

LAST UPDATED: **MAY 1, 2008 • 11:00 TBILISI**

NATO Accuses Russia of Undermining Stability in Abkhazia, As Georgia & Ukraine Issue Call for Peaceful Settlement

EU, OSCE & US Also Criticize Movement of Russian Troops Into Conflict Zone, Offer Unqualified Support for Georgia

NATO yesterday issued its sharpest rebuke in the face of Russian moves to increase troops and military equipment in the Abkhazia region of Georgia. "The decision to send more troops to Abkhazia does not contribute to stability, but undermines it," said James Appathurai, a NATO spokesman, after Allied ambassadors met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"The steps taken by Russia and the rhetoric that has been used concerning the threat of force have undermined Georgia's territorial integrity," said Mr. Appathurai, making clear Russian force increases without the consent of Georgia would break an agreement reached in 1994.

Yet, the Russian defense ministry on Tuesday announced a unilateral increase in troop deployments to Abkhazia. Heavy artillery, armored vehicles, and additional military units already crossed into Abkhazia at the Psou River crossing of the Georgia-Russia border.

Georgia's special presidential envoy, David Bakradze, offered a clear interpretation of Russia's actions. "Russia's end goal now appears to be to force Georgia into armed conflict," Mr. Bakradze asserted. "It would thus strip it of the opportunity to earn NATO membership, while finally annexing Georgia's territories."

Mr. Bakradze said Georgia is being "pushed to the edge of a precipice," and added: "Without credible and concerted reaction, we are confronted by the prospect of a situation similar to that in northern Cyprus or analogous to what occurred in Taiwan."

The Government of Georgia and the international community, meanwhile, renewed their call for peace and restraint. On April 29, President Mikheil Saakashvili delivered a nationwide address in which he reached out again to those living in the separatist areas. "We know... that it is impossible to build one's happiness on enmity and destruction," he said. "We can build our prosperity together."

Meanwhile, after meeting with EU ministers in Luxembourg on Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov threatened that Russia would take "retaliatory" actions against Georgia to protect Russia's newly minted citizens in the rebel region. Russia has illegally issued its passports to many of Abkhazia's remaining residents, and is now using these "citizens" as a pretext for military action.

Russia claims that its actions in bolstering troop levels is within its legal limits, but the move was criticized by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana. "Even if the increase in peacekeepers is within limits," he said, "I don't think it is a wise measure to increase now."

Mr. Solana's rebuke was echoed by OSCE Chairman-in-Office Alexander Stubb: "The latest events, including the decision of the Russian Federation to establish official ties with Georgia's breakaway regions, the shooting down of a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle over Abkhazia, Georgia, on 20 April, and the recent military build-up have considerably increased tension in the region."

The international community also has unanimously reaffirmed its support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, and has lauded Georgia's peaceful overtures in the face

of deliberate provocation. NATO spokesman Appathurai said yesterday that the alliance was unanimous in supporting Georgia's territorial integrity.

Referring to President Saakashvili's speech on Tuesday, meanwhile, Council of Europe Secretary-General Terry Davis said: "The tone of the speech delivered by the President of Georgia last night and his message to the local population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are encouraging." He stressed the need to find a "peaceful political solution to the problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which must respect the territorial integrity of Georgia."

In light of Russia's worrying moves toward military aggression, the presidents of Ukraine and Georgia issued a joint statement reaffirming "that resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetian is possible exclusively through peaceful means." The statement also underlined Ukraine's willingness to consider participating in peacekeeping operations in the region, together with other concerned parties.

JOINT STATEMENT OF THE PRESIDENTS OF UKRAINE & GEORGIA

April 30 — The Presidents of Ukraine and Georgia discussed the existing situation in terms of resolution of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. They expressed their concern over the Russian Federation's attempts to call into question the territorial integrity of Georgia by elevating the status of relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Thus the self-recognized republics are in fact encouraged to secede from Georgia.

Ukraine and Georgia condemn the recent statements of Russian officials on the possible use by Russia of "military means for the protection of its own citizens in Abkhazia." It can