

Central Asia

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Many of the key issues that impinged on national development in the five Central Asian republics in 2002 were regional in dimension. Humanitarian professionals in the area continued to call for Central Asia-wide collaboration in tackling them. The key areas for regional action in Central Asia are: water, trade, transport, communications, trans-boundary environment issues and drug trafficking, experts say.

"The land-locked nature of the five countries makes joint actions imperative to open up their markets to the wider world and enjoy the benefits of tighter integration with the global economy," Selva Ramachandran, Deputy United Nations Resident Representative in the Kazakh commercial capital of Almaty told IRIN. Observers agree a major constraint to economic development is the infrastructure, which was optimised around the needs of the Soviet Union, and that it only can be restructured collectively.

Despite a new engagement with the West, the five Central Asian nations in 2002 failed to undertake meaningful political and economic reform. Some regional analysts see this as a missed opportunity, given Western interest in the region following the events of 11 September 2001.

"Unfortunately, none of these regimes has used this advantage. In fact, we have seen greater repression, with more intellectuals, journalists and politicians going to jail," Ahmed Rashid, best selling author of the book "Jihad - The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia" told IRIN.

Some leaders in the region supported the US-led war on terror by providing bases, but in return expected Washington to turn a blind eye to growing authoritarianism.

KYRGYZSTAN

>From independence in 1991 onwards, due to economic contraction, Kyrgyzstan has been confronted by problems of low productivity, high inflation and unemployment rates, rising levels of poverty and distorted income distribution. GDP declined by 45 percent during 1991-95 but recovered slightly in 2000-2002. Sixty-two percent of the population of almost five million live below the poverty line (US \$42 per month), and 23 percent live in conditions of extreme poverty (\$13 per month).

Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic state comprising Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians, Ukrainians and Germans, and a small number of Uighur, Dungan (Chinese Muslims) and Koreans. Tension persists between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities over access to land and housing.

People openly expressed their opposition to the government on a large scale for the first time during the first half of 2002. They were objecting to a deal ceding border territory to China, and the detention of an outspoken deputy, Azimbek Beknazarov and opposition figure, Feliks Kulov.

"We have seen a massive political movement against President Akayev in 2002. These are not Islamic fundamentalists but rather democrats, who wants to see change and reform in their own countries," Ahmed Rashid told IRIN.

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"The type of clampdown we saw in 2002 will continue and maybe get worse in 2003 as the people have realised that organised protest can lead to change," one of IRIN's reporters in the country said. The government resigned after a state commission ruled that senior officials were to blame for the deaths of five civilian protesters in March of last year.

Other observers see real dangers in the kind of political repression that we may see more of in 2003. "Bishkek has requested that the Americans ban Hizbu-Tahrir [a radical, but peaceful Islamic movement in Central Asia] as a terrorist movement. I think this is hugely unfortunate, because it means that essentially you are not able to reach out to any kind of political Islam and the only answer you have for political Islam is to crush it," Rashid said.

One of the main priorities for the UN system in Kyrgyzstan in 2003 will be to enhance conflict resolution, poverty alleviation and governance programmes in the volatile Ferghana Valley. Because of the way Soviet planners defined the boundaries of neighbouring countries, the valley - once a single economic and geographic entity - also encompasses Tajik and Uzbek territory.

"The UN has been instrumental in bringing together Kyrgyz and Tajik government and security officials in order to resolve some of the huge problems in the valley, and we shall be building on this success," UN Resident Coordinator Jerzy Skuratowicz told IRIN from the capital, Bishkek.

Other UN programmes in the Ferghana Valley that will be expanded in 2003, donor funding permitting, include support to local government, micro-credit schemes and improved access to water, health facilities and education. Efforts by the UN in-country teams to draw all three nations more closely into solving the problems of the valley will continue this year, Skuratowicz added.

While Kyrgyzstan has a low prevalence for HIV infection, a steady rise in the number of injecting drug users is increasingly making its threat felt. The largest and fastest growing high-risk group for HIV, injecting drug users, are particularly prevalent in the south of the country. UNAIDS, along with implementing partners like ECHO, will do more work in Kyrgyzstan on prevention, education, advocacy and capacity building in 2003.

