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HEADLINE: Report From the Road

BYLINE: BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

HIGHLIGHT:

Again and again, I saw how much good American aid and investment can do.

BODY:

LAST WEEK I TRAVELED to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Russia and Ukraine at the request of the president and Secretary of State Albright to see the historic transformation in the former Soviet Union. In many ways, this trip is a continuation of the work I have tried to do for the past four and a half years -- and which I hope to continue in the years ahead. I want to help these newly independent nations promote democracy, economic reform and civil society, and to send a clear message that the United States will stand with those who are committed to them. I came to stress the important roles that women, young people and nongovernmental organizations must play in building a better future. At a time when Americans legitimately wonder what our responsibilities are in the aftermath of the cold war, I hope this trip will underscore why American assistance and involvement remain essential.

I have many memories of my trip: the mountains of Almaty, a thriving bazaar outside Bishkek, the mosques and synagogues of Bukhara, the universities of Yekaterinburg in Novosibirsk, the beauty of Lviv. But the most powerful memories of my visit are of the people. Despite crumbling schools and rising tuition, classrooms were filled with exceptionally bright young people. I'll always remember walking into Soviet-style schools and finding students inside learning for the first time about democracy. Under the Freedom Support Act, many of these students had studied in U.S. high schools. If the American people could hear how they had been transformed by the experience, I believe they would want to invite more.

In the places I visited, the health-care system of the past has been left behind, leaving enormous gaps in care. Physicians told me about high infant and maternal mortality rates, and about the widespread cancers, birth defects and other illnesses caused by environmental damage. I officially opened two of the 13 new women's wellness centers that our government is helping to create in the former Soviet republics. They are the result of a true public-private international partnership, providing a full range of health care to women -- including family-planning services. Over time, access to contraception could lower the abortion rate, as is already happening in Kazakhstan.

Everywhere I went I spoke with women who have overcome unimaginable odds to

build a society that values their contributions. In Kyrgyzstan, women described to me how they are often the first fired and last hired. With help from nongovernmental agencies and USAID, they have formed "Village Banks," which give them modest loans to buy goods to sell at market. Many have also been helped by vital nongovernmental organizations, which are cleaning up the environment, protecting the rights of disabled children and supporting a free press and independent judiciary.

Again and again, I saw how much good American aid and investment abroad can do. I also saw how American businesses and voluntary organizations have donated supplies for hospitals and clothing for children, through projects like Operation Provide Hope. Peace Corps volunteers are teaching English and economics and cleaning up environmental damage.

Across Central Asia, Russia and Ukraine, we are making progress. But even in this age of rapid change, we cannot expect the legacy of communism to vanish overnight. These newly free people need our support. To do otherwise would be to abdicate our responsibilities and miss a historic opportunity to ensure prosperity not only in these countries, but in our own country and around the world.

GRAPHIC: Picture, Supporting new societies: In Kazakhstan, DAVID HUME KENNERLY FOR NEWSWEEK

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