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Georgia Sends Peace Envoy to Meet Separatist Rebels in First Direct Talks Since 2007

Russia ignores international criticism of its “provocative” actions, as Georgia initiates effort to change peacekeeping format

A senior Georgian official met Monday with separatist leaders in Abkhazia in the first direct high-level talks between the two sides since last October. The move follows the increasingly tense situation in the Abkhazia region provoked by Russia’s militarization and attempted de facto annexation of sovereign Georgian territory.

Irakli Alasania—the former chief negotiator on Abkhazia and now Georgia’s ambassador to the UN—traveled on May 12 to Sukhumi to present details of the Government’s peace initiative to separatist leaders Sergey Bagapsh and Sergey Shamba.

“We are ready for direct contacts with the separatists and the fact that Mr. Alasania visited Sukhumi is a practical step by us to find common language with our compatriots in Abkhazia,” David Bakradze, Georgia’s former Foreign Minister, said on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, the Government of Georgia has initiated steps to change the peacekeeping format in the region—which, despite its multinational CIS mandate, has been staffed exclusively by Russian troops for the past 15 years. The Foreign Ministry of Georgia has asked CIS Heads of State to consider a new peacekeeping format and mandate, and to hold consultations on the issue by July 30, 2008. Georgia also announced that it was formally ending its participation in the 1995 CIS agreement on “Creation of the Integrated Air Defense System of CIS Member States.”

The Government’s peace overture comes as Russia, which has recently illegally increased its military presence in the region, continues to ignore international appeals to respect Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty.

On April 16, Russia established official links with the separatists—an egregious violation of international law and a direct challenge to Georgia’s statehood. Four days later, a Russian MiG-29 fighter jet shot down an unarmed Georgian drone in Georgian sovereign airspace. Russia began moving heavy artillery and anti-aircraft systems, armored vehicles, and additional military units (including 440 paratroopers) into the rebel territory the following week.

On May 8, the Russian Defense Ministry threatened to send in more troops and to use force if necessary—despite the fact that the Government of Georgia has repeatedly stressed its peaceful intentions. Both the UN Observer Mission and international journalists on the ground have refuted Russia’s claims of a military buildup by the Government of Georgia.

World leaders have roundly condemned Russia’s actions, calling them “destabilizing” and “provocative” and urging that they be reversed. After visiting Tbilisi and Sukhumi between May 9-12, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza said Russia’s steps were “working against the cause of peaceful settlement [of the Abkhazia conflict].” He stressed that mediators and peacekeepers, such as Russia claims to be, “do not issue military threats to parties to the conflict.”

“I have never seen artillery as a means to maintain peace in my entire diplomatic career before I went to Sukhumi this time,” Mr. Bryza added.

Mr. Bryza’s comments echo remarks made by EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner last week, when she said Russia’s measures had “undermined efforts to find a peaceful solution.”

The Russian Foreign Ministry, however, dismissed Mr. Bryza’s comments on May 12 as “not corresponding to reality,” saying they were “aimed at covering and protecting from criticism those whom they [the United States] are dragging into NATO.”

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. **Aerial footage of military deployment in the separatist-controlled part of the Abkhazia region, recorded May 8:** <http://www.police.ge/downloads/UPI.wmv>
2. **Reuters article on the situation in Kodori Gorge (Upper Abkhazia):** <http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL02495128>
3. **Press release of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia, May 8:** http://unomig.org/data/file/979/PR_2008_90_eng.pdf