In a nation new to representative democratic government, the UN Development Programme's governance programmes and support for parliament will continue in 2003. "Grass-roots democracy-building is important. There have been successes like the creation of an ombudsman in 2002, but it's long-term work which will continue in 2003," Skuratowicz said.

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan has a population of 25 million people, it is the most populated of the five Central Asian republics. Its 447,400 km territory touches the borders of all the other Central Asian states and ethnic Uzbeks make up 69 percent of its population, giving the country a reasonable homogeneity.

During the Soviet era, intensive production of "white gold" (cotton) and grain led to overuse of agrochemicals and the depletion of water supplies, which have left the land poisoned in parts of Uzbekistan and the Aral Sea and certain rivers half dry.

Independent since 1991, the country seeks to gradually lessen its dependence on agriculture while developing its mineral and petroleum reserves. One of the most pressing issue in Uzbekistan in 2002 continued to be human rights and the repressive campaign against perceived Islamic extremists.

According to the US government's International Religious Freedom report last year, this campaign resulted in an atmosphere of intimidation, in which many young Muslim men felt unsafe observing even basic religious duties such as praying five times each day. The ban on proselytizing resulted in fines and the denial of registration to many Christian churches, and in some cases, assaults on many of their members.

The control over publication and distribution of religious literature has been used to prevent the distribution of Bibles in the Uzbek language, something the Government fears is a barely disguised effort to convert the Uzbek-speaking Muslim majority.

Human rights activists argue that even after becoming a US ally by providing vital military bases following 11 September, little has changed regarding human rights in the country. With an ongoing campaign against independent Muslims, widespread torture in prisons, and repression of women, the country remains reclusive and authoritarian.

Head of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Uzbekistan, Matilda Bogner maintained that with more than 7,000

independent Muslims languishing in prisons, the human rights situation remained abysmal. "There has been no fundamental change in policy in relation to human rights in the country," she told IRIN.

In January 2002, a court sentenced four policemen to 20 years imprisonment each for beating to death an alleged Islamist activist, Ravshon Haitov. In October 2001, Ravshon and his brother Rasul Haitov were arrested in Tashkent on suspicion of belonging to Hizb-ut Tahrir. The next morning, Ravshon's body was returned to his family, who reported that it showed signs of severe torture.

Rasul Haitov also was tortured and spent several months in the hospital. There have been allegations that three senior police officers also involved in the beatings escaped prosecution. Such prosecution of independent Muslims is not uncommon in Uzbekistan.

On a more positive note, in February 2002, the Ministry of Justice registered the Independent Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan (IHROU) after a four year delay. IHROU monitors the arrests and trials of persons accused of extremism.

Although Uzbekistan officially lifted pre-publication censorship last year, Bogner maintained that little has changed on the ground. "It's very clear that media output is tightly controlled....it's very clear that it's pro-government and there is very little criticism or even very little debate about public policy and about issues that affect society at large," she said.

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Human Rights activists believe that the international community should remain cautious. "The international community must not accept that at face value and must continue to examine what is going on in this country. They should make decisions about their future co-operation with Uzbekistan based on that real assessment," Bogner maintained, adding that security interests in the region shouldn't take priority over human rights.

Overall human rights in Uzbekistan remained one of the worse among the five post Soviet Central Asian republics, according to Bogner. "I think Uzbekistan is one of the worst. Turkmenistan is even worse, but it is closed and it's hard to get a lot of up-to-date information. Compared to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and even Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is a much more tightly controlled environment," she said.

TAJIKISTAN

With a population of six million, Tajikistan is the poorest of the five Central Asian nations. Made up of an ethnic mix of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Russians, the country continues to grapple with the effects of its five-year civil war, which ended in 1997. In addition to an antiquated infrastructure and lack of development, the most chronic and immediate problems faced by Tajiks today are food shortages, contagious diseases, natural disasters and poor access to clean water.

