects supreme confidence in his election chances. Addressing a cabinet session on February 7, Sarkisian warned the heads of local HHK branches local government officials to be scrupulously careful to comply with election-related legislation, Noyan Tapan reported.

Sarkisian's campaign spending is another source of controversy. According to the Central Election Commission, it totaled 26.3 million drams (\$85,000) as of January 31, well below the 70 million-dram limit set by the Electoral Code. Opposition politicians dismiss the figure as fraudulent, saying that such a modest sum could not have enabled Sarkisian to flood Yerevan and just about every Armenian town and village with his campaign billboards and posters.

Ter-Petrosian's camp has also cried foul over Sarkisian's December 4 decision to form a special government commission to address citizens' grievances, saying that its activities amount to vote buying. They claim that voters needing financial and other assistance are being referred to the commission by Sarkisian's campaign offices.

Ter-Petrosian on February 5 accused the OSCE observers of turning a blind eye to this and other alleged violations. "They don't see or don't want to see that," he said. "At least, there have been no preventive steps, no statements on their part." Ahrens, however, said the observer mission is looking into Ter-Petrosian's claims. "If this is the case, then this would of course be a way of using administrative resources that would not be acceptable," he said.

Ahrens also expressed concern about violence that marred a Ter-Petrosian election rally on February 6 in Artashat, 30 kilometers south of Yerevan. A group of pro-government youths there scuffled with Ter-Petrosian's loyalists and pelted them with stones in an apparent attempt to disrupt the gathering. Ter-Petrosian condemned the incident, which was witnessed by two OSCE observers, as a government "provocation" aimed at derailing his campaign. Law-enforcement authorities claimed, however, that Ter-Petrosian and his allies themselves provoked it by making "offensive" remarks about Deputy Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamian, Sarkisian's Artashat-based campaign manager.

"We will certainly investigate this incident," Ahrens said. "We have long-term observers everywhere in the country. They will talk to all those involved and then submit a report to us. Then on that basis we can form our judgment on this incident." "Whoever is to blame, any such incident is deplorable," he added.

#15

ARMENIA: TER-PETROSIAN FILES SUIT THAT COULD POSTPONE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

By Marianna Grigoryan

Eurasianet, February 8, 2008

"Besides the anti-campaigning, the authorities are doing everything in this period to create obstacles for us, and for this very reason we have applied to the Constitutional Court," Musinian said.

The first interim report from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights election observation mission cited overwhelmingly negative coverage of Ter-Petrosian, Armenia's first post-Soviet president. Local monitoring groups have reached similar conclusions.

While government officials have issued repeated assurances that the election campaign is going relatively smoothly and comes close to meeting "international standards," opposition leaders have frequently complained about alleged cases of violence that they attribute to the government.

On February 3, Orinats Yerkir (Country of Law) Party leader and presidential candidate Artur Baghdasarian declared at a rally in Yerevan that he had received a death threat. A police investigation is ongoing.

Pro-government media, however, have hinted that the claim is a publicity stunt. Although he reportedly received the threat on February 2, Baghdasarian did not visit the police until February 7, noted Hayots Ashkharh. "This means Baghdasarian has absolutely no problems connected with his personal security, as he announced at the rally," said commentary published by the newspaper. "Or, he is really determined to sacrifice his life for the sake of Armenia and does not want that the police interfere in this."

Baghdasarian has since accepted protection from the National Security Service.

Meanwhile, during a February 6 rally for Ter-Petrosian in the eastern town of Artashat, in Armenia's Ararat region, several young men hurled stones and pieces of ice in the direction of the former president. A scuffle between rally participants and the young men – termed "hooligans" by Ter-Petrosian -- broke out, injuring the candidate's deputy security chief. Campaign members have said that he was hospitalized.

Ter-Petrosian's campaign blamed the government for the incident and, personally, on Deputy Prime Minister Hovik Abrahamian and his brother, parliamentarian Jonik Abrahamian, who are both from nearby Artashat. The town is widely assumed to be an Abrahamian political stronghold.

In response, the police have claimed that Ter-Petrosian and his supporters "voiced personal insults and discrediting words against certain officials."

"Three citizens participating in the rally demanded that the obscene and offensive expressions be put to an end," an official statement claims. It goes on to allege that "four or five young people from among the supporters of the event organizers dragged, threw on the ground and hit those who made the remarks, inflicting bodily injuries on them."

A criminal case has been started in connection with the incident and a police investigation is reportedly ongoing. The OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission will be conducting its own inquiry as well, according to mission head, Amb. Geert Ahrens of Germany.

Not surprisingly, opposition and government supporters are diametrically opposed over who is responsible for the clash. "Those are shows that the authorities from time to time organize to discredit Levon Ter-Petrosian on public television," commented opposition journalist Nikol Pashinian, a senior Ter-Petrosian ally. "In reality, we are carrying out our campaign in an atmosphere of terror created by the authorities."

Pashinian also holds the government responsible for a reported assault on a Ter-Petrosian heckler in the town of Talin – an incident cited by Ter-Petrosian opponents to underline the former president's supposed low tolerance for criticism.

Local government officials routinely intervene, Pashinian continued. At a rally in Charentsavan, a town near Lake Sevan in eastern Armenia, the town's mayor stood near the demonstration and ordered people not to attend it, Pashinian alleged.

"We get very warm receptions everywhere, with special ceremonies, with horses, offerings, presents, and it is clear that [Prime Minister and rival presidential candidate] Serzh Sarkisian does not like all this," Pashinian said.

Orinats Yerkir Party spokeswoman Susanna Abrahamian – no relation to the deputy prime minister -- also claims that voters are afraid to act freely during the campaign.

"In several cases during our campaign meetings people do not manage to get to the place because of government intervention and intimidation," Abrahamian claimed. "Despite that, things fortunately have not gone as far as fistfights in our campaign." Orinats Yerkir and Ter-Petrosian have reportedly recently held talks about forming an alliance of some sort.

Pro-administration officials, however, claim that the opposition itself is staging the incidents. "One [player] is stirring up everything, and that instigator is the opposition, which has created a situation with such stories to make it appear that there is pressure on them," alleged ruling Republican Party of Armenia parliamentarian Rafik Petrosian. "We have stated many times that we have sufficient strength and resources to cruise to an easy victory in the election. And the opposition needs an excuse for their [coming] defeat."

At a February 7 rally in the city of Vanadzor, Prime Minister Sarkisian attributed the "mud slinging" to opposition candidates "losing their conscience."

#16

European Jewry splits in two

By Haviv Rettig

THE JERUSALEM POST, February 11, 2008

The French Jewish community suspended its membership in the European Jewish Congress on Sunday, shortly after a vote in Paris extending the terms of the umbrella group's leadership by two years.

