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Russia Illegally Deploys New Troops in Abkhazia; Georgia Calls for Immediate Withdrawal, Condemns Reckless Escalation

In apparent prelude to military action, Russia cites former President Putin's widely condemned April 16 decree establishing ties with separatist rebels

Russia today illegally and unilaterally deployed 400 new troops in Georgia's Abkhazia region in flagrant violation of international agreements. The move marks another sharp escalation by Moscow in a conflict that has alarmed the international community. Last week, the United Nations condemned the recent downing by Russia of a Georgian aircraft in Georgian airspace.

This is the first explicit action by Russia that invokes former President Putin's April 16 decree establishing official links with separatist rebels in Georgia. The international community—including the European Union, the UN, NATO, and the United States—roundly condemned that decree, and called on Russia to revoke or at least not to implement it. Today's new troop deployment also further subverts any remaining Russian claim to be acting as a mediator in the conflict.

Despite hopes that new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev would seek to calm tensions with Georgia, this latest action seems to confirm that Moscow will continue with its policy of annexing Georgian territory. Medvedev is set to meet President Mikheil Saakashvili on June 7 in St. Petersburg. Saakashvili said on Thursday that Georgia would refrain from any actions that might be perceived as even remotely provocative in advance of that meeting.

Russia thinly veiled its actions by saying that they were "in accordance with the Russian president's decree on humanitarian aid to Abkhazia." Its defense ministry labeled the new soldiers "railroad troops," claiming they would rehabilitate strategic infrastructure in the separatist-controlled territory. However, there is no means of verifying such a claim, nor to assess how heavily armed the new troops are. Furthermore, such engineering troops are not recognized—even by Russia itself—as legitimate peacekeeping forces. Traditionally, their role is to make technical preparations in advance of military action.

The Foreign Ministry of Georgia strongly protested the deployment, which appears aimed at preparing military transport routes for an invasion of Georgia. "Nobody needs to bring railway forces to the territory of another country unless a military intervention is being prepared," said Grigol Vashadze, First Deputy Foreign Minister.

Saakashvili has requested an urgent call with Medvedev to discuss Russia's latest military move in the Abkhazia region. The Government of Georgia is also briefing senior officials in Western capitals about today's developments.

Earlier this week, the UN confirmed that a Russian fighter jet—either a MiG-29 or an SU-27—was responsible for shooting down an unarmed Georgian drone in Georgia's airspace on April 20. Russia has also recently illegally deployed heavy artillery and anti-aircraft systems, armored vehicles, and hundreds of troops—among them up to 500 paratroopers—in the Abkhazia region.

Paratroopers, whose function is to conduct airborne assaults, are not conventionally considered to be peacekeeping troops. Russia's Itar-Tass news agency has quoted a source in the Russian Air Force as confirming the deployment: "The paratroopers came to Abkhazia with their submachine guns, machine guns, and grenade launchers. They

also have about 30 airborne combat vehicles, artillery and air defense launchers, including ZSU-23-2 anti-aircraft systems.”

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. **RIA Novosti, “Russian railroad troops enter Abkhazia to help rebuild roads”:**
<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20080531/108953337.html>
2. **Georgia Update, “United Nations Confirms Russian Fighter Jet Shot & Destroyed Georgian Unmanned Police Aircraft on April 20”:**
http://www.president.gov.ge/PDF/GEORGIA_UPDATE_2008-05-26.pdf
3. **Georgia Update, “Overview of World Reaction”:**
http://www.president.gov.ge/PDF/GEORGIA%20UPDATE_2008-04-24-2.pdf
4. **Itar-Tass, “Russian Defense Ministry to hold peacekeepers’ rotation in Abkhazia in late May”:** <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=12711009&PageNum=0>