Although one of the more liberal states in Central Asia, Tajikistan also suffers from suppression of human rights and press freedom. With an unemployment rate of 54.1 percent (1999), and 80 percent of people living below the poverty line (2001), the nation is struggling to stand on its own two feet following the collapse of the Soviet Union and independence in 1991.

Following the intervention of the US-led coalition in the long civil war in Afghanistan, the UN system in Tajikistan, as in neighbouring Afghanistan, was required to upgrade significantly its capacity to support development and humanitarian actions in border areas.

The system also needed to expand its capacity in Tajikistan in order to be able to support humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. An essential element of this was enhancing existing, and opening new crossing points into Afghanistan - nine in all. During the first nine months of 2002, more than 70,000 mt of humanitarian assistance reached Afghanistan via Tajikistan.

But Tajikistan must not be forgotten, humanitarian workers say. "Tajikistan itself is a vulnerable country, which is still in dire need of international assistance," UN Resident Coordinator for Tajikistan Matthew Kahane told IRIN from the capital, Dushanbe.

Press freedom remained an issue of concern in 2002 due to both political and economic factors. Despite existing legislation protecting freedom of speech and the press, government pressure is still felt by journalists, who often have to self-censor and are afraid to openly criticise the authorities. An independent radio station was refused a licence to operate but eventually permission was granted by Dushanbe.

Three young journalists from local TV stations SM-1 and TRK-Asia in the northern Sughd Province were detained by the military in the latter part of 2002 and sent to the army after broadcasting a programme showing the local military authorities catching young people in the streets and sending them to the army.

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Being a land-locked country with only seven percent arable land, and the poorest of the five former Soviet republics, Tajikistan will continue in 2003 to face a precarious and complex humanitarian situation in the throes of a difficult post-conflict peace-building process. Extreme poverty, post-drought consequences and frequent recurrence of natural disasters will remain this year.

Despite input from the international community after 11 September, Kahane explained that none of the social indicators changed significantly for the better in the past year, as unemployment remains at over 30 percent and the average monthly salary hardly reaches US \$10.50. Only half the population has access to safe water and hence water borne diseases will continue to be widespread in 2003.

Tajikistan will continue to grapple with food shortages. As a result of two consecutive years of drought between 2000 and 2002, the World Food Programme (WFP) distributed 102,537 mt of food to 1.2 million targeted beneficiaries in both urban and rural areas. The food agency is supporting more than 800,000 vulnerable Tajiks during the winter of 2002-2003.

In addition to this, the WFP/Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) crop and food supply assessment mission, fielded in Tajikistan in June-July 2002, estimated a shortfall of 112,000 mt of Tajikistan's need for cereals for 2002. "These are the major humanitarian developments in Tajikistan, as well as the biggest challenges before this impoverished nation, which deserves a better hope for the future," Kahane said.

KAZAKHSTAN

A government crackdown on the Kazakh media in 2002 coupled with the suppression of political opposition has contributed at least partly to a recent and troubling decline in business conditions - all of which have put the desperately poor Central Asian nation at risk of ever-increasing international isolation.

A huge country covering a territory equivalent to the whole of Western Europe, Kazakhstan has vast mineral resources and considerable economic potential. However, one decade after independence, and despite generous foreign investments, its people continue to suffer serious hardship.

Kazakhstan has been largely unable to benefit from its huge energy reserves in 2002 due to the lack of adequate export pipelines. While the opening in March 2001 of a pipeline linking the Tengiz oil field in the west to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk may potentially transform the economy, Kazakhstan faces other daunting challenges.

These include a dilapidated infrastructure, high unemployment, inflation, poverty, prostitution, drug addiction and HIV/AIDS. Contamination caused by Soviet-era nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk is also a problem, as are the dumping of toxic waste and the jettisoning of rocket fuel by Russian space vehicles launched from Baykonur, and the drying up of the Aral Sea.

