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Kazakhstan and NATO Approve Partnership Plan

An individual partnership action plan (IPAP) between Kazakhstan and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), initialed last month at a high level meeting in Brussels, officially came into force on January 31. The IPAP makes Kazakhstan the first country in Central Asia to have an individual cooperative agreement with NATO.

Konstantin Zhigalov, Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Belgium and NATO, said the plan was "prepared in a short amount of time consistent with our President's instructions on strengthening cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance given at the June 2005 Ministry of Foreign Affairs board meeting."

The IPAP with Kazakhstan is a comprehensive plan aimed at strengthening regional and international security, furthering transformation of the country's armed forces, improving operational compatibility, cooperation in science, civil emergency planning, environment protection and the fight against terrorism. The plan also provides for strengthening political dialog between NATO and Kazakhstan, and practical cooperation including personnel exchanges, training Kazakh military personnel at NATO training centers as well as participation in NATO exercises and international peacekeeping operations.

Kazakhstan is a member of the Council of Euro-Atlantic Partnership and NATO's Partnership for Peace program.

It's Official: New South and Central Asia Bureau at State

In a long planned and anticipated reorganization, the U.S State Department announced on February 9 the expansion of its Bureau of South Asian Affairs to include responsibility for Kazakhstan and four other countries of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The expanded bureau is now called the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

The new bureau is currently headed by Christina Rocca, an outgoing Assistant Secretary of State. The former State Department spokesman Richard Boucher has been nominated by the President to head the new bureau.



Kazakhstan's Yvgeniy Koreshkov, top, and Keith Tkachuk, of the United States, battle for the puck during a men's ice hockey match at the 2006 Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy Thursday Feb. 16, 2006.

AP Photo.

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Raising Living Standards and Competitiveness, Government's Goals for Next Three Years

Prime Minister Daniyal Akhmetov said the Kazakh Government's main goal for the next three years is to create favorable conditions required to sharpen the country's competitive edge worldwide and raise living standards.

The Prime Minister spoke at a joint session of Kazakhstan's Parliament in Astana on February 15, presenting the Government's program for years 2006 through 2008. Akhmetov said the program envisages the country's annualized GDP growth to reach 8.5% in real terms in the three years allowing the economy to grow 27.7% in that time. "This performance will enable Kazakhstan to achieve its strategic task of doubling GDP by 2008 compared to 2000," Akhmetov explained.

The Government will aim to keep annual inflation within the range of 5 to 7.3 percent to ensure a stable macroeconomic environment, he said, adding that labor productivity was expected to grow by 6.3 to 7 percent annually and boost economic development.

Various international financial institutions and rating agencies have already acknowledged Kazakhstan's economic successes thus far. Kazakhstan was ranked 61st in the 2005 Global Competitiveness Report published by the World Economic Forum, leading all the former Soviet republics, Akhmetov said. He added Kazakhstan was also up 17 notches in the Heritage Foundation/Wall Street Journal Index of Economic Freedom published in January 2006, rising to 113th place, leaving behind Russia (122nd position) and coming closer to China (111th place).

The economic growth has been showing in the rising per capita gross domestic product and improving living standards. In the past three years, it grew an estimated 30 percent to reach US\$3,620 in real terms by the end of 2005. During the next three years, the per capita GDP is due to expand another 50 percent to US\$5,450 in 2008.

President Orders Thorough and Transparent Investigation of Former Minister's Killing, U.S. FBI Will Participate in Probe

President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan has sent his condolences to the family and friends of the slain politician Altynbek Sarsenbayev and instructed law enforcement agencies to conduct a thorough investigation of the tragedy.

Altynbek Sarsenbayev, along with his bodyguard and his driver, were found shot dead on the roadside outside Almaty on February 13. During his life, Sarsenbayev was Minister of Culture, Information and Public Accord, Secretary of the Security Council, and Kazakh Ambassador to Russia. Recently, he had been cochairman of the Ak Zhol political party and one of the leaders of "For a Fair Kazakhstan" movement.

