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Nauryz unites Kazakhstan in celebration



Photo credit: madeniet.astana.kz.

By Aigerim Sadykova

ASTANA – Kazakhstan's annual Nauryz celebration on March 21 and 22 was as eventful as ever, despite this year's cold, foggy weather.

Astana residents celebrated Nauryz for the first time at the site of last year's EXPO 2017, visiting ethnic villages erected on the high-tech campus and participating in outdoor activities March 21.

The festivities started with the Kazakh musical "Zhanarghan zher, bak konghan nurly el" ("Renewed land, blessed country") at the expo's Congress Centre. Nauryz was embodied as a boy in the story, a hero who returns warmth, love and patience stolen from his people by dark forces. He discovers for them the secret of happiness and prosperity.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited the musical and congratulated Kazakhstan's people on the traditional new year holiday.

"Nauryz is a holiday of spring, revival and growth. Historically, we expect this holiday with pleasure and great joy, as day and night are equal, winter ends and spring with summer begins," Nazarbayev said.

Guests at the so called ethnic village were greeted by characters from Kazakh folk tales and took photos with them. Artists from the capital's theatres showcased national customs and traditions. There was also an exhibition of handmade pottery, felt and jewellery.

"This year, the celebration lasts for five days. I have a chance to spend weekends with my family. My husband took part in a Kazakh traditional sport competition. The children mostly liked the ethnic village. No one was bored," Astana resident Zhamilya Bayazitova told The Astana Times.

The traditional and symbolic holiday dish, Nauryz kozhe, was prepared in an enormous taikazan (a type of cooking pot) with a capacity of 1,000 litres. Nauryz kozhe consists of seven components, a number that symbolises the seven days of the week and seven virtues. Traditionally, everyone should visit seven houses and invite seven guests to their home on the holiday. Guests were also offered other traditional Kazakh and Central Asian dishes in a food court.

In the past, perhaps the biggest sensation was a performance by legendary Kazakh wrestler and Guinness World Record-holder Kazhimukan Munaitpasov and Baluan Sholak. This year, famous athlete and one of Kazakhstan's 100 New Faces Sergei Tsyrulnikov also delighted the crowd by tearing apart chains and hammering pins with his hands.

Spectators also paid great attention to the exhibition of ancient Kazakh dog breeds, the Tazy and Tobet. The speed of the Tazy hunting dogs – up to 80 kilometers an hour – as well as their hunting skills amazed the viewers.

Continued on Page A2

Nazarbayev pays surprise visit to Samarkand, meets with Mirziyoyev



By Almasbek Zhumadilov

ASTANA – Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev paid an unannounced visit to Uzbekistan's famous city of Samarkand March 21 where he discussed bilateral, regional and international issues with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

The two leaders praised the state of bilateral relations and outlined additional development prospects.

According to the Akorda press service, Nazarbayev noted the positive effects the country's bilateral relations have on trade, economic relations and cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

He also noted increases in bilateral trade and the promotion of ties between the two nations' business communities as well as effective bilateral cooperation on international and regional issues.

Mirziyoyev and Nazarbayev also visited the Hazret Khizr memorial complex and paid tribute to the memory of the first President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov buried there.

On the eve of the Nauryz holiday, common to the peoples of both countries, the heads of the two states visited Samarkand's cultural and historical sights.

Mirziyoev visited Astana March 15 to attend the meeting of the leaders of five Central Asian nations and personally launch the Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan.

Central Asian leaders discuss regional challenges in Astana

By Aigerim Seisembayeva

ASTANA – Leaders of five Central Asian states met March 15 in Astana in such a format for the first time in 10 years to address regional challenges, such as borders, water resource management and regional security.

The presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan attended. Turkmenistan was represented by its Parliament's Speaker Akja Nurberdyeva and a delegation, including the president's son Serdar Berdymuhamedov, who chairs the Turkmen Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.

Nazarbayev met on the sidelines of the gathering with Berdymuhamedov as well as Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and the Uzbek leader Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

The event produced a joint statement on the upcoming Nauryz holiday and a decision to meet in such a format annually.

Nazarbayev also proposed during the meeting to establish a mechanism for five-sided regular consultations between the security councils of Central Asian states, the Kazakh leader told a press briefing following the meeting.

Nazarbayev said the leaders also considered establishing a five-sided working commission at the level deputy prime ministers to promote regional economic cooperation.

He highlighted the advantages of holding consultative meetings at the highest level, noting the importance of combining the potential of Central Asian states, increasing interregional trade, ensuring regional security and facilitating the rapprochement of peoples.

The Kazakh President also drew attention to Kazakhstan's relations with other Central Asian states, including export relationships, intergovernmental commissions, the opening of new border crossings, the simplification of passport procedures, cooperation in building transportation infrastructure and cooperation in settling border issues.

He also noted that, during the meeting, the leaders agreed that the delimitation and demarcation of borders between the five countries is a priority to strengthen security and stability in the region.

Nazarbayev also outlined the need for Central Asian states to strengthen ties with the leading countries bordering the region – Russia and China.

Speaking at the meeting as a host, Nazarbayev applauded his Uzbek counterpart Mirziyoyev for proposing the idea of holding the meeting.

"We can solve all our problems together. It is symbolic that our meeting is held on the eve of the Nauryz holiday that is common for all of us. Kazakhstan has always strived for close economic cooperation with its neighbours, especially with the countries of Central Asia, with whom we share common history, culture, understanding and vision of the world," said Nazarbayev, according to the Akorda press release.

"I am pleased to state that we have reached significant progress in political cooperation between our countries. We managed to establish dialogue between our foreign ministers. I personally was pleased to see your foreign ministers at the UN Security Council meeting in New York [in January]. It was a solid support for us. That's what we should always do – support each other," said Nazarbayev.

The Kazakh President also drew attention to Kazakhstan's trade relations with other Central Asian states.

"In 2017, Kazakhstan's exports to each of your countries grew 35 percent. We hold meetings of intergovernmental commissions. We are opening new border crossing points, simplifying passport control procedures, building new roads and bridges, settling border issues, developing transport infrastructure and launching new flights and high-speed trains," he said.

Kyrgyz President Jeenbekov also stressed during the meeting the importance of regional cooperation, saying, "today's meeting will serve to renew and intensify our friendly and good-neighbourly relations. It will give new impetus to our common aspirations aimed at greater rapprochement of our countries and peoples."

President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, who arrived in Astana one day earlier for an official visit, spoke about developing Central Asia's transit and transport potential, rational use of water and energy resources, cultural interaction and strengthening regional security.

"The growing challenges and threats to security, such as terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational organised crime and religious radicalism call on us to use all mechanisms of effective and prompt response. Solving these issues is a priority task for our interaction, because a change in the situation in one country can negatively affect the situation in the whole region," he said.

Mirziyoyev stressed the importance of developing trade, economic and interstate cooperation in ensuring regional security and stability.

"All our joint actions, projects and programmes will undoubtedly strengthen the spirit of mutual trust and respect and provide specific content to our close regional cooperation that is fully in line with our common interests and is wholly supported by our peoples," he said.

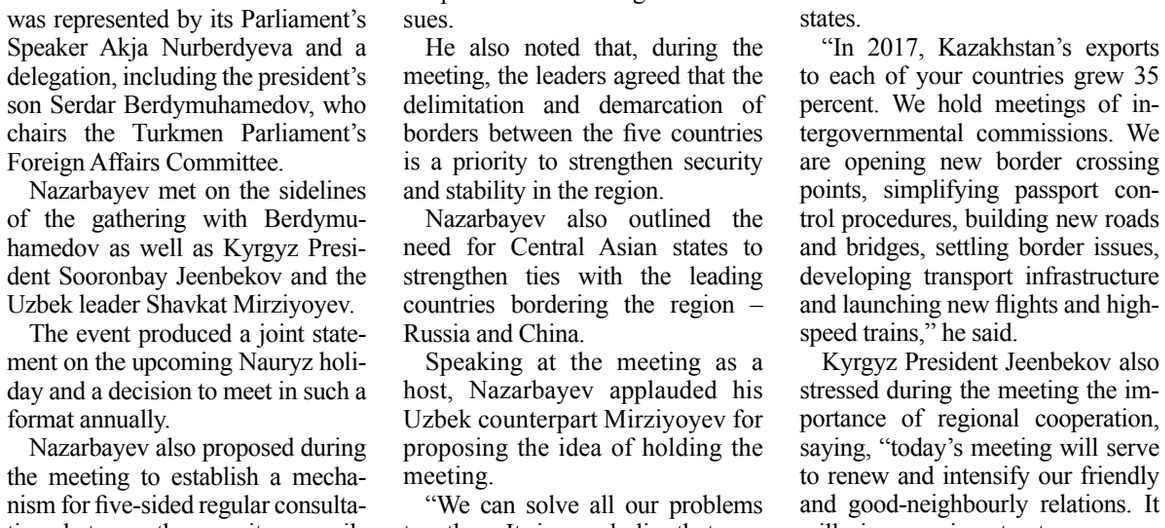
Nurberdyeva read out an address from Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov.

"Cooperation with the closest neighbours in Central Asia is one of the priority aspects of Turkmenistan's foreign policy strategy. Our country is committed to the widest cooperation with the countries of the region, while contributing in every way to the enhancement of an equal and trustful dialogue in all directions, in both bilateral and multilateral formats," read the address.

The meeting's joint statement was dedicated to the upcoming Nauryz holiday and read: "It is very symbolic that on the eve of this shared holiday we express our desire for regional cooperation, mutual support and joint solutions to pressing issues, in order to ensure the security, stability and sustainable development of our entire region."

Following the meeting, the four heads of state participated the official launch of the year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan, where President Nazarbayev awarded his Uzbek counterpart Mirziyoyev the Order of Dostyk (Friendship) of the 1st degree "for significant contribution to strengthening and developing political, economic and cultural relations between the two countries."

The event was held at the Astana Opera Theatre and included performances by leading Uzbek artists and an exhibition of folk and applied arts.



Construction to begin in July on gas pipeline serving Astana, Karaganda, regions

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – Construction on the Saryarka gas pipeline, intended to bring gas to Kazakhstan's capital and central and northern regions, will be launched in July, Kazakh Minister of Energy Kanat Bozumbayev told a March 13 government meeting. A cubic metre of gas will vary at a level of 47-50 tenge (US$0.1-0.2).

"We agreed to ensure the development and approval of design estimates and the allocation of land for the gas pipeline construction along the Kyzylorda-Zhezkazgan-Karaganda-Temirtau-Astana route. The Ministry of Energy; Ministry of Investments and Development; executive bodies of Kyzylorda, Karaganda and Akmola regions; and the KazTransGas company are responsible for the project's implementation," said Bozumbayev.

According to the ministry, the gas pipeline will be constructed in four stages. In the first stage, over the course of a year, a pipeline is to be built along the Kyzylorda-Zhezkazgan-Karaganda-Astana route with a length of 1,081 kilometres. The project costs 267.3 billion tenge (US$837 million). The second stage of the project will see the pipeline continue from Astana to Kokshetau; the third stage will extend it to Petropavlovsk. The fourth stage envisages the construction of Zhezkazgan and Temirtau compressor stations.

KazTransGas is developing the design and estimate documentation for approval. The gasification roadmap has already been approved.

"The working group consists of state bodies and organisations to work out issues related to the implementation of the first phase of this project, including the terms of financing, by raising funds from international financial institutions such as the Eurasian Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Eurasian Development Bank, the Development Bank of Kazakhstan and other organisations," he said.

On March 5, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, as part of his Five Social Initiatives project intended to improve the lives of citizens, set the task of increasing access to gas by building a gas pipeline from Karaozek in the Kyzylorda region to Astana.

The project implementation will have a socio-economic impact, as it will replace some considerable coal consumption. It is expected to save 36,100 tonnes of pollutant emissions, including sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, nitrogen oxide and solid particles, per year in Astana alone.

"The construction and the ceremony of welding the first joint of the gas pipeline are scheduled for early July this year," Bozumbayev said.

Regions taking part in the project should provide the design and construction of gas distribution networks to ensure gas supply to consumers by the time construction on the pipeline is completed in December 2019.

INSIDE

NATION

Government approves five social initiatives roadmap **A2**

Khorgos to introduce new luggage terminal to fully automate cargo transportation **A2**

ECONOMY&BUSINESS

National Bank presents consumer-friendly home loan programme **A4**

DBK continues investing in non-primary economy **A5**

EDITORIAL

Kazakhstan's digital transformation is central to nation's next stage of development **A6**

OPINIONS

BAHARUDIN, SULEIMEN: Celebrating 25th anniversary of friendly relations between Kazakhstan and Singapore **A7**

ALTANGEREL: Highlights of UNDP-Kazakhstan partnership in the past four years **A7**

NATION&CAPITAL

Central Asian artists bring postmodern life to ancient oral traditions in US staging of women warrior epic **B1**

Otrar settlement animated film presented under Ruhani Janghyru programme **B6**

US$ 1 = 319.26 KZT € 1 = 396.01 KZT ₽ 1 = 5.61 KZT

Government approves five social initiatives roadmap

By Meruyert Abugaliyeva

ASTANA – The Kazakh government approved the Five Social Initiatives roadmap March 13 previously announced by President Nursultan Nazarbayev. The measures, cutting across affordable housing, lower tax burden, accessibility of higher education, business loans and gas provisions are meant to enhance the well-being of the Kazakh people.

The roadmap, developed by the National Bank and various ministries, was presented by Minister of National Economy Timur Suleimenov.

The National Bank, primarily responsible for the first initiative to provide new opportunities for families to purchase accommodations, will establish a subsidiary national company as the sole operator of the programme. The company will purchase 25-year, 7-percent mortgages provided by second-tier banks to citizens with 20 percent initial payment.

"The key measures involve the approval of 7-20-25 programme and introduction of relevant amendments to normative legal acts for its execution. We also plan to boost Nurly Zher programme financing by 20 billion tenge (US$62.5 million) per year and make the changes to it in accordance with the terms of the 7-20-25 programme," said Suleimenov.

The first housing loan under the new mortgage scheme is expected to be issued in August.

The Ministry of National Economy will be responsible for the second initiative seeking to reduce the tax burden and increase income of low-paid workers.

"The plans are to make relevant amendments related to income tax to the tax code and investigate potential implementation of progressive income tax system by August. The changes will enter into force during the next tax period beginning Jan. 1, 2019," he added.

The Ministry of Education and Science will be accountable for the third initiative meant to increase the accessibility and quality of higher education and improve living conditions for students. Plans are underway to provide 20,000 state scholarships for technical majors during the next academic year, including 16,000 for undergraduate studies, 3,000 for master's degrees and 1,000 for PhDs.

By the end of May, regional governors will identify land slots near universities and colleges for dormitory construction. The objective is to build housing for 75,000 students by 2022.

The fourth initiative, increasing business loans, will be executed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. It will amend the productive employment and mass entrepreneurship programme for 2017-2022 by seeking a bigger objective of boosting microloans and stimulating entrepreneurship, especially in rural areas.

The Ministry of Energy will be responsible for the last initiative on further gas provisions, namely construction of a gas pipeline from Kyzylorda to the capital through Zhezkazgan and Karagandy.

"The construction scheme of the Saryarka pipeline and finance terms will be identified by June. There are plants to attract investment from international financing institutions, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and Eurasian Development Bank. Regional governors will earmark land lots for the pipeline in June and the project will be launched in June to terminate in February 2019," said Suleimenov.

Overall, the roadmap consists of 35 measures and involves amendments to three codes, 12 draft laws and six government decrees.

Government passes draft national anti-corruption report

By Zhazira Dyussembekova

ASTANA – The Kazakh government adopted a draft National Report on Combating Corruption presented March 13 by public service affairs and anti-corruption agency deputy chairman Sayan Akhmetzhanov. The document provides information about anti-corruption work in the country and an analysis of existing issues, as well as suggestions for further improvement of the anti-corruption policy.

"This year, Kazakhstan has gained 31 points in the Corruption Perceptions Index and ranked 122nd, improving in the index by two points and nine positions. Such results, in particular exceeding the threshold value of 30 points, allowed Kazakhstan to withdraw from the category of the most corrupted countries," he said.

"The analysis in the national report indicates that one of the key factors of success was the legislative support of the anti-corruption policy of the state and the creation of new institutions for the effective prevention of corruption, taking into account the best international practices and high world standards. The main emphasis in the fight against corruption is made to the system and implementation of effective measures to prevent corruption," he added.

The draft report has five chapters. The first sums up the results of the initial stage of the Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2015-2025 and talks about the key directions of the national model of combating corruption.

The second chapter analyses corruption trends in Kazakhstan based on official legal statistics and a sociological measurement of the level of its perception, as well as the results of research conducted by international organisations. The third describes the measures taken to eliminate corruption risks, as well as their social and economic effect.

Chapter four is devoted to civil society's involvement in the state policy of combating corruption, as well as forming public aversion to corruption and promoting an anti-corruption culture in society.

The final part explains the prospects to further develop anti-corruption policies and legislation, including implementing international anti-corruption standards, project management in a number of anti-corruption activities and the draft plan to execute the anti-corruption strategy for 2018-2020.

Akhmetzhanov also provided recommendations to state bodies and the quasi-public sector. Central and local executive bodies should ensure the multiplicative effect of disseminating the Astana-Adaldyk Alany project in all the country's bodies and regions. The authorised bodies should take into account the specifics of national legislation based on deep and balanced analysis, as well as consider the prospects and need for adopting the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Anti-Corruption Network recommendations within the fourth round of monitoring the Istanbul Plan of Action for combating corruption and prepare a coordinated action strategy, he added.

Samarkand, S. Kazakhstan entrepreneurs agree to establish joint ventures

By Aigerim Sadykova

ASTANA – Representatives of the Umar Company from Samarkand city in Uzbekistan recently visited the South Kazakhstan region and agreed to establish joint enterprises with businesses from that region.

The company delegation was led by president of the organisation and philantropist Umar Radjabov on the invitation of the head of Ikanbir firm, Donish Mannatov.

"I visited factories and construction sites, got acquainted with the charitable work of Umar Company last year in Samarkand. I was convinced that our joint business would bring great benefits. I invited Radjabov to start cooperating," Mannatov said, adding that tourism enterprises will also be needed on both sides.

The mausoleum of Khodja Ahmad Yassawi, revered in the Muslim world, built in Turkestan is popular among pilgrims from Uzbekistan as well as many tourists visiting the town. Thousands of pilgrims visit the graves of two of the three great biys (judges) of the Kazakh people buried in Uzbekistan.

The buildings around the mausoleum will be demolished to build national centres of the Turkic peoples. Each Turkic country will be able to construct a hotel, handicraft workshops, catering and other attractions here. Radjabov intends to build an Uzbek centre and invite well-known builders and masters if the Kazakh side will allocate a plot.

> The buildings around the mausoleum will be demolished to build national centres of the Turkic peoples. Each Turkic country will be able to construct a hotel, handicraft workshops, catering and other attractions here.

Samarkand manufacturers and Mannatov also negotiated to establish a joint cattle-breeding complex after visiting the Ikanbir firm. The firm is located 20 kilometres from Turkestan.

The Uzbek delegation visiting an agricultural operation was surprised by the large size of Edilbai sheep, which originated in northern Kazakhstan. The Samarkand entrepreneurs suggested crossing the Edilbai sheep with Gissar sheep from Uzbekistan.

Samarkand entrepreneurs also met with the Director of Nurosman Milling Combine Ibadulla Musabekov in Turkestan. Entrepreneurs agreed on a two-step plan of cooperation. First, flour and pasta will be delivered to Samarkand, then, depending on demand and sales, they will create a joint production venture.

The Nurosman Milling Combine produces higher, first and second-grade quality flour and will install an Italian line to produce pasta, added Musabekov.

South Kazakh businessman Batritdin Nishonkulov also said the South Kazakhstan region plans to organise events celebrating Uzbekistan.

"We will invite guests from Uzbekistan, among them will be writers, poets, artists. We are going to organise festivals and celebrate significant dates in the history of our countries," Nishonkulov said.

Nishonkulov also suggested Umar Company build houses in Shymkent and offered to establish contacts with local construction companies.

Nauryz unites Kazakhstan in celebration

Continued from Page A1

The next day, city celebrations included concerts and celebrations of national cuisine; displays, discussions and performances in yurts; master classes by famous artisans on Central Asian arts and crafts; and, of course, a variety of kids' activities. Artists and dance ensembles from Turkey, Uzbekistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan performed at a large concert, and the day ended with a fireworks show.

Almaty residents learned about the cuisines of Central Asia over the Nauryz holiday. Azerbaijani chefs taught pilaf in pita bread preparations and made baklava desserts. Turkish masters made burek bun with spinach and the sweet lukum. An Afghan chef showed the cooking process of a drink made of seven kinds of fruit, while an Indian chef prepared tandai, a refreshing milk drink with spices.

Guests visiting the Almaty Art Centre purchased national souvenirs, clothes with Kazakh ornaments and handmade goods from the Qazaq Oner (Kazakh art) Craft Centre at a market alley nearby.

Aktobe city was visited by a Nauryz-Keruen caravan that congratulated citizens and wished them great holidays. Carts harnessed with horses were decorated with carpets, ribbons and flowers. A car with an improvised stage headed the column while equestrians in traditional clothes accompanied the caravan. Young people sang the song "Zharapazan," which symbolises well-being and prosperity. Children performed the song on peoples' doorsteps in old days and received candies or coins from the residents.

Nauryz is celebrated across Central Asia and in Afghanistan and Iran.

Khorgos to introduce new luggage terminal to fully automate cargo transportation

By Dana Omirgazy

ASTANA – The Khorgos cross-border trade centre will offer improved services, enhanced safety and automated baggage handling to provide better conditions for tourists and avoid transporting cargo through the passenger bus system.

Each tourist may take only one bag on the bus at the Kazakh-Chinese border; the rest of the cargo is delivered through KazPost points, according to the centre's press service.

"Unsatisfied with the imposed restrictions, certain unscrupulous entrepreneurs try to destabilise the situation, carrying cargo of 50 kilogrammes several times a day. They literally storm buses, trying to transport cargo in large quantities. Employees of the centre prevent this practice and intend to restore order to the passengers and baggage transportation system," said the report.

The Kazakh part of the centre currently has a sufficient number of buses for its passengers. Ten more vehicles were purchased in February and a fleet of 50 new buses will begin operation by the summer. Cargo, however, will not be permitted on passenger buses.

At the same time, work is continuing to arrange adequate transportation for tourists and their baggage.



"To provide quality service for luggage transportation, the centre is improving the system for passing goods through luggage terminals, where their registration will take place. There are plans to open three additional baggage drop-off points on the Chinese territory of the centre. Baggage will be transported by truck separately from the passenger and will be brought to the baggage claim area outside the customs control line. Further work on baggage transportation provides for differentiation of oversized cargo, commercial and tourist. For this, new trucks have been purchased," reported the press service.