"There is no question that media was under fierce attack by the government of Kazakhstan this past year. Physical attacks on journalists, the fire-bombing of a newspaper's office, threats to editors, and the continued use of criminal libel all served to put media under intense pressure, Acacia Shields of Human Rights Watch (HRW) told IRIN from New York. The hostility appeared to have roots in the government's desire to silence reports regarding accusations of official corruption.

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Regarding development in 2002, despite economic growth, there was little progress, this will continue on into 2003, observers predict. "Poverty is widespread - about 28 percent of people live below national subsistence minimum level, unemployment is large - close to 20 percent despite the official figures of 10.5 percent, child and maternal mortality rates are quite high and the social safety net inherited from the Soviet Union is fraying," Selva Ramachandran of the UN in Almaty told IRIN.

The UNDP will be launching the Millennium Development Goals Report (MDGR) in Kazakhstan late in January (the first report to be launched in Central Asia). This report will provide clear indications along the seven dimensions of MDGs. These are: to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; and ensure environmental sustainability.

While the UN system in Kazakhstan and the closely coordinated donor community try to fill the development gaps, in 2003 there is a need for the state to become more aware of the development needs of the country and tune its own programmes plus budget to resolve the key development challenges, experts told IRIN.

Analysts see no reason to be optimistic with regards to human rights and press freedom in Kazakhstan in 2003, despite widespread international criticism. "The situation of democracy and human rights is extremely bad. We may see a situation where the political situation in Afghanistan improves much more than it does in Central Asia. It's extremely depressing that we haven't seen any political reforms in the region over the last one year," analyst Ahmed Rashid told IRIN.

TURKMENISTAN

Turkmenistan, a one-party state dominated by its president, Saparmurad Niyazov, and an inner circle of close advisors, has made little progress in casting off its Soviet-era authoritarian style this past year. Despite its huge gas reserves - estimated to be the fifth-largest in the world today - its wealth has yet to reach the five million inhabitants of this reclusive Central Asian state.

According to the World Bank, over half the population continues to live in poverty. Largely closed off to outsiders, investment is limited and development - particularly in rural areas - remains poor. Unemployment is rife and the country is grappling with one of the worst human rights records in Central Asia.

Political opposition and freedom of the press within the country is virtually non-existent. For a country that "officially" has no problems, and issues are not openly discussed, there is a limited NGO presence in the country. What international NGOs are present remain particularly cautious in their criticism, less they find themselves no longer welcome.

The only arable land found in this mostly desert state is found along the banks of the Amu Darya river and a series of antiquated Soviet-built canals, thereby depleting the flow of water into the Aral Sea which is already an internationally accepted ecological disaster zone. For people living along the canals' banks, contaminated water continues to prove a major health hazard, and remains a key issue the government has yet to seriously address.

But as the most homogeneous of the Central Asian states - with more than 70 percent of the population ethnic Turkmen - Turkmenistan has largely been spared the ethnic tensions that have adversely impacted on its neighbours. But this has given the country a false sense of stability to outside observers.

Over the past year President Niyazov, or the Turkenbashi (Father of All Turkmens) as he is known, has continued to seek international support for a massive 1,800 km gas pipeline project for his landlocked country's energy wealth, passing through Afghanistan and onward to the huge markets of Pakistan and India.

While discussions between Ashgabat, Kabul and Islamabad were ongoing in 2002, security within Afghanistan and uncertain financing for the project curtailed meaningful progress.

Observers link lack of political progress in Turkmenistan with a reluctance on the part of the West to engage economically with Ashgabat. "If the Turkenbashi continues to be repressive and instable, it's less likely that people

would like to invest in Turkmenistan, so that's becoming a serious issues for the region," regional analyst Barnett Rubin told IRIN from New York.

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While the country must tackle many of the same issues its Central Asian neighbours face, it is quite likely human rights will deteriorate further. Following a failed attempt to assassinate the president on 25 November in Ashgabat - largely blamed on opposition groups living in exile - rights groups have warned of a further crackdown on political dissent, with Washington calling for restraint.

Such a crackdown will only further the country's isolation in 2003, hampering international investment and development in what is otherwise a potentially rich nation.