The French were joined by the Austrian and Portuguese communities, who say they may break away from the European Jewish Congress entirely after its General Assembly retroactively extended the term of members of the EJC's executive. Instead of holding elections in June 2009, they will serve until June 2011.

"Someone elected for two years should not have his mandate prolonged in this way," Richard Prasquier, president of the Representative Council of French Jewry (CRIF), told The Jerusalem Post.

According to Prasquier, the problem isn't the longer terms, but its application to the current executive.

"There is no reason that an electoral mandate given for two years be prolonged. The mandate must end, and new elections can bring a new mandate for four years," Prasquier said.

The EJC General Assembly's delegates, from more than 40 nations, voted 51-34 to double the term lengths. Though "it was done through a vote," said Prasquier, "an electoral mandate was extended without electoral campaigning, without adversaries. This is not democracy as I see it."

The French delegates said the initiative required a two-thirds majority to pass, but a simple majority vote was called, which allowed it to pass.

The dispute comes after months of tension going back to the mid-2007 election for EJC president, contested by Russian agrochemical tycoon Moshe Kantor and French businessman Pierre Besnainou. Kantor, who ultimately won the election, was often denigrated as a "Putin stooge" who would be soft on the Kremlin and would represent Russian interests in Europe, rather than Jewish interests in Russia.

The current crisis includes similar talk, with one European Jewish official telling the Post that Kantor "is taking over the whole EJC as his own little soccer club or something. At least the French and the Austrians have the balls to stand up and stay away. Most of those folks are afraid in an open and public audience to stand up and say 'no.' That's a shame, but it's also a result of certain elements of Russian mentality. We've seen it on other occasions when there were elections on certain issues."

No one has presented evidence or explanations regarding alleged illegitimate pressure by either camp, and Kantor has called the persistent talk about a "Russian mentality" a form of racism.

The French, Austrians and Portuguese may be on their own. In addition to losing the vote on the term extension, a new constitution was passed at Sunday's meeting, also evidently against their wishes, by 63-22.

According to Britain's Flo Kaufmann, vice president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the new chairwoman of the EJC Council, Kantor has been anything but a "one-man show."

"I think the difference between him and previous presidents is that he's prepared to involve his colleagues and members of his executive in roles in a way that has not previously happened, and I've been on the executive for a number of years," she said. "It's not a one-man band, no way. I didn't quite understand what the beef was with the French."

For the French and Austrians, extending the term length was "just the last straw," said Ariel Muzicant, president of the Austrian Jewish community. "We don't feel that this president [Kantor] and his policies represent the European Jewish communities."

According to Muzicant, Kantor had mismanaged the EJC approach to the close ties between Russia and Iran. Kantor "met Putin [in October], and two weeks later Putin goes to Iran, but says nothing about the Holocaust, Israel, any of our concerns. Then the EJC is silent!"

But Britain's Kaufmann believes Kantor has handled the Russian-Iranian issue as well as he could have. "It's not solved because the problem itself is difficult," she told the Post.

What's the next step? Prasquier is examining the options.

"I would like to have confirmation of the legal aspect of my position. Afterwards, we'll see. I'm not trying at this point to create a new organization. We have enough organizations; having more only weakens us. But we have to abide by some rules. Democracy has some rules. I want to have the legal possibilities cleared up, and then we'll see."

#17

Georgian opposition refuses to talks with authorities until demands fulfilled

Interfax Russia, February 10, 2008

Leaders of Georgia's united opposition made a decision at a closed-door meeting on Sunday that talks with the authorities will not be resumed until their demands are fulfilled.

The opposition insists that Levan Tarkhnishvili, the chairman of the Central Elections Commission (CEC), and Tamara Kintsurashvili, the general director of the Georgian Public Broadcasting, be dismissed and 43 opposition supporters, who were detained at a rally in Tbilisi on November 7, 2007, be released.

"If the authorities fulfill these demands, we will continue the talks. If they will try to spin out time, we will stage a mass rally in Tbilisi on February 15, at which more radical demands could be articulated," MP Zviad Dzidziguri, one the united opposition leaders, said.

Meanwhile, Georgian parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze told journalists on Friday that she "cannot understand reasons for which the opposition want to pause the dialogue with the authorities."

"We still hope that a part of the opposition will be more constructive and will continue the dialogues as ultimatums are unacceptable," Burjanadze said.

#18

Russia will not recognise Abkhazia, Ossetia-Ivanov

By Oleg Shchedrov

Reuters, February 10, 2008

Moscow will not respond to a likely Western recognition of Kosovo's independence by immediately backing an independence bid by two Georgian breakaway provinces, a top Russian official said on Sunday.

"Russia is not going to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia the day after Kosovo's independence has been declared," First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov told a news conference.

Russia opposes granting independence to Serbia's breakaway province over the objections of Belgrade and says it could create a dangerous precedent elsewhere in the world. Russia has urged the West not to recognise Kosovo's independence unilaterally.

Russia itself backs Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia -- a highly contentious issue between the two ex-Soviet states -- but has so far rejected calls by separatist leaders to recognise their independence.

Analysts have suggested Moscow, upset by Georgia's drive to join NATO and the European Union, could recognise the independence of the two regions once the West recognised Kosovo's independence.

#19

INTERVIEW-Georgia offers olive branch to breakaway regions

By Niko Mchedlishvili

Reuters, February 8, 2008

Georgia is prepared to lift an economic blockade on its breakaway territory of Abkhazia, the minister leading negotiations with the ex-Soviet state's separatist regions said on Friday.

Temur Iakobashvili, State Minister for Reintegration, did not say what conditions might be attached to lifting the embargo. Abkhazia has rejected past Georgian offers because they were linked to it diluting its claim to independence.

But Iakobashvili, brought into the government in a reshuffle last month, struck a tone that was more conciliatory than the rhetoric from Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, who has vowed to bring the separatists to heel.

Conflicts with the separatists have destabilised Georgia, a U.S. ally and transit route for energy exports from the Caspian Sea. They have also poisoned relations with neighbouring Russia, accused by Tbilisi of backing the separatists.

"I am ready to discuss the question of lifting economic sanctions," the minister told Reuters in an interview.

"We can look at everything, there are no taboo subjects: not sanctions, not the railway," he said.

A rail link between Tbilisi and the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi, on the Black Sea, has been severed since the separatists threw off Georgian rule in a 1990s war. Georgia's navy also frequently prevents ships docking in Abkhazia's ports.

"We can discuss all of this, we must do everything to restore relations between us, economic and trade relations," Iakobashvili said.