Plans are underway to build a new luggage terminal by the end of the year. With its completion, transporting goods, customs control and receiving baggage at the centre's exit will be fully automated.

Khorgos visitors reached 1.134 million in 2017, growing 1.7 times from the 671,000 a year earlier, according to the press service.

"In 2016, no more than 1,800 people entered Khorgos from the Kazakh side on a daily basis. Last year, this number exceeded 3,000 tourists per day. In January, almost 80,000 people visited the centre," it added.

NATIONAL NEWS IN BRIEF

South Kazakhstan region's 24,900 farms will merge into 102 cooperatives this year, reported the regional akimat's press service. The cooperatives anticipate opening 3,173 small feeding grounds, 731 family dairy farms, 15 small poultry farms and seven fish farms producing 2,700 tonnes of meat, 34,200 tonnes of milk, 6,000 tonnes of fruit and 5,000 tonnes of vegetables. "Forty-nine investment projects worth 54 billion tenge (US$168.48 million) will get financing this year. The export of food products will amount to $350 million. The agricultural crops will increase by 15,000 hectares and reach 833,000 hectares according to the Damu programme," said regional agriculture department head Serik Turbekov. The change will also include intensive gardening introduced on 800 hectares, 200 additional hectares of greenhouses and 13,800 hectares of irrigated land.

Mechanical activities were completed as part of the second modernisation stage at Shymkent oil refinery, according to the enterprise press service. Thirty local companies were involved in the project and 445 jobs were created to operate the new plants. "The construction of RFCC catalytic cracking facilities, Prime G+ gasoline hydrotreating, desulphurisation of saturated and Merox unsaturated gases, Claus sulphur production and PSA-2 hydrogen purification were completed. Now, the commissioning work starts on the new installations," said the March 20 report. The first phase was completed in June 2017 and the entire project, with a refining capacity of up to six million tonnes per year and increased processing depth, should be finished by Sept. 30.

The Kyzyl gold deposit in the East Kazakhstan region will be operating at full capacity next year, reported Kazinform March 20. "The deposit, with a capacity of two million tonnes of ore per year, is being developed with the use of the latest technologies at the Bakyrchik mining and processing enterprise. The project will be put into operation in 2019," said regional entrepreneurship, industrial and innovative development department deputy head Olga Grigoryeva. Kyzyl is a large deposit of 7.3 million ounces of gold ore reserves with an average grade of 7.7 grams per tonne. Its full production capacity is more than 300,000 ounces of gold per year and extraction will be conducted in the first 10 years.

Beginning May 31, SCAT Airlines will start Monday and Tuesday flights from Tomsk (Russia) to Astana aboard a CRJ200. Tickets are already on sale. "The much-anticipated flight to Astana will significantly shorten time for students from Kazakhstan on the way home and make business and tourist trips more convenient," said Tomsk Airport head Roman Frolenko. The schedule also allows passengers to book connecting flights to other Kazakh cities.

Seven agricultural pilot projects are being implemented in the Kostanai region under the digitisation road map, including introducing precision farming elements, smart control systems and smart meat and dairy farms. "We will determine the specific technologies and reveal the economic effect as part of these projects. The agro-technological hub will be created to ensure the transfer of advanced technologies and its adaptation to local conditions with the support of the Asian Development Bank. Farmers will take part in trainings on digital technologies," said regional deputy akim (governor) Meirzhan Myrzaliyev.

A children's cancer and hematology centre will open at the regional hospital in Aktobe, reported Zakon.kz. "This centre is designed to identify the disease at an early stage and provide all the necessary medical assistance. Every year, 30-35 children in the region are diagnosed with primary cases of the disease. Approximately 140 children are diagnosed with cancer and hematological disease each year. Now, we will be able to provide all the necessary medical assistance," said regional health care department head Asset Kaliyev. The centre will be built under a public-private partnership at a cost of 4.2 billion tenge (US$13 million).

EURASIA&WORLD

EXTERNAL NEWS IN BRIEF

Kazakh Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov met with European Union (EU) delegation to Kazakhstan head Traian Hristea March 15 to discuss developing relationship in light of the 16th Kazakhstan-EU Cooperation Council held in Brussels on Feb. 26. They agreed on the need to create a roadmap to execute the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between Kazakhstan and the EU. Attention was also paid to developing transport and logistics, cooperation advances between Central Asian states, progress in promoting sustainable development in Afghanistan and institutional reforms in Kazakhstan. Hristea spoke about progress in designing a new EU Strategy for Central Asia, which should be adopted in the second half of 2019. The parties also discussed cooperation in executing President Nursultan Nazarbayev's Five Social Initiatives, which are fully compatible with the main directions of cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU.

Majilis (lower house of Parliament) Chair Nurlan Nigmatulin met with Czech Parliament Chamber of Deputies Chair Radek Vondracek during his official visit to the Czech Republic on March 14-15. Nigmatulin noted strengthening cooperation with the country is one of the main priorities of Kazakhstan's foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe. He also valued Kazakhstan's inclusion on the Czech list of its 12 main trade partners, especially in machinery manufacturing, agriculture, technology and innovation. Vondracek noted the international centre of green technologies and investment projects and IT start-up hub on the expo grounds might be a platform for diversifying Kazakh-Czech cooperation. He also commended Kazakhstan's role on the UN Security Council, noting the countries' common interests in maintaining stability and security.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev congratulated Vladimir Putin March 18 on his win in the Russian presidential election. Nazarbayev noted such an impressive victory is a sign of appreciation for Putin's significant contribution to the well-being of the people of the Russian Federation and promoting its national interests. He also emphasised Kazakhstan seeks to strengthen ties with Russia in bilateral cooperation and within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Majilis (lower house of Parliament) Chair Nurlan Nigmatulin and South Korean National Assembly Speaker Chung Sye-kyun signed the first memorandum of cooperation between the parliaments during the latter's visit to Astana in mid-March. The agreement will serve as the basis for sharing legislative experience. Noting South Korea's technological advances, Nigmatulin expressed interest in understanding its method to implement innovative technologies in logistics, healthcare and education and legislative support for digital transformations. Chung commended Kazakhstan's initiatives in nuclear disarmament and settling the conflict on the Korean peninsula, adding the Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy offers great opportunities for the country.

Representatives of Kazakhstan, Russia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), meeting March 21 at the Baikonur Cosmodrome, agreed to form a working group in April to further cooperate in space activities and negotiate joint projects regarding the cosmodrome. Earlier, the UAE expressed interest in investment projects related to space activities, specifically the Kazakhstan–Russia Baiterek project expected to be launched by 2025. Kazakh Minister of Defence and Aerospace Industry Beibut Atamkulov, Roskosmos General Director Igor Komarov and UAE Minister of Higher Education and Space Agency Chair Ahmad Belhul Al-Falasi signed a protocol on expanding cooperation.

Kazakh President, UAE Crown Prince discuss bilateral ties, oversee multiple agreements

By Elya Altynsarina

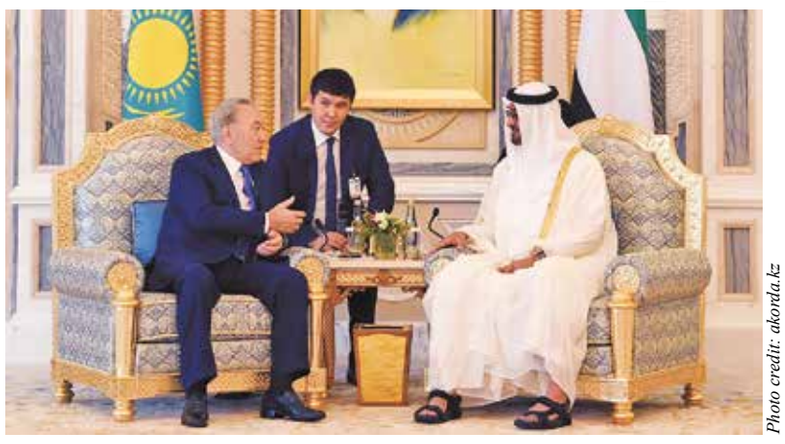


Photo credit: akorda.kz

ASTANA – Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev paid an official visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) March 24, meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and UAE Armed Forces Deputy Supreme Commander Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

According to the Akorda press service, the expanded meeting explored cooperation in investment protection, space technology, hydraulic power, petrochemicals, agriculture and digitisation, as well as tourism and trade. The latest agreement on mutual visa-free travel between the countries, which entered into force March 10, is designed to impact relations and implement perspective deals.

The two leaders also emphasised the importance of enhancing efforts for regional and global peace and security by promoting dialogue and peaceful cooperation.

Nazarbayev hailed the UAE's growth and achievements, noting how the efforts of its leadership ensured the country's leading position in global development. He also paid tribute to the nation's late founding father Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, whose 100th anniversary will be celebrated this year.

Underlining the positive dynamics of Kazakh-UAE cooperation and the importance of bringing it to new heights, Nazarbayev expressed confidence the friendly ties between the people of the two countries will continue to deepen.

"In 2017 alone, thanks to the implementation of bilateral agreements trade has doubled from $374 million to $643 million and [it has grown] six times since 2015," he added.

The Crown Prince noted UAE President Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan is eager to boost cooperation and communication based on a policy of mutual respect, confidence and interest. He added he is prepared to expand cooperation in multiple fields.

The visit included signing several agreements, mostly in investments and economy. Kazakh Minister of Investment and Development Zhenis Kassymbek and UAE Minister of State for Financial Affairs Obiad Humaid Al Tayer inked an Agreement between the two governments on the promotion and mutual protection of investments.

A framework agreement on the basic principles for the acquisition of a 49-percent stake in the JSC "Aktau Sea Port" Special Economic Zone, and a framework agreement on the basic principles of DP World's participation in the capital of the JSC "Khorgos-Eastern Gate" Special Economic Zone Management Company were also signed.

The two documents, inked by Kazakhstan Temir Zholy President Kanat Alpysbayev, Mangistau Region Governor Yeraly Tugzhanov and DP World chairperson and CEO Sultan Ahmad Bin Sulayem, represent a major development in the Kazakh transit and logistics markets. DP World, a global operator for marine and inland terminals, maritime services, logistics and technology-driven trade services, will acquire, govern and manage a share of the two SEZs located on the western and eastern borders of Kazakhstan.

For the past four years, DP World has been providing services to the country's main terminal on the Caspian Sea at Aktau and at Khorgos, one of the main transit points of Eurasia, strategically located on the Kazakh-Chinese border.

The other agreements, which provide for setting up a polyethylene plant in Kazakhstan, constructing an integrated gas chemical complex and the repurchase/acquisition of shares of the polypropylene plant, both in the Atyrau Region, were signed by Kazakh Energy Minister Kanat Bozumbayev and UAE Minister of Energy and Industry Suhail Bin Mohammad Faraj Al Mazroui.

Considering that Kazakhstan hosted EXPO 2017 and the upcoming World EXPO 2020 is in Dubai,Kazakh2020 pavilion commissioner Alen Chaizhunusov signed an agreement with his UAE counterparts on his country's participation in the event.

Nazarbayev ended his visit by inviting the Crown Prince to Kazakhstan.

Nazarbayev recognises Tajik President's efforts to deepen bilateral relations during meeting in Astana

By Almasbek Zhumadilov

ASTANA – President Nursultan Nazarbayev awarded Tajik President Emomali Rahmon during a March 14 meeting in Astana the Order of "Parasat" for achievements in deepening Kazakh-Tajik relations.

"Over all these years, thanks to your leadership, we have built relations of great trust, cooperation and friendship. We have never had unresolved issues. We have always supported each other, including in the international arena," said Nazarbayev, who also announced the renaming of a street in Astana in honour of Tajik poet and philosopher Rudaki.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations, which Nazarbayev said he believes is on the verge of entering a more advanced stage.

"We are ready to discuss with you any questions and solve them. Moreover, the heads of neighbouring states are coming. Tomorrow, we will have the opportunity to meet each other again. I know that this year you will have a conference on water resources management. Kazakhstan supports this initiative," said Nazarbayev.

Rahmon thanked the Kazakh President for the award, invited the Kazakh leader to Tajikistan and praised Nazarbayev's leadership.

"With every visit to Kazakhstan, I see how quickly the image of its capital Astana is changing. These achievements, first of all, are the results of your wise and farsighted policy," said the President of Tajikistan.

Tajikistan also often supports Kazakh foreign policies, for example, supporting Kazakhstan's non-permanent membership on the UN Security Council and its accession to the World Trade Organisation, as well as initiatives to establish the Islamic Organisation for Food Security (IOFS) and host EXPO 2017 in Astana.

Rahmon also said bilateral trade and economic relations are developing rapidly and that Tajikistan would like to expand those relations..

"Kazakhstan is the second among Tajikistan's leading economic partners in terms of trade turnover. We are interested in developing comprehensive and strategic relations between our countries," added President Rahmon.

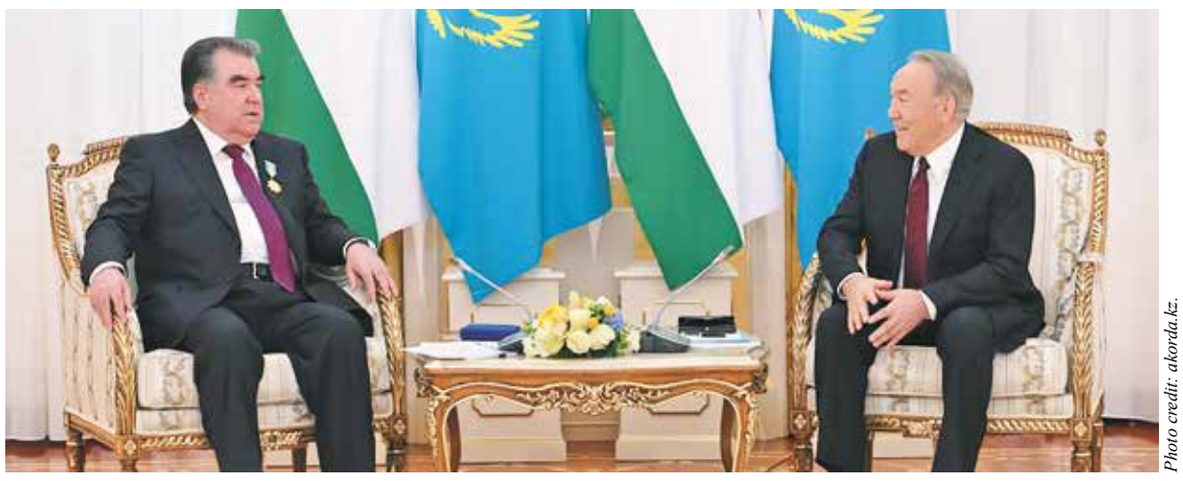


Photo credit: akorda.kz.

Bilateral trade totalled $776 million in 2017, a 31.5 percent increase over 2016. Both leaders expressed confidence during the meeting that bilateral trade can reach $1 billion by increasing business contacts, creating a business council and, possibly, by launching direct Astana-Dushanbe airline flights.

The two leaders also signed a joint statement and three agreements related to returning citizens, visitors' stays in each country and migration.

The two countries' ministries of foreign affairs also signed a cooperation programme for 2018-2019, while seven memorandums of understanding concerning such issues as social affairs, labour and employment, public service and antimonopoly policy were signed. The bilateral legal framework encompasses more than 80 treaties and agreements.

Value of Astana Process recognised during international ministerial meeting on Syria

By Almasbek Zhumadilov

ASTANA – The Kazakh capital hosted a March 16 trilateral ministerial meeting of the guarantor states within the framework of the Astana Process on Syria, which was attended by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.

In his opening remarks, Kazakh Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov noted the negotiations to help end the violence in Syria, that started in Astana in January 2017 with the full support of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, provided great opportunities for the restoration of a peaceful life to Syria.

"We must remember that the Astana Process is not a separate endeavour to the UN brokered talks but is fully intended to integrate with the Geneva meetings. Any agreement reached in Astana undeniably complements the Geneva process and gives a positive impetus to the political settlement of the Syrian conflict," said Abdrakhmanov.

"Despite the difficulties, the Astana Process has proved its effectiveness as a platform where all parties to the conflict can express their views and, more importantly, agree on concrete steps. Thanks to the established four de-escalation zones and the ceasefire monitoring mechanism, it has been possible to reduce the violence level in the country and provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population of Syria," Abdrakhmanov said.

"Kazakhstan calls on all actors that support an early settlement of the Syrian conflict, including the government of Syria, representatives of the armed opposition, guarantor states, as well as other countries that can exercise influence, to fully comply with the ceasefire regime," the Kazakh foreign minister added.

The Kazakh top diplomat stressed the agreements, reached within the Astana Process, should not remain on paper and called on all interested parties to observe UN Security Council Resolution 2401 and the ceasefire regime to avoid senseless bloodshed, unfortunately observed, for example, in Eastern Ghouta.

"It is possible to achieve a final settlement of the Syrian crisis only through the direct and inclusive dialogue between the parties. We believe that this significant gathering will help to galvanise and positively contribute to the Geneva process, while respecting the interests and rights of the various ethnic and communal groups of the Syrian population. We note that the conference agreed on a statement, setting out 12 principles underlying the constitution, including a commitment that the security services would be democratically accountable. We fully support the creation of a constitutional committee that could lay the foundations for a Congress," the minister concluded.

Speaking at the plenary session, Russia's Lavrov said the Astana format, created a year ago by Russia, Iran and Turkey, proved its relevance. "With the start of the Astana process, Astana has become an important platform, where decisions are made on Syrian settlement – one of the most pressing issues on the international agenda. When the name of the capital of Kazakhstan sounds in the media, millions of Syrians look with hope towards Astana," Lavrov stressed.

During the meeting, the foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey exchanged views on the results achieved last year since the Astana Process launch and outlined steps to resolve the situation in Syria. Following the meeting, the ministers have issued a joint statement. Among other things, the statement announced the upcoming summit meeting of the three guarantor states in Istanbul on April 4.

> "It is possible to achieve a final settlement of the Syrian crisis only through the direct and inclusive dialogue between the parties."



Photo credit: mfa.kz

On the eve of the ministerial talks, Astana also hosted the first meeting of the Working Group on the Exchange of Detainees, the Transfer of the Bodies of the Dead and the Search for the Missing, which was established following the results of the eighth round of the Astana Process negotiations.

On the sidelines of the meeting, Abdrakhmanov held bilateral meetings with the foreign ministers of Iran and Turkey, where the current issues of Kazakh-Iranian and Kazakh-Turkish relations were discussed.

The top diplomats of Iran, Russia and Turkey were also received by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

ECONOMY

AIFC to host World Islamic Economic Forum in July

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – The Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC) and World Islamic Economic Forum Foundation recently signed an agreement to hold World Islamic Economic Forum (WIEF) in Astana on July 4. The forum will attract more attention to the AIFC and promote it as a regional hub of Islamic finance.

The annual forum was founded by WIEF Foundation in 2006 with the support of the Malaysian government. WIEF is a business platform showcasing business opportunities in the Muslim world. The forum aims to promote cooperation between Muslim business people, companies and governments in member states of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

According to the 2017 Islamic Finance Development Report provided by Thomson Reuters, the Islamic finance industry will continue to develop. Experts believe the industry will reach $3.8 trillion by 2022 from $2.2 trillion at the end of 2016. AIFC management considers Islamic finance one of the key pillars of activities and a potential source of foreign investments in Kazakhstan.

The hosting of the 14th WIEF in Astana will assist the establishment of AIFC as a regional hub of Islamic finance for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Western and Central Asian countries and will ensure the promotion of AIFC activities in the OIC countries' business community, the organisers believe. The 14th WIEF expects to attract more than 1,000 attendees from all over the world.

After the agreement, the AIFC delegation visited the Republic of Malta to establish contacts and explore the local experience in the development of the financial services market. Malta is one of the fastest-growing financial centres in the European Union with flexible regulatory and tax regimes.

The delegation negotiated with Malta government representatives, top managers of the single regulator for financial services activities Malta Financial Services Authority, FinanceMalta, Malta Funds Industry Association and Malta Stock Exchange. Corresponding negotiations were held with the representatives of Malta state bodies, including Malta Residency Visa Agency and leading law firms Henley & Partners and Chetcuti Cauchi Advocates. Following the meetings, the parties agreed to exchange experience, jointly organise seminars, round tables and events.

IT services volume grew 14 percent in 2017

Staff Report

ASTANA – Last year the volume of IT services in Kazakhstan grew 14 percent, at the same time a sharp increase in demand for IT services did not lead to specialists' wages rising, reported energyprom.kz.

In 2017, the volume of computer programming services, as well as consulting and other similar services in the sector, amounted to more than 160 billion tenge (US$502.4 million), which is 14.2 percent more than a year earlier.

More than 86 percent of IT services were provided in the cities of Almaty (51.7 percent) in the amount of 83 billion tenge (US$260.6 million), showing a 15 percent increase compared to 2016, and Astana (34.6 percent) in the amount of 55.6 billion tenge (US$174.5 million), which is 25.7 percent more than in the previous year.

The Digital Kazakhstan programme was approved in December. It was developed on behalf of the President of Kazakhstan on the basis of the address "The Third Modernisation of Kazakhstan: Global Competitiveness." The programme provides large-scale digitisation in various sectors of the economy and daily lives of citizens.

The largest volume of services in the sector was in software development (48.2 percent) and IT consulting services (16.9 percent).

A total of 10.7 percent of the total volume of services was provided to the population, which is up from 7 percent.

It is noteworthy that with the growth of services at once by more than 14 percent, salaries in the IT sector increased by only three percent per year. Taking into account inflation, their purchasing power declined 4 percent year-on-year.

However, programmers, coders and other IT specialists still receive more than double the average salary in Kazakhstan – 308,900 tenge (US$970), while the average for all industries in January-December of 2017 was 149,700 tenge (US$470).

National Bank presents consumer-friendly home loan programme

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – The Kazakh National Bank recently presented the 7-20-25 mortgage programme, which will provide soft conditions for every citizen with official income to purchase housing. The plan was initiated by President Nursultan Nazarbayev to provide sufficiently lower 7-percent interest rates (compared to the average 14-16 percent mortgage loans offered by private banks) with a 20-percent down payment and 25-year loan.

The programme, to be managed by a bank subsidiary, will have four main stages. The first phase includes a mechanism to secure mortgage loans by maximising the opportunities of banks and the stock market, noted National Bank Chairman Daniyar Akishev.

"In the near future, National Bank will create a 100-percent owned subsidiary which will manage the loan programme. The capital of the new company will be formed at the expense of National Bank. The capital will be necessary to raise funds from the financial market under market conditions for repurchase of new mortgage loans granted by banks under the 7-20-25 formula. This is the securitisation mechanism," he said.

The second stage includes company recognition by a financial agency to effectively implement the programme.