Baurzhan Mukhamedzhanov, the Minister of Interior, is personally overseeing the investigation. At a February 16 press conference, the Minister said: "At the President's instructions we are working on inviting foreign specialists to investigating this crime, particularly from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation." He said drawing FBI agents into the investigation "is conditioned by the need to avert any insinuations on the killing motives and give the investigation maximum transparency."

The Ministry of Interior announced a bounty of 10 million tenge (US\$1=134 tenge) for credible information about those who organized and carried out the crime.

Kazakh Olympians Compete; Ice Hockey: KAZ 1 - 4 USA

Kazakh athletes are putting their best foot forward at the Olympic Games in Turin, but so far they weren't able to win any medals. The closest the Kazakhs came to doing that was in men's team sprint in cross country skiing where Nikolai Chebotko and Yevgeni Koshevoy finished sixth.

Team Kazakhstan lost its opening ice hockey match to Sweden, 7-2, on February 15. On February 16, after a strong show and a good game, they lost to the United States, 4-1.

As for a little contest held by the Embassy prior to the game amongst our readers, more than 150 people shared their predictions. Most said the U.S. will win 4-2. Seven correctly predicted the score.

The first three to respond with correct predictions, within 20 minutes of our original announcement, were: Kristin E. Longley, of Washington, DC; Olga Shabalkina and Nurlan Muratov, both of Houston. Also with correct predictions, but they came later than the three winners, were Marianne Girardin, Nurzhan Zhabekov, Barry Kime, and Scott Cole.

Kazakh Team Most Stylish at Olympics Opening, Say D&G

The following is a February 13 Reuters news story by Jane Barrett

Kazakhstan came to the Winter Olympics with few hopes of winning a medal but they have already scooped one of the highest accolades in Italy. Top fashion designers Dolce & Gabbana voted the Kazakhs the most stylish team to parade at the Olympics opening ceremony and said they would happily cast them on their catwalk.

“We would hire the athletes from Kazakhstan in a second, so stylish in their black coats and Borsalino hats, so Dolce & Gabbana,” the designers wrote in Italian daily La Stampa.

The French were fanciest, although “a little too perfectly tailored”, the Russians looked “all Christmas in white jackets that somehow managed to make them look slimmer and taller”, and the Italians were, of course, “glamorous”.

So who were the losers? “The Chinese wore the kitchiest, clad in long down jackets that made them look like sandwiches and even shorter than they already are,” Dolce & Gabbana wrote.

The Germans’ tangerine and lime outfits were dubbed an “overdose of vitamin C”, the Danes’ hats were likened to horrible “waffles” and the Americans’ “flabby berets... looked like upside down underwear”.

St. Valentine’s Kissing Contest Tally:

Fainted Babushka 1, Clear Winners 0, Kisses Incalculable

An ingenious mobile phone company staged a St. Valentine’s Day kissing contest in downtown Almaty, drawing crowds of couples lured by a chance to show off and win a Motorola cellular phone.

Five most loving couples were selected by a small jury from the much larger group of hopefuls. In cool temperatures they kept kissing to stay warm.

The first half hour of the competition did not yield a clear favorite. Then, a strong passion displayed by one of the couples, who evidently spent time studying the Kamasutra, created an unexpected diversion when an elderly woman observer (babushka) briefly fainted. After brief intermission, she was OK, and the contest resumed with great gusto.

Another hour passed until the referee stopped the competition for lack of a clear favorite. In the end, on a popular vote, two couples were crowned winners after being nominated The Most Erotic Kiss and The Most Romantic Kiss.

Yulia Korshenko, representative of the Euroset company, presented the winners with new Motorola C390 phones. She summed up the mood at the festival paraphrasing the great Tolstoy quote: “If you are kissed on the left cheek, turn your right one.”

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