ENERGY TRANSIT

Georgia is on the route of an oil pipeline operated by a BP-led (BP.L: Quote, Profile, Research) consortium that will soon be pumping 1 million barrels of crude a day from the Caspian Sea to a terminal on Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

Abkhazia, and Georgia's second breakaway region of South Ossetia, are likely to renew their calls for international recognition if, as is widely expected, Western states recognise the independence of Serbia's Kosovo province this year.

Saakashvili last year vowed to take control over Abkhazia within a year and promised to force out Russian peacekeepers in both regions. Tbilisi alleges that the Russian troops side with the separatists.

Russia has accused Tbilisi of building up its military to take back the regions by force.

Iakobashvili said Georgia had no interest in forcing the separatists to accept Tbilisi's rule, or in excluding Russia from the search for a peace settlement.

"We will definitely have negotiations with Russia," he said. "If someone believes that we will drive the Russian peacekeepers out of there and return Abkhazia, they are deeply mistaken."

"Approaches change, and first of all that means that our policy will be aimed at improving people's lives."

"In this case, integration means not just integrating territories, but the integration of people. We must not just bring back Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but bring back the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia," he said.

#20

Russian schoolchildren hold anti-Estonia protest AFP, February 10, 2008

Russian schoolchildren held a history class about World War II on Saturday outside the Estonian embassy in Moscow in a protest over the removal of a Soviet war monument from central Tallinn.

The class, which was given by a Russian war veteran, was held outdoors in a street near the embassy amid near-freezing temperatures. Around 20 children dressed in winter coats and hats attended, an AFP photographer saw.

The protest was organised by the Mishki (Teddy Bears), a children's group affiliated with the Kremlin-backed youth organisation Nashi, which has carried out numerous protests against Estonia.

The bitter dispute over the Bronze Soldier war monument last year plunged relations between Estonia and Russia to their lowest level since 1991, when the Baltic country regained independence as the Soviet Union fell apart.

Estonian authorities moved the monument from a square in central Tallinn where it had stood for 60 years to a cemetery, sparking riots in the Estonian capital in which one person died.

Russians, including the substantial minority that lives in Estonia, see the statue as a memorial to the millions of Soviet soldiers who died in the war.

But many Estonians see it as a reminder of five decades of Soviet occupation, which began at the end of the war and lasted until 1991.

#21

FEARING MASS PROTESTS, KYRGYZ REGIME PLANS TO BAN PUBLIC PRAYERS By Erica Marat Eurasia Daily Monitor, February 8, 2008

The Kyrgyz Interior Ministry intends to ban public prayers at the central square in Bishkek during Islamic holidays. The ministry's main rationale for its decision is that because Kyrgyzstan is a secular state, religion should be everyone's private business as opposed to state-sanctioned public events. This decision comes amid Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's drive to curb civil society organizations that could potentially mobilize the masses against his regime.

Two huge public prayers are held at the old square of capital city Bishkek annually, on Kurman ait and Orozo ait – two major Islamic holidays. What began as a gathering of 4,000-10,000 people five years ago has grown into events collecting crowds of 40,000-50,000. Anyone could join the prayers, and city residents from various social backgrounds and age groups would attend. Local officials and diplomatic representatives from Muslim countries gathered for the prayers as well (24.kg, January 24). For some participants public prayers on religious holidays became an important part of their identity, while others joined in because of their wish to learn Muslim prayers and traditions better.

Former interior minister Bolotbek Nogoibayev's decision to officially ban prayers was likely dictated by higher-ranking government members or influential political leaders. In his memo to the government on the subject, Nogoibayev, who was sacked last month (see EDM, January 17), complained that on the days of large public prayer assemblies, Bishkek's central streets must be shut down due to the large numbers of people. He was instantly supported by the governmental Agency on Religious Affairs, led by Toigonbek Kalmatov. Without further delay, Kalmatov sent an official letter to Kyrgyzstan's chief mufti, Murataly aji Jumanov, ordering him to hold all public prayers on the grounds of the Central Mosque.

Kalmatov's advisor, Shamshibe Zakirov, presented more arguments in favor of the ban, saying, "During namaz on the street in snowy weather some of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims might want to go to the toilet, and this will distract them from the prayer itself. According to Koran this can already be interpreted as a sin" (24.kg, January 25). The Kyrgyz officials' interpretation of the implications of public prayers reveals a general lack of expertise on religious issues among government members.

Kyrgyzstan is known for its pluralism of religious identities with thousands of ethnic Kyrgyz converting to Christianity and other religions. A greater proportion of the population in southern parts of the country, where the influence of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is stronger, follows more conservative religious practices.

Whereas the population in Kyrgyzstan's south might be influenced by their neighbors' more traditional approach to Islam, the Kyrgyz government is under pressure from the Uzbek government as well. Kyrgyz intelligence services are infamous for cooperating with neighboring governments in capturing unwanted Islamic leaders. The killing of popular imam Muhammadrafiq Kamalov in the outskirts of the town of Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan in August 2006 showed how the Kyrgyz National Security Service carried out instructions from the Uzbek regime, which had accused him of organizing terrorist acts in May 2006.

When outspoken Kyrgyz journalist Alisher Saipov was shot dead in October 2007, the Kyrgyz government agreed with Uzbekistan's accusations that he had connections with terrorist organizations. Saipov was an ethnic Uzbek who researched and wrote about the repressions of the Uzbek regime, harshly criticizing President Islam Karimov's authoritarian regime for allowing torture.

The Kyrgyz Interior Ministry has stepped up its efforts to capture groups believed to be propagating religious fundamentalism.

Unlike public officials, most experts on the Central Asian region do not see a threat in the diversity of Islamic practices in Kyrgyzstan. Speaking at a Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI) forum on February 6, Martha Brill Olcott from the Carnegie Endowment in Washington, DC, explained that it is mainly the younger generation that promotes conservative religious ideas, in an effort to revive the form of Islam that existed prior to the Soviet regime, while the older generations try to set political and ideological contexts for religious practices in Central Asia.

A number of civil society organizations, including the Congress of Muslims, have expressed their concerns with the Bakiyev government's ban on mass prayers. The most common interpretation of the decision was linked to the government's efforts to prevent any further significant political demonstrations in central Bishkek.

Similarly, Bishkek Mayor Daniyar Usenov has recently banned large public demonstrations in central Bishkek. Anyone organizing large meetings must notify the mayor in advance to receive a special permit. This ban has already resulted in a number of arrests of young civil society activists.

As Islamic holidays approach this year, tensions between the religious public and the government might intensify. At a December 12 CACI meeting, Eric McGlinchey from George Mason University rightly argued that the Kyrgyz government, based in the north of the country, is the main source of problems regarding religious practices in the country's south.

