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In this issue:

Foreign Minister Visits Afghanistan to Promote Development

OSCE Chairman Welcomes Kazakhstan's Political Reforms, Encourages More as Country Bids for Chairmanship

Kazakhstan May Build Nuclear Power Plant by 2015

Kazakhstan and China Open Small Free Trade Shopping Zone New Crew Blasts Off From Baikonur for ISS

Say it in Kazakh:
*It is a beautiful day.
--- Bugun aurayie tamasha.*

*It must be spring,
the flowers are coming. --- Koktem kelip, gulder zhaikaldy.*

Tulips first came from the Kazakh steppes. --- Baisheshektin otany Kazakh dalasy.

Foreign Minister Visits Afghanistan to Promote Development and Trade

Kassymzhomart Tokaev, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister visits Kabul today and tomorrow for talks with officials there on promotion of greater regional cooperation. He will participate in a major international conference on regional trade in the Afghan capital.

Tokaev is scheduled to meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his counterpart, Foreign Minister Rangeen Dadfar Spanta. On April 1, the Kazakh Foreign Minister will be a major speaker at an international conference, *Partnership, Trade and Development in Greater Central Asia*. The conference is organized by the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute at the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University and the World Policy and Economy Institute under the Foundation of the First President of Kazakhstan.

Restoring normalcy to Afghanistan and promoting greater regional cooperation have been top priorities of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. Speaking at the Afghanistan Compact conference in London in February 2006, which ended with billions of dollars in pledges of assistance to that nation, Tokaev said, "Viewing Afghanistan as an integral and important part of Central Asia, Kazakhstan welcomes that country's involvement in regional affairs to cement its positive political, social and economic achievements. We are strongly committed to continuing our efforts in reconstructing Afghanistan in partnership with the Afghan authorities and the international community."

The term "Greater Central Asia" has recently come into use as including the five traditional countries of this region, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, and, now, Afghanistan. It reflects a desire by many countries to promote intra-regional trade and the development of a new Silk Road, reconnecting economies of Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia.



Reuters Photo
U.S. astronaut Jeffrey Williams (top), Brazil's first astronaut, Marcos Pontes (C), and Russian Pavel Vinogradov wave before getting into the spacecraft at Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, March 30, 2006.

(See page three)

The Kabul conference, held under the auspices of the Afghan Government and attended by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, promises to become a useful platform for laying out the issues facing the region in its search for possible solutions.

OSCE Chairman Welcomes Kazakhstan's Political Reforms, Encourages More as Country Bids for Chairmanship

Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, the Chairman-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), visited Kazakhstan from March 26 to 28 meeting with officials on political reforms in the country and Kazakhstan's bid to chair the 55-member OSCE in 2009.

Minister De Gucht met President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Foreign Minister Kassymzhomart Tokaev in Astana on March 27. He described Kazakhstan's bid for the Chairmanship of the OSCE as both a challenge and an opportunity for the organization and Kazakhstan. Without speculating on the outcome of the decision on Kazakhstan's bid, which is due to be made by the end of 2006, the Belgian called on Kazakhstan to rise to the occasion and ensure the right conditions to increase political pluralism.

"Now that Mr. Nazarbayev has been reelected as President, he has the mandate to push ahead with political reforms," he said.

"For the OSCE it is very important that in the future, one of the countries that, as we say, is 'east of Vienna' should chair the organization," De Gucht noted. "In this connection, the Central Asian region is very important, and we consider that in this region Kazakhstan is the worthiest candidate for this post," he added, as reported by the Associated Press.

An OSCE March 27 press release said De Gucht welcomed the recent establishment of the State Commission on Democratization: "The Commission's establishment is a step in the right direction and further steps should be taken to strengthen the promotion of political pluralism and to enhance civil society."

De Gucht agreed with his Kazakh interlocutors that the three dimensions within the OSCE were equally important, reinforcing the comprehensive approach to security. He pledged the OSCE support in addressing serious environmental issues, such as raising awareness about radioactive contamination in regions where this remains a problem.

Noting Kazakhstan's increased efforts to combat money laundering and financing of terrorism, De Gucht pledged continued OSCE support to help the country adopt measures in line with international commitments and best practices.

During his meetings in Astana, De Gucht also welcomed the recent registration of yet another political party, Naghyz Ak Zhol. He ended his visit to Kazakhstan in the commercial capital of Almaty, where he met with representatives of political parties and nongovernmental organizations.

Kazakhstan has taken an increasingly active role in the OSCE, and will host several high level conferences in the coming months. In cooperation with the OSCE Special Representative on Trafficking in Human Beings, the Government will convene an international conference in Astana. Astana will also be the site of a conference on intercultural, inter-religious and interethnic understanding. When in Astana, the OSCE chief noted the "climate of tolerance in Kazakhstan which is particularly important at a time when the 'clash of civilizations' takes place in the world."

