



Kazakhstan News Bulletin

Released weekly by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the USA and Canada
www.kazakhembus.com

March 3, 2006

Vol. 6, No. 9

In this issue:

Northern Aral Sees Faster Than Expected Revival, Lifts Hopes

Majilis Approves Joining Bioweapons Convention

E-Government to Be Introduced in Mid-April

U.S. Says Kazakhstan Makes "Considerable Progress" in Fighting Drug Trafficking, Seeks Greater Cooperation

President Signs New Laws to Fight Drug and Human Trafficking

Northern Aral Sees Faster Than Expected Revival, Lifts Hopes

The Northern Aral Sea, whose surface had shrunk to half its original size, has filled up just months after a dam was erected between it and the Southern Aral Sea in August 2005, lifting hopes of the people in the affected region and of those who helped build the dam.

Anatoli Ryabtsev, Chairman of Water Resources Committee in Kazakhstan's Ministry of Agriculture said the northern part of the sea is filling up faster than expected, receiving about 10 million cubic meters of water since the Kok-Aral Dam was completed. He said the northern sea's surface grew by a third, bringing water back to many communities which found themselves surrounded by desert when the sea shrank. The distance between the sea and Aralsk, formerly a port city and a major fishing center, contracted from 80 kilometers last summer to 12 kilometers now, and officials now estimate the water will reach the city later in the spring. Also in the spring, the water will begin overflowing the dam to feed the Southern Aral.

The US\$85.8 million Kok-Aral Dam was built jointly by the Government of Kazakhstan and the World Bank with the latter providing a loan of US\$65 million. The World Bank experts had predicted it would take five to ten years to fill the northern part of the sea.

The Aral Sea is shared by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but its basin also encompasses Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The sea began to shrink in the 1960s, when massive diversion of water for cotton cultivation during the Soviet times drained the two rivers that feed the sea, the Syr Darya and Amu Darya. The resulting three-fourths decrease in volume of the Northern Aral Sea by 1996 had devastated the surrounding environment and ruined the traditional fishing economy of the bordering villages.



July - September, 1989

August 12, 2003

Two pictures, taken from the space in 14 years apart show the scope of the environmental catastrophe at the Aral Sea. The pictures show the northern part of the sea already separated by a wide swath of land from the larger southern part.

The dam was a major component of a joint Kazakhstan-World Bank program to regulate the Syr Darya River and revive the northern part of the sea. The program also includes building and restoring waterworks along the river to revive local economy by opening up opportunities for fishing, agriculture and hydro-electric power production.

Masood Ahmad, World Bank task team leader for the project said, "Effective project works upstream on the Syr Darya River and good inflows to the River, thanks to new waterworks, contributed to the fast pace of success in this project."

Newly reconstructed, rebuilt, and rehabilitated waterworks along the Syr Darya are increasing the carrying capacity of the river, filling the Northern Aral Sea and also benefiting farmers by irrigating their lands. Additional waterworks are planned to restore fishing lakes in the delta region, which will serve as hatcheries from which to restock the Northern Aral Sea's fish population, which was nearly decimated because of the extreme salinity of the water.

Despite its early success, the project is only half complete. The World Bank believes the next step is to improve the irrigation efficiency of two-thirds of the land in the Kazakh part of the Aral Sea basin.

Majilis Approves Joining Bioweapons Convention

The Majilis (lower house of the Parliament) approved and sent to the Senate a government-sponsored bill foreseeing Kazakhstan's accession to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction.

The measures passed the Majilis on February 27. Earlier, the Senate returned the bill having decided that Kazakhstan should not only join the Convention but also ratify it. The bioweapons convention was signed in London, Moscow and Washington in 1972 and entered into force in 1975.