Azerbaijan, stuck between U.S. and Iran
By Kim Murphy
Los Angeles Times, February 10, 2008

If there is a post-Cold War Berlin, it may well be this agricultural town straddling a river between Iran and Azerbaijan, a former Soviet republic that has become an important ally in Washington's declared war on Islamic extremism.

The pedestrian border crossing is a narrow steel gateway and bridge, traversed daily by local people with a foot in both countries, the occasional heroin trafficker, traders bearing cheap clothing and perfumes and, sometimes, Shiite Muslim proselytizers with boxes full of Iranian religious CDs.

"We see books, all kinds of religious materials. In all of these cases, we take the materials and give them to the administration," said a border guard who stood scrutinizing a long line of Iranians filing into the country.

In the turbulent world of geopolitics, the Middle East gets most of the ink. But it is here along the gloomy shores of the Caspian Sea that one of the most vital global contests -- for energy, money and political dominion -- is being waged between East and West.

Azerbaijan, which controls 7 billion to 13 billion barrels of petroleum reserves, is home to a crucial new pipeline that provides the West with its first major access to Caspian Sea oil that is not dependent on Russia. The Central Asian country is also a key refueling point for U.S. planes bound for Afghanistan.

In the last year, however, this little-known nation dominated by Shiite Muslims has seen a rising incidence of religious fundamentalism and threats of extremist violence in opposition to the government's ties with Washington.

Some of it is spillover from Muslim separatist violence in the nearby Russian republics of Chechnya and Dagestan. But the fingerprints of Shiite-ruled Iran are increasingly apparent, authorities say, in what many analysts believe is a warning against expanded cooperation with the United States.

"Today, Azerbaijan has made a European choice, but Iran has made a choice to the East," said Rasim Musabayov, a political analyst in the capital, Baku. "It seems to them that an independent Azerbaijan is somehow a danger for the existence of the Iranian republic."

Concerns in Tehran

The fact of "an increase in Iranian subversive activities in Azerbaijan" coincides with growing Iranian fears that Azerbaijan could be used as a launchpad for an American attack on Iran, said Svante E. Cornell, deputy director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University. "It's basically telling the Azeris, 'This is the damage we can inflict on you,'" he said.

Iran is also keenly aware of Azerbaijan's potential ability to stir up the estimated 20 million ethnic Azeris who live in northwest Iran, an area many in Baku pointedly refer to as "Southern Azerbaijan." Some Iranian officials fear that the U.S. is pushing ethnic minorities to confront the Iranian leadership.

Mindful that the country is walking on a political knife edge, Azerbaijani officials have repeatedly said they would not allow their country to be used in any military action against Iran. Yet Baku is already comfortably part of the Western infrastructure aimed at Afghanistan, Iran's eastern neighbor, and signs of a U.S. military presence are not hard to find.

"It's an open secret that Azerbaijan is essentially set up as a sort of rapid deployment location for the U.S.," said a Western political analyst who has spent a great deal of time in the country.

"Almost anyone with a trained eye at Baku airport can see there's this whole section with unmarked planes. For almost all the military flights into Afghanistan, the refueling takes place in Baku, and you only have to walk into one of Baku's carpet shops to figure out how many American soldiers are overnighing there.

"Essentially, it's already part of the system."

In interviews with Muslim clerics, opposition politicians and political analysts in Baku, many said they believed the government was exaggerating the threat of Islamic extremism in order to convince the United States, which sometimes is critical of the government of President Ilham Aliyev's record on human rights and democracy, that it is waging a vital fight against Islamic militants.

"Radical Islam has become a means of blackmail for Azerbaijan to use against the West," lawyer Elchin Gambarov said in an interview.

He represented a man who was convicted last year of cooperating with Iran to try to establish an Islamic state in Azerbaijan. "This case from the beginning was a game of role-playing by the Azerbaijan government to show Western countries that 'I'm here alone against Iran, I'm face-to-face with Iran.' "

Iranian meddling alleged

Yet even some opposition leaders point to a strong Iranian influence.

Yadigar Sadigov, head of the local branch of the opposition Musavat Party in Lankaran, just north of Astara, said the majority of local clerics have studied in Iran, and it is widely believed that the Iranian secret services are supporting the flow of religious literature across the border.

"They use them to spread their influence in Azerbaijan," Sadigov said. Iran's case has been helped, he said, by recent crackdowns on fundamentalist Muslims in Azerbaijan; the continuing poverty of many Azerbaijanis despite recent oil boom riches; shortcomings in elections; and the arrests of independent journalists.

The rise of Islamic militancy is unusual in this country, which has had a laid-back approach to religion. Even now, Azerbaijanis attend mosques in relatively small numbers, and many have difficulty specifying the theological differences between Sunnis and Shiites.

Then, last fall, 15 members of an Islamic charity went on trial on charges that the group was a front for a militant organization backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. Prosecutors alleged that members of the group, identified as the Northern Imam Mahdi Army, were in communication with Iranian intelligence agents. They were accused of trying to pass along detailed engineering information about the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, or BTC, oil pipeline and details of the activities of U.S., British and Israeli agencies in Azerbaijan.

Treason charges

The group's leader was Said Dadashbeyli, 32, the supply manager for a U.S.-Azerbaijani oil drilling joint venture in Baku who had previously lived in Canada.

Dadashbeyli and his co-defendants were sentenced to up to 14 years in prison in December. According to the National Security Ministry's account of the closed-door trial, two members of the group met several times with agents in Iran, including in Tehran and the holy city of Qom.

According to the account, they received training in Iran on how to use maps and explosives and were given \$10,300 to gather information on the embassies of the U.S., Britain and Israel and establishing an Islamic state in Azerbaijan.

"They expressed their support of ideas of Iranian agents against the U.S. and Israel, and to prevent Azerbaijan from integration into Europe. At the same time, they supported establishment of a state based on religious rules," the Security Ministry said in a summary of the case.

The ministry said Revolutionary Guard agents also asked the group to obtain photographs and detailed information about the 1,099-mile oil conduit that runs from Baku on the Caspian Sea through Tbilisi, Georgia, to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean. The pipeline's completion in 2005 marked a crucial political coup for the U.S. and Europe.

Police in Baku said they seized firearms, explosive devices, knives and drugs as well as counterfeit currency from the apartments of some of the defendants.

Iran has vigorously denied any involvement in the case.

"They raised a delusory accusation against Iran and made propaganda based on it," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammed Ali Hosseini told reporters in Tehran.