Kazakhstan May Build Nuclear Power Plant by 2015

Kazakhstan may build its first nuclear power plant since the end of Soviet rule by 2015, a high official in the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry told reporters in Astana on March 28.

Nesipkul Bertisbayev, Director of the Ministry's Department of Power Engineering and Coal Industry said a working group led by Prime Minister Danial Akhmetov is considering various aspects of such a project.

In January 2006, Akhmetov said Kazakhstan needs its own nuclear power plant. The former Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Vladimir Shkolnik earlier said Kazakhstan “has the political will to build a nuclear power plant” and noted the availability of appropriate personnel, the production of nuclear fuel inside the country, and the selection of a location for a plant near Lake Balkhash in central Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan, with more than 20 percent of the world’s known uranium reserves, has been considering building its own nuclear power capability since the late 1990s.

In a country which has suffered from more than 450 nuclear tests at the former Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, the issue of peaceful nuclear energy remains highly controversial. It is the reason why environmental activists, including Mels Eleusizov, the leader of the Tabigat ecological movement, have argued against the new power plant, questioning its environmental safety and the feasibility of alternative sources of energy.

Kazakh officials say modern nuclear technologies ensure both environmental safety and profitable operation of a nuclear power plant.

Evgeni Ryaskov, Director of the Energy Ministry’s Department of Technology Development and Managing State Assets, said in Astana, “during the next 100 years, the energy of the atom will dominate, especially since nuclear radiation phobia is receding as the level of the security of power plants is improved by two levels. The issue today is of diversifying energy supplies and using coal, gas, and nuclear power in equal proportions, but there are no real alternatives to nuclear power plants.”

He noted such a power plant may recover its costs in 10 to 11 years after completion.

Kazakhstan and China Open Small Free Trade Shopping Zone

Kazakh and Chinese officials opened a small free trade zone in the border area allowing Kazakh visitors one-day visa-free shopping passage to buy Chinese goods at Chuguchak City, several miles into China.

The zone was established following an agreement signed by Foreign Ministries of Kazakhstan and China. Under the agreement, people from Kazakhstan have the opportunity to purchase Chinese goods during one day visits without visas.

About 300 public officials from the East Kazakhstan region, including akims (mayors) of towns and districts, headed by Deputy Akim of the Oblast Magzam Bayandarov, took part in the official opening ceremonies for the zone early in March.

Kazakh officials intend to build warehouses, hotels, highways and other necessary infrastructure to promote better international trade through Kazakhstan. It is expected that expanded trade between citizens along the borders of Kazakhstan, China and Russia, which meet in this region, will greatly contribute to development of economies there.

New Crew Blasts Off From Baikonur for ISS

A new crew blasted off from Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan in the Soyuz rocket on March 30, 2006 for the International Space Station (ISS). The crew includes Russian Commander Pavel Vinogradov, U.S. space scientist Geoffrey Williams, and Brazil’s first astronaut, Marcos Pontes.

The Soyuz reached orbit a little less than nine minutes after launch. Russian flight controllers reported the spacecraft’s solar arrays had been deployed as scheduled and that all appeared normal.

Vinogradov earlier said they would carry out more than 65 scientific experiments during the flight, including tests of human reaction to prolonged space travel. The Soyuz is scheduled to dock with the ISS March 31. Vinogradov and Williams are to be joined by European Space Agency astronaut Thomas Reiter of Germany when the space shuttle Discovery visits the ISS in July. Once Reiter arrives, the station’s long term crew will be three in number for the first time since May 2003, following the Columbia disaster.

During the liftoff of the Soyuz on March 30, a video camera aboard the Russian spaceship showed Brazil's Pontes grinning broadly, giving a thumbs up and pointing to his country's flag on the left arm of his spacesuit. Pontes beamed as he told reporters on Earth of his hope that everyone in Brazil would share his pride in having a chance to take part, and would watch as their national flag soared into space. "I am taking the Brazilian flag, it is the most important thing that I am taking," he told reporters. "Actually, I am going with the flag, not the flag going with me." Pontes will come back from space on April 9 with the returning current crew of the ISS.

Things to Watch:

- President Nursultan Nazarbayev will pay an official visit to Moscow, April 3 to 5. His itinerary for the visit includes official meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin, signing a number of bilateral agreements, and a joint opening by the two presidents of the *Year of Abai in Russia* and the *Year of Pushkin in Kazakhstan*. Each is considered his nation's greatest poet.
- The World Boxing Council ordered U.S. boxer Hasim "The Rock" Rahman to fight Kazakhstan's Oleg Maskaev in defense of his heavyweight title, with the winner to face James "Lights Out" Toney. Rahman, handed the WBC belt when Vitali Klitschko retired last November, drew his first defense against Toney on March 18. Toney wanted a rematch but the WBC differed. The decision on the match needs to be made by May 1.

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