Under the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan used to be involved in the secretive biological weapons production and testing efforts. The city of Stepnogorsk in northern Kazakhstan was home to what could be the world's largest anthrax production and weaponization facility, capable of producing up to two tons of anthrax bacteria a day during the military mobilization. The anthrax and other bacteria were tested at the Vozrozhdeniye Island in the Aral Sea, which Kazakhstan shares with Uzbekistan. Both production and testing facilities were demolished by Kazakhstan with the U.S. assistance under the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program since the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

E-Government to Be Introduced in Mid-April

Askar Zhumagaliyev, Chairman of Kazakhstan's Information and Telecommunications Agency said the country will introduce its e-Government system in mid-April.

He said 32 of the 34 government agencies and institutions have already established websites forming the infrastructure for implementing the e-government portal. The people of Kazakhstan will be able to take advantage of the portal's interactive information services, such as obtaining tax declaration forms and licenses over the Internet, and do online shopping.

Also, all citizens of Kazakhstan will be assigned unified identification numbers which will be quoted in their new passports and other documents. This electronic number will help identify the person on the Internet, and serve as access key to official services.

U.S. Says Kazakhstan Makes "Considerable Progress" in Fighting Drug Trafficking, Seeks Greater Cooperation

Kazakhstan has made considerable progress" in fighting drug trafficking and drug abuse, said the United States Department of State in its 2006 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report unveiled on

March 1, adding that Washington's goal is to pursue long term cooperation between the two countries' law enforcement agencies.

The State Department said: "Despite its continued problems of drug trafficking and drug abuse, Kazakhstan has made considerable progress. Given Kazakhstan's great potential as a partner in the fight against narcotics, the overall goal of the United States is to develop a long-term cooperative relationship between the police and investigative services of the United States and those of Kazakhstan."

All assistance provided by the U.S. to Kazakhstan in 2005 was intended to further this goal. This included building an inspection hangar and expanded cooperation with Kazakhstan's Border Guards to strengthen its capabilities to intercept drugs on its borders, primarily with Kyrgyzstan.

Kazakhstan continues to be an important narcotics transit country, especially for drugs coming out of Afghanistan. The Ministry of the Interior's Committee on Combating and Controlling Narcotics estimates that approximately 1,400 tons of Afghanistan's opium will move through Kazakhstan this year via the northern Afghan route (Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan-Kazakhstan). It is also estimated that approximately 10 percent of these drugs will be sold in Kazakhstan. According to data provided by the Committee, more than 19 tons of narcotics, including 130 kilograms of heroin, have been seized in nine months of 2005.

Kazakhstan is in the fifth year of its five-year plan to fight drug trafficking, and is making wide ranging efforts to combat the growing problem.

In the report's conclusion, the State Department said: "Kazakhstan is making serious efforts to end its status as a narcotics transit country. The Government of Kazakhstan is working to refine its laws related to narcotics, to develop its police services and to cooperate with the international community and regional partners. Furthermore, it is better targeting its approach to counternarcotics work, is trying to curb corrupt law enforcement officials, and is establishing stricter punishments for drug-related crimes. Corruption, failure to devote sufficient resources to training and equipment, and a weak infrastructure remain serious problems, but trends are encouraging."

President Signs New Laws to Fight Drug and Human Trafficking

President Nursultan Nazarbayev signed into law two measures meant to toughen Kazakhstan's fight against two of the more serious problems it faces: the growing drug trade and human trafficking. Both laws were signed on March 2.

The first one introduced amendments into the existing law "On drugs, psychotropic substances..." which toughen regulations over multi-component drugs and instruments for their making. The new law, meant to provide Kazakhstan with an additional defense against synthetic drugs, requires the Government to approve lists of such medicinal drugs and such instruments by special resolutions.

The second law is aimed at strengthening the fight against trafficking in persons. Amendments introduced to the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedural Code and other laws provide specific definitions of trafficking in persons and criminalize illegal extraction and trafficking in human organs and tissues.

Things to Watch:

- President Nazarbayev delivered his annual state of the nation address on March 1. The Embassy will be sending out a special edition of its *Kazakhstan's Echo* shortly.
- The 2005 Kazakhstan Internet Award last year drew 537 Kazakhstan-related websites. The 2006 competition will be completed in June of this year with results announced at a KITEL exhibition in Astana.

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