However, Dadashbeyli's lawyer and family acknowledged in interviews that the young businessman, whom they described as an idealist who set up an Islamic charity to help orphans and the poor, had seen his group infiltrated by members with connections to Iran.

Gambarov, the lawyer, pointed to the involvement of two Azerbaijanis who appear to have been recruited as agents by the Revolutionary Guard. He said Dadashbeyli became suspicious of the pair and closed down the organization, but authorities already had secretly recorded many of their conversations.

The question of oil

In recent months, the U.S. has been focusing on building access to new sources of Caspian Sea oil and gas, in addition to the BTC pipeline, that would further weaken Russia's near-monopoly on energy exports to Europe.

Much of the focus is on a proposed network of pipelines that Western officials hope could transport gas from Turkmenistan, and possibly Kazakhstan, to Central Europe. But Russia is racing ahead with a plan of its own.

Because the Western-backed pipeline would again pass through Azerbaijan, Baku remains a crucial capital for U.S. diplomacy, and Azerbaijani officials say the country's future lies in expanding its role as a transit point between East and West.

"Once you had East and West linked through the pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan, a lot of things changed," Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov said in an interview.

Azerbaijan has seen billions of dollars in additional investment spawned by the oil transit line; now, he said, the country is evolving as a major thoroughfare for fiber-optic communications, as well as rail transportation bridging Europe and Asia.

"So the decision to sign the contract of the century [for the pipeline] has been more far-reaching than anyone expected. But to realize these benefits, we need the openness. We have to be integrated," he said.

"And therefore we shall be at odds with anyone who will try to return us back from where we are trying to escape."

#23

**Council of Europe releases Report on racism in Ukraine
UNIAN News Agency, February 12, 2008**

The Council of Europe's independent human rights monitoring body specialised in combating racism, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), today released four new reports examining racism, xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance in Andorra, Latvia, the Netherlands and Ukraine. According to CE Communication Office, ECRI recognises that positive developments have occurred in all four of these Council of Europe member countries. At the same time, however, the reports detail continuing grounds for concern for the Commission:

In Ukraine, the Committee for Nationalities and Religion became fully operational with, among other tasks, combating racism and racial discrimination. However, criminal legislation against racially-motivated crimes has not been strengthened and the authorities have not yet adopted a comprehensive body of civil and administrative anti-discrimination laws. There have been very few prosecutions against people who make antisemitic statements or publish antisemitic literature. Members of the Roma community still face many inequalities in areas such as education, employment and housing.

In Andorra, a new Criminal Code came into force, providing for the racist motivation of a criminal offence to be regarded as an aggravating circumstance and prohibiting incitement to racial hatred as well as racist organisations. However, Andorra has not yet ratified Protocol N°12 to the European Convention on Human Rights and does not have a detailed and comprehensive body of civil and administrative law prohibiting racial discrimination in all areas.

In Latvia, a clear prohibition of racial discrimination was included in the Labour code and efforts have been made to increase the number of non-citizens being granted Latvian citizenship, either by encouraging or facilitating naturalisation. Nevertheless there remain a number of problems as to the full integration of the Russian-speaking population. The number of racially-motivated attacks targeting visible minorities has been increasing and the use of racist discourse, by some politicians and in the media, remains a problem.

In the Netherlands, work is underway for the establishment of a network of professional local anti-discrimination bureaus throughout the country, with the aim of improving the protection provided to victims of racism and racial discrimination and the monitoring of these phenomena. However, the tone of Dutch political and public debate on integration and other issues relevant to ethnic minorities has experienced a dramatic deterioration. The criminal justice system, and notably the police, still needs to enhance its role in monitoring and countering racially-motivated offences.

#24

Russia and NATO to discuss controversial issues in Bucharest

By Pyotr Goncharov

RIA Novosti, February 12, 2008

First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov's speech at the 44th international security conference in Munich has raised many questions.

Practically all political scientists were surprised at his peaceful attitude toward his opponents - the United States and other Western countries.

Known for his adamant position on NATO's eastward expansion, deployment of American missile defense elements along Russia's borders with Europe, and some other sensitive issues, Ivanov only mentioned them in passing. This is all the more surprising against the backdrop of Vladimir Putin's speech at the 43rd Munich conference last year.

Political analysts were unanimous in describing Putin's speech as a turning point in Russia's relations with the United States and other Western nations. Moscow obviously toughened its positions regarding the West. The situation has not changed for the better since then, and Ivanov was expected to continue Putin's line.

Head of the Duma's International Relations Committee Konstantin Kosachev did not conceal his hope that the forum would "destroy the U.S. and NATO political monopoly." It is easy to understand his position. In the latter half of the 1990s, the majority of Russian political scientists had many questions about Western policy. In reply to Moscow's striving for rapprochement, the West embarked on NATO's eastern expansion, imposed one-sided disarmament treaties on Russia, tried to separate it from the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), and undermine the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization). The West completely ignored Russia's positions on the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, and subjected Serbia to massive bombing that resulted in the Serbs' exodus from Kosovo.

The political circles of NATO and the United States turned a blind eye to Russia's protests, and a crisis in their relations became obvious. The 1999 war in Yugoslavia was the last straw; deterioration of relations became inevitable.

The situation could have changed for the better after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Moscow made a big step toward the United States, not only out of sympathy, but because Putin wanted to improve cooperation with it. By that time, Putin and George W. Bush had become friendly, and their contacts largely prevented bilateral relations from total collapse.

Russia unequivocally supported the United States in its efforts to set-up the anti-terrorist coalition against the Taliban. Russia allowed the aircraft of the United States and its coalition allies to fly to Afghanistan, and even to build temporary air force bases in Central Asia. The Kremlin had limited itself to a gentleman's oral agreement to the effect that these bases would remain in Central Asia until the end of the anti-terrorist campaign.

How did the White House respond to these steps? In 2002, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, putting Russia in a very difficult situation. It started a war in Iraq, which deprived Russia of all oil concessions in the country. Then NATO made one more leap to the East, this time to the former Soviet territory - the Baltic nations. Procrastination with the notorious Jackson-Vanik amendment and Russia's WTO entry are not even worth mentioning.

In general, NATO continues pursuing a provocative policy toward Russia. On the one hand, the NATO-Russia Council has been established in recognition of Russia's leading role in Europe, but on the other hand, all of Moscow's attempts to discuss possible options of joining the alliance are not taken seriously - Russia is told to stand in line. Finally, NATO's maneuvers around Ukraine are the most sensitive issue for Russia today.

Needless to say, Russia will continue to discuss all these problems, including U.S. efforts to deploy ABM elements in Europe, with NATO. Yet, Ivanov planned his speech in Munich with the express purpose of answering the question "Where is Russia going?" It is clear that the West is increasingly concerned over Russia, a country that is gaining political and economic weight.