"This means the same taxation as for government securities will be used for the company's bonds. The National Bank will submit necessary legislative amendments to the government in March," he added.

The third phase will provide new opportunities to purchase real estate with preferential terms.

"The financial conditions of the programme require the solvency of future borrowers. Any Kazakh citizen who has an official income can take part in it. The criteria are now being worked out with banks. For example, if the cost of housing is seven million tenge (US$21,700), a monthly payment will not be more than 50,000 tenge (US$155), which is generally acceptable for most working people of the country," said Akishev.

The fourth stage indicates preferential mortgage loans must be fully secured and absolutely refundable.

"It will be necessary to revise certain norms introduced in recent years which made mortgage lending unattractive. The National Bank will also forward the necessary legislative amendments to the government for consideration," he said.

Akishev added the parameters are preliminary and will continue to be discussed with interested state bodies and banks.

"It is very important to take into account the opinion and interests of local executive bodies concerning increasing the availability of housing in the regions. Under these conditions, the measures and implementation deadlines, which are outlined in the roadmap for the implementation of the Five social initiatives of the Kazakhstan President, are supported by us and provide timely implementation of legislative amendments," he said.

First Kazakh ammunitions plant to launch this year

By Zhazira Dyussembekova

ASTANA – Officials have indicated Kazakhstan's first ammunitions plant will start delivering cartridges to the Kazakh Armed Forces this year. The project was under discussion for several years and although work was expected to have finished by the end of 2017, it was slightly delayed.

Kaztechnology, a subordinate organisation of the Kazakh Ministry of Defence and Aerospace Industry, is responsible for the plant's construction and launch.

"As for the cartridge factory, which is being built in the city of Karaganda, it should be noted that the responsible task was set by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief and the President of Kazakhstan. The launch of a cartridge plant for the needs of the army and the country is just as important as the economic and social effect that is expected from the implementation of this project," said Kaztechnology board chair Talgatbek Aitkuzhinov, according to inform.kz.

Construction of the facility, in the Karaganda region's Saryarka Special Economic Zone, is being completed by Steel Manufacturing in accordance with the approved schedule, he added.

The plant is designed for a production capacity of 30 million ammunition in a one-shift operation. The most popular cartridges – 5.45 x 39 mm, 7.62 x 54 mm, 9 x 18 mm and 9 x 19 mm, will be manufactured.

"From the point of view of the development of the region's economy, the launch of the plant will certainly become an impetus to the development of other industries. The social effect will also be positive, as new jobs will be created for our citizens. Also, the new cartridge plant will give an opportunity to be independent from the supplier countries, will be able to meet the needs of the domestic market and export its products to foreign markets," said Aitkuzhinov.

Issues arose last year because the ground water seriously affected the design of the main building and its foundation. Plant head Dauren Arynov later said the problem was fixed and work was proceeding according to schedule.

The project cost is more than 20 billion tenge (US$61.8 million). The factory, to be furnished with advanced equipment supplied by Canadian company Waterbury Farrel, is expected to provide nearly 160 new jobs.

Locally-made electric cars to be available this year

By Zhazira Dyussembekova

ASTANA – The Kostanai car plant has started serial assembly of electric cars and customers will be able to buy the Chinese JAC iEV7S in the second half of this year, reported kapital.kz. The price is expected to start at 7.5 million tenge (US$23,300).

SaryarkaAvtoProm plans to assemble more than 1,000 cars in three years. The company anticipates electric cars will be purchased for private and taxi service use.

Twenty-seven electric cars, the EV4, EV5, EV6S, EV6E and EV7 models, have been assembled at the facility in the last two years. Potential consumers and experts have tested them and the JAC iEV6S crossover has proven to be the best, according to information provided by the Allure Group press service. SaryarkaAvtoProm is a company shareholder.

"Of the five tested models, it best fits Kazakhstan's climatic and landscape conditions. In October 2017, this model on the conveyors was replaced by the improved JAC iEV7S. This car uses the most advanced liquid cooling/heating system in its battery. It also meets the requirements of the technical regulations of the European Union and the Customs Union, which allows it to be exported," read the statement.

An ordinary 220V outlet can charge the vehicle for seven-eight hours, while a special station can finish the job in an hour and a-half. The power reserve provides enough charge to drive 280 kilometres and the manufacturer notes "if you move no faster than 60 kilometres per hour, you can drive up to 350 kilometres." The mini-crossover's maximum speed is 130 kilometres per hour and it can operate in temperatures as low as minus 27 degrees Celsius.

The country's related infrastructure is still poorly developed and the Allure Group admits it will be difficult to find customers in the regions in the coming years. As a result, the company is more focused on residents of the capital and Almaty. The necessary charging stations are expected to emerge in, as well as between, the cities.

Kazakh residents bought 19 electric cars last year from Chevrolet, Renault, Tesla and Toyota, according to the Allure Group. Approximately 200 such vehicles are presently operating in the country.

The Allure Group aims to lower the cost of the vehicles for the ultimate consumer and customers will soon be able to get a 4-percent per annum preferred car loan. The company also expects to provide benefits for electric cars owners in the form of a special lane and free parking.

The JAC models are not the first electric cars made in Kazakhstan. The KIA Soul EV was released in 2014 at the AziaAvto plant in Ust-Kamenogorsk and the Lada Vesta EV assembled in the same city was presented in June 2017. Both models were in pilot mode without entering serial production.

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Editor-in-Chief
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ECONOMY NEWS IN BRIEF

The Khorgos-Eastern Gate Special Economic Zone (SEZ), on the border between Kazakhstan and China, and the Incheon Free Economic Zone (IFEZ) in South Korea have agreed to strengthen cooperation, reported 24.kz. The Kazakh Embassy in Seoul met with large South Korean corporations and visited IFEZ. The South Koreans expressed interest in Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol economic policy and China's Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the New Silk Road extension to the Busan seaport. IFEZ, founded 15 years ago, has established a large experimental platform using advanced technology to construct Songdo smart city, a progressive clinic and the highest tower and longest bridge in the country.

Arab businesspersons are willing to invest in building and housing construction in Aktau, said 24.kz. The new projects are expected to introduce high technology in housing and communal services, preserve heat and produce electricity independently and provide local residents with new jobs. Foreign investors plan to launch the first phase of a 35-storey multifunctional campus, which will combine a residential complex and business centres. "There are investors who are ready to cooperate with us. Residential facilities, including hotels and apartment houses, will be sold on a commercial basis to the residents of our city," said regional Chamber of Entrepreneurs Director Nurbek Karasayev.

Taraz students presented an eco-friendly house with solar power, according to kazakh-tv.kz The young inventors made the house, which is adapted for desert, mountainous and arid regions, with no communication. The smart house works with renewables, including a solar battery, wind generator and installation to collect rainwater, and does not harm the environment, according to the developers. "During winter there is not enough solar energy, so the wind generator will supplement the solar power and the collected rainwater is used for secondary purposes, not for drinking, but for washing. There is a triple-glazed window on the south side, which is filled with the inert gas krypton, which lets the warmth in and insulates it. Thus, the room is heated naturally," said student Nurtileu Amankeldy.

Six digital farms collecting the necessary data to improve soil quality will start operating in Kazakhstan this year, said Zerde national holding head Ruslan Yensebayev, reported 24.kz. Precise farming technology (the efficient use of data including collection, analysis and adopting correct management decisions) will be introduced in several farms and two farms will be designed for dairy, meat and crop production, he added. "Every square metre of land is unique and contains huge and varied information: soil composition, humidity and other important information about the climate," said Yensebayev.

Kazakhstan sent 35.7 billion tenge (US$112.09 million) in remittances abroad in January, almost 1.5 times more than the same month last year, said ranking.kz. More than 40 percent of all transactions (14.5 billion tenge (US$45.53 million)) were made from Kazakhstan to Russia, a 29.6-percent increase compared to 2017. Russia's share in January 2017 was 46.6 percent. China is second with 5.3 billion tenge (US$16.64 million) in transactions, 5.4 times more than the previous January and a share increase from 4.1 percent to 14.8 percent. Kyrgyzstan's share increased from 7.1 to 10.9 percent, reaching 3.9 billion tenge (US$12.24 million).

Kazakhstan's GDP in January-February grew 4 percent, said Minister of National Economy Timur Suleimenov, reported kazakh-tv.kz. He believes the positive dynamics were caused by higher rates in manufacturing and services and increased investments. Fixed capital investments increased 54.5 percent. The growth was accelerated by modernising and reconstructing the Shymkent Oil Refinery and building the third generation plant and implementing project expansions at the Tengiz oil field. Investments have grown significantly in construction, industry and trade and agricultural growth composed 3.3 percent due to improved livestock breeding.

BUSINESS

BUSINESS NEWS IN BRIEF

The planned Meruyert theme park project has been presented to the Astana town-planning council. A group of private of local and European investors intends to build it, according to Yelorda Info. They have already purchased 180 hectares of land in the area of the Korgalzhyn highway. The park is planned to be about 26,000 square metres and will cost about $40 million to build. The volume of investments in the construction of the park will be $180-200 million, reads the source. The project is being managed by Mega Construction in a consortium with Renovation Construction.

The Yandex Taxi app has started working in Taldykorgan, Ekibastuz, Temirtau and Zhezkazgan, according to the company's press service. It cooperates only with taxi companies and dispatch services. When distributing orders, the application takes into account drivers' ratings, based on user ratings and statistics of completed trips. In each of the cities, more than 100 cars from several partner taxi companies are connected to the service. In Kazakhstan, the service appeared in July 2016. Since then, Yandex Taxi has launched in 20 more Kazakh cities, including all regional centres.

Social and entrepreneurial corporation Yertis has become the new owner of the Ust-Kamenogorsk tram fleet after bidding to purchase the property complex belonging to the local transport company that was put up for sale because of debts to Bank Centre Credit, according to inform.kz. Yertis Chair Anton Kramarenko confirmed that the corporation had won the trams and property at auction. The purchase price was about 444 million tenge (US$1.4 million), which is lower than the initial price announced at the beginning of the auction.

A new cement plant is expected to be launched in June in the city of Rudny in the Kostanai region. Its start had been postponed since 2016, according to inform.kz, but now, general manager of the plant Artyom Maklasov says that the enterprise is almost ready. "We have actually two unfinished objects. That is, today 98 percent of the construction is completed. … Construction of the railway and arrangement for the delivery of raw materials are planned to be completed by June," said Maklasov. According to him, the plant will produce sulphate-resistant cement of grade 400, which is the most popular one, as well as 500, both with and without additives.

Papa John's, the famous American pizza company, plans to enter the Kazakh market in the second quarter of 2018 by launching a pizzeria in Almaty, according to kapital.kz. In the next 18 months the company plans to focus on developing the chain in Almaty, and only after that enter other regions of Kazakhstan. "We plan to open the first pizzeria in the city centre, where traffic of visitors can reach 500 people daily. We are considering all possible options – a residential building, an office building and the first floors of shopping centres with a separate entrance. Delivery is a priority for the development of our pizzeria network until 2022, so we do not need to open restaurants in food courts of shopping centres," said Executive Director of Papa John's in Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Eastern Europe Mikhail Koltsov.

In 2017, the revenue of KazZinc was $3.07 billion, according to company's annual report. Revenue grew 18 percent in annual terms. In 2016, the mining company's revenue reached $2.6 billion. The financial growth of KazZinc was supported by record prices for metallurgical products, particularly for zinc. The profitability of the company grew along with revenue. Earnings before interest and taxes showed growth of almost 43 percent over the two years, from $539 million in 2016 to $769 million in 2017. KazZinc continues to increase capital expenditures in order to improve its raw materials base. In 2017, they grew by 15 percent, or $20 million, to $173 million, a third of which ($52 million) was aimed at expanding production.

DBK continues investing in non-primary economy

By Meruyert Abugaliyeva

ASTANA – The Development Bank of Kazakhstan (DBK), a subsidiary of Baiterek National Holding, plans to invest 405 billion tenge (US$1.3 billion) into projects in 2018 related to the manufacturing industry and industry infrastructure, according to a March 5 press conference dedicated to the bank's past year performance.

"This year, we expect that 11 projects will be put into operation, creating around 2,700 workplaces. The bank will also approve funding for 15 more projects for 332 billion tenge (US$1 billion)," said DBK Chairman of the Board Bolat Zhamishev.

Last year, the bank funded nine projects worth 489.5 billion tenge (US$1.53 billion) and four pre-export operations for 20.4 billion tenge (US$63.9 million). DBK approved a total of 14 loan applications for 526.1 billion tenge (US$1.65 billion).

The ventures included greenfield projects, entities built from scratch which received long-term funding, such as the Zhairem polymetallic ore mining and processing plant with a capacity of five million tonnes, 110 and 220-voltage power transformer plants in the South Kazakhstan region and a wind farm near Astana.

DBK also financed 11 projects which either began operation or were modernised, including the Aktogai mining and processing plant, updating the Pavlodar oil refinery, ensuring gas provisions to settlements in the Aktobe and Kyzylorda regions and renovating the gas distribution system in the South Kazakhstan region.

Last year was a favourable one for the bank, as it generated a profit of 4.8 billion tenge (US$14.9 million), although its strategy is aimed at break-even. Bank assets increased by 5 percent to 2.5 trillion tenge (US$7.83 billion) compared to 2016 and DBK's loan portfolio was approximately 1.6 trillion tenge (US$5 billion), with 85 percent loaned to projects in the manufacturing industry.

This year, DBK plans to increase its proportion of non-state sources in loan structure to a minimum of 55 percent. By comparison, just under a third of 406 billion tenge (US$1.3 billion) was generated in 2017 from budget sources, as most of the funds were attracted on the market. Additional sources included tenge denominated Eurobonds, which DBK issued for the first time in December for 100 billion tenge (US$313 million), 98 percent of which were purchased by foreign investors.

The loans are part of a long-term strategy to invest 4.4 trillion tenge (US$13.7 billion) into the manufacturing industry and industrial infrastructure in 2014-2023.

EBRD to finance modernising street lights in East Kazakhstan

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – East Kazakhstan region Akim (Governor) Daniyal Akhmetov and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) President Sir Suma Chakrabarti signed a 5.6 billion tenge (US$17.6 million) agreement to finance modernising the street lighting systems in six cities and 11 towns in the region. The document, signed in London in early March, will provide more than 32,000 energy-saving bulbs and the changes will benefit a population of more than 630,000.

The project is the second stage to introduce energy-saving street light technology in the region, as the administration and the bank previously inked the corresponding agreements for smart lighting systems. The 4.8 billion tenge (US$15.1 million) contracts will replace more than 25,000 bulbs with energy-saving technology in Semei and Ust-Kamenogorsk. The work will start in May.

The regional administration and EBRD management will also consider the possibility of developing technical documentation and financing for a 29.5 billion tenge (US$92.6 million) modern waste management and recycling project in Ust-Kamenogorsk. In addition, the bank is to examine a 33.3 billion tenge (US$104.5 million) gasification project in 50 rural settlements in the Tarbagatai, Urzhar and Zaisan districts.

While in London, Akhmetov visited the Southwark Integrated Waste Management Facility, where he learned about sorting and processing solid waste. The delegation also spoke with the management of Transport for London, the British capital's public transport operator, to gain experience in public transportation organisation.

Akhmetov met with EBRD Vice President for Banking Alain Pilloux March 6 to discuss additional joint investment projects aimed at developing the region's infrastructure.

The current agreements will increase the bank's investment volume in the region up to 108.9 billion tenge (US$341.9 million) by the end of the year. Including the recently-signed document, 10 loan and investment agreements totalling 46.1 billion tenge (US$144.8 million) have been concluded between the entities since 2015.

According to the bank, in line with international efforts to combat climate change, EBRD supports improvements in energy efficiency and energy savings in every nation where it operates. The bank aims to unlock each country's significant energy efficiency potential and promote energy efficiency investments including power generation and gas flaring reduction, energy efficiency in industrial processes, energy savings in residential and public buildings and an environmentally friendly transport infrastructure.

EBRD loans $37.6 million to Mangistau utility company

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) will provide a $37.6 million post-privatisation loan to the Mangistau Regional Distribution Company (MRDC) to help the company improve efficiency and promote renewable power integration in the region.

The loan will help MRDC, a major power utility in western Kazakhstan, finance its investment programme until 2020. MRDC was recently privatised under a government programme and the majority interest is now owned by Kazakhstan Utility Systems (KUS), a privately-owned company that operates in electricity and heat generation, distribution and supply.

"We are pleased to start EBRD's engagement with Kazakhstan Utility Systems and to continue our support of renewables and privatisation in the Kazakh energy sector," EBRD Director for Energy and Natural Resources for Russia, the Caucasus and the Central Asian Region Aida Sitdikova said.

"KUS is pleased to sign the first transaction with the EBRD and considers that this project is an important first step that unlocks huge potential for our cooperation in the future," Kazakhstan Utility Systems CEO and MRDC Chairman Nabi Aitzhanov noted.

The EBRD loan will help finance MRDC's priority investments, up to 40 subprojects, which include modernisation of the existing substations and distribution lines, the construction of new power lines and the installation of Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition systems (SCADA) and modern automatic control systems.

MRDC's network capacity, efficiency and reliability will be significantly improved and will allow a smooth integration of renewable energy production elements into the grid. After the implementation of the project, MRDC will be able to achieve better efficiency and reduce energy losses, resulting in the reduction of CO2 emissions by 11,670 tonnes per year.

The loan will be the fourth subproject under the Kazakhstan Renewables project established by the bank in 2016.

Tengizchevroil chooses national cadres and local suppliers

By Aigerim Sadykova

ASTANA – Tengizchevroil (TCO), the company responsible for developing the Tengiz oil field in the Atyrau region, has expanded production through Future Growth and Wellhead Pressure Management (FGP-WPMP). The project has engaged 30,000 Kazakh employees and involved 92 percent of the staff.

"We visit various regions throughout Kazakhstan searching for local companies with goods that will meet our quality, services and costs standards. We urge foreign companies that are looking for opportunities doing business with TCO to pay attention to Kazakh makers," said company general director Ted Etchison.

TCO spent $2.5 billion in 2017 to purchase Kazakh products, he added. Partners from the Atyrau, East Kazakhstan, Karaganda, North Kazakhstan, Pavlodar and West Kazakhstan regions supply metal structures, cables, chemicals, reinforcing iron, heat exchangers and pressure vessels for construction works.

"Most of the construction work must be completed this year. Now, we are working on finishing the necessary work for acceptance," said TCO engineer Arsen Tagirov.

FGP-WPMP construction modules manufactured in Italy, Kazakhstan and South Korea will be transported to Tengiz for final assembly. The project will increase production by approximately 12 million tonnes per year (260,000 barrels per day), as well as develop the use of domestic goods and services.

"The project provides an economic effect not only to Atyrau region, but also to regions throughout Kazakhstan. Local producers strive [to meet] our standards of quality. TCO brought quality change to the culture of local production, working for a quarter of a century in Kazakhstan," said public relations general manager Rzabek Artygaliyev.

Etchison noted Kazakh citizens fill 83 percent of the company's jobs, including 67 percent of middle and senior managers.

"Since 2007, 156 Kazakh specialists have replaced their foreign colleagues in key management and technical positions," he said.

TCO has a talent management system similar to any serious company, said HR manager Sholpan Altybaeva.

"The share of workers in TCO is not very high, but it is a highly skilled workforce. The staff turnover rate was 1.5 percent last year. We do not take leaders from outside; we have a policy of bringing them up inside the company. Employees need to know production processes from the basics and understand the prospects for their own growth," he added.

More than 200 TCO employees travel abroad for internships annually and the most talented specialists have the opportunity to work for long periods of time in foreign nations, according to company statistics. Forty-five Kazakh employees worked outside the country last year and 19 earned their postgraduate education at company expense. The budget for training employees has grown 131 percent since 2008, from $3.6 million to $8.3 million in 2012.

The TCO benefits package includes medical insurance and interest-free home loans. Employees do not pay traditionally high mortgage interest rates and more than 1,400 loans worth $104 million have been issued since 2010.

Kenzhetai Tlegenov has worked for TCO since it was founded in 1993. Starting as a simple operator, he today heads the Tengiz export department and his career history is classic and very common.

"The key to success is you. The company provides equal opportunities for all employees to grow professionally. We need only to work well and use these opportunities," he said.

Vegetable oil production launches in East Kazakhstan

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – Tag-Tin is the latest Kazakh company to use state financing to increase production to compete with foreign producers. The company is planning to build a sunflower and rape seed processing plant for export to China.

The new creamery will be the second in the country to process both crops. The facility, with a production capacity of more than 50,000 tonnes of raw material per year, is expected to launch in May.

Tag-Tin is a subsidiary of Vostok Agro, an agricultural and industrial holding specialising in crop production with a technologically interconnected production and distribution chain. One of the largest enterprises in the region, it plans to switch to production diversification and processing its own raw materials. The plant will use 50 percent of its raw materials and purchase the rest from farmers, according to Vostok Agro director Yerzhan Nurbayev.

"We plan to create a farm cooperative, which will include farms engaged in growing sunflower and rapeseed to guarantee the provision of a creamery with raw materials," he said.

The cost of construction is estimated at one billion tenge (US$3.13 million).

"We received funding from the state. The project is implemented in two stages: the construction of the plant for processing agricultural products and bottling sunflower oil," he added.

"Now, the plant owners aren't interested in exporting sunflower seeds, but in processing them and receiving added value. The plant's equipment can be easily switched to rape seed processing. That is, when the sunflower seeds are over or there is no need for it, the plant can start processing rape seeds," said chamber of entrepreneurs agricultural and industrial department head Kairat Mamyrbaev.

He added rapeseed and sunflower oil are in great demand in the Chinese market. If sunflower oil can be sold in Kazakhstan, rapeseed will be processed and exported to China. The East Kazakhstan region is the second after the Almaty region where rapeseeds will be processed.



Many Kazakh farmers do not produce rape seeds, because it is not an easy process and they are more expensive than sunflower seeds. Last year, the price of rapeseeds reached 115,000 tenge ($360) per tonne, while the maximum price for a tonne of sunflower seeds was only 80,000 tenge ($250).

"This year, China had a crop failure of rapeseeds. But, unfortunately, we cannot export it in the form of raw materials. Kazakhstan is not included in the list of suppliers for this type of oilseed. We can export sunflower seeds, sunflower oil and rapeseed oil, but not rape seeds," said Nurbayev.

Most Kazakh oil processing companies work for the domestic market, yet still can't supply the demand. Russian companies are their main competitors. In 2017, domestic producers exported sunflower oil to Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but faced some challenges connected to increased railway tariffs and the unstable exchange rate.

EDITORIAL&OPINION

Kazakhstan's digital transformation central to next stage of development

As a country, Kazakhstan has been fortunate in its rich natural resources. Although we faced many grave challenges in our first years as a modern, independent country, the discovery in particular of large oil and gas reserves provided the revenues to help us overcome them. The result has been that we have transformed our country and the living standards and prospects of all of our citizens.

