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**KYRGYZSTAN FALLING INTO LINE WITH OPPRESSIVE NEIGHBOURS?**

By Ivar Dale, NHCs Central-Asia representative

During a press conference in Moscow on 5 February, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiev announced that the US military base at Manas will be closed. The base has served as a supplier to the military operations in Afghanistan since 2001.

The announcement was made the same day as Kyrgyzstan and Russia signed a document promising unprecedented aid and financial investments to the Central Asian republic, underlining the geopolitical significance of the closure of the US base.

Kyrgyz authorities hope that Russian investments and support will help the country get out from under its vast economic problems, launching a new era of positive developments.

Geopolitics notwithstanding, the human rights situation in the country has seen a negative development over the past year.

Once hailed as the "Switzerland of Central Asia" and as an "island of democracy" in the region, Kyrgyzstan has been showing a worrisome eagerness to align itself with the standards of its more oppressive neighbours in terms of human rights.

Part of the reason could indeed be pressure from the country's leading strategic partner, Russia, and from other member states in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Kyrgyzstan has a tradition of standing out among Central Asian republic as a country willing to take a more liberal position towards human rights groups and open public debate. As such, the country has been a thorn in the side of its neighbours and of Russia, who have looked disfavouredly at the "safe haven" the country has provided for activists and international human rights organizations. However, economic hardship and political turmoil has plagued the country in recent years, and the current government seems set on exchanging democratic values for stability and economic security.

After a parliamentary election in December 2007, which OSCE described as a step backwards for democratic developments, the government has made several steps in the direction of better control of what is said and done at grassroot level. Particular attention has been given to the amendments to the law on citizens' right to peaceful assembly.

Kyrgyzstan has seen several massive demonstrations demanding President Kurmanbek Bakiev's resignation – eerily similar to the uprisings leading to his predecessor's flight from the country, and Bakiev's own rise to the presidency. The last of these went on for an entire week in April 2008. Police broke up the demonstrations when the crowds, chanting "Bakiev go away!" seemed about to storm the presidential palace.

As ordinary Kyrgyz citizens lament dire economic conditions and suffer 12-13 hours of electricity cuts every day even in the center of the capital Bishkek, Bakiev is perhaps trying to avoid a fate similar to that of former president Akayev's. The amendments to the law on peaceful gatherings

effectively bar would-be demonstrators from voicing their complaints anywhere where they would actually be heard, such as outside the government building or near the Parliament. Attempts to test the authorities' sincerity on the matter have led to a string of arrests of activists and political figures.

As the opposition struggles to agree on a common strategy, Kyrgyzstan has lately seen a number of disconcerting cases where journalists and politicians have fallen victim to various legal attacks from police and security services.

The editor of one newspaper, De Facto, left the country after what she claimed was government harassment, leading to an end of its publishing. Another paper, Alibi, was closed after President Bakiev's nephew demanded 28,000\$ in a libel suit. Radio Azzatyk has faced similar problems.

These developments have been met with fierce criticism from local human rights activists.

Parallel with what is already a clear pattern of government harassment of opposition forces, President Bakiev has gone on a frenzy in firing high-ranking officials in his own government, sometimes citing corruption and incompetence as the official reason. In Kyrgyzstan the political game has always been hard to understand for outsiders, but in a short period of time, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the head of the Presidential Administration, several mayors and governors, as well as numerous Ambassadors abroad have been swept off their posts by presidential decrees. Some of them have re-appeared in other positions, while others are effectively a gift to the existing movement demanding Bakiev's resignation.

The opposition seems to be gaining force, however, and rallies with or without official permission can be expected in the coming months. As such, Bakiev's move to close the somewhat unpopular US military base outside Bishkek, could also be intended to gain favour with opposing forces.

As far as human rights go – the world should keep a watchful eye on developments in Kyrgyzstan.