This is why his speech was limited to the Western attitude toward Russia. A NATO summit will take place in Bucharest, Romania in April. NATO leaders believe that the Russian president's participation in the summit will help the sides openly discuss controversial issues.

Ivanov expects Putin to attend the summit in Bucharest as Russia's president. Judging by everything, the sides will continue the serious dialogue started in Munich in 2007.

#25

Putin Strengthens His Legacy New York Times Editorial, February 13, 2008

There has been a lot of talk about Vladimir Putin's legacy. On Friday, he gave a 45-minute speech that, as Pravda put it, was meant "to remind everyone of the terrible situation in Russia before Putin." But Mr. Putin's real legacy needs no speech or spin from Pravda.

In less than three months, he plans to turn over the presidency to his anointed heir, Dmitry Medvedev, through elections that will be a mockery of democracy. And the strange paranoia and vindictiveness of Mr. Putin are on display everywhere, notably in Russia's frozen far east, where Mikhail Khodorkovsky, once Russia's richest man, is languishing in a subarctic labor camp, his Yukos oil company grabbed by Putin's people.

Now, the government is pressing charges that could add two more decades to his sentence, and if that's not enough, prosecutors have been cruelly pressuring Mr. Khodorkovsky's jailed and gravely ill former lawyer, Vasily Aleksanyan, to testify against him in exchange for medical care. Last week, under strong pressure from abroad and a hunger strike by Mr. Khodorkovsky, prison authorities finally said last week that they would transfer Mr. Aleksanyan to a civilian clinic.

Glance at the news out of Russia on any given day and you will find more legacy: Mikhail Kasyanov, the former prime minister turned ardent critic of the Kremlin, was summarily disqualified from the presidential race; the principal election-monitoring organization in Europe said that it would not observe the presidential balloting on March 2 because of severe restrictions imposed by the Russian government; the European University of St. Petersburg, which criticized Mr. Putin, was closed down as a "fire risk."

And on it goes. The Kremlin and its apologists always have the same explanation: look how bad things were; surely the most important thing is to rein in the oligarchs and restore political and economic stability. But that does not justify the setbacks to the rule of law, the systematic hounding of rivals and critics, the settling of scores, the constant snarling at the West or the massive state inroads into private enterprise. In five years, the state has increased its share of the stock market from 24 percent to 40 percent. These are Putin's true legacy.

#26

MK charges Ukrainian Embassy of anti-Semitism, discrimination

By Zohar Blumenkrantz

Ha'aretz, February 13, 2008

The Foreign Ministry is investigating complaints of discrimination and anti-Semitism in the Ukrainian Embassy's treatment of a Hasidic travel agency, Ma'ayanot Hahaim Tours.

The complaints were filed by MK Meir Porush (United Torah Judaism) and attorney Gadi Elbaz, who represents the local Bratslav Hasidic community. Bratslav Hasidim are the agency's major clients, since the grave of the movement's founder, Rabbi Nahman of Uman, is a major Bratslav pilgrimage site.

In their complaints, Porush and Elbaz detailed three incidents. In one, on January 22, two Ma'ayanot Hahaim employees who came to arrange visas for their customers were denied entry for about 90 minutes, and finally admitted only after the company's lawyer intervened, even though travel agency workers are normally allowed free access to file visa applications.

'No real reason'

On January 30, agency employees were kept outside for 45 minutes, "for no real reason," and on February 1, the embassy's security officer refused to let them in at all, even though employees of other travel agencies, who were not Hasidim, were admitted.

Moreover, Porush's complaint charged, the security officer "made anti-Semitic remarks about their dress and religious affiliation," while the deputy ambassador informed them that visa applications from Ma'ayanot Hahaim would be subjected to a longer than usual approval process.

Elbaz added that the agency was later told its representatives would no longer be allowed into the consulate at all.

"The ultra-Orthodox public has the right to receive service and treatment as an equal among equals, with no hint of discrimination," Porush wrote.

The complaints complicate an already bitter dispute over the Bratslav community's request that Ukraine permit more flights from Israel. Thus far, Ukraine has refused this request.

#27

Ukraine must confront racism says Council of Europe Focus Information Agency, February 13, 2008

Strasbourg. Racially motivated attacks continue to take place in Ukraine while police and courts do little to intervene, the Council of Europe said in a critical report made public Tuesday in Strasbourg, AFP reported.

Discrimination against the Roma community, continuing anti-Semitism, violence in Crimea and other acts of intolerance against various ethnic groups in Ukraine were singled out in the report by the Council of Europe's racism-monitoring body, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

"However, criminal legislation against racially-motivated crimes has not been strengthened and the authorities have not yet adopted a comprehensive body of civil and administrative anti-discrimination laws," the body said.

"There have been very few prosecutions against people who make anti-Semitic statements or publish anti-Semitic literature."

According to ECRI, the Roma face discrimination in matters of education, employment and housing.

High infections and cardiovascular diseases, along with malnutrition, are other problems, with only half of Romas having the means to eat daily, added ECRI, which also revealed a rise in the rate of infectious and cardiovascular diseases among its members.

One ray of hope in the current situation, according to ECRI, is that several Roma are pursuing studies in journalism -- an evolution it said reinforced diversity in the profession.

ECRI also expressed concern about attacks against rabbis and Jewish students, as well as the vandalism of synagogues, cemeteries and cultural centres.

Tensions between Crimean Tartars and ethnic Russians in Ukraine -- mainly based on disagreements about land and historic monuments -- were another source of concern, the report said.

Skinhead violence against Tartars and Jews is also frequent and police have offered little protection to the different communities, it said.

And ECRI asked Ukrainian authorities to step up efforts to fight violence by skinheads against Africans, Asians, and people from the Caucasus and the Middle East.

Composed of independent members, ECRI periodically analyses racism and intolerance in the 47 member States of the Council of Europe.

#28

Threatened Jewish Georgian tycoon died of natural causes By Jonny Paul THE JERUSALEM POST, February 14, 2008

An exiled Jewish Georgian billionaire living in Israel and the UK, who had spoken of his fears of assassination, died of natural causes, according to initial results of a postmortem examination.

Badri Patarkatsishvili, 52, collapsed at his country mansion in Surrey, southeast England, on Tuesday night.

His family reported that he suffered a heart attack. Police, however, were treating his death as "suspicious," which is standard with sudden deaths.

A Surrey Police spokesperson said the postmortem carried out on Wednesday night showed he died of natural causes.

