

The E.U. encouraged Kazakhstan to ensure broader political pluralism, but the Kazakh government took no discernible action in response. The E.U. used an OSCE Permanent Council meeting in late July to express concern about the new law on political parties, saying that it “pose[d] a threat to political pluralism” and would “impede the full development of political parties in all sectors of Kazakh society.”

United States

U.S. President George W. Bush reportedly raised human rights issues during his December 2001 meeting with President Nazarbaev. But since the White House made no public statement to this effect, Nazarbaev was able to use the meeting to show that he had unqualified U.S. support. At the close of the visit, the Bush administration promised to seek Kazakhstan’s “graduation” from the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the U.S. Freedom Support Act, which denies “most favored nation” trade status to countries that restrict freedom of emigration.

As the crackdown against the Kazakh media and political opposition intensified, the Bush administration’s frustration with the Kazakh government appeared to grow. In August, a State Department spokesman stated that “recent developments... pose a serious threat to the country’s democratic process” and promised that the U.S. would “raise these concerns at the highest levels with the Government of Kazakhstan.”

The U.S. risked sending mixed signals to Kazakhstan, however, by simultaneously pursuing closer military ties, culminating in a July agreement giving U.S. aircraft landing rights at Almaty airport.

In September, U.S. government officials took the lead in an international effort to convince Kazakh authorities not to extradite Gulgeldi Annaniyazov, a Turkmen dissident in Kazakh custody, to Turkmenistan. Annaniyazov was granted refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and was able to travel to Norway for medical treatment in early October.

KYRGYZSTAN

HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENTS

The events of 2002 provided further evidence that the government of President Askar Akaev had abandoned human rights commitments. It used lethal violence to break up demonstrations, jailed the president’s political rivals and independent-minded Muslims, and attempted to dismantle media freedoms. With its increasingly close relationship to the U.S. and heightened international profile, the government appeared confident that repressive measures would have no diplomatic consequence.

At least five demonstrators were killed and some ninety people injured, includ-

ing forty-seven police officers, when violence erupted during a protest on March 17 and 18 in the Aksy district of Jalal Abad province in southern Kyrgyzstan. Protesters demanded the release of Azimbek Beknazarov, a popular member of parliament. (See also below.) According to eyewitnesses, police and security forces opened fire on an unarmed crowd of hundreds to halt the demonstration, without first allowing sufficient time for those gathered to disperse. The Ministry of Internal Affairs claimed that demonstrators initiated the violence by throwing stones, and originally said that no charges would be brought against the officers. The use of live ammunition on unarmed civilians was explained as being due to a lack of supply of rubber bullets.

Parliament introduced a bill that would amnesty those responsible for the violence in Aksy, including officers who opened fire on demonstrators. In August, Akaev sent the bill back to parliament for revision. Following domestic and international pressure for accountability, a case was eventually opened. The trial of six police officers and local administrators accused of abuse of power for their role in the March Aksy incident began September 30 but was postponed the same day. Relatives and supporters of the policemen staged large-scale protest rallies demanding the defendants’ acquittal and that the court instead try the officials who gave the order to fire on the protesters. The hearing was repeatedly delayed until October 22, when a judge remanded the case for further investigation.

High-level government officials who supervised the forces—including the minister of internal affairs and the National Security Service (SNB) chief—were promoted to posts in the presidential administration following the shootings.

Persecution of Akaev’s political rivals continued. As of November, the government failed to release Feliks Kulov, former vice-president of Kyrgyzstan who was excluded from running against Akaev in the 2000 elections. He had been sentenced in 2001 to seven years in prison on politically motivated charges of abuse of office. In May 2002 he was convicted on additional charges of embezzlement and his sentence increased to ten years. On October 11, an appeals court in Bishkek upheld the sentence. Kulov’s imprisonment continued to generate public outrage and international protest in 2002, as did the arrest in January 2002 of Azimbek Beknazarov. The charges against Beknazarov stemmed from his alleged failure to investigate a murder in 1995, when he worked as a prosecutor in Jalal Abad province. Opposition activists believed his arrest was motivated by the government’s interest in silencing Beknazarov’s criticism of the decision to cede to China land that had been the subject of contention between the two states for years.

After the demonstrations in Jalal Abad province, Beknazarov was released from custody and, on May 24, a court handed down a one-year suspended sentence and stripped him of his seat in parliament. In June, an appeals court upheld the conviction but annulled the sentence, restoring his parliamentary mandate. Upon his release, Beknazarov reportedly stated that police had beaten him in custody and that his earlier denial of ill-treatment on national television had been coerced by security officials.

Police forcibly dispersed numerous protests in the capital, Bishkek, and detained peaceful demonstrators, including rights defenders and journalists observing the gatherings. Dozens of protestors were given short jail terms or forced to pay fines.

