

Government fails 'ordinary people'

BY KATHY GANNON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DARDOI, Kyrgyzstan — Jumatai is 8 and looks much younger. He can't walk. He can't close his mouth, so he can only eat mashed food. The state should have treated his disability, his grandmother says, but instead it turned its back on ordinary people.

Across Kyrgyzstan, frustrations such as these fused into the street protests that climaxed last week with crowds storming the presidential office building and driving out Askar Akayev.

"The government made such a mess of things," said Aiyman Baitasheva, the grandmother. "I wish that just once Akayev would have driven past here. Right now I am feeling so much anger. What can I do?"

The family lives in DarDOI, an impoverished market town just a 15-minute drive from the president's office. The family's unheated home, with no gas or running water, is typical of conditions on the outskirts of Bishkek, the capital, where thousands migrated from the countryside hoping to cash in on post-Soviet capitalism but instead live in slums.

Before 1990, when Kyrgyzstan was still a communist republic, it offered free health care and housing, and even then it was one of the poorest Soviet regions, with 32 percent of its people living in poverty. Today the U.N. Development Program estimates that about 44 percent of Kyrgyzstan's 5 million people live in poverty.

The poor blame Akayev, who came to power in the Soviet era, for corruption, the collapse of the communist social safety net and the rise of cutthroat capitalism. They have seen Bishkek fill up with cell phones, Mercedes-Benz showrooms and ads for Versace sunglasses, while Baitasheva's 11-year-old granddaughter is

n't in school because the family can't afford the \$16 enrollment fee or the transport costs.

Baitasheva, her two daughters and seven grandchildren live on about \$170 a month. The daughters get up at 3 a.m. to sell cigarettes, chewing gum and toys at a nearby market and bring home about \$2.50 a day. A son-in-law earns about \$100 a month as a trucker and isn't home much. A quart of milk costs about 60 cents, a piece of flat bread 25 cents. Rent on the family's barely furnished two-room hovel is about \$40 a month.

Baitasheva says it cost her \$75 to be treated by a doctor for a heart ailment.

The children spend the day on the thin matted floor, wrapped in blankets, hands ice cold. Water is fetched from a pump outdoors in the snow.

The grandmother said she tried to get the boy into a home for handicapped children near Bishkek but was told to take him south to her home town, Jalal-Abad, in the poorest part of the country. Months later, Jalal-Abad became a bastion of the protests that brought down Akayev. His temporary replacement, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, is from Jalal-Abad, but Baitasheva isn't reassured.

"I am still afraid because even now I don't know for sure if Bakiyev is in charge or whether Akayev will come back," she said.

Venera Kojemkylova, 15, lives next door, crammed with her mother, uncles, aunts and cousins in a three-room house of mud and straw.

Kojemkylova's father died when she was 4. Her mother, Anara, operates a fast-food stall in the market, bringing home \$5 a day.

Venera Kojemkylova warmed herself with an electric hot plate while her aunt, Nurkyz, shoved coal into a heater, her head hidden beneath a

Kyrgyzstan in perspective

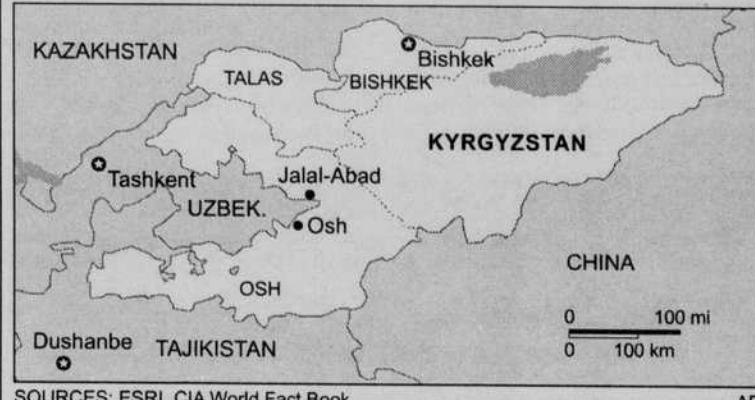
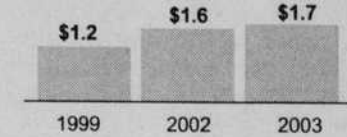
The Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan achieved independence in 1991. Regional clans and the tensions that exist between them weigh heavily on the country's politics.

- Area: 79,400 square miles
- Population: 5,081,429 ('04 est.)
- Ethnic groups: Kyrgyz 64.9%, Uzbek 13.8%, Russian 12.5%, Dungan 1.1%, Ukrainian 1%, Uygur 1%, other 5.7% (1999)
- Religions: Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%
- Industrial exports: gold, mercury, uranium, natural gas, electricity

► Age structure:

0 - 14 years	32.3%
15 - 64 years	61.6%
65 years and over	6.1%

Gross domestic product
in billions



SOURCES: ESRI, CIA World Fact Book

AP

broad scarf.