"Following initial inquiries and the postmortem carried out last night, Surrey Police can confirm that at this stage there is no indication that the sudden death of Badri Patarkatsishvili was from anything other than natural causes," the spokesperson said.

Toxicology tests are yet to be carried out and an inquest will be opened on Friday; full test results are not expected for at least 10 weeks.

Patarkatsishvili helped to finance the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 that swept President Mikhail Saakashvili to power, but subsequently fell out with him and backed mass street protests last year against the Georgian government. He was charged with plotting a coup after the protests and has since lived in self-imposed exile in the UK and Israel. Patarkatsishvili had visited Israel several times before leaving Georgia, and is understood to have had close ties in the Israeli leadership, including with President Shimon Peres.

The Georgian tycoon, who had an estimated £6 billion fortune amassed during the privatization of state industries in Russia during the 1990s, had voiced concerns for his safety, believing his life was at risk.

In December he told The Sunday Times he did not feel safe returning to his country.

The paper published extracts of a tape recording of a conversation alleged to have taken place between a Georgian Interior Ministry official and a possible hit man. Allegedly, the two men discussed options to make Patarkatsishvili "disappear completely."

His death raised fears of another Alexander Litvinenko-style murder. Litvinenko was a Russian dissident who was poisoned in London in 2006, leading to public accusations that the Russian government was behind his death.

Patarkatsishvili had been a longtime business partner of Russian tycoon Boris Berezovsky, an outspoken Kremlin critic who now lives in exile in London.

#29

Jewish Agency beefs up security

By Amir Mizroch

THE JERUSALEM POST, February 14, 2008

With 320 centers and institutions spanning the globe, the Jewish Agency is the largest Jewish organization in the world and is justifiably worried that its facilities and personnel may be targeted by terrorists as a response to the killing of Hizbullah mastermind Imad Mughniyeh.

While Israel has denied responsibility for the killing, Hizbullah, together with its Iranian and Syrian patrons, have pointed a finger squarely at Jerusalem and have vowed that a painful response will follow. After the Israeli assassination of Hizbullah secretary-general Abbas Musawi in 1992, Mughniyeh masterminded two attacks on Israeli and Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires in which hundreds were killed and wounded.

Following the killing Tuesday night in Damascus, Jewish Agency officials met with the relevant Israeli security services and after consultations sent instructions to all its representatives abroad with updated security guidelines.

Moshe Vigdor, director-general of the Jewish Agency, said all of the agency's shlichim (emissaries) had been told to increase their alertness and immediately report any suspicious behavior to the relevant authorities.

Vigdor told The Jerusalem Post on Thursday that the agency was not responsible for the security of individual Jewish communities across the world, but since the agency worked closely with many of the communities, there was a degree of coordination. Many agency activities and events that involve members of the local communities and agency officials will have to work out between them which events and functions are deemed risky at this time, and which can be allowed to continue.

The agency holds a myriad of aliya fairs worldwide on a regular basis, and security around these and other Israel-related events will be examined and the decision to publicize them reviewed. Similarly, scrutiny will be placed on summer camps and ulpanim (language schools).

"We have naturally taken steps to protect everyone who works for the agency and is a beneficiary of its services. We have consulted with the relevant authorities and instructions have been disseminated," Vigdor said.

Most Jewish communities have a security plan which they operate in coordination with the local authorities of the host country. The interface between the community and the local police is usually carried out by a community security group made up of volunteers and some paid staff. Synagogue and community event protection falls under this system. Local leaders are encouraged to meet regularly to set guidelines and look over existing plans.

It is common practice for community officials to receive security training by either local security forces or by Israel. These courses usually revolve around how to best secure Jewish institutions abroad. The Anti-Defamation League works with national US law enforcement agencies to help them better protect Jewish institutions.

ADL spokesman Arieh O'Sullivan said threats to Jewish facilities usually peak around the High Holy Days. "There is a heightened awareness around the world now following Mughniyeh's killing," he said.

Vigdor added, "We have taken all the precautions we can think of, but there is never enough that you can do when it comes to security. The assessment we have arrived at together with the security agencies we have consulted says that the precautions we have taken should be sufficient."

Asked if the agency was more worried about Jewish communities in Muslim countries, South America or in other far-flung locales, Vigdor said only that the Jewish Agency considered all Jewish communities equally in their security consultations; he did say that there were certain regions which had different rules regarding protection and different emphases.

Several large communities have set up networks to guard against terror attacks and to provide protection against anti-Semitic violence. In the former Soviet Union states, the Federation of Jewish Communities has established a Jewish Security Fund for increasing security at Jewish institutions - installing metal doors, metal detectors, "panic" buttons, cameras for video observation and hiring armed guards.

British Jews have set up the Community Security Trust, which provides physical security, training and advice for the protection of British Jews. CST assists victims of anti-Semitism, monitors anti-Semitic activity and represents British Jewry to the police and government.

In the US, Jews operate the Secure Community Network as part of the community's response to heightened security concerns in the United States. In Australia, the Council for Jewish Community Security works to protect the community, and in South Africa it is the Community Security Organization.

#30

President Putin Talks of the Future as Premier

By C. J. CHIVERS

New York Times, February 15, 2008

President Vladimir V. Putin, in the final weeks of an eight-year administration that secured his place as the country's most popular politician, said Thursday that he intended to wield substantial and long-running power in the Kremlin after leaving office next month and becoming Russia's prime minister.

In a confident and forceful public performance in which he described many of Russia's continuing policy choices, Mr. Putin spoke bitingly of his international critics and defied Washington by refusing to back down from threats to aim strategic missiles at the Czech Republic, Poland and Ukraine.

He said the Kremlin had been forced to assume a reinvigorated nuclear defense by NATO's courting of Ukraine and by the United States' development of a missile defense system for deployment in Europe. "We will have to retarget our missiles on the objects that we think threaten our national security," he said. "I have to speak about this directly and honestly, so that there would be no attempts to shift the responsibility for such developments on those who should not be blamed."

Mr. Putin appeared in public for more than four hours in what the Kremlin billed as his final news conference as president. Under Russia's Constitution, he cannot seek a third consecutive term, and a new president will be selected on March 2 by popular vote.

But the event had none of the trappings of a farewell performance, and it did little to suggest Mr. Putin was yielding his position as Russia's unrivaled leader.

He reiterated his intention to become prime minister and to lead the government of his presumptive successor, whom he had selected himself, Dmitri A. Medvedev. He also implied that Mr. Medvedev would follow the course that he had set.

"The president is the guarantor of the Constitution," Mr. Putin said. "He sets the main directions for internal and external policies. But the highest executive power in the country is the Russian government, led by the premier."

