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Russia Expands Illegal Activity in Abkhazia as Bombs Rock Territory; Moscow's "Absolute Control" Thwarts Peace Efforts, Says Georgian FM

Separatist rebels close border with Georgia following outbreak of gang warfare; OSCE Parliamentary Assembly & Georgian Patriarch criticize Moscow

Moscow yesterday sharpened its confrontation with Georgia by establishing a commercial sea route between Sochi, the Russian port expected to host the 2014 Olympic Games, and the resort town of Gagra in Abkhazia, Georgia. The resumption of maritime links with the separatist territory violates the CIS economic embargo that has been in place against Abkhazia since 1992 and which Moscow defiantly reneged on this past March.

Russia's latest move in its de facto annexation of Abkhazia came one day after two explosions rocked the Abkhaz city of Sokhumi; on Sunday, a pair of bombs went off in Gagra, injuring six civilians. The attacks appear linked to turf wars between rival Russian criminal gangs operating in Abkhazia, following an influx of hot money since Russia lifted its economic embargo.

"It is becoming clear that Russia's unilateral and illegal moves have degraded the security environment in Abkhazia," said Alexander Lomaia, Secretary of Georgia's National Security Council. "Reports by Russian media confirm our own information: the recent explosions seem to be part of a battle between rival criminal gangs, their business interests, and their political patrons." Lomaia added that high-ranking Russian officials, as well as separatist rebel leaders, appear to be supporting the criminal gangs.

After Monday's bombings, separatist rebel leaders closed the de facto border between the territory and Georgia. The illegal move prompted Georgian Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili to denounce Moscow's "absolute control" of Abkhazia.

"Russian control does not serve the peace process, and is not in the interests of the Abkhaz people, who have now become de facto hostages to the current situation on Abkhazia's territory," Tkeshelashvili said. "The main aim of the Georgian government is to change this situation, so that Abkhazia is not controlled by any one country—in this case Russia—and the Abkhaz people are allowed to decide their own fate." Georgia has proposed a peace plan that would guarantee broad autonomy to Abkhazia and that has won the support of the international community.

The government of Georgia sought to refocus attention on its peace plan following false reports by Russian media last week of a supposed proposal to partition Abkhazia. The reports were strongly condemned by Giga Bokeria, Georgia's Deputy Foreign Minister.

"This information is completely groundless, absolutely groundless," he said on Friday "No talks have taken place about the partition of Abkhaz territory. The only ongoing discussion is about President Saakashvili's peace plan, which has very serious backing from the international community and which we hope the new Russian president will support." Added Bokeria: "This is the most effective and direct way of resolving the conflict."

In a separate development, the Patriarch of Georgia, His Holiness and Beatitude Ilia II, criticized Moscow for violating the domain of the Georgian church.

"The Russian priests often come to Abkhazia and unilaterally, without our permission, carry out public liturgies," the Patriarch said on Sunday. "We have received several letters from Aleksey II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, which declare that the Russian Federation

and the Russian Orthodox Church respect Georgia's territorial integrity and respect the Tskhum-Abkhazian Eparchy as one of the eparchies of the Georgian Orthodox Church.”

The international community yesterday kept strong pressure on Moscow to reverse its provocations in Abkhazia that are leading to the de facto annexation of the Georgian region. The Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE passed a resolution that criticized Russia for illegally moving additional military troops into Abkhazia and for breaching Georgian sovereignty by illegally issuing passports to residents of Abkhazia.

“The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly urges the Government of the Russian Federation, in its contacts with the de facto authorities of the secessionist regions of Georgia, to refrain from maintaining ties with those regions in any manner that would constitute a challenge to the sovereignty of Georgia,” declared the resolution that was passed on Tuesday.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. Full text of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly resolution:

EXPRESSING CONCERN OVER THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN GEORGIA

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1. Noting the growing instability within the conflict zones in Georgia against the backdrop of the decision of the Government of the Russian Federation to strengthen official ties with secessionist regimes in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions,
2. Concerned by the unilateral decision of the Government of the Russian Federation to move additional military personnel into the Abkhazia region of Georgia under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeeping Force, of which Russia is the only troop-contributing country,
3. Acknowledging that the Russian Federation’s issuance of passports to residents of the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia, and the Government of the Russian Federation’s assertion of the right to defend these people by military force constitute a challenge to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia,
4. Believing that the situation described above could exacerbate an already volatile situation in these regions and might lead, however unintentionally, to renewed armed conflict in those regions,
5. Concerned that renewed armed conflict in those regions would lead to a deterioration of the broader European security environment,
6. Noting that the Government of Georgia has offered extensive autonomy to Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the framework of a sovereign Georgian state,

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly:

7. Urges the Government of the Russian Federation, in its contacts with the *de facto* authorities of the secessionist regions of Georgia, to refrain from maintaining ties with those regions in any manner that would constitute a challenge to the sovereignty of Georgia;

8. Urges the Russian Federation to abide by OSCE standards and generally accepted international norms with respect to the threat or use of force to resolve conflicts in relations with other Participating States.

2. Full text of statement by NSC Secretary Lomaia on Abkhaz explosions:
Tbilisi 1 July, 2008

Several explosions have occurred in the Abkhazia region of Georgia in recent days, injuring a number of civilians. We wish to express our condemnation of these callous attacks and our concerns that these incidents may further destabilize the situation.

Unfortunately, these incidents are not isolated occurrences, but part of a pattern. Over the past few months, the region of Abkhazia has suffered from a number of explosions, from armed attacks against innocent citizens, and from murders and attempted murders.

It is becoming clear that a number of unilateral and illegal moves by the Russian Federation have led to a degradation of the security environment in this region of the country. The illegal lifting of sanctions, including military sanctions against the separatists, has led to an influx of hot money, much of it linked to organized crime. Reports by Russian media confirm our own information: the recent explosions seem to be part of a battle between rival criminal gangs, their business interests, and their political patrons. Sadly, it seems that at least some separatist representative, as well as some high-ranking Russian officials, are supporting the illegal economic activities that are the root cause of these attacks.

The Government of Georgia's efforts are geared to restoring law and order in this region of the country within a context of wide autonomy. Providing a secure and safe environment to its residents will allow them to visit the rest of the country unhindered and to establish business and trading relations with partners both in Georgia and the outside world. The confidence building between people is an essential prerequisite to a peaceful solution of the conflict, and this is predicated on the restoration of normal relations between individuals.

This analysis is shared by separatist representatives, many of which are clearly afraid that dialogue and a growing understanding between people that have been forcibly isolated from each other would diminish their power. Their illegal decision to close the border between the Gali and Zugdidi districts for an "unlimited period of time" is a clear illustration of this fact.