But wise nations understand that natural resources alone are not sufficient for a sustainably successful economy. Their supply is, of course, finite and once exploited can't be replaced. The inevitable fluctuations in demand and price inject instability into economies and can knock even the best run off course. And, as the world strives to combat climate change and limit environmental damage, there will inevitably be a switch away from fossil fuels.

Kazakhstan's response has been to commit itself to a new stage in its development by diversifying and modernising its economy away from a dependence on its natural resources. At its heart is the ambitious Digital Kazakhstan programme and a determination to maximise the opportunities that it brings to enhance competitiveness, unlock potential and drive improvements in what the government delivers to its citizens. It is central to our goal of joining the ranks of the 30 most developed countries by 2050.

The programme involves major investment to create what's been called the Digital Silk Road through which information can flow freely to all parts of our vast country. Our aim is to connect all businesses and, in time, all homes to a reliable, high-speed digital infrastructure. This is as essential to the Fourth Industrial Revolution as canals and railways were to the first nearly two centuries ago.

We are also investing in digital skills at every level. In our schools and colleges, there is a new emphasis placed on ensuring our young people have the knowledge and skills to maximise the opportunities the digital revolution is bringing.

We are training, too, the advanced specialists we need to ensure we are in the forefront of future innovation. Our universities and new hubs, such as the Astana International Financial Centre and the International IT Start-up Hub are not only setting the lead themselves but also working in collaboration more widely to improve standards and support advances right across the economy.

It is vital that every corner of our economy, every industry and business is part of the digital transformation now underway. The construction of intelligent transport systems can shorten cargo delivering time to our markets and in transit across our country.

In our manufacturing industry, the harnessing of digital technologies can both boost productivity and increase quality. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has singled out agriculture as a major sector where harvests can be transformed and exports grown through the use of smart technology.

A determined effort has been made to create the environment where digital start-ups can grow. The first incubation programme with 14 projects was launched in February. We need a genuinely "creative society" and are working hard to remove the remaining barriers to entrepreneurship and innovation.

And just as we are committed to ensuring digitisation delivers its full benefits across the economy, we want to see the same transformation in public services. There are many opportunities to enhance the way the government interacts with its citizens and we are committed to making the most of them.

Modernising and strengthening the supply chain prevents shortages and cuts costs of providing services allowing savings to be re-invested to improve them further. There is huge potential to personalise services to the individual to reduce waste and improve the benefits to those who receive them. The introduction of electronic payments is a powerful weapon in the government's battle to eliminate corruption.

The Digital Kazakhstan programme which will touch every aspect of our country and have as big an impact on the prosperity of our people as oil and gas have in recent decades. Above all, it is about giving our talented and educated young people – our most important natural resource for the future – the opportunities to accelerate the progress we have seen over the last 26 years.



Central Asian leaders meeting represents unity, understanding

By Erlan Karin



The first working meeting of the leaders of the Central Asian states has taken place. Negotiations to arrange this meeting lasted until the very moment of the meeting, during which the parties had been adjusting the format, date and agenda: no side was in a rush to make the announcement of the upcoming event.

Contrary to forecasts that the meeting won't happen, it eventually did. It is not only symbolic that the meeting took place on the eve of the Nauryz holiday. Binding to this common holiday helped to coordinate the event more quickly and avoid all sorts of hidden motives about a geopolitical background of the event. Due to the fact that the co-ordination was going until the last moment, not everyone noticed the actual status of the Astana meeting.

Neither in the announcements, nor in some releases, in any speeches – absolutely nowhere the forthcoming meeting was called a summit. One may not notice this important point, but why it is relevant? A formal summit would involve agreeing on certain final documents, making specific decisions; from the very beginning, the entire regional process would be put into a framework. This in the end could prevent the start of the dialogue. The initiators seem to have chosen an appropriate language when calling the event a working and consultative meeting.

It did not oblige the parties to anything, avoiding on the other hand excessive expectations.

Even though many predicted no specific decisions should be expected from the meeting, I would say, based upon the final statement, voiced by the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, that the participants still worked out certain positions in some areas.

The discussions touched on several topics including trade, security, culture, etc. As we have predicted in our report of "10 important events in Central Asia in 2018," the success of this meeting (then, the probability of the meeting was only discussed) will largely depend on how Astana and Tashkent – the main stakeholders of the process, – will coordinate their efforts. The President of Kazakhstan has stressed several times that the initiative belonged to President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, but it seems as if diplomatic efforts and political weight of Nursultan Nazarbayev were needed to act upon.

Therefore, the main result of the meeting is not the mere fact of the meeting itself (a week ago everyone was happy with the possibility of meeting only). Now we can say that the meeting took place, and it managed to bring agreements on certain positions of common interest and a shared agenda.

Ultimately, the regional dialogue was launched in Astana. Most likely, this will be the nature of regular meetings. Much will depend on the parties filling the process with practical steps.

Regarding the absence of the President of Turkmenistan, I guess we should not take this too literally / seriously. Two senior officials of Turkmenistan, Chairman of the Mejlis (house of the Parliament) Akjee Nurberdyeva and Chairman of Mejlis Committee Serdar Berdimuhamedov came to Astana. For those who understand the subtleties of Central Asian politics, it is a very interesting and important point.

This meeting was certainly a common success for all countries in Central Asia. It demonstrates the understanding the leaders of the region have on the challenges they face and demonstrates their focus, a pragmatic approach to these challenges, as well as shows the formation of a common regional identity.

The author is a political scientist and Chairperson of the Board of the Kazakhstan National Television And Radio Company.

Central Asia: one region with many faces and common prosperity

By Aitolkyn Kourmanova



The recent Central Asian regional summit (or a working meeting?) did not bring any breakthrough announcements but the whole idea of a regular platform for only five Central Asian countries – without Russia, China and the U.S. – is revolutionary and changes everything that was told about Central Asia years until now. At the same time, the attentive analysts and watchers have been expecting this regional thaw even before Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev proclaimed Central Asia a priority of his foreign policy.

There are few logical arguments that precipitate that Central Asia becomes a more interconnected space.

First, the people-to-people perspective. There are still relatives on both borders in every country of the region. Families, students, workers, and traders are traversing across the region's undeveloped roads by busy old buses, cars and trains. After more than two decades of independence, it is a still a common space for the Central Asians: with easily understood languages, names, street signs, and symbols, and, while abroad, Central Asians do often declare their regional identity (even though, many think a non-existent one).

Therefore, there is almost unanimous support in any of the countries of the region in favour of the regional cooperation agenda, which is understood as more people-to-people ties, more contact and more friendship. This was so colourfully displayed in the course of the visit of Uzbek President Mirziyoyev to Dushanbe in the first weeks of March. Flags were waving, girls were singing and poets were competing in their most exquisite metaphors in Tajik and Uzbek as if this is truly a "one nation with two languages."

Second, there is a solid economic logic in making Central Asia more interconnected. In the south, people grow lemons, in the north – wheat. There are vast cotton fields in one country and a growing clothing industry in another. As Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev has noted: "From pomegranates to strawberries, the region should trade more within itself."

Regional trade can easily be doubled if not tripled, should there be fewer barriers to trade. There could emerge a whole portfolio of regionally financed projects – again the Uzbek-Tajik example: a decision by the Uzbeks to co-finance some of the Talko's projects. These may be smaller scale projects compared to internationally financed infrastructure or energy projects funded by multinational companies, but these regionally owned projects are critically important for the local communities, their economies and job creation.

Of course, the private sector will decide what is best to invest in, but from what has been already discussed, there are potential common projects in agriculture and the food industry, tourism (as Kazakhs and Uzbeks already propose to introduce a common tourist visa), energy, and hydro projects. There is a cost differential that enables the creation of industrial chains – with electricity and wage costs being lower in some countries and finance and technology available in others. The market around the region is truly unique – Russia, China, Middle East and Iran, as well as reconstructing Afghanistan. For additional financing mechanisms, the Astana International Financial Center may facilitate access to capital markets and attract investors from outside. From large to small businesses, people in the region undoubtedly see the perspectives of trade, exchange and common prosperity.

And the third "reconnecting" factor is external, as always. While an international agenda has opened new avenues for the countries to participate as a region, the current state of international relations necessitates that Central Asia should turn to itself too. President Nazarbayev has clearly stated that "the region has to deal with its issues independently, with no involvement of third parties." As the Great Games may still reignite and reengage, the region in its orbit (particularly, the potential rivalries between Russia and China, China and the West, the West and Russia), five Central Asian countries should have an opportunity to discuss their positions between themselves. They are active members of regional and international organisations and do present a powerful group by being a common region with common positions.

Central Asia remains a diverse and multinational space with sovereign countries determining their own future but this does not preclude them from making their people closer and their economies and their friendship – stronger.

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OPINIONS

Celebrating 25th anniversary of friendly relations between Kazakhstan and Singapore

By Arsen Omarov

On March 30, Kazakhstan and Singapore mark the 25th anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Ahead of the date, The Astana Times talked to both Kazakhstan's Ambassador to Singapore Dr. Usen Suleimen and Singapore's Ambassador to Kazakhstan Zulkifli Baharudin to discuss the current state and prospects of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Ambassador Zulkifli, you are giving this interview on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Singapore, how would you describe the dynamics of relations between the two countries during this period?

Ties between Singapore and Kazakhstan have grown from strength to strength over the last 25 years. Both sides have built on the close friendship between President Nursultan Nazarbayev and the late Lee Kuan Yew, with many high-level exchanges today that helped foster closer connections between our respective leaderships.



Zulkifli Baharudin



Usen Suleimen

BAHARUDIN: There is progress at the strategic level to put in place the long-term mechanisms to promote investments and trade. Negotiations for a bilateral investment treaty have concluded and we look forward to its signing soon.

For example, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong visited Kazakhstan in September 2016, while then-Speaker of Parliament Dr. Halimah Yacob, who is now Singapore's President, visited in June last year. Asset Issekeshev, the Mayor of Astana and Bauyrzhan Baibek, the Mayor of Almaty, visited Singapore in October and November 2017 respectively to explore synergies between our hub cities. The most recent visits were made by Chairwoman of the Senate Committee for International Relations, Defence and Security Dr. Dariga Nazarbayeva and Chairman of the Supreme Court Zhakip Assanov in February this year.

Our institutional linkages are also growing. Let me cite a few examples. First, our Civil Service College is collaborating with Kazakhstan's Academy of Public Administration on leadership training, with two workshops for 150 Kazakh officials conducted in 2016. Both sides are now planning a follow-up course on public administration and public service reforms to take place this September.

Second, the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) has recently renewed its partnership with Nazarbayev University to offer Masters programmes and courses to promising Kazakh executives. The LKYSPP has conducted courses for more than 700 senior Kazakh officials to date.

Third, our foreign ministries convened an inaugural round of bilateral consultations in July 2016. Apart from serving as a mechanism to take stock of the bilateral account and explore new initiatives, it has been useful in exchanging views regarding developments in our respective regions. We look forward to hosting the next round of the consultations.

Fourth, Kazakh officials continue to embark on various benchmarking visits to Singapore, ranging from urban and transport planning to e-justice and ICT policy-making and implementation.

We welcome more of such visits as opportunities for both countries to exchange ideas and experiences and strengthen ties at all levels.

In your opinion, what are the main prospects for development of bilateral relations between Astana and Singapore?

Let me focus on trade. While Kazakhstan is Singapore's largest trading partner in Central Asia today, there is potential to do more to strengthen our economic linkages. Singapore's strategic location along the Maritime Silk Road and Kazakhstan's position along the Silk Road Economic Belt make us complementary partners of land and sea.

Singapore companies have ventured into Kazakhstan in the fields of master planning and education. There is increasing interest from our respective business communities to cooperate in sectors, such as information and communications technology as well as urban solutions. Initiatives like the Astana EXPO2017 and Singapore's participation in the Expo have helped to draw attention to the immense opportunities in Kazakhstan to our business community. Meanwhile, Singapore can be considered as a platform to attract investments from, and through Singapore, to Kazakhstan. We are also a key hub in the Asia-Pacific region and a gateway to the 600 million-strong ASEAN market for Kazakhstan investments.

There is progress at the strategic level to put in place the long-term mechanisms to promote investments and trade. Negotiations for a bilateral investment treaty have concluded and we look forward to its signing soon. We are also working with Kazakhstan to conclude a free-trade agreement between Singapore and the Eurasian Economic Union, which will benefit businesses from both sides significantly, including cost savings. I am confident that these will spur greater economic cooperation and bring our countries closer together as investment gateways for our respective regions.

What do Kazakhstan and Singapore have in common?

Despite the vast differences in our land mass and the geographical distance, we share some similarities with Kazakhstan, such as our multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies. As young nations, Singapore and Kazakhstan also share a common interest in developing our economies and "soft" infrastructure, including developing our human resources and grooming our next generation of leaders.

Kazakhstan is developing rapidly and has set the goal of becoming one of the top 30 most developed countries by 2050. I read President Nazarbayev's recent address in January 2018 on the 10 priorities that Kazakhstan needs to implement for its next stage of development, such as introducing smart city technologies, strengthening the rule of law and public administration, as well as fighting against corruption. Many of these areas resonate with Singapore's developmental experience. Meanwhile, we are not resting on our laurels despite promising economic growth figures (Singapore's economy grew by 3.5 percent in 2017, which is more than double of the government's initial forecast). For instance, the government has economic restructuring plans in place and working with the unions and businesses to implement industry transformation maps, inculcate lifelong learning in the Singapore workforce, and help affected workers to adapt and grow in their new jobs.

As two vibrant economies and societies that are doing our best to navigate a more turbulent and challenging world today, there is much more that we can work together on and also learn from each other. Singapore is happy to continue sharing our development experience with Kazakhstan. However, Kazakhstan needs to adapt our experiences to its own needs and context.

Ambassador Dr. Usen Suleimen, is there anything Kazakhstan has learnt from Singapore's development experience?

Over these years, Kazakhstan has picked up a number of (elements of) Singapore's experience, especially in finance, education, civil service and (establishing a) financial centre. I would like to highlight some significant examples.

The first is the establishment of the Samruk Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund), which is based on the structures of the Temasek Holding and the government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC). We also picked up some experience in establishing our international financial centre, as well as reforming our pension system, where we have borrowed some ideas from Singapore's Central Provident Fund system.

Another good example is the Bolashak scholarship programme, established in the 1990s. It is similar to Singapore's public service scholarship system. Every year, the Kazakh government sends up to 500 Kazakhs students overseas to study in the world's leading universities.

In reforming our civil service, Kazakhstan has established the so called Corps A for senior executive government officials. Its structure is similar to Singapore's administrative service.

Ambassador Suleimen, what are the most promising areas to enhance cooperation between Kazakhstan and Singapore?

Actually, from the very beginning, the leadership of Kazakhstan has been adhering to the fundamental principle, "economy first, then politics," which President Nursultan Nazarbayev learnt from the late Lee Kuan Yew.

Nowadays, the world does not stand still and is rapidly becoming globalised and interconnected. Against this backdrop, with its strategic location on the world map, Kazakhstan is becoming one of the attractive destinations for doing business.

Despite being the largest landlocked country, Kazakhstan is now joining the list of prospective countries to do trade internationally.

Recently, in January 2018, President Nazarbayev delivered his annual address to the nation, in which he outlined 10 top priorities, aimed at achieving the goals of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, specifically focusing on digital economy, trade and infrastructure. In this context, Kazakhstan has every opportunity to enhance interaction with Singapore almost in every priority voiced by President Nazarbayev in his address.

Kazakhstan is considered to be the most developed country in the Central Asian region and biggest land-locked country in the world, while Singapore is the most successful and economically developed country in South-East Asia, which has one of the biggest seaports. For a long time, the interaction between these two regions was at a low level.

Nowadays, in light of unfolding global integration processes in trade and economic dimension, particularly along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), our two countries and regions have real opportunities to achieve an essential breakthrough in the midterm perspective.

It is no coincidence that BRI was first announced by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping during his visit to Astana in September 2013. Apparently, such an announcement became a clear message that Kazakhstan has an important role within the mega project.

Connecting BRI to Kazakhstan's infrastructure development programmes would give a great impetus not only to the development of trade and economic cooperation between our countries and regions but may transform Kazakhstan into a transport-logistical and transit hub in Eurasia. This is where Singapore can actively be involved in these infrastructure projects.

Indeed, our countries have enormous potential within BRI. Development of infrastructure potential has the paramount importance for Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan has a huge infrastructure potential and respective sites, it has concrete vision and appropriate state programmes to elevate its logistics potential to a higher level. Kazakhstan intends to increase the volume of transit freight traffic up to two million containers by 2020 through transcontinental transportation corridor between Asia and Europe, which has several links. Almost of all them cross Kazakhstan's territory.

SULEIMEN: Connecting BRI to Kazakhstan's infrastructure development programmes would give a great impetus not only to the development of trade and economic cooperation between our countries and regions but may transform Kazakhstan into a transport-logistical and transit hub in Eurasia. This is where Singapore can actively be involved in these infrastructure projects.

In particular, we can use the opportunities of the Khorgos free economic zone on the border with China and the Kazakhstan-Chinese joint logistics terminal in the Lianyungang Sea port in the northeast of China through which businesses of the two countries can deliver goods in both directions via railroad and sea routes.

I would also include the Western Europe – Western China international transit auto-corridor, with a total length of 8,445 kilometres, of which 2,787 kilometres go through Kazakhstan.

In addition, recently, Kazakhstan officially established its full-fledged financial centre, the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC). In fact, AIFC has no parallels in the Central Asia the Commonwealth of Independent States region, and is based on its prototypes in Singapore and Dubai. AIFC aims to become a sort of Singapore in Central Asia, spanning Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Eurasian Economic Union, Middle East countries, Western China, Mongolia and Eastern Europe, which is almost the main route of the land-based Silk Road. Having this in mind, AIFC's main goal is to become a regional financial hub within BRI.

To sum up the main outcomes and future prospects of bilateral relations, we can say with confidence that both countries have built a solid foundation, which now has all the opportunities to be elevated to the strategic partnership level in the midterm perspective.

Highlights of UNDP-Kazakhstan partnership in the past four years

By Munkhtuya Altangerel

I have worked as the Deputy Resident Representative for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Kazakhstan from 2014 until now. During my tenure in Kazakhstan, our organisation was privileged to support the government's core reforms and transformation processes geared towards social, economic and institutional modernisation. Out of these reforms, UNDP has focused its partnership with Kazakhstan in support of the goals which promote "government in service of the people," and "governance for equitable development in all regions of Kazakhstan," among others.

Our partnership scheme, well established through Government-UNDP cost-shared initiatives in line with core priorities of the country, has achieved many transformational results in the past four years.



UNDP is particularly proud of contributing to the ongoing modernisation of civil and public services. For example, together with the Agency of Civil Service and Anti-Corruption and the Astana Hub of Civil Service, we contributed to the development of new and competitive remuneration, competencies and bonus framework for civil service.

In partnership with the Ministry of National Economy, UNDP helped analyse and optimise 43 high-demand public services, with the aim of improving their efficiencies and quality. UNDP has also helped implement in partnership with civil society and local akimats (regional administrations) landmark laws, which promote local self-governance and meaningful citizen participation in the local decision-making processes.

UNDP, in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other partners such as Japan, helped develop in-country capacities for launching Kazakhstan's Oversees Development Assistance (ODA) system, focused on helping other countries achieve the global development agenda, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and promote South-South cooperation.

In 2017, UNDP, with sister UN agencies was privileged to participate in the global thematic EXPO 2017, Future Energy, hosted by Kazakhstan. The platform provided by the EXPO helped facilitate important global, regional and country-level dialogues to promote sustainable energy production and consumption in line with the Paris climate agreements, as well as provided us with an opportunity to feature green technologies in water, agriculture and energy for the benefit of the people and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These are but highlights of a very productive and dynamic partnership which UNDP enjoys with the Government of Kazakhstan.

UNDP is particularly proud of contributing to the ongoing modernisation of civil and public services. For example, together with the Agency of Civil Service and Anti-Corruption and the Astana Hub of Civil Service, we contributed to the development of new and competitive remuneration, competencies and bonus framework for civil service.

By end of March 2018, I will have finished my official assignment here, and I'm grateful that I have had the opportunity to work with the people and the Government of Kazakhstan. I was lucky to be able to travel extensively through the vast and beautiful territories and regions and interact with the people and local governments all the way from Fort Shevchenko, Mangystau, to the township of Zaisan, East Kazakhstan. I have experienced the breathtaking beauty of national parks and bio-reserves such as Altyn Emel, Katon Karagai, and Kurgalzhin; have witnessed the enormous human capacities and potential of the people living in remote auls and districts and have learned about the county's deep cultural and historical heritage. On a personal note, as a Mongolian, I have felt close kinship to each person I have had the honour to interact throughout these years. I am sincerely thankful for the wonderful experiences I have had and will always cherish in my heart the hospitality and friendship that has been extended to me and my family by the people of Kazakhstan. To all my colleagues and friends in Kazakhstan I would like to say: Кор rakhmet! Alga, Kazakhstan! Көріскенше! (Until we meet again!).

The author is UNDP Deputy Resident Representative in Kazakhstan

Kazakh FM attends EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting



By Almasbek Zhumadilov

ASTANA – Kazakh Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov participated in an informal ministerial meeting between Central Asia and the European Union on March 26 in Tashkent as the ministers gathered in the Uzbek capital for the Afghanistan conference to take place the following day.

Foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, a deputy foreign minister from Turkmenistan, as well as EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini discussed relations between the region and the 28-nation bloc.

According to the Kazakh foreign ministry press release, the main message of the meeting was that the countries of Central Asia and the European Union are committed to developing cooperation, while the EU remains committed to promoting stable, secure and sustainable development of the region.

During the event, the European side was informed of the successful outcome of the first so called Working (Consultative) Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian states in Astana March 15.

The European Union is one of the key political, trade, economic and investment partners for the Central Asian countries. Dialogue and cooperation between them in recent years have acquired a new dynamic. The platform of annual ministerial meetings provides an opportunity to discuss issues and prospects for cooperation.

Participants welcomed the positive dynamics of intra-regional interaction. It was particularly emphasised that the recent positive trends in the region, including the recent meeting in Astana, open up broad prospects for cooperation between the European Union and the region.

Abdrakhmanov noted that the course set by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev towards a comprehensive modernisation of the country opens new horizons for cooperation with the European Union.

The sides confirmed their common understanding of the priority to deepen cooperation in regional security and economic development and to deepen EU-CA interaction, including within the framework of the EU Strategy for Central Asia that is being currently updated.

"Kazakhstan supports the EU's decision to update the Strategy for Central Asia and will present its vision of the main elements of the new document to the European side shortly," the Kazakh FM noted. It is expected that the document will be prepared and approved by the middle of 2019.