"This is our only heat. For us life is very difficult. Sometimes I wonder how I will feed my family," Anara said. "I don't know how this new government will do anything for us. No one did anything before. I just want the new government to take care of ordinary people, people like us. We are the poorest of our people."

Erkin Moldaliyev, who sells used clothes at the DarDOI market, was among the demonstrators who forced Akayev to flee to Russia. Echoing a

complaint heard widely across the country, he said Akayev was corrupt.

"He and his family took everything. They kept everything and left nothing for the people," he said.

He was cautiously hopeful.

"We hope the new government will be different and that everything will be transparent," he said. "But we don't know for sure because some of the same people are there and we hope that we have not exchanged one set of bad people for another set of bad people."

Sharon's Gaza Strip pullout plan goes to Supreme Court

BY RAVI NESSMAN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM — Israel's parliament on Monday rejected a last-ditch attempt to torpedo Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, vetoing a proposed national referendum. The plan now goes to the nation's Supreme Court.

Demoralized by the defeat, settlers said they would move their fight into the streets, promising to bring 100,000 protesters to the settlements slated for evacuation to prevent the withdrawal.

They also pinned their hopes on the Supreme Court, which agreed Monday to hear a challenge to the law providing the legal framework for the withdrawal from the entire Gaza Strip and four West Bank settlements.

Approval of a referendum would have almost certainly delayed the withdrawal, scheduled for this summer, and could have brought down Sharon's government and forced new elections. Sharon has repeatedly rejected calls for a national vote as a stalling tactic. Opinion polls show a large majority of Israelis back the withdrawal plan.

After a debate by angry lawmakers, the Knesset defeated the referendum proposal 72-39.

"This is a dramatic statement of the Israeli parliament that disen-

gagement is going to be carried out as planned," Vice Premier Ehud Olmert said.

Settlers, thousands of whom protested near the Knesset, said the vote would split Israeli society. The government missed a chance to "prevent a violent confrontation and civil war," the Settlers Council said.

The vote exposed the deep divisions in Likud, a hawkish party filled with settlers and their allies that was stunned by Sharon's sudden reversal last year of his longtime policy of backing settlement building. Sharon says the pullout will help Israel hang on to parts of the West Bank.

Only 13 of Likud's 40 legislators voted against the referendum, forcing Sharon to rely on the support of dovish parties and Arab legislators.

The disengagement plan repeatedly has won Knesset votes. In what will likely be its final legislative test, Sharon must get his budget passed by Thursday, a near certainty after the opposition Shinui Party agreed to support the spending plan.

The Supreme Court hearing was set for April 8 before an expanded panel of 11 judges, the Courts Administration said.

Israeli legal analyst Moshe Negbi said the court decided to hear the case to show that justice was being done, but it was highly unlikely to strike down the law.

John Paul II misses post-Easter blessing because of illness

BY NICOLE WINFIELD
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II skipped another beloved tradition Monday — a post-Easter blessing from his window — ending the Easter holiday as silently as he began it.

A few hundred people had gathered in St. Peter's Square in hopes that John Paul would appear as he has on each Easter Monday of his 26-year pontificate, and Vatican TV cameras zoomed in on his third-floor window around noon.

But the curtains remained closed as the 84-year-old pope continued recovering from Feb. 24 surgery to insert a tube in his throat to help him breathe.

"Despite the regret, we're happy because it's good that he continues his convalescence without strain," said the Rev. Federico Lombardi, head of programming at Radio Vatican.

John Paul's appearance on Easter Sunday, when he tried but failed to speak, was still on the minds of many at the Vatican, a dramatic end to a Holy Week in which the pope's suffering was clearly evident.

John Paul had come to his studio window at the end of Easter Mass to bless the tens of thousands of people in the square below. Aides readied a microphone, and he tapped it as if preparing to speak. But after uttering a few unintelligible sounds,

he made the sign of the cross with his hand and the microphone was taken away.

Many in the crowd cried and others quietly applauded in appreciation of the pope's efforts to speak to them.

Vatican Radio said Monday it would be difficult to ever forget the pope's pained "Urbi et Orbi" blessing and that it would "remain in the history of the church and humanity."

"This silence, full of emotion and desire to speak beyond the physical ability to communicate, spoke to us perhaps as never before the universal language of love," Lombardi said. "For us it was enough. We understood what the pope wanted to say, and how much he wanted to bless us."

John Paul last spoke to the public on March 13, shortly before he was discharged from the hospital for a second time in a month. In addition to the breathing tube, John Paul suffers from Parkinson's disease, which makes it difficult for him to talk.

He followed the Holy Week ceremonies by television from his apartment. He also appeared via live video hookup to the faithful marking Good Friday at Rome's Colosseum. But he never spoke. The pope has not confirmed public appearances for several months, and Vatican officials have stressed that this is a time of recovery.

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