In a strike against media freedoms, in January Akaev issued Decree 20, which set out a series of bureaucratic obstacles to independent press and publishing. It was annulled on May 27, after an international outcry. While it was in effect, the decree required that all printing equipment, broadly defined to include even copy machines, be registered with the state and strictly monitored by state agencies.

The Kyrgyz government continued to make use of criminal libel laws and other politically motivated criminal charges to punish journalists for criticism of government policies or officials. In June, the Supreme Court upheld a 2001 verdict sentencing television journalist Samagan Orozaliev and his driver to nine and eight years in prison respectively on hotly contested charges of extortion and illegal weapons possession. Orozaliev had been investigating local corruption for a documentary film at the time of his arrest in 2001.

In May 2002 authorities also briefly detained Zharkyn Temerbaeva, a reporter for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) just prior to a planned protest she had come to observe. According to a report by PEN International, government authorities opened a criminal case against poet Asanbai Jusupbekov on February 21 for “spreading false information” for informing RFE/RL, after visiting Azimbek Beknazarov in detention, that the latter had been beaten in custody. PEN reported that Jusupbekov had gone into hiding.

The government intensified efforts to eliminate Muslim groups whose religious practices fell outside narrow state controls. Decree 20 appeared to be aimed also at restricting the exchange of information by members of such groups. The decree’s preamble stated that it was intended “to prevent subversive ideological and propagandizing activities by various extremist religious centers and [to prevent] . . . their informational impact . . .” To this end, the decree called on certain state agencies to regulate the number of religious groups and to counter the “unlawful activities of various religious movements.”

Police arrested and harassed dozens of independent Muslims, targeting in particular members of Hizb ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), a non-violent Islamic group that seeks to establish a Caliphate, or Islamic state, in Central Asia. The majority were charged under legal provisions prohibiting incitement of racial, ethnic or religious enmity and sentenced to several years in prison. On July 4, Abdulla Abduraulov and Shakat Islambaev, who had been detained for distributing Hizb ut-Tahrir leaflets in Osh province, were convicted on such charges and sentenced to five years in prison.

Authorities also conducted numerous search-and-seizure operations, during which they confiscated the group’s books, brochures and leaflets, and audio- and videocassettes. During one search in early February in Osh province, police claimed to find a cache of weapons in the home of a Hizb ut-Tahrir member Adkham Baltabaev, who was later released and fined 10,000 som (U.S.\$208). The weapons possession charge was presumably dropped.

In early September SNB chief Kalyk Imankulov made several unfounded statements attempting to link the Jalal Abad protests to the work of Hizb ut-Tahrir activists and accused the organization of destabilizing the country. He also claimed that the SNB had recently prevented a series of “terrorist acts” by confiscating a cache of weapons it allegedly found in a “hiding place” along with Hizb ut-Tahrir

leaflets. There were no known cases under investigation on these charges as of October 2002.

The government of Kyrgyzstan also continued to pursue its relentless campaign against the country’s Uighur minority. Uighur activists and local rights groups accused the Kyrgyz government of conducting a baseless smear campaign to brand Uighurs “terrorists” and “extremists.”

In past years, Kyrgyz authorities charged several groups of Uighur men with responsibility for violent acts, including a 1998 bus bombing. In an unusual twist, in late 2001 Kyrgyz authorities charged that an Uzbek man was in league with Uighur separatists when he allegedly shot to death a businessman prominent in Kyrgyzstan’s Uighur community. The Uzbek, Otabek Akhadov, was sentenced to death and three other men were sentenced to prison terms in what rights groups believed was a politically motivated case. In May 2002, two citizens of China were arrested for the same crime and handed over to Chinese authorities for prosecution in China.

Uighur separatists were initially blamed for the shooting deaths of an official from the Chinese embassy in Bishkek and his driver in June. At least one Uighur with Kyrgyz citizenship was briefly detained following the incident. In July, Kyrgyz authorities arrested and charged two Uighur men with the crime, but said they found it was in fact not political but the consequence of a commercial dispute.

The government of Kyrgyzstan took some steps to counter the trafficking of humans abroad. A government council on trafficking met for the first time in July. However, local press reports indicated that trafficking and specifically the use of companies registered in Kyrgyzstan as fronts for trafficking remained serious problems in 2002.

Following a June 2001 decree on mine clearance and mine awareness, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Emergency Situations began conducting mine awareness programs among high-risk populations in affected areas.

DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS

State agents took an aggressive stance against rights defenders, subjecting them to harassment, intimidating surveillance, and arbitrary arrest and detention.