He later added that he planned to be the prime minister throughout Mr. Medvedev's administration, and perhaps beyond. "I formulated tasks for the development of Russia from 2010 until 2020," he said. "The fate is taking shape in a way that I have a possibility to participate directly in achievement of these goals."

The conference also underscored the degree to which Mr. Putin continued to eclipse Mr. Medvedev.

Although Russia is in the middle of the official one-month presidential campaign, there is little sign of competing ideas or public involvement in choosing the next president. And Mr. Putin is not fading from view.

Last week, he addressed Russia's lawmakers with his plans for the country through 2020. On Thursday he threatened to escalate a dispute with Europe and the United States over the future of Kosovo, which is expected to declare its independence next week, with support from the West.

Russia has backed its traditional ally, Serbia, and opposed Kosovo's independence. It has threatened to protest the move at the United Nations Security Council and perhaps to recognize breakaway regions it supports in Moldova and Georgia.

“We are told all the time, ‘Kosovo is a special case,’ ” Mr. Putin said. “It is all lies. There is no special case, and everybody understands it perfectly well.”

The conference, a question-and-answer format, has been an annual event in which Mr. Putin has often displayed his comfort with power and a command of the fine details of governing.

The audience was a mixture of Russian reporters, many openly praising the Russian president, and foreign journalists, several of them pressing him on policies that have alarmed Western governments and undermined his reputation abroad.

Mr. Putin basked in the praise and seemed to revel in the criticism, which he rebutted with a mix of long, unapologetic answers and occasional insults.

When asked about the decision of the principal international election monitors not to send missions to observe the presidential elections, Mr. Putin was dismissive.

The monitors, from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, have routinely found that elections in post-Soviet autocracies, including Russia, have been rigged. And they have said that Russia has unilaterally imposed conditions that make it impossible to assess the current campaign and election fully.

Mr. Putin said that the organization needed to be overhauled, and suggested that the monitors intended to teach Russia how to become democratic.

“Let them teach their wives to make shchi,” he said. Shchi is a popular Russian cabbage soup.

Similarly, Mr. Putin swept aside a remark by Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, who said that as a former K.G.B. officer, Mr. Putin “has no soul.”

“As a minimum, a state official must at least have a head,” he said.

Mr. Putin also flashed his annoyance when asked about reports in Western newspapers that he had used his office to accumulate a vast personal fortune. Such “rumors,” he said, “they picked from a nose and smeared onto their papers.”

The conference alternated between these occasionally scalding moments and others in which Mr. Putin, answering questions from admiring Russian journalists, was at ease and treated with public fealty.

One young woman noted that the conference was held on Valentine’s Day, and asked whether Mr. Putin had received a gift.

He said he had been busy doing his morning exercises and preparing for the conference, and had not yet received any presents. The reporter then grinned and said she would like to give him a Valentine, and he invited her to pass it down to him through the crowd.

At another point, a French journalist asked Mr. Putin if he thought that the official results recorded in Chechnya during parliamentary elections in December were realistic. According to the Central Election Commission, the voter turnout in Chechnya was 99 percent, and 99 percent of the voters cast their ballots for United Russia, the party Mr. Putin leads.

Chechnya sought to break from Russia in the early 1990s, and waged a long insurgency for which it has been intensely punished. Past elections there have been openly rigged, and the latest results were viewed in the West and among Mr. Putin’s domestic critics as unashamedly fake.

Mr. Putin, looking confident, asked a state journalist from Chechnya to answer the question. "These are absolutely realistic figures," the journalist said. "Personally, all my acquaintances, including myself, voted for United Russia."

#31

U.S. Military Weighing if Russia in Cold War Pose

By Richard Cowan

Reuters, February 13, 2008

Washington is trying to gauge whether Russia's recent bomber mission near a U.S. aircraft carrier indicated Moscow's return to a Cold War "mind-set" and is considering how the Pentagon should respond, a senior U.S. military officer said on Tuesday.

But other senior U.S. defense and Navy officials stressed they did not see Russia's weekend bomber flights south of Japan as provocative.

Four U.S. fighter jets were scrambled on Feb. 9 to escort Russian bombers that approached the USS Nimitz south of Japan. One Russian bomber flew over the deck of the aircraft carrier, escorted by a U.S. fighter jet.

Adm. Gary Roughead, U.S. chief of naval operations, downplayed the incident and said it reflected Russia's emerging naval power.

"I think what we are seeing is a Russian military or Russian navy that is emerging and, in the case of the navy, desiring to emerge as a global navy," Roughead told reporters at the Pentagon.

"I do not consider it to be provocative," he said of the bomber mission.

But on Capitol Hill, another top U.S. military officer -- Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright -- said the Pentagon was trying to assess the implications of Russia's actions.

"Now, what we're concerned about is what are the indications of this return to a Cold War mind-set, what are the implications of that activity and how do we best address that," said Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The incident happened in neutral international airspace, Cartwright said.

"We're just trying to go back and look at what message was intended by this overflight," he told a Senate panel.

At the State Department, spokesman Sean McCormack said the Russian bomber flights were not seen as a threat.

"The Russians made a decision to resume some of their long-range aviation flights, involving some of their assets left over from the Cold War," he told reporters.

"I don't think we view it as a particular threat. It is something that we watch closely, and I'm sure folks over at the Pentagon watch it as well."

Any U.S. expressions of concern to Russia would probably be carried out through military channels, McCormack said.

TESTY RELATIONS

U.S.-Russian relations have become testy, with Washington concerned that Russian democracy is being eroded and Moscow complaining of U.S. interference.

A dispute over U.S. plans to place missile defense assets in former Soviet-allied territory has also raised tensions, and Russia is unhappy with continued U.S. support for expansion of the NATO military alliance.

Russian officials have said they will revive some of the military power and reach that was allowed to collapse with the Soviet Union.

Russia could train its nuclear missiles on Ukraine if the pro-Western state joins NATO, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in Moscow on Tuesday.

Asked his reaction to Putin's statement, McCormack said: "There he goes again." McCormack offered no further comment, saying he had not seen Putin's remarks.

The Russian Air Force said the mission by four Tu-95 bombers was part of long-distance patrols in the Pacific, Atlantic and Arctic oceans and the Black Sea that began last August.

A Russian news agency quoted Air Force spokesman Alexander Drobyshevsky expressing surprise at "all the clamor this raised."

The last time a Russian bomber flew over a U.S. aircraft carrier was in July 2004, and Russian bombers have increased their flights near U.S. territory to demonstrate their long-range strike capability.

Sen. Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat who raised the issue during the Senate hearing, said the Russian maneuver "sounds pretty provocative to me." He said the Armed Services Committee, of which he is a member, would look into the issue.