During the meeting, the Kazakh side proposed to update the main areas of cooperation, identify clear goals and indicators, and introduce new tools to achieve these goals. According to Abdrakhmanov, the priority areas of the new strategy could include the development of human capital, the rule of law and good governance, the development of private entrepreneurship, including the promotion of women entrepreneurship, the promotion of universal digitisation, the provision of interconnectedness and the development of transport and logistics infrastructure, the promotion of energy efficiency and the introduction of green technologies, environmental protection.

At the meeting, particular emphasis was placed on regional security and assistance to Afghanistan.

During its presidency of the UN Security Council in January 2018, Kazakhstan put forward strengthening the international efforts to assist Afghanistan as one of its top priorities. It organised the first visit to Kabul of the UN Security Council in as many years and the special session of the UNSC devoted to Afghanistan that resulted in the adoption of a presidential statement outlining common approaches to the many problems faced by that nation.

According the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, as a result of the joint work carried out by Central Asian countries during Kazakhstan's UNSC presidency, it was possible to contribute to changing the international perception of Afghanistan from that of a source of instability to a source of great opportunities for regional development, trade and connectivity.

According to a press release from the European External Action Service, Mogherini stressed the importance of the international community – including regional partners – delivering on their commitment to promoting peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. Concrete regional projects involving Central Asian countries, aiming at increasing connections with Afghanistan, such as railways, air links and pipelines, are welcome and important steps in this regard, the press release said.

In this context, meeting participants were briefed about the educational programme implemented in Kazakhstan since 2010 to train 1,000 Afghan youth in peaceful professions. As it was divulged, currently, Kazakhstan and the European Union are preparing to launch the first phase of a new multilateral project aimed at training Afghan girls in Kazakhstan.

Senate Chair visits Indonesia

By Elya Altynsarina

A meeting with the President of Indonesia Joko Widodo was a central event of Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's official visit to Indonesia in mid-March.

On behalf of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Tokayev invited Widodo to visit Kazakhstan in October 2018 and participate at the 6th Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. Extending the invitation to Widodo, the speaker of the senate underlined that throughout these years, the congress has become a helpful dialogue platform for not only spiritual, but political leaders to gather and share their views on issues of common interest.

"In different years, the United Nations Secretary-General, state and government leaders and senior officials of international organisations took part in the congress," said Tokayev.

He believes that the representation of Indonesia – the largest and a respected Muslim country – personally by its President would greatly contribute to the success of the 6th congress that will devote this year's meeting to a topic Religious Leaders for a Safer World.

Speaking about bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and Indonesia, Tokayev focused on the importance of this leading the Southeast Asian nation to Kazakhstan in the field of trade, economic and interregional partnership as well as cultural, humanitarian and inter-parliamentary cooperation. In recent years, there has been a steady growth in these fields of interaction. Moreover, the launch of transport and logistics routes within the framework of Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol infrastructure programme and the Chinese Belt and Road initiative are expected to help promote economic and trade relations. Kazakhstan expects the Kazakhstan – Lianyungang Port (China) – Seaports of the Asia-Pacific Region corridor to bring major trade and transit opportunities.

According to the Senate press service, at the high-level meeting with Indonesian officials, Tokayev praised the rich experience of the host country in Islamic finances – an area of great interest for Kazakhstan as the country embarks on offering international financial services at the premises of newly established Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC). "We invite Indonesian institutions to work at AIFC," said Tokayev.

Concluding the meeting, Widodo thanked Tokayev and President Nazarbayev for such consideration and shared his intention to take measures for the expansion of political, economic and cultural ties between the two countries.

Tokayev then met with Indonesian colleagues led by Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly of Indonesia Zulkifli Hasan and Speaker of the People's Representative Council Bambang Soesatyo to discuss prospects of inter-parliamentary relations.

Tokayev discussed the strong features of the legislative procedures of the two countries and emphasised the latest social initiatives of the Kazakh President and the country's programme of identity modernisation. It has been noted that the role of parliaments in enhancing the international cooperation is critical. Following the meetings, the Kazakh delegation was invited to visit the National Independence Monument and the Taman Mini Indonesia Park in Jakarta.

Astana, Tashkent boost economic cooperation

By Zhazira Dyussembekova

ASTANA – The Joint Intergovernmental Commission on Bilateral Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, co-chaired by Kazakh First Deputy Prime Minister Askar Mamin and Uzbek First Deputy Prime Minister Ochilboy Ramatov, met March 14 to discuss relations between the states, including the expected increase in trade turnover, the Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan and vice versa and regional and border cooperation.

Trade turnover last year between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was $2 billion, 31.2 percent higher than in 2016. Exports from Kazakhstan grew 35 percent in 2017 to $1.3 billion, while imports increased 25.1 percent to $735.2 million.

"We welcome the stable, positive dynamics in mutual trade. A further increase in volumes and extension of the list of commodity turnover will contribute to an increase in the volume of mutual trade. In addition, we need to timely implement trade contracts and agreements signed in 2017," said Ramatov.

The parties agreed on further coordinated measures to ensure the growth of trade turnover to $3 billion in 2018 and $5 billion by 2020, according to the Kazakh prime minister's press service.

This is the Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan, with plans to hold more than 200 events highlighting the economy, tourism, culture and humanitarianism.

"The decision of the heads of our states to hold the Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan in 2018 and the Year of Kazakhstan in Uzbekistan in 2019 is a clear indication of the unprecedentedly high level of trust and partnership relations between our countries," said Mamin.

One of the key cooperation factors is the interaction of business circles and investments. Two large business forums were organised last year and commercial agreements worth more than $1 billion were signed. Joint ventures operate in food supplies, petrochemicals and chemistry.

Within the agreement on long-term cooperation between Uzavtosanoat and SaryarkaAvtoProm, a joint project is being executed to export products to foreign markets, including the Eurasian Economic Union.

Regional ties have been developing as well, noted the meeting participants, with Uzbekistan supporting the Kazakh initiative to hold forums on interregional cooperation on a regular basis, read the statement.

The countries also agreed to consider the prospects for building an international cross-border cooperation centre, a transport and logistics centre (dry port) in the border area between the nations.

In 2017, the volume of rail transportation between the states increased 8 percent to 20.5 million tonnes. During the first two months of 2018, traffic volume increased by 44 percent compared to the same period the previous year. The sides noted regular railway passenger trains along the Samarkand-Astana route will start operation in April.

Water cooperation issues were also discussed, as the counties will continue working to implement water relations roadmap activities. In addition, the sides discussed the need to develop a legal mechanism for Central Asian trans-boundary water resources that considers the interests of the entire region.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are also interested in gas industry cooperation. An agreement was reached to continue the joint work to create the technical logistics to transport Kazakh gas supplies through Uzbekistan to the southern portion of Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan announces conference on Afghan gender equality

By Elya Altynsarina

Ambassador-at-large of the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs Stanislav Vassilenko proposed during a March 8 United Nations Security Council meeting on Afghanistan a three-pronged approach to bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan and announced plans to hold a conference devoted to women empowerment.

The approach includes a) a security-development nexus, meaning that programmes for sustainable development would help achieve peace and security in the country, b) a regional approach to cross-border challenges and threats instead of the widely practiced narrow, country-specific focus and c) greater coordination between United Nations offices and programmes to improve efficiency and reduce fragmentation.

Vassilenko said he believes the situation in Afghanistan has entered a crucial phase on several lines, including the ceasefire agreement, transitional confidence-building measures, upcoming elections, revising the nation's constitution, possible release of Taliban members from prisons and their withdrawal from the sanction's list.

In this vein, "sustained support from the countries of the region, the international community, the UN and the Security Council, international, regional and sub-regional organisations is required," he said.

He also noted that a decision by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to recognise the Taliban as a legitimate political group and offer it the opportunity to open an office in Kabul with no preconditions deserves "our most serious attention." If the Taliban is to accept the deal, its members will have a right to legitimately reside in the country, with potential exclusion from the council's sanctions list.

In that same council meeting, its 15 members adopted Resolution 2405 (2018) on extending the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) through March 17, 2019.

President of the Security Council for the month of March and Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands Sigrid Kaag said, "Peace in Afghanistan can only be built through comprehensive negotiations and under the leadership of the Afghan people themselves." The support of the international community, including partners and donors to the Afghan people, is indispensable, Kaag continued.

The Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Tadamichi Yamamoto also briefed participants on the latest developments in Afghanistan, including the launch of construction on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. Officials hope the pipeline will spur regional cooperation and the self-reliant economic development of Afghanistan.

Parliamentary and local elections in 2018 and presidential one next year have also called UNAMA into action to activate women's participation as voters and candidates, said Yamamoto. Yet, the relationship gridlock between President Ghani and one of the country's political parties, Jamiat-e Islami (Islamic society), over sacking its representative from the leadership of Balkh province of Afghanistan is a new concern, said Yamamoto.

Yamamoto stressed that UNAMA is cooperating with international partners and national defense forces to pressure, prior to the elections season, terrorist groups that impede peace and stability in the country. The visit of the council members to Kabul on January 13-15, organised during Kazakhstan's presidency, has been noted as a positive sign of high-level support among international partners for the Afghan government and an illustration of regional partnership between Afghanistan and Central Asia in security and development.

The council meeting also occurred on International Women's Day and prominent female representatives of Afghanistan, Deputy Chairperson of Afghanistan's High Peace Council Habibi Sarabi, and Executive Director of the Organisation for Policy Research and Development Studies Mariam Safi, gave presentations on the lives of Afghan women. They noted that the lives of women have been impacted by constitutional and legislative amendments and expressed concern over the increased number of women among refugees.

A member of the Afghan delegation to the council also highlighted Afghanistan's achievements in women's empowerment, saying the government of National Unity is committed to enhancing the role of women in all spheres of Afghan society and that women are represented in ministerial, parliamentary and diplomatic positions.

In turn, Vassilenko also voiced Kazakhstan's support of the Afghan government's efforts to improve gender equality and its adoption of the National Action Plan, which includes developing a policy to protect women in conflict, establish special courts to combat violence against women and implement the Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. He also noted the mission to Kabul in January included meetings with women's organisations led by First Lady of Afghanistan Rula Ghani, which provided insights into gender issues in Afghanistan.

The Kazakh special envoy then announced Kazakhstan's plans to organise an international conference in the fall to seek ways to empower Afghan women in the socio-economic and political spheres.

He also informed that Kazakhstan has taken the initiative to continue its flagship $50 million education programme for Afghan citizens for 2010-2021, now with co-financing from the European Union and other partners. A total of 1,000 Afghan citizens will undergo training at Kazakh universities under the Kazakh programme, said Vassilenko. Additionally, a joint project to educate Afghan girls specifically at Kazakhstan's higher education institutions to be co-funded by the EU and run in cooperation with the UN Women, is in the pipeline, noted the Kazakh envoy.

Vassilenko also expressed concern over the spread of violence against women in Afghanistan, especially the deaths of women and children because of terrorist attacks and offensive airstrikes and called on participants to join efforts to reduce such casualties.

The head of the Kazakh delegation concluded his remarks concerning gender equality by citing a Kazakh proverb, which says "A woman rock the cradle with one hand and rules the world with another."

Nation&Capital

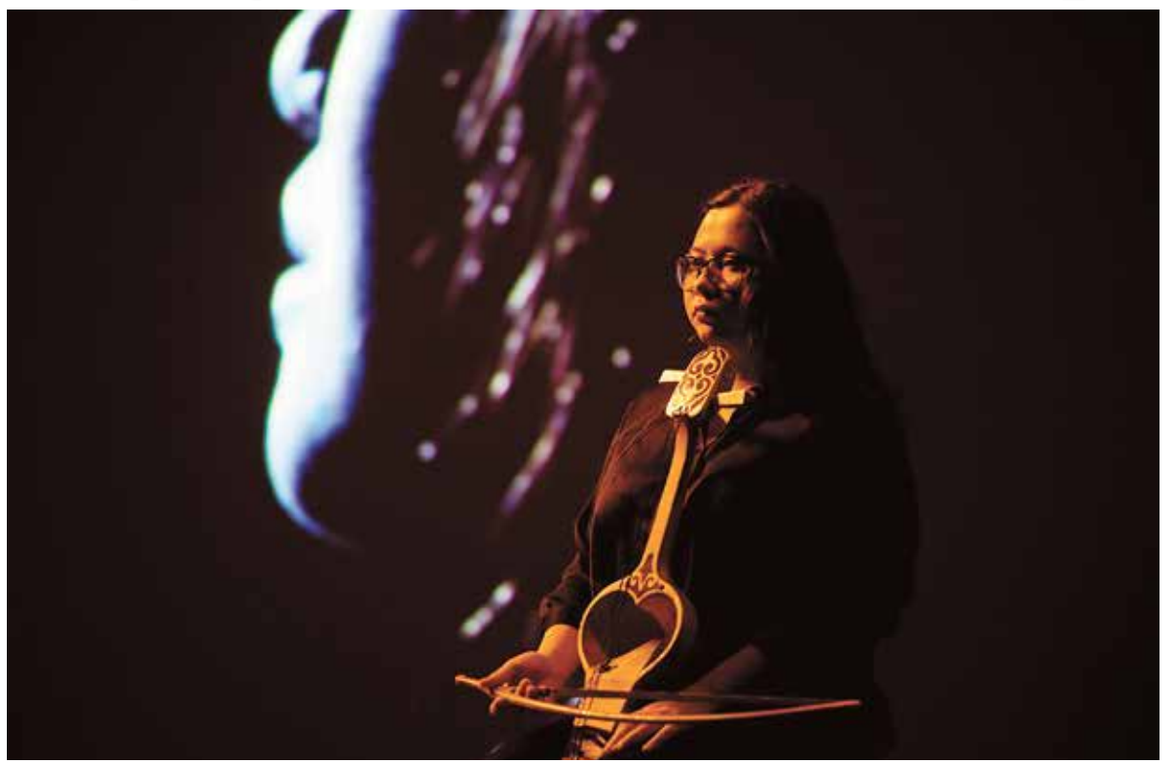
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 2018

PEOPLE
Gene editing will cure cancer, HIV, young Kazakh biotechnologist says B2

CULTURE
Kazakh comic superhero Ermek Batyr conquers mainstream US audience, spin-off on its way B3

SPORTS
Skier wins Kazakhstan's first gold medal at Paralympic Games B7

Central Asian artists bring postmodern life to ancient oral traditions in US staging of women warrior epic



A scene from "Qyrq Qyz" multimedia theatrical performance.

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – "Qyrq Qyz" ("Forty Girls"), a multimedia theatrical performance directed by Uzbek filmmaker Saodat Ismailova, debuted at New York's BAM Harvey Theatre March 23 and 24. The show premiered March 1 at the Hopkins Centre in Vermont.

"The premiere went impressively well. The girls are great! Full hall, with such a positive and generous reaction," Ismailova told The Astana Times. "The project is to show the strength and beauty of the Central Asian female world, through the talent of young creative representatives. 'Qyrq Qyz' intends to bring to life and transform into a modern language an oral ancient tradition that has disappeared. For me, this project celebrates the spiritual dimension of women and their ability to become the driving force of a civilisation."

"Qyrq Qyz" is in fact an ancient oral epic widespread in Central Asia. The legend tells the story of 40 teenage girls, led by their leader Gulaim. Ismailova's hybrid of film and performance also includes moments of text recitation – an homage to the old bards of Central Asia.

"This number [40] appears prominently in most spiritual rituals of Central Asia, whether for purification, mourning, healing, fertility, or life transitions. Everyone you know in Central Asia knows the story of 'Forty Girls,'" she said.

Through her complex new work's first layer, audiences are presented with a sonic and visual landscape of Central Asia, she explained. Then, the project speaks about female power, as well as a female world guided by the interior and spiritual as much as the linear and expressive. "Qyrq Qyz" is a story based on an ancient archetype Ismailova says is rooted deeply in the psyche, an echo of a forgotten matriarchal society.

The performing cast includes Gumshagul Bekturganova and Gumisay Berdikhanova from Karakalpakstan; Aziza Davronova and Alibek Kabdurakhmanov from Uzbekistan; Saltanat Yersultan, Arailym Omirbekova and Tokzhan Karatai from Kazakhstan; and Makhabat Kobogonova from Kyrgyzstan. The ensemble performs under the direction of Kazakhstan's Raushan Orazbaeva, a performer of the two-stringed fiddle qobyz. The music was written by Uzbek composer Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky.

The performance alternates between the narrative playing out on film and performances by live musicians who recite, sing, murmur and act onstage. The story is told in different voices and Central Asian languages, subtitled in English.

"It is difficult to say which stage I prefer in creation, each step has its own challenge, excitement and magic," Ismailova noted.

"Brooklyn Academy of Music got interested in the project at its early stage, when even the sound score was not finalised, only the script was in place. This commitment was important to embark upon the project," she commented.

Initially, Ismailova made a short film titled "Gulaim" based on the legend. Then ethnomusicologist Theodore Levin from the Aga Khan Music Initiative, an interregional music and arts education programme, supported her idea of staging a multimedia concert performed by young women musicians from different Central Asian countries.

Continued on Page B3

Life Is Here project inspires appreciating life, chasing dreams



Helene Satushkina

By Meruyert Abugaliyeva

ASTANA – Author Helene Satushkina established the Life Is Here project in the capital in 2015, including a diary and community for active and ambitious people, to remind individuals of the importance of living a conscious life. The diary is not an ordinary notebook – it is a Book of Life.

"I chose 'Life Is Here' as a name for two reasons. First, the book covers a certain period of an owner's life who is writing dreams, plans, goals, thoughts, gratitude and a personal life story there. Moreover, the diary serves as a reminder that one should live in the present, act, love, be grateful and not to be stuck in the past or future, missing out on today," she said in an interview with The Astana Times.

The mission is to inspire people to chase their dreams and pursue ambitious goals, to be honest with themselves and appreciate each day.

Satushkina elaborately developed the diary's page layout. Book of Life contains regular and travel calendars, an address book, list of birthdays, films to watch, books to read and places to visit and special pages for writing down ideas. Apart from simple pages for everyday planning, it has monthly planners to conveniently see a whole month at a glance. The unique feature is the 100 List, special catalogues of things giving a sense of gratitude, dreams and goals for the year and guidance on how to complete the lists.

"While working on the project I have changed my perception of the product, which is natural, I believe. It has transformed into the 'Book of Life' and we no longer call it a diary. Its original feature lies in its message; it makes one look for answers to serious questions. What do you want from life? How do you want to live it? 'Life is Here' inspires living a conscious life and answering those questions honestly. I want owners to use it as a personal diary, since writing helps us unveil many fascinating things," she added.

More than 2,000 copies of Life Is Here diaries are printed each year. Users who have completed the 100 List and strive to achieve their goals can join the project community, which currently has approximately 30 active members. Most are entrepreneurs, aged 22 to 35, who dedicate considerable time and effort to self-development and personal growth.

"During the meetings we share our stories and achievements, support and inspire each other. We also divide into parts and thus everyone gets a partner for the next month who will help track progress and provide guidance if necessary. I believe it is important to communicate with someone who thinks the same way, since people surrounding us play an important role in our development," noted Satushkina.

Announcements for monthly community meetings are posted on the project's Instagram page @life.is.here, where more information on both diaries and meetings is available.

Kazakh stunt people take part in internationally acclaimed films, launch training courses

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – Kazakh stunt performers are known for their top-level skills and spectacular horse scenes. They are experts in fight choreography using swords and weapons, waterfall jumps, fires and epic battle scenes.

The Astana Times recently spoke with Nomad Stunts founder, performer and director Zhaidarbek Kunguzhinov to learn about the company's new productions and projects.

Established in 2000, Nomad Stunts currently consists of more than 70 stuntmen and stuntwomen including professionals from Australia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkey and Ukraine. There are also 30 specially trained stunt horses.

While filming, the team has collaborated with actors including Colin Farrell, Jet Li, Keanu Reeves, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Christian Slater, Sylvester Stallone, Jason Statham and Bruce Willis.

"Our team is currently involved in two TV series and a filming process in Turkey. We also plan to start shooting 'Dekabrists' ('Russian Revolutionaries'), a film to be directed by Andrey Kravchuk this March. There will be big-screen tricks with horses. Some part of our team is participating in the Bollywood film based on real events about the Indo-English war," he said.

A martial arts Oscar winner, Kunguzhinov is a member of the Stuntmen Association, Kazakh Filmmakers Union and the Taurus Academy as the best director of a foreign film. He performed stunts in "The Expendables 2," "Conan the Barbarian" and the battle



Zhaidarbek Kunguzhinov

scenes in Netflix's historical series "Marco Polo" and worked as the stunt coordinator for the film "47 Ronin" and the TV series "The Kazakh Khanate" and a Turkish TV series called "Survived." He was also involved in the unique stunt of a running horse breaking through a wall in Timur Bekmambetov's movie "Daywatch."

The career of a stunt person is difficult and amazing at the same time, noted Kunguzhinov.

"Each motion picture has its own difficulties. The most challenging was the filming of 'The Expendables.' There are so many tricks under water and explosions. Some stuntmen were injured. The weather conditions were poor during the filming of 'The Vikings.' It was cold in spring. The stunt horses began to get tired and they needed rest, but there was no time for rest. The preparatory period lasted three months. However, everything was fine and the horses had no injuries," he said.

Nomad Stunts team during the filming of Viking film.

This year, the stunt team also appeared in the "McMafia" drama series on BBC One and will join the cast for Disney's "Mulan" live-action remake.

"We plan to cooperate with Sergei Bodrov… Last year, the story of the legendary battle 'Legend about Kolovrat' was released. The premiere of the 'Tobol' film directed by Igor Zaitsev is expected in autumn. We started filming 'Tomiris' with a large group of performers. The team joined the cast of 'Kazak Batyrlary' ('Kazakh Warriors') and 'Mustafa Shokai.' We closely collaborate with Hollywood and Bollywood studio projects," said Kunguzhinov.

In 2016, Nomad Stunts opened its own training base designed to prepare actors and stunt people.

"The project began with the money we earned from filming. We constructed a special sports hall for fitness workouts and a paddock for training stunt horses. People came from Bulgaria and Russia for training last year. This year, a stunt team from Canada wants to come to us for training," he said.

Kunguzhinov talked about shooting Akan Satayev's much anticipated film "Tomiris."

"We put a lot of energy into this film. There will be many different tricks and techniques to make the fight scenes look more believable. We have not done these battle scenes yet. Azerbaijani and Turkish stuntmen will join our team. More than 100 people will be present in one action scene. We want to present this film at the Taurus World Stunt Awards in January 2019," he said.

The team always finds time to take part in charity events and cooperates with Kazakhstan's Red Crescent Society. In 2017, it organised Action for Red to help lonely pensioners and low-income families.

This year, they plan to open Nomad Stunts Turkey.

"We never repeat our tricks and setting new tricks is quite challenging. It is important to properly conduct the preparatory work. For example, the rider simultaneously took two swords in the 'Mongol' film. Nobody did this before. The director liked this scene and it blended well with the general outline of the film. This became a classic magic trick," said Kunguzhinov.

Photo credit: Nomad Stunts

THINGS TO WATCH & PLACES TO GO

ASTANA OPERA

March 28 at 7 p.m.	La Bayadère, ballet
March 30 at 3 p.m.	The Journey of Peer Gynt, concert
March 31 at 6 p.m.	The Fountain of Bakhchisarai, ballet
April 1 at 6 p.m. at	Musical Kaleidoscope, concert
April 7,8 at 6 p.m.	Notre-Dame de Paris, ballet

ASTANA BALLET

March 31 at 6 p.m.	Salome, ballet

KAZAKHSTAN CONCERT HALL

March 31 at 6 p.m.	Aiman Mussakhajayeva presents…, concert

ASTANA ARENA

March 31 at 4 p.m.	FC Astana – FC Kairat

Gene editing will cure cancer, HIV, young Kazakh biotechnologist says



Galymzhan Tleboldinov

By Meruyert Abugaliyeva

ASTANA – Genetically modified living organisms might sound like fiction today, but in the not-too-distant future, genome modification will be used to edit DNA and treat human diseases like cancer and HIV, Kazakh biotechnologist Galymzhan Tleboldinov says.

The new method for such gene editing, CRISPR, helped Tleboldinov win the national stage of Famelab 2018, a popular science communications competition held by the British Council.

"Indeed, the CRISPR/Cas9 system existed even before the first human appeared on Earth, as it is based on the ancient immune system of bacteria. In the 1980s, scientists found small pieces in DNA not belonging to living organisms under study. Later it became known that these pieces belonged to viruses – but the reason for their presence was still unknown. Only in 2012 did scientists conclude that these pieces were deliberately preserved by bacteria after the first attack of a particular virus. This was done in order for the bacteria to use that DNA piece to destroy the virus if it attacked again later. This system is now studied and improved for drug development, agriculture, and the treatment of genetic diseases, such as HIV and cancer," he explained in an interview with The Astana Times.

The method was first proposed for gene editing in 2012 by Jennifer Doudna, a professor at University of California (UC) Berkeley. At that time, Tleboldinov was studying biotechnology at UC Davis, where he was a student from 2012 to 2016.

"Biotechnology was developing rapidly at that time and professors were up to date with new publications and always informed us about them. There, I was always in the know. CRISPR/Cas9 was a breakthrough, attracting a lot of interest. People, however, are still interested in it and since the topic was thoroughly researched in my university, I decided to tell about it at Famelab," he said.

Tleboldinov's video about the gene editing process took 11th place among 240 entries in the first stage of the competition. Fortunately for him, one participant decided to withdraw, allowing the young biotechnologist to join the national competition.

"During the competition, I learned that sometimes it does not matter how smart you are. I almost failed to make it to the national stage, because I was trying to show how much I knew. The point of Famelab is to deliver your speech in a clear way for your audience, and to attract interest. There is plenty of information on the internet; scientists must be able to communicate their knowledge to the public," he added.

Tleboldinov was particularly impressed by the competition participants.

"I was surprised by the participants, as they are highly qualified and the overall level of preparation was great. Most of them are either in a research group investigating their topics or somehow related to the topic. Moreover, there was no sense of rivalry, as we helped each other prepare for presentation," he added. Tleboldinov currently works at the National Centre for Science and Technology Evaluation.

"My work entails locating respected experts and contacting them to provide feedback for funding applications in biotechnology and agriculture. The nature of the work is closer to management, and in the future, I do not want to be just a researcher in a lab. I want to work on collaboration between researchers, as I feel that we have plenty of talented scientists but there is not proper management in research," he added.

As a winner of the national stage, Tleboldinov was invited to represent Kazakhstan in the international round of Famelab in London.

Entrepreneur turns hobby into business

By Zhazira Dyussembekova



Bakhargul Tolegenkyzy

ASTANA – Bakhargul Tolegenkyzy, one of Kazakhstan's 100 New Faces, has been collecting Turkic gold and silver antiques since she was young, eventually presenting them in her own private museum. In 2000, she founded Ademi-Ai Plus, which has become one of country's leaders in national souvenir production.

Tolegenkyzy moved to Kazakhstan from China in 1994.

"I remember when the news came that Kazakhstan had received independence; we were so happy when we were still students in China. I heard this news and I set a goal to go to my historical homeland. After moving to Kazakhstan, I opened my own private museum for the first time, where I presented different things in the national style that I had collected since my student days, and then I travelled all over Kazakhstan with that exhibition," she said.

The museum, in Almaty, has a collection of more than 1,000 exhibits which she often takes to different locations. The items include jewellery dating to the first-third centuries B.C., as well as clothes, a variety of household utensils, equipment and cold steel as recent as the 19-20th centuries.

Love for history brought Tolegenkyzy to produce Kazakh-style souvenirs and accessories. Her company also sells textiles, silver jewellery and business accessories and was the first in the country to introduce gilding. Ademi-Ai Plus branches have been opened in each region.

"Our goal is to revive the ancient cultural heritage of the Kazakh people and their application for the benefit of society. To breathe life into the forgotten past by writing words of wishes and blessings on the souvenirs, as well as the winged expressions of our people; thus, to show the world the rich and unique soul of the Kazakhs," she said.

Tolegenkyzy thinks the main components of success for any business are, first of all, hard work and patience.

"We must not only know and love our work, but also constantly learn new things. Equally important is the benevolent atmosphere both in the family and in the team where you work," she said.

Running a business takes strength and perseverance; it requires a lot of work capacity, knowledge, responsibility and skills.

"For me this path was led by a great love of national traditions, love for applied art in the national style. I started to collect such things from a small age. Kazakh art is worthy of high praise, so I want it to be known in the whole world and I think that promoting this art is my civic duty," she added.

Tolegenkyzy noted it is not easy to be a successful entrepreneur, especially a businesswoman. A female entrepreneur must still think about her family so her children can be fed and dressed on time, in addition to meeting their many other needs.

The support of her family, especially her spouse, was the key element in successfully developing her business.

"He is a reliable support for me and a partner and a wise business adviser," she said.



Virtuoso violinist Erzhan Kulibaev performs at Astana Opera

By Meruyert Abugaliyeva

ASTANA – World famous Kazakh violinist Erzhan Kulibaev was featured March 21 in the Astana Opera Chamber Orchestra's "Masterpieces of violin music" concert under the direction of Abzal Mukhitdinov. The programme included works by eminent German composers Max Bruch and Ludwig van Beethoven.

"Almost 20 years have passed since I first performed a concert by Bruch with the orchestra under maestro Mukhitdinov. Since then, we have held joint concerts in many countries. Beethoven's music is the apex of violin repertoire and playing it in the original version gives me an incomparable feeling," said Kulibaev.

The violinist started his musical education at the age of six at Kulyash Baisseitova Music School in Almaty, later studying at the Central Music School of Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory. After graduation, Kulibaev continued his studies with world famous teacher Zakhar Bron at Queen Sofia High School of Music in Madrid, Spain. He also did postgraduate studies with Professor Pierre Amoyal at Mozarteum University in Salzburg, Austria.



Photo credit: festivalenescu.ro

Erzhan Kulibaev

He is currently a professor at Katarina Gurska Higher School of Music in Madrid. He plays a 1722 Antonio Stradivarius Rode violin provided by Switzerland's Madjini Foundation.

Kulibaev's talent is recognised and appreciated worldwide. He received first prizes at international violin competitions in Berlin, Buenos Aires, Lisbon, Novosibirsk and Yekaterinburg, including the prestigious Henryk Wieniawski Competition in Poznan, Poland, George Enescu Festival in Bucharest, Romania and Washington Award in 2015.

He has performed in concert halls in Argentina, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, Latvia, Mexico, Morocco, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and Ukraine. He was featured with the Astana Opera Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in New York, the Sony Centre for the Performing Arts in Toronto, Canada and Opera Bastille in Paris.

Kulibaev, who resides in Spain, believes studying and working abroad was key to his success. He shared guidance for young musicians in an interview for this story.

"Do not stay put in one place. Fortunately for me I was able to go abroad, as I studied in Moscow and then joined Bron. Exploring the world, studying abroad and communicating with musicians from different countries helped me achieve success. I lived in Salzburg, where I learned a lot about Mozart. I drank the same water he drank and enjoyed the same sceneries. It was an invaluable experience," he said.

"My success was due to my mom, family and Zakhar Bron. In the future, I want to play music with talented musicians and enjoy it," he added.

Promising young entrepreneur named one of 100 New Faces

By Dana Omirgazy

ASTANA – Arman Toskanbayev, 26, is an ambitious businessperson engaged in popularising, protecting and developing Kazakh entrepreneurial activities. His endeavour and persistence serve as an example for thousands of novice entrepreneurs, for which he has been named one of the country's 100 New Faces.

During his school years, the Karaganda native repaired old computers and sold the second-hand office equipment. After graduation, he opened a small store in the city centre, earning his first million tenge (US$3,117) in just one summer.

While he chose not to continue his studies at a university, the lack of a higher education did not prevent him from starting a business.

"Now, I run several businesses. I do not remember how many businesses I started. Some of them failed, while others succeeded," he said in an interview for this story.

In 2014, Toskanbayev won a grant for three million tenge (US$9,390) for a hydroponic production project through the Business Road Map 2020 programme. Later, he founded New Green Technology and Zertis, which have become leading agricultural companies.

New Green Technology is engaged in engineering, producing and marketing hydroponic growing systems for feed.

"The equipment allows growing the seeds to feed within seven days. Our systems of growing hydroponic green fodder in closed premises allow owners of cattle to receive green food all year round directly at the place of consumption," he said.

The companies also developed and introduced technologies for groundless plant cultivation in multi-tier installations. Private investments allowed him to build a greenhouse in his home town, where he grows spinach and ruccola.

With his friend Aibek Yessenov, Toskanbayev founded United Business Group in 2015. The company has been designing and producing watches, including the Otan Patrioty ("The Country's Patriot") brand, and business accessories.

"The watches have Swiss movement; everything else is the work of Kazakh masters who create unique watches with the emblem of Kazakhstan. On the Day of the First President in 2016, I personally presented them to President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev. I also know that our watches were presented to Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Hollywood star Mark Dacascos," he said.

Last year, Toskanbayev launched a new project of producing Kazakh crypto-currency. His team provides services for ordinary people interested in the topic.

"In June last year, I released a training programme for beginning entrepreneurs 'From idea to business.' In total, over 600 young people underwent the training programme during the year, of which 150 have opened their own businesses," he noted.

Toskanbayev is a permanent member of the Committee for Small and Medium Business, National Chamber of Entrepreneurs Young Entrepreneurs Discussion Club and Nur Otan Party Public Council of Small and Medium Enterprise Support Centre. He encourages novice entrepreneurs not to be lazy, to be more optimistic, try everything new and never stop.

"I think that the 100 New Faces project is really necessary for Kazakhstan. The project participants are people with unique strength of will. To be among them is a great responsibility. I believe that young people should develop their talents while they are studying at school or a university. Talents and skills are very helpful in future endeavours," he said.



Arman Toskanbayev (R) shows the home hydroponic system.

Kazakh comic superhero Ermek Batyr conquers mainstream US audience

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – "Ermek Batyr," a comic book featuring the Kazakh superhero, has gained immediate interest since its release on Amazon's Comixology, the leading digital platform. Creators Madibek Musabekov and Bekzat Myrzakhmetov announced plans in February for the spin-off "Brothers" written by scriptwriter, producer and director Aidiye Aidarbekov.

The team is currently negotiating with Amazon Studios to launch an animated cartoon series based on the comics.

"Our book has a maximum five-point rating. We have received positive feedback from the American audience. Our comics are something new and unusual for them," Aidarbekov told The Astana Times.

Dark Matter showrunner and Stargate executive producer Joseph Mallozzi noted the high quality of the comics in his blog. He wrote that by "melding fantasy and science fiction, Musabekov's art hints at a unique folklore-based narrative."

"We have preliminary agreements with the major Kazakh media companies to publish and distribute our comics in the domestic



Aidiye Aidarbekov

market. Our team aims to develop a comic book culture in the country. Comics are a universal art that has conquered the whole world. No matter what language you speak, if you see a picture in a comic book, you can understand what the author wanted to say, even without reading the text. We promote our country through our comic books. The creation of the Kazakh Khanate is the starting point of Ermek Batyr's story. We set the task to show our rich and diverse traditions and culture," he added.

As a co-owner of Kazakhstan-based Tengri Comics publishing house, Aidarbekov is engaged in promoting the company in the U.S. It was founded by architect Musabekov and IT specialist Myrzakhmetov.

"I write scripts for our project and adapt them to the literary and cinematographic format. We all have different backgrounds, but we share a common love for comic books. When I first read the book, I knew it should be released in the U.S. At this time, I have already finished my books 'Descent from Heaven' and 'The Great Steppe.' We decided to unite our efforts and collaborate as a team," he said.

"We are also making an adaption of the Kazakh folk tale 'Yer-Tostik' in the modern superhero style with artist and animator Amira Tuyakbayeva. In collaboration with previsualisation storyboard artist Alexander Sokolov, we are working on the comics and a film based on 'The Song of Hiawatha.' This project already has great interest among several large American film companies," he added.

Aidarbekov, who has a master's degree in engineering, is currently studying filmmaking at New York Film Academy in Los Angeles.

"I am engaged in producing, directing and writing scripts. I'm trying to participate in various projects no matter whether it is making a short film, a low-budget indie film, a music video or a personal blog. Once, we made a YouTube prank video about famous UFC fighter Conor McGregor featuring Islam Badurgov and Amir Allahverdi. It immediately became popular," he said.

Aidarbekov was also involved in filming "Disaster Artist."

"It was my first Hollywood film which received a Golden Globe and was nominated for an Oscar. I wrote the script for the 'Flags over Berlin' film produced by Dauren Toleukhanov. British filmmaker Gareth Lewis and actor Damian Lewis will join the project. Every day and every meeting in Hollywood is an opportunity I cannot miss," he added.

Despite his young age, Aidarbekov is one of the country's 100 New Faces and he has ambitious plans to serve his country with knowledge and experience.

"It is a great honour for me. I try to meet the expectations of the people who believe in me and support me. The domestic film industry is seeing major growth and I want to contribute to the development of our cinematography. I have already received job offers in Kazakhstan," he said.

Central Asian artists...

Continued from Page B1

"It is thanks to the Aga Khan Music Initiative that 'Qyrq Qyz' came to life as a cross disciplinary project. Dartmouth College, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Museum Quai Branly and the National Centre of Contemporary Art, France, supported the project. The Art and Culture Development Foundation in Uzbekistan supported the filming of the project," she revealed.

It took two and a half years to create and produce the show.

"We invited over 100 young women to a casting session in search of our Gulaim for the film. We found her in Aysanem Yusupova, a first-year acting student from Karakalpakstan. The film was shot in Karakalpakstan, on the sites of 'Qyrq Qyz' ruins, and in one of the oldest mosques of Tashkent," she said.

In early June, "Qyrq Qyz" will be staged at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris.

"Later we are bringing the project to Tashkent. In 2019, we are hoping to organise presentations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," she said.

Kazakh movie producer to shoot film using AI

Staff Report

ASTANA – Kazakh producer Timur Bekmambetov plans to make a film titled "Lost and Returned World" about Soviet lieutenant Lev Zasecky, who had to learn to perceive the world again after a severe war injury. The movie will be produced with the help of artificial intelligence (AI).

"This is a story based on true events about Soviet lieutenant Lev Zasecky, who lost the ability to perceive the world around him after serious head injury. The world started falling into pieces for him, however, thanks to the power of will he was able to regain faith in life," said Bekmambetov.

"Our film is an innovative project, the first to resort to artificial intelligence for cinematic images creation," he added.

In the film's production, AI has numerous applications, including plot arrangements, selection of effects and background images and creation of movie trailers.

Lev Zasecky fought in World War II and later wrote "I will fight" diary. In 1943, he received a severe head injury losing almost a quarter of brain substance. After coming out of long coma, he was incapable of perceiving logical, cause-effect and spatial connections. Still, he was aware of the changes occurring to him and started fighting for conscious life with the help of psychologist Alexander Luria.

Luria dedicated the "Lost and Returned World" book to Zasecky, who managed to partially recover.

International contemporary music festival to be held in Almaty

By Aigerim Sadykova

ASTANA – The Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory is arranging an international festival of contemporary classic music dedicated to the Nauryz holiday April 2 to 5 in Almaty. Outstanding and world-renowned French and Austrian composers and other famous quests will perform with the Kazakh State Academic Symphony Orchestra, said conservatory rector Zhaniya Aubakirova.

"Guests of the Nauryz-21 festival are first-rate representative of the New Music Tristan Murail from France and progressive Austrian thinker and composer Klaus Lang. Also, world-class flutist Mario Caroli and conductor of St. Petersburg's modern eNsemble Fedor Lednyov will take the stage," she told The Astana Times. The Nikel ensemble of contemporary music and Moscow ensemble of Contemporary Music soloist Vladislav Pesin will also participate in the festival.

Aubakirova noted Kazakhstan's only modern music ensemble, Eegeru, which will perform at the festival, has earned attention and respect from colleagues and listeners in a short time.

"The real result of the festival will be a growing number of musicians looking for their unique language of expression and listeners



Eegeru Kazakh ensemble.

who come to concerts of contemporary music for new ideas and feelings," added Aubakirova.

The programme promises to be saturated, with 12 Kazakh and four world premieres, lectures, presentations and master classes with invited guests and musical masters of Kazakhstan.

The first day of the festival, April 2, will be a night of premiers. The Kazakh premier of Tristan Murail's "Reflections 1-2" and "Siebzehnstufen," written by Klaus Lang, will be conducted by Fedor Lednyov, who has performed more than 200 world premieres of contemporary composers.

The Kazakh State Academic Symphony Orchestra will perform together with Pesin, a violinist who has received prestigious music awards from the Internationales Musikinstitut Darmstadt, Gartov Stiftung and Kuhmo Chamber Music Festivals.

The next day, the Israeli Nikel ensemble will perform in the Great Concert Hall of the Kazakh Conservatory. The ensemble, founded in Tel Aviv in 2006, unites musicians from Israel, France, Belgium and Sweden who play the piano, saxophone, electric guitar and percussion instruments.

They present a new format of chamber music and demonstrate new possibilities of sound in electronic and acoustic instruments. Nikel is a participant of prestigious contemporary music festivals like the International Summer Music Course in Darmstadt.

Modern flute player Mario Caroli will perform April 4. World music magazine American Record Guide characterised him as musician with superhuman mastery and extraordinary musical intelligence. Caroli will appear onstage in a premier composed by Kazakh musician Beibit Daldenbai. The festival will finish with a performance by young Kazakh band Eegeru. They will play masterpieces by Tristan Murail and Klaus Lang and new compositions by Kazakh musicians Rakhat-Bi Abdyssagin, Vladimir Strigotsky-Pack and Olga Khromova.

Eeggeru is the first ensemble from Kazakhstan to perform contemporary classical music. Composer Sanzhar Baiterekov founded Eegeru in 2015 with the help of the Kurmangazy conservatory, uniting young musicians specialising in cello, viola, fiddle, flute, clarinet and piano.

"The ensemble is working for both export and import of contemporary music. Music is an elite art, especially contemporary music. Our ensemble is ready to play one of the main roles in setting up the image of our country, and to be a dialogue between contemporary and traditional musical cultures of East and West," said Baiterekov in an interview with the and.kz website.

The Nauryz-21 festival, held since 2004, is the only large-scale platform for contemporary classic music in Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

Adili – ethnic style accessories



By Dana Omirgazy

ASTANA – National-style accessories are becoming increasingly in vogue in Kazakhstan. Adili, the brand offering fashionable accessories with a national ornament, is introducing elements of that style into everyday life. The company has an online store (www.shopadili.com), where customers can browse through a charming collection for women and men.

The concept of creating a brand of national style accessories came to Adili founder and main designer Assel Adil in 2010 during her studies in the U.K. The Bolashak Scholarship student missed her native country and looked for any accessory that reminded her of Kazakhstan. Her homesickness provided the insight she realised once she returned.

Adil's talent led her to believe she could create a brand that would be highly recognised in Kazakhstan and abroad. Her older sister Indira supported the idea to create nationally inspired handkerchiefs and leather items and invested some capital into the new business. The idea turned into reality and they started manufacturing silk handkerchiefs, scarfs and leather accessories.

"The growing popularity of Kazakh ornaments in the fashion industry inspired us. Accessories with Kazakh brands have become beloved among the country's citizens. We try to meet this dress trend; we often design and produce new collections using bright and rich colours," she said.

Using natural fabrics reflects sophistication and serves as a subtle hint of wealth and well-being. Those who collect silk handkerchiefs are confident and tiny patterns and diverse colours make the accessory unique. The Adili handkerchief collection meets this belief, and customers say the accessories can compete with European fashion houses.

The sisters subsequently received numerous requests for men's accessories. Three years ago, Adili started producing a line of ties, scarves, handkerchiefs, purses and bags.

"We began to study what our men wanted. It turned out that they are very conservative. They would not wear those ties that I would like to produce. Therefore, we try to choose restrained ornaments and colours. Leather accessories are made in black or brown colours," Adil told forbes.kz.

In seven years, the Adili brand has gained customer loyalty and recently launched the innovative project of digital printing on natural fabrics. With the help of new technology, the company started producing home textiles under the Adili Textile label. The company offers an ecologically clean product made in Kazakhstan.

"Digital printing on natural fabrics allows us to create a product with a high image and printing quality corresponding to world brands. Previously, Kazakhstan used rotary fabric printing technology, which implied a long and costly process of making drawings on fabric of rather low quality. Adili Textile Company brought know-how to our market by making world-class fabrics at a reasonable price," said Adil.

Adili currently has stores in Aktau, Aktobe, Almaty, Atyrau and the capital. The company plans to open more shops throughout the country and continue creating trendy and elegant collections.

Bekmambetov presents "Unfriended: Dark Web"

Staff Report

ASTANA – Kazakh producer Timur Bekmambetov and Blumhouse Productions CEO Jason Blum presented a horror film titled "Unfriended: Dark Web" at the March 9-18 South by Southwest (SXSW) Film Festival in Texas.

"We all should have our doubts about the personal weaknesses we've exposed through our social media accounts," said a SXSW Film Review.

The film written and directed by Stephen Susco is a sequel to the "Unfriended" horror film released in 2014. It is the fourth film produced by Bazelevs studio in the screenlife format.

"The film is the inception of Screenlife language. Screenlife is an innovative film language that tells a whole narrative within the frames of a computer screen. The concept was initially developed when Timur Bekmambetov produced Unfriended, a horror flick that turned into a commercial success," the press service of the Bazelevs production company reported.

According to Internet Movie Database (IMDB), a teen comes into possession of a new laptop and soon discovers that the previous owner is not only watching him but will do anything to get it back. All the action unfolds on computer screen of the main character.

"A dark, grim, and truly unsettling example of tech-horror, 'Unfriended: Dark Web' is a reminder that we're never safe from prying eyes," said the review on the Dread Central website.

The original "Unfriended" film earned more than $64 million in the global ticket sales. It won the Most Innovative Film award at the Fantasia Film Festival in Montréal in 2014. Bekmambetov's film about the search for a missing schoolgirl "Search" in a similar format won the Audience Award and Alfred P. Sloan Feature Film Prize at the recent Sundance Film Festival. The film "Profile," about the recruitment of European women into the so called ISIS, won the 20th Panorama Audience Awards for best fiction film at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The Bazelevs is an international film production company founded by Bekmambetov in 1994, with offices in Los Angeles, Moscow and Beijing. Its portfolio includes "Night Watch," "Day Watch," "Wanted," the "Elki" franchise, "9," "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter," "Unfriended," "Hardcore Henry" and other films.

Almaty quilting enthusiasts try to patch together a world record



Photo credit: depositphotos.com

By Dana Omirgazy

ASTANA – Quilting enthusiasts in Almaty will work from March 22 to the Sept. 16 Almaty Day to break a Guinness World Record for the world's largest patchwork quilt ("Kurak Korpe" in Kazakh), measuring 25,500 square metres. Organisers chose March 22 as it marks the rebirth of nature and the spring holiday of Nauryz.

Quilting materials will be collected from 25 Almaty libraries prior to March 22.

"Each piece of Kurak Korpe reflects the diversity of our Kazakh land: its steppes, mountains and rivers, and, of course, the unity of the people. Kazakhstan is a home for people of at least 130 nationalities. As quilts are tightly sewn in one blanket, so we are united by one country," Almaty Department of Culture and Archives said in its announcement of the project.

The project will conclude with a gathering on Almaty City Day in the First President's Park, where the largest Kurak Korpe will be laid out. Later, pieces of the quilt will be exhibited at events throughout the country.

The previous record for quilting was established in Porto, Portugal. A quilt patchwork measuring 25,100 square metres was completed in 2000.

Another record on tea drinking will be arranged on Zhibek Zholy Avenue March 22 in Almaty. For this, organisers intend to install a large teacup of 2,000 litres of instant tea to share with 20,000 people. The record will be recorded in Kazakhstan's book of records.

The main festive events for Nauryz will take place at several locations in Almaty March 21-25 from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. On March 22, a concert and a festival of national cuisine will be held on the Astana Square in Almaty. Almaty residents will also attend celebrations on Panfilov and Zhibek Zholy streets March 22-25 from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

The Spring Festival will be celebrated on the square near the Zhurgenov Academy, in the Athletic Village and near the Almaty Arena Ice Palace.

Ministry of Agriculture to provide farmers with free seeds

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – The Kazakh Ministry of Agriculture has prepared a new seed production programme in which farmers will be offered free high-quality seeds and required to return only a portion of their value in autumn. The remainder will be paid by the state. The plan was developed due to worsening grain quality in the past few years.

Under the seed development fund, every farmer will be able to take the necessary quantity, then repay 30-50 percent of their value after the harvest. The payment delay is important and convenient, as many farmers have financial problems in the spring and often do not have enough money for spare parts, fuel and other expenses.

Kazakh grain has always been valued for its high gluten content made possible thanks to the country's traditionally hot, dry summers. Food grain must contain at least 23 percent gluten to be considered high quality and the best Kazakh grain has up to 32 percent.

Summers in Kazakhstan were unusually wet in 2014-2016, however, resulting in a negative effect on grain quality. The situation was aggravated by many farmers who sowed their fields with ordinary grains, not seeds, and did not use fertilisers to fight weeds and diseases.

Research in 2016 regarding seed production and use found Kazakhstan's annual demand for quality seeds is approximately 2.4 million tonnes of spring cereals, legumes, oilseeds, fodder crops and potatoes. The study also determined the share of elite seeds decreased 1.5 times in a five-year period, from 5 percent in 2010 (124,000 tonnes) to 3.3 percent in 2015 (78,000 tonnes). In the same time period, the government decreased financial support for seed production, spending 3.7 billion tenge (US$11.5 million) in 2013 and only 1.8 billion tenge (US$5.6 million) in 2015. In addition, it did not subsidise elite seeds in 2015.

Deciding to change the situation, the ministry took measures to support seed production and the use of mineral fertilisers and, in particular, restore subsidising original and elite seeds. The state programme set the goal to increase the share of elite seeds up to 6 percent in the hope of increasing their use and production 2.8-fold in five years (from 78,000-134,000 tonnes in 2017 to 219,000 tonnes in 2021).

The programme showed results very quickly and farmers were pleased with the high quality of last year's harvest.

The ministry intends to strictly control the standard for updating seeds to farmers who receive state support. State bodies will take administrative measures against those who violate the regulations.

Kostanai region to advance agriculture, car assembly with Italian, Chinese investments

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – The Kostanai region has announced plans to launch eight projects this year worth 28.3 billion tenge (US$88 million), according to a March 13 regional press service report.

Kazakh Invest, KazAgro and the region signed an investment agreement for agricultural product deep processing in mid-February with the Milan and Lombardy Chamber of Commerce and Industry, an organisation that unites more than 9,000 Italian companies.

"We visited a number of enterprises involved in the processing of agricultural products in a four-day period. We agreed to launch a joint plant producing durum wheat pasta in collaboration with the Pavan company, an enterprise with 60 years of experience. This project is important for our region," said Kostanai region Deputy Akim (Governor) Meirzhan Myrzaliyev.

The regional delegation met with ten interested companies, including AIDEPI, Andalini, Arete Slr, Bonifiche Ferraresi, Caseificio Parma 2064, Fava, the Italian Chamber of Commerce, ItalPast and Pavan, before reaching the agreement.

"The Italian investors are interested in land leasing with ready engineering and transport infrastructure, measures of state support to provide investment preferences and stimulate exports and access to the Chinese and Russian markets," he added.

The region, which has approximately six million hectares of land with quality wheat varieties, is seeking investors in agriculture and food processing. The harvest reaches about 183,000 tonnes, including varieties with gluten levels of more than 25 percent, but the products are mainly exported to neighbouring countries as raw materials. The authorities sell the added value products in accordance with the instructions of the head of state.

As part of the Kazakh-Chinese cooperation programme, the region continues to attract Chinese investment. SaryarkaAvtoProm, in cooperation with China Machinery, implemented a project in 2017 to produce JAC cars in minimal facilities using completely knocked down (CKD) kits.

"This year, the China Machinery company plans to complete its entry as a strategic partner to the Allur Group. The acquisition of the company's shares will contribute to investing additional investments in the working capital and fixed assets of the enterprise, attracting new brands and increasing exports. In addition, the automotive industry is implementing two projects to assemble light commercial vehicles and large-capacity IVECO trucks and to produce Peugeot 301 cars from CKD kits this year," said Myrzaliyev.

Best Kostanai commissioned a mill complex last year with the participation of foreign capital. Plans are also underway to begin three projects with foreign participation of 5.1 billion tenge (US$16 million) in the Kostanai Industrial Zone, he added.

A total of 58.5 billion tenge (US$181 million) was invested in the non-primary sector of the economy in 2017, an indicator which exceeded the previous year's figures by 17.8 billion tenge (US$55 million). Approximately 5.5 billion tenge (US$17 million) was invested in January.

New York real estate baron to return assets to Kazakh BTA Bank

Staff Report

ASTANA – Kazakhstan's BTA Bank will receive assets and money worth $38.3 million after reaching an amicable agreement with Joseph Chetrit, an American developer and former partner of fugitive oligarch Mukhtar Ablyazov.

"During a trial initiated in 2015 by BTA Bank JSC and Almaty Akimat [mayor's office] against Mukhtar Ablyazov, Viktor Khrapunov, Ilyas Khrapunov, and Triadou SPV S.A. in the Southern District Court of New York (USA), an amicable agreement was concluded with one of the participants in the lawsuit, Mr. Joseph Chetrit," BTA Bank's press service reported March 16.

Chetrit transferred ownership rights for two real estate objects through a company owned by him, the total value of which, according to preliminary estimates, is $13.165 million, cash equal to the estimated value of a property – $1.6 million, financial assets in the amount of $23.5 million, which, according to the judge's order, are kept in a deposit account. The funds will be released upon completion of the trial.

Chetrit was initially accused of participating in an international money laundering scheme and helping Ablyazov and the Khrapunovs hide $40 million in New York real estate deals.

"The activities of the BTA Bank on asset recovery at the interstate level have created a legal precedent of establishing and returning stolen assets through creating an evidence base in the U.S. judicial bodies. We also want to highlight the cooperation efforts of Ablyazov's former partner, which helped resolve part of the dispute peacefully and strictly in a legal field," the bank's press release read.

Additionally, as part of the trial, the court ruled on the defendants' contempt of court. During a March 5 trial, U.S. Magistrate Judge Katharine H. Parker found Ilyas Khrapunov, the son of Viktor Khrapunov and the son-in-law of Ablyazov, responsible for violating the protective order issued earlier by the court on transcripts of the plaintiffs' depositions.

The court found that Ilyas Khrapunov leaked the transcript of a BTA Bank representative to a number of media outlets. The court ruling also stated that "Ilyas Khrapunov has played games with this court in the past, and his violation of the confidentiality order here is simply another example of this behaviour."

This way, he not only violated the court's order, but also hampered justice, the judge stated.

"Taking into account these facts, BTA Bank and Almaty Akimat are set for a positive outcome of the trial that is scheduled for the middle or the end of 2018. We are confident that in the future we will be able to identify and return other possible hidden assets to Kazakhstan, including through the American system of justice," the bank's statement read.

Ablyazov is a former chairman of BTA bank, who was accused of stealing about $7.5 billion from the bank. The case against Ablyazov, who has lived abroad for many years, was filed in Kazakhstan in 2009. An investigation found that the stolen funds were the Kazakh citizens' pension deposits, personal savings and loans from foreign financial institutions. In 2017, he was sentenced in absentia by the Kazakh court to 20 years in prison. He is also wanted in Russia and Ukraine and was convicted in absentia to 22 months of imprisonment by the English High Court of Justice for "deliberate" and "substantial" contempt of court.

Viktor Khrapunov, a former mayor of Almaty, was accused of creating and leading a criminal group, misappropriation and embezzlement of entrusted property, fraud, money laundering and abuse of office. He currently resides in Switzerland where he fled after finding out the Kazakh government started an investigation against him. He was placed on an international detention request list by the International Criminal Police Organisation (INTERPOL).

Kyzylorda rice producers to make animal feed from rice hulls

Staff Report

ASTANA – The Kyzylorda region Chamber of Entrepreneurs will be putting the phrase reduce-reuse-recycle into action. The organisation, which studied the leading rice-producing countries, found many South Korean farmers use a processing technology that recycles the hulls. The chamber plans to help its own growers by covering half the expense of the equipment.

"We came out with a proposal to subsidise 50 percent of the cost, stimulating farmers to install the Korean facility," said chamber head Galymbek Zhaksylykov at a regional meeting.

The equipment is in demand by Korean and Kazakh rice producers. The cost varies from $122,925 to $221,220 and the acquisition will ensure the growth of rice farmers' incomes and increase tax deductions. By assisting in negotiations with suppliers and providing a portion of the funding, the chamber hopes to motivate farmers to make the purchase.

Rice hulls contain lignin, a complex polymer substance, and Kyzylorda farmers have long faced the problem of how to use them. Lignin is unsuitable for animal feed, nor does it decompose in the open air or soil. While the hulls contain 20 percent lignin, they also have 70 percent nutrients, including various medicinal components. The recycled hulls can be used as an easily digested additive in animal feed.

"There are two ways to dispose of lignin in the rice hull, to chop or to destroy the lignin form under high pressure compression. We found the facility in a South Korean company," said Zhaksylykov.

"About 530,000 tonnes of rice were harvested in Kyzylorda region in 2017. Ninety thousand tonnes of rice hull remain after the grain processing that are burned or thrown away," he added.

Approximately 600 million tonnes of rice hulls are buried or burned annually around the world, causing negative effects on the environment and human health as the silicon dioxide they contain does not decompose under the ground. The substance does not conduct heat, however, and is widely used in construction and manufacturing electrical products.

Regional scientists discovered another way to use rice hulls last summer. They created a new technology where the grain coverings would be mixed with liquid glass and calcium chloride to form papercrete, a lightweight concrete used in construction. Using the hulls would reduce the cost, making papercrete an economical and environmentally friendly product.



Health Technology Assessment is key element in decision making, says Polish expert

By Zhazira Dyussembekova

ASTANA – Kazakhstan's healthcare system is being reformed based on introducing compulsory health insurance and no modern country can offer a basic benefit package without a Health Technology Assessment (HTA), said Polish former Deputy Health Minister and strategic medical technologies consultant for Dentons Business Services EMEA Krzysztof Landa during a March 15 workshop in the capital.



Krzysztof Landa

"If the country introduces health insurance or coverage and begins to collect money from taxes or premiums, it needs to define a basic benefit package, so basically they [officials] have to explain to people what exactly people are paying for. In order to provide rational and transparent management of a basic benefit package, an HTA must be introduced. Otherwise, the process of defining benefits for people covered with insurance will be not transparent and rational. That will cause many issues for decision makers, since they may be accused of not being transparent or not using limited resources the best possible way. HTA helps decision makers to achieve the goal of transparency and rational use," he told The Astana Times.

The workshop, "Health Technology Assessment in strategic healthcare management and policy development: national and regional decisions taking on the pharmaceutical listing and reimbursement," gathered Kazakh experts on HTA and rational drug supply. The detailed study of international best practices has been attracting great practical interest, said the organisers.

HTA is the only tool that allows assessing the effectiveness of spending funds and achieving their efficient use, said Landa. It is an integrated interdisciplinary approach used to analyse health policy based on the long-term consequences of applying existing or new technologies for medical care. HTA is conducted to justify decisions and formulate health policy based on objective information. The approach evaluates technologies such as medicines, medical equipment, procedures and organisational structures within the healthcare system. HTA involves choosing the best available treatment methods that ensure maximum health benefits for the population at a given cost level.

The method allows specialists to determine which products are more effective and economically profitable, especially in cases when choosing between local and foreign producers. According to experts, the state seeks to use its funds more rationally and gives preference to Kazakh producers. If the assessment shows an expensive foreign medicine is more effective, however, the state gives it preference.

"The knowledge of the HTA system and its functionality will be important for future decision-making, which in the future will result in using the technologies that are the most efficient, safe and economically beneficial and effective for this country. It will result in rational use of healthcare resources," said Centre for Rational Use of Medicines head Gulzira Zhusupova at the event.

Using HTA in Kazakhstan is a recent development, as it was launched in 2009. Since 2011, the World Bank has trained a number of HTA experts and the list of the country's high-tech medical services was formed based on the assessment.

The most important thing is that Kazakhstan is moving towards evidence-based healthcare, said Landa. Talking about Poland's experience, he noted the country has compulsory medical insurance and solidarity rule, which is actually a coverage system.

"So, people pay money in the way of taxes and this money is then managed by the National Health Fund, so we have a monopsony institution which is responsible for the delivery of goods and benefits from the basic benefits package, including drug reimbursement. All Polish citizens are entitled to the basic benefit package and they have health coverage," he said.

Poland's drug reimbursement programme was introduced in the 1970s. Today, some medicines are available for free and the majority of drugs on the reimbursement list can be purchased for a lump sum payment of 3.2 Polish zloty (US$0.96).

"Just like in Kazakhstan, emergency care was reimbursed from the beginning. There were probably always some benefits in Poland for people needing urgent care, but then this system was developed," he added.

Landa thinks the best way to introduce compulsory medical insurance is learning from those nations where programmes have succeeded, such as Australia and Scotland.

Kazakh consumers see small seasonal price hikes for agricultural products

By Dana Omirgazy

ASTANA – Prices for socially important food products have increased 0.7 percent since the beginning of the year. The largest increases have been in Astana (102.2 percent), Almaty (101.6 percent) and Aktobe region (101.3 percent), First Vice Minister of Agriculture Arman Yevniyev said during a March 13 government meeting in Astana.

According to the minister, the price increases can be seen primarily in agricultural products such as cabbage, onions, potatoes and carrots. Citizens have also seen price hikes in dairy products and beef. However, prices for buckwheat, rice, eggs, granulated sugar, flour and salt have decreased.

"In general, the price movements show seasonal fluctuations. The prices depend on the costs and losses in the storage of products, a decrease in the supply of vegetable products due to a reduction in inventories, as well as an increase in the cost of goods and services that directly affect the cost of production and transportation costs," Yevniyev said.

Meantime, almost 2,178 tonnes of food products were purchased and delivered to the Stabilisation Fund of Kazakhstan in January. Particularly, the bulk of the purchase was made by the Zhambyl (2,000 tonnes of sugar), Pavlodar (68 tonnes of rice) and the West Kazakhstan regions (60 tonnes of rice).

"This year, 5,538 tonnes of foodstuffs were sold, including 2,541 tonnes of potatoes (45.9 percent), 762 tonnes of carrots (13.8 percent), 618.6 tonnes of onions (11.2 percent), 577.3 tonnes of cabbage (10.4 percent) and 504.1 tonnes of flour (9.1 percent)," the vice minister reported.

According to the regional and city administrations of Almaty and Astana, as of Feb. 25, the Stabilisation Fund accounts for 8,136.7 tonnes of foodstuffs, as 14,257.8 tonnes of products were delivered to refreshment and storage.

"The accounts of social-entrepreneurial corporations and deposits of second-tier banks keep 4.4 billion tenge (US$13.7 million), allocated for the formation of stabilisation funds," Yevniev added.

Following the meeting, Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Bakytzhan Sagintayev instructed representatives of executive bodies to prevent further price increases and strengthen control over price hikes ahead of the upcoming holidays.

Government to build more college dorms to accommodate increasing student numbers

By Zhanat Tukpiyev

ASTANA – Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev recently ordered 75,000 more dormitory beds be made available to address an increasing shortage in housing for Kazakh college students.

Out of 530,000 students, approximately 204,000, just over 38 percent, studying at Kazakh higher educational institutions live outside of college dorms, Vice Minister of Education and Science Bibigul Assylova said during the March 15 press conference.

The President also recently increased the number of available higher education grants, which is expected to further increase the need for dormitories. Assylova said, adding that the 75,000 more beds should accommodate the increase resulting from the new grants.

Assylova also noted for the press the process for building dormitories in Kazakhstan.

"First, a university or developer organisation prepares a dormitory project and concludes a contract with the financing company, which will be determined by the programme operator. The contract assumes that from the day of the dormitory operation, a developer or university will receive a monthly payment per one bed over several years to recover the construction costs," the vice minister said.

Kazakhstan Engineering celebrates 15th anniversary of domestic innovation in armaments

By Yerbolat Uatkhanov

ASTANA – The Kazakhstan Engineering company celebrated its 15th anniversary March 13. Since its creation, the company has ensured a unified financial, production and technological policy for the largest enterprises of Kazakhstan's military-industrial complex. Today, the company produces cutting-edge military equipment unseen elsewhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

The sole shareholder of Kazakhstan Engineering is the Samruk Kazyna Sovereign Wealth Fund. The company is under the trust management of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defence and Aerospace Industry.

The KAE plant, a joint venture among Kazakhstan Engineering, Turkey's Aselsan and the Turkish Defence Industry Committee, opened in December 2013 and produces radio stations, surveillance systems, remotely controlled combat modules, collimator sights, reconnaissance devices, infrared lenses, electronic boards and night vision devices. It is one of Kazakhstan Engineering's most successful projects.

"This is all for the needs of the Kazakh army. What is an optical sight? Previously, this device consisted of several lenses, but now modern military optical sights are complex systems combining the most advanced developments in the field of optics and electronics," said KAE Commercial Director Yerassyl Baizhumanov, according to Tengrinews.kz.

There is sterile cleanliness in the plant, because any dust particle that gets into a night vision device or optical sight at the assembly stage can affect their operation. Almost everything at the plant is hand-made. This is a necessity caused by the huge number of components in each device and the painstaking work needed to install them.

The plant uses nanotechnology to produce lenses that are very similar to glass, but are actually made of metal, an advanced process only used in about 10 countries.

"Many people, when they see them for the first time, think they are made of glass, but they are made from germanium. It's the only material in nature that allows to transfer heat up to 50 to 60 percent. But that's not all. Thanks to our technological processes, we bring this number to 97 to 98 percent. The lenses are processed and covered by a special coating," said Baizhumanov.

"It's just impossible to buy such a lens anywhere in the world. Purchase of such lenses is controlled according to international standards regulating the trade in armaments. Lense sales are limited, but we do not buy them – we manufacture them ourselves… At a military exhibition, representatives of the CIS countries were shocked at seeing these samples, because they believed that this type of production was mastered only by Israel and the U.S.," the commercial director said.

He highlighted that the plant produces not only modern optical devices, but radio-electronic equipment.

"This is a unique production – we can create up to 25 layers of motherboards, which ultimately increases the functionality of the devices," Baizhumanov said.

A good example of an innovative KAE product is its system of image transmission from the optical sight to a soldier's eye monitor, which allows a shooter to fire from shelter, without coming into the field of view of the enemy.

"A soldier puts an eye-patch monitor on his helmet, connects to the sight with a wireless connection and sees the aiming from his weapon. That is, he can shoot from behind the corner, from a trench, under cover, which can eventually save his life. The product is very useful," he explained.

From May 23 to May 26, the KADEX 2018 international exhibition of military equipment and armament will take place in Astana. For the first time, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defence and Aerospace Industry will organise the event. The KAE plant is a permanent participant of KADEX. This year, the enterprise will present promising projects as well as its main products.

Smart technologies transform education, healthcare in Pavlodar region

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – The Pavlodar region is building its smart cities by introducing 74 education, healthcare, culture and social projects as part of the Digital Kazakhstan initiative, reported the regional press service.

The region is participating in a pilot programme on digitisation in education by introducing an electronic queue in preschool educational organisations, according to the Smart Pavlodar project. The face recognition system also operates at the Zhas Daryn School for gifted children and the fingerprint payment solution is offered at public school No. 16.

"We are creating a unified educational information system. Currently, 366 out of 371 schools in the region use this system. The remaining five schools will join in the near future. The Bilim Land system, a digital educational resource featuring 315 online and 55 offline courses, is available in 370 educational institutions. The number of online lessons viewed has reached 700,000 in the last three months," said Pavlodar region Deputy Akim (Governor) Meiram Begentayev at the March 13 Central Communications Centre press briefing.

He noted the need to eliminate the shortcomings related to digitisation.

"The innovative solutions, first of all, should be convenient for people. For example, teachers have to fill in electronic and paper grade books. In accordance with the current regulatory and legal acts, grade books must be in a written format. As a result, teachers are required to fill in two documents. Today, they have a choice to choose electronic or paper format. However, the electronic grade book system is convenient. It allows spending much less time putting a tick in the necessary boxes. We need more effective approaches," he added.

The same situation prevails in healthcare. Physicians spend twice as much time on paperwork as seeing patients. The electronic filing system must be by default.

Today, 32 of 35 healthcare organisations are connected to the region's medical information system and the remaining hospitals will join by April 1. Creating a single database of personal medical data for residents is currently underway and will be integrated into the Ministry of Healthcare database. There are also plans to organise information system training for medical workers and provide the latest computer equipment in hospitals and clinics. The archival paper documents will be converted into digital format.



Photo credit: Zakon.kz

Zhas Daryn School launches face recognition technology at the entrance to the building.

Ancient Saraishyk to be revived in Atyrau region

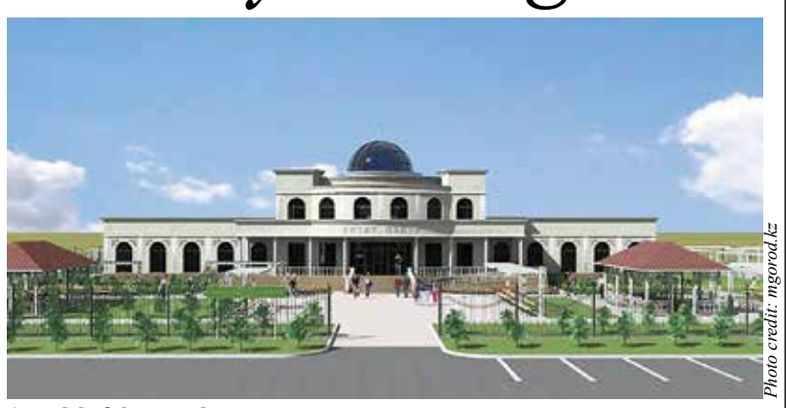


Photo credit: mgorod.kz

A model of the complex.

Staff Report

ASTANA – A historical and cultural museum of Saraishyk, displaying artefacts from this ancient city of the Great Silk Road, will be constructed near Atyrau city, said Atyrau region Akim (Governor) Nurlan Nogayev. He outlined the plans during a recent meeting with the locals.

"The museum will increase entry and domestic tourism by drawing people's attention to the sacred Saraishyk city," he said.

Plans for the complex show administrative and household buildings and a hotel. Guests will be invited to visit the exhibition halls, depository, conference hall and open air ethnic village. There will also be a laboratory, respiratory rooms and a library with book depository and electronic database.

A delegation led by Minister of Culture and Sports Arystanbek Mukhamediuly visited the complex in February.

"This is a very good project; we have the same visit centre in Almaty. I suggest building the centre on the embankment of the Ural River, not near the memorial complex, because people from regional centres and other regions of the country will come here. We have to think if they can bath in the river during the summer," he noted.

The complex is 60 percent complete, said company project regional representative Azilkhan Baibatyrov.

"A special commission will be set up to study the banks of the Ural River for human remains and archaeological value. The exact location of the construction will be indicated after the research," he said.

The Ural River has already washed away more than 200 metres of the ancient city and construction of a protective dam to be completed this year will preserve Saraishyk's cultural heritage. The government allocated 1.6 billion tenge (US$5 million) in 2016 for the protective work.

The ministry is also creating the Bozok and Botai reserve museums in Akmola and North Kazakhstan regions respectively.

As part of the Rukhani Janghyru programme, Q-Daily media centre created an animated film about children travelling to ancient Saraishyk. To write the script, the producers visited the excavation site, consulted with scientists and became acquainted with archaeological research.

Saraishyk is 30 kilometres from Atyrau. The Saraishyk Khan (ruler) memorial complex built in 1999 consists of a mosque and mausoleum with commemorative plaques indicating where seven Khans were buried, four rulers of the Golden Horde and three Kazakhs, including Kassym Khan. The latter's reign was known as the period when the Kazakh state reached its power in Central Asia.

Saraishyk was a major Golden Horde trading centre and one of the stops on the Great Silk Road in the 15th–17th centuries. Although the city's glory has long been associated with successful trade, excavations of sacred books have proven the theory it was also a centre of spiritual enlightenment.

Otrar settlement animated film presented under Ruhani Janghyru programme

By Lyubov Dobrota

ASTANA – The animated film "Otyrardy Korgau" ("Defence of Otrar") was presented in the South Kazakhstan region in early March under the Ruhani Janghyru (Modernisation of Kazakhstan's Identity) programme.

"The film is aimed not only at small viewers. The presentation of the cartoon, held in the South Kazakhstan regional Opera and Ballet Theatre, showed that adults also watched the film with interest. The fact that the film was created in 2D and 3D attracted people. The SAK studio created the film under the Ruhani Janghyru programme. The idea of filming came to Akim (Governor) of the region Zhanseit Tuimebayev, who believes that books are not enough to promote the history and cultural heritage of the country," according to the press release.

The film tells the story of Zhanai and Aibol, rural boys who became part of historical events, learned cultural heritage and made many curious discoveries. They went to one of the world's biggest libraries in Otrar to study different sciences. When the Dzhungar warriors invaded, the boys had to be brave to defend the settlement.

Zhanai and Aibol recreated a catapult – the most formidable weapon of the time – from drawings found in one of the books. Their ingenuity and courage helped the Otrar inhabitants protect their city. Their heroic acts serve as an example to modern children and teenagers of the ways to receive and use knowledge, love their land and be real patriots, note the filmmakers.

The movie was created in four months. Director and main artist Azamat Yernazarov, scriptwriter Bakytzhan Kulzhabai, composer Ruslan Shynykulov and manager Nuriddin Patteyev hope to transport audiences to the historical events.

Shymkent will soon host the shooting of a ten-episode film about one of the Zhety Zhargy (Seven Regulations) Code of Laws authors, orator and poet Tole-bi, as well as the animated film "Ordabasy – Birliktin Tu'y" ("Ordabasy – Flag of Unity"). The latter will recount the history of ancient Turkestan and the Oksys settlement, where, according to historians, outstanding scientist, poet and thinker Al-Farabi was born.

During the spring school holidays, South Kazakhstan region children will have the chance to watch a number of animated movies like "Kush atasy – Kazhymukan" about Kazakh wrestler Kazhymukan, "Kiyeli Kazygurt" about the Kazygurt holy mount and historical cartoons "Otyrardy Korgau" and "Kone Zhetigennin Syry."

Russia to introduce special registration rules for Kazakh citizens during World Cup 2018

Staff Report

ASTANA – Russia will be hosting World Cup 2018 and the Kazakh Embassy there will introduce special registration rules for Kazakh citizens in a number of cities beginning May 25.

"The special rules for the registration of foreign citizens will be put into effect in Ekaterinburg, Kaliningrad, Kazan, Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, Rostov-on-Don, Samara, Saransk, Sochi, St. Petersburg and Volgograd for the period of the World Football Championship from May 25-July 25. Kazakh citizens are obliged to register within a day after arrival at the place of temporary stay at the territorial migration authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia. The ministry will work in an enhanced mode. These rules apply to foreign citizens staying only in the above-mentioned cities," according to an embassy statement.

Entry to remaining Russian cities will continue as normal. Kazakh citizens will be exempt from the need to register after arriving in Russia for a period not exceeding 30 days.

"The responsibility for registering Kazakh citizens in hotels, sanatoria, rest homes or other places of temporary stay and accommodation shall be borne by the host party," said the embassy.

The World Cup 2018 finals will be held June 14-July 15. Russia will be hosting the football championship for the first time and this year marks the first time the event will be in Eastern Europe. The championship is scheduled at 12 stadiums in 11 cities.

According to the special rules, all registration procedures will be performed by the receiving party, which will not be required to contact any organisation.

The host can be either Russian or foreign citizens permanently residing in the country with a residence permit, legal entities, their branches or representative offices where the foreign citizen works.

Citizens will be asked to present their passports and migration cards to the host party. Withdrawing the passport and migration card will not be permitted.

The receiving party shall fill out a special notification form based on the documents submitted by the foreign citizen upon arrival. It will then submit the form and a copy of the passport and migration card to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs territorial migration authority. The state registration fee will not be charged where the guests are staying.



Skier wins Kazakhstan's first gold medal at Paralympic Games

By Anuar Abdrakhmanov

The Kazakh National Paralympic team recently won its first gold medal in the history of the Paralympic games with Alexander Kolyadin's winning gold in the men's 1.5 km sprint classic.

Kolyadin's time was four minutes, 19.7 seconds. Second place went to Yoshihiro Nitta of Japan, followed by Mark Arendz of Canada and Iikka Tuomisto from Finland.

Kolyadin, who is from the Sarykol district of the Kostanai region, is a master of sports of Kazakhstan, six-time champion of the country and participant in the Sochi 2014 Paralympic Games. The athlete's best previous achievement was 6th place at the World Championships in Germany.

President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev congratulated the athlete on his gold medal.

"This is a wonderful victory, which the country can be proud of. It gives joy to millions of fans in Kazakhstan. Your achievement will go down in the history of Kazakhstan's sport and will be a good example for the younger generation," the presidential telegram read. The Kazakh President wished the athlete good health, well-being and more success.

"We met with him in Borovoye right before the start, and I saw how he trained. And you know, he was ready, both mentally and physically. Then we wrote to each other, and I asked him how he was doing. He had a winning mindset, he was ready to win and promised to try," said Kolyadin's coach Anatoly Poiskovoy.



Photo credit: sputniknews.kz

Alexander Kolyadin (C).

> "We met with him in Borovoye right before the start, and I saw how he trained. And you know, he was ready, both mentally and physically. Then we wrote to each other, and I asked him how he was doing. He had a winning mindset, he was ready to win and promised to try."

Kazakhstan competed in cross-country skiing and biathlon at the Paralympic games in PyeongChang. The national team's athletes placed well in international competitions leading up to the games.

The Games included competitions in alpine skiing, biathlon, cross-country skiing, ice hockey, snowboarding and wheelchair curling.

Kazakh boxers win four gold medals at international tournament in Warsaw

By Anuar Abdrakhmanov

ASTANA – Kazakh boxers recorded impressive results at the recent 25th Feliks Stamm International Tournament in Poland.

Ilyas Suleimenov won the gold medal in the up to 56 kg category, defeating Mohammad Alvadi of Jordan. Bekdaulet Ibragimov (64 kg) knocked out Damian Durkacz, the host country's only representative in the finals, and Aslanbek Shymbergenov (69 kg) defeated Russian Sergey Sobylinsky. The last fight was quite spectacular with a bloody ending, with Shymbergenov breaking his opponent's nose and then getting injured himself. The Kazakh boxer continued to dominate, however, attacking in all three rounds until the final bell.

Russian Student Championship victor Gleb Bakshi broke the Kazakh winning streak by defeating Abai Tolesh, the 2017 Kazakh champion, in the up to 75 kg category.

Kazakhstan's national team captain, two-time Olympic silver medalist Adilbek Niyazymbetov, lost in the finals as well. The judges gave the victory to his opponent Georgy Kushitashvili, the 2015 Russian champ.

Anton Pinchuk (91 kg), the last Kazakh boxer to fight, took the gold medal in the bout against Arslanbek Achilov of Turkmenistan.

"The fight was not easy. I had to work hard to win. We will keep working, as we have a lot of tasks and goals ahead to achieve. We will do our best to prove the high level of Kazakhstan's boxing," said Pinchuk after the tournament.

"This tournament is a good challenge for our guys. They will have a lot of important tournaments, such as the Asian Games and World Championship. We were convinced that we have a strong team and despite the fact that the team leaders did not take part in the tournament in Poland, the team showed good results," said national team head coach Myrzagali Aitzhanov.

The team won seven medals altogether, including four gold, two silver and one bronze, the lastby Aiboldy Daurenuly in the over 91 kg category.

Kazakh boxers earlier had several wins, including five champions, at the tournament in Finland.

Kairat Yeraliyev, the 2017 world champion, won 5-0 over Hungarian boxer Nandor Csoka, the prizewinner at the 2015 European Championship. Olympic athlete, Asian championship and world prize winner Abylaikhan Zhussupov defeated British boxer Harris Akbar by the same score. Olympic silver medalist Vasily Levit easily defeated Ukrainian Konstantin Pinchuk. Kamshibek Kunkabayev, despite getting a cut in the second round, injured Briton Solomon Dacros in the same way, defeating him 5-0.

The highlight of the finals was the fight between Kazakh boxer Bek Nurmaganbet and Russian Artyom Ageyev, bronze medalist of the 2017 Russian championship. Nurmaganbet knocked out his opponent with a quick blow 40 seconds into the match to become the champ.

"We showed great results in Finland. Of course, there is always room for improvement. Kairat Yeraliyev had three fights in which he looked very convincing and showed his class once again. Abylaikhan Zhussupov also had three bouts with good boxers. Vasily Levit needed all three bouts in the tournament. Kamshibek Kunkabayev got very strong opponents in the super heavyweight category, a French boxer and an English one, but had very convincing wins over them. Our young boxer Bek Nurmaganbet had the first fight against a good Dutch athlete and knocked out the 2017 Russian championship prizewinner in the first round of the finals," said Aitzhanov.

> "This tournament is a good challenge for our guys. They will have a lot of important tournaments, such as the Asian Games and World Championship. We were convinced that we have a strong team and despite the fact that the team leaders did not take part in the tournament in Poland, the team showed good results,"



Photo credit: Kazakhstan Box Federation

Ilyas Suleimenov (R).

Team Kazakhstan defeats Hungary in friendly match

By Anuar Abdrakhmanov

ASTANA – The Kazakh national football team recently beat Hungary 3-2 in a friendly match in Budapest on March 24. The outcome was upset as the Hungarian team, a participant of the 2016 European championship in France, was expected to win.

The match was the first for the new head coach of the Kazakhstan's national team, Bulgarian Stanimir Stoilov. Stoilov became the head coach of the national team in early March. Prior to that, he worked within FC Astana, which won the national championship four times and reached the group stage of the Champions League and the 1/16 finals of the Europa League. The Kazakh team started the game well, taking the initiative. As early as the 6th minute, 24-year-old midfielder Roman Murtazayev opened the score. Four minutes later, 19-year-old Bakhtiyor Zainutdinov scored another goal. After a while the Hungarians got one back thanks to Adam Szalai.

The Kazakh players did not revert to a defensive posture but continued to try their chances at the opponents' net. At the 39th minute of the match, 18-year-old forward Yerkebulan Seidakhmet, who plays for football club Ufa, scored his first goal in the national team of Kazakhstan.

After that, team Hungary started to increase pressure, eventually getting another one back. Hungarian player Christian Nemeth made the score 2-3. However, after that, team Kazakhstan dealt with all the attacks of the Hungarian players, managing to keep the score until the final whistle.

"I think the game was a good test for both teams. I am satisfied with the organisation and discipline the national team of Kazakhstan showed in their game. I'm also happy with the confidence of my players, as I wanted them to play equally in both attack and defence, and they did it. I was more interested in how each player would prove himself than in the result of the match. It's great they won, it will give them self-belief. As I said, the 136th place in the FIFA rating does not match the level of Kazakh players. The Hungarians also showed an excellent game, and it is clear that they are a high-level team. I wish them good luck in the League of Nations tournament," Stoilov said.

"Now everyone on the team and, I hope, all Kazakh fans, have only positive emotions. I know that many were waiting for victories from the national team of Kazakhstan, and it's a double pleasure that we managed to defeat a strong team that took part in the last European championship, team Hungary, in particular, in their home," said the defender of the national team of Kazakhstan, Yevgeny Postnikov.



Astana celebrates Nauryz in grand style

By Meruyert Abugaliyeva

ASTANA – Nauryz, an ancient holiday symbolising spring revival, is always celebrated by Kazakh people with grandeur. The festivities in the capital, including concerts and exhibitions, took place throughout the week ending with large-scale outdoor celebrations on March 21-22.

The holiday, commonly referred to as "Ulystyn uly kuni" ("Great day of the nation" in Kazakh,) is also a symbol of unity. People gather in the streets to congratulate each other and revel in the coming of spring.

The festivities began March 16 with an exhibition at Mangilik El Triumphal Arc of works dedicated to Nauryz by the city's young artists. Saken Seifullin Museum greeted visitors March 19-23 to its "Welcome to Astana, Nauryz" exhibit.



Music is an important part of the celebration, beginning with an invitation to capital residents and guests to a March 20 concert at Zhastar Theatre. The Kazakh musical "Zhanarghan zher, bak konghan nurly el" ("Renewed land, blessed country"), featuring a symphonic orchestra and young opera, ballet and theatre talents, was presented March 21 at the expo Congress Centre. The same day, Astana Concert Hall hosted the "Auylym – anim" ("My village – my song") concert.

The Astana Opera staged grand concert "Qosh qeldin, Nauryz" ("Welcome, Nauryz") March 23, including Kazakh national songs, arias from the "Abai," "Birzhan-Sara" and "Kyz Zhibek" operas and a performance by its children choir.



"The stage transformed into a yurt and each artist was a guest coming to dedicate the performance to Nauryz. We also prepared an aitys, a vocal traditional competition between the performers. Since all the people of our multi-ethnic country celebrate Nauryz, we decided to include masterpieces of vocal and instrumental art which depict themes of love and spring revival," said pianist Raushan Beskembirova.

The outdoor festivities took place 10 a.m.-6 p.m., March 21-22 at several city locations, including the expo site, Kazakh Eli Square, City Square, Student Park and numerous residential sites. Each spot hosted concert programmes and more than 40 yurts and altybakans (traditional Kazakh hanging swings).

Ethno Auyl (Ethno Village) was constructed on the former expo grounds, where city artists and cultural centre representatives will showcase national customs and traditions near yurts. It also sponsored a Tazy and Tobet exhibit, breeds of ancient Kazakh dogs, and greyhound racing.

A special area with food courts offered tastes of plov (rice with meat and seasoned broth), baursak (puff pastry) and Nauryz kozhe (a traditional cold drink prepared especially during the holiday). All guests also had an opportunity to test their strength and stamina in national sports competitions such as Kazakh wrestling, arkan tartys (tug-of-war) and sheep lifting.

Korean Cultural Centre hosts Olympics exhibit

By Aigerim Sadykova

ASTANA – The city's Korean Cultural Centre (KKC) is presenting an exhibit related to the Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in PyeongChang, South Korea.

"The Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games are the festivals filled with peace and hope for all generations. We invite you to the Winter Paralympic Games in PyeongChang," said Kazakh Paralympic Games Honorary Ambassador Dastan Valiulin at a Feb. 27 meeting with students.

A student at Korean Kookmin University, Valiulin provided information about life in the country and the admission process to Korean universities. He inspired Kazakhs to watch and follow the Games.

Valiulin moved to Korea for language courses. While studying and working as a waiter, he was noticed by Korean TV producer Lee Seungtaek. He was invited to participate in programmes where he represented Kazakhstan and revealed the secrets of the national cuisine.

"I want to tell Koreans about Kazakhstan," he said.

Speaking about the exhibit, he noted the Winter Games mascots, the main characters, are embodied as tall puppets. Soohorang, a Korean guardian white tiger, symbolises the Olympics. Its name is derived from Sooho (Korean for protection) and Rang (tiger).

Bandabi, the Asiatic black bear representing the Paralympics, is a combination of Banda (half-moon) and Bi (celebration of the Games). The mascot denotes the need for equality and harmony and encourages athletes to push themselves beyond their limits.

The emblem of the Games, combining images of ice, snow, winter sports stars and people from all over the globe, shows a world open to everyone, according to pyeongchang2018.com.



Photo credit: Korean Cultural Centre.

"There are several exhibits released in honour of the Olympic and Paralympic Games: badges, soft toys, eco-bags, various printed products and promo videos," said KKC manager Gulnar Aubekerova, pointing to souvenirs with the mascots' images and a glass stand with the emblem.

The exhibit is introduced with an information stand. Guests can leave messages on the wish board.

A TV showing Kazakh and Korean Paralympic team competitions will continue through the March 18 closing ceremony. Six Kazakh athletes are participating in cross-country skiing and biathlon.

PyeongChang used the latest technologies to broadcast the Games, said Korean Ambassador in Kazakhstan Kim Daesik at the Feb. 9 opening ceremony broadcast by KKC.

"The whole world will see robots with artificial intelligence, the newest 5G network system and other modern technologies," he noted.

The exhibit will close March 29.

BI Group hosting start-up competition to mark Astana's 20th anniversary

By Zhanna Shayakhmetova

ASTANA – BI Group, one of Kazakhstan's leading construction and real estate companies, is hosting the Happy Start-Up competition to mark the capital's 20th anniversary. The best projects will be recognised by the company with cash prizes and ten finalists will have the chance to attend courses at BI University. Applications are due by April 16.

"Our university was founded in 2012 with a mission to provide training for our employees. This year, we celebrate its sixth anniversary. We started to invite our partners and contractors to our programmes two years ago. Today, we are ready to share our knowledge and resources with all interested parties," said university head Olga Baspayeva at the March 14 presentation.

The university offers approximately 20 qualification programmes for builders, project managers and owners of small and medium-sized businesses and organises trainings and master classes conducted by well-known coaches. Participants also share experiences and establish contacts with potential partners.

The company's management focuses special attention on integrating science, education and innovation and establishing a creative environment that maximises the ability of each individual.

Development department head Aibar Mukanov also spoke about BI Group's projects and activities.

"The company built 1.1 million square metres of housing, 1,500 km of roads and 9,000 premises, including residential and commercial real estate. A total of 61 projects have been implemented," he said.

BI Group includes five companies which construct highways, railways, residential complexes, commercial premises, infrastructure and industrial facilities.

"We did a colossal job to improve the quality of construction in the housing sector. All the buildings meet all the requirements of comfort assessment," he noted.

The company is developing the area near the botanical garden, a project which will benefit the city's ecological environment. Visitors and residents will have year-round access to the garden.

"The Green Quarter multifunctional complex built on the green technologies and smart home principles is one of our most significant projects. We monitor the quality level, installation work and subsequent maintenance of facilities in the construction projects. The construction is subject to constant technical supervision. After commissioning the residential complex, the warranty period of the facility will be 36 months," he added.

The company plans to launch the 51st housing blocks including 13 completely new projects.

"We try to create maximum comfort for living. We additionally build leisure rooms and each resident will have the opportunity to spend time with friends. The company intends to expand nationwide. There are plans to launch seven housing blocks in Almaty. In addition, we will start constructing the first residential complex in Atyrau," said Mukanov.

More than 32,000 families have purchased BI Group houses. The company is set to increase this number, providing comfortable conditions for real estate purchases in the capital