In January 2002, police searched the home of Bakhodir Akhmedov, deputy director of the Committee for the Rights of Muslims, and arrested him on charges that he had sixteen bullets in his oven. Akhmedov’s work, based in Jalal Abad province, focused primarily on defense of ethnic Uzbeks and non-violent independent-minded Muslims, a particularly unpopular group in Kyrgyzstan’s current political climate. In the months that followed his arrest, as the government intensified its campaign to arrest members of such groups, the charges against Akhmedov became increasingly outrageous. According to Russian rights group Memorial, in August, when state prosecutors were faced with a deadline to file charges against Akhmedov, they charged him with membership in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a militant group that had invaded Kyrgyz and Uzbek territory in years past. Akhmedov’s lawyer reported that the only support for the new allegations was

the testimony of ex-convicts from Uzbekistan. As of this writing, Akhmedov remained in custody awaiting trial.

Tursunbek Akunov, chair of the Human Rights Movement of Kyrgyzstan, was reportedly a particular target of police harassment during the Aksy protests in March, when police grabbed him from the crowd of demonstrators. Shortly after the shootings, the minister of internal affairs publicly blamed Akunov for the deaths of protestors.

Police again detained Akunov when they broke up a May 2002 protest outside parliament. Other defenders detained in that incident included Ramazan Dyryldaev, chair of the Kyrgyz Committee for Human Rights (KCHR), and Alexander Fomenko, Mamasadyk Jakyshev, and Kachkyn Bulatov, also of the KCHR. Dyryldaev also reported in September that he was under intensive and intimidating surveillance by authorities.

Among seven civilians charged in relation to the holding of the Aksy demonstrations was Kadyrkul Omurbekov, who had been working to defend the rights of victims and their relatives. After twelve days in custody, Omurbekov was released on September 19, pursuant to a government agreement to drop all charges against the demonstrators and their advocates.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Several Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) seminars and conferences took place in Bishkek. A conference on freedom of belief and expression held February 15-16 focused on the need for greater dialogue between authorities and religious confessions in Central Asia, and for interfaith tolerance as a means to maintain stability.

OSCE leaders played a positive role by advocating increased dialogue between the Kyrgyz government and political opposition. During his visit to the country in May, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) Director Ambassador Gérard Stoudmann called on the Kyrgyz leadership to promote tolerance and build public confidence. The OSCE chairman-in-office also traveled to Kyrgyzstan in July for talks with President Akaev as well as meetings with civil society groups, including independent media outlets, human rights groups, and the leaders of opposition parties.

European Union

The E.U.-Kyrgyzstan Cooperation Council met in July to discuss implementation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). An E.U. statement following the meeting did not indicate whether the E.U. had directly challenged Kyrgyzstan on its rights record. It noted only that respect for human rights was a necessary condition for cooperation and that freedom of expression was among the factors of democracy, and “took note of the measures taken by the Government of Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the events in Aksy.”

United States

The U.S.-Kyrgyz relationship changed significantly in late 2001 and 2002 as Kyrgyzstan agreed to host about one thousand U.S. troops—along with one thousand troops from other countries—at Manas airbase to facilitate military operations in Afghanistan. Now an important U.S. ally, Kyrgyzstan reportedly received U.S.\$49.9 million in assistance in 2002, including \$12 million for security programs, none of it tied to progress on human rights. The U.S. continued to provide Kyrgyzstan with non-lethal equipment and military training, and as the year progressed, security concerns dominated its relationship with Kyrgyzstan.

At the same time, U.S. policy-makers criticized Kyrgyzstan's backsliding on human rights, calling it, in the words of U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Lynn Pascoe, a country that “retreated from its early promise.” When President Akaev visited Washington, U.S. officials reportedly told him privately that his cooperation against terrorism did not give him a green light to undermine democracy. The joint statement issued at the close of Akaev's visit said that the two countries “reaffirm” their “mutual commitment” to promote human rights. At the same time, the U.S. failed to insist that Kyrgyzstan show tangible progress, such as the release of Feliks Kulov, prior to the visit, and reportedly failed to ask for specific human rights improvements during meetings between Akaev and President George W. Bush.

The United States also provided funds for the establishment of a printing press in Kyrgyzstan designed to help the country's independent media resist government harassment. As of November, however, the Kyrgyz government had refused to authorize the printing press.

China

Kyrgyzstan's relations with China deeply affected the domestic political situation. In particular, the Kyrgyz government's controversial decision to cede a three hundred-square-mile strip of land to China sparked objection from parliamentarians and became a focal issue for mass protests across the country. China's influence with Kyrgyz authorities was particularly apparent in the Kyrgyz government's policy toward Uighurs. China reportedly encouraged Kyrgyz officials to use a firm hand with the Uighur minority and to pursue a series of arrests to quash any manifestation of Uighur separatism or ambitions for self-determination in China's Xinjiang province.

China and Kyrgyzstan undertook counter-terrorism training exercises along their border on October 1 under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (the joint security group previously known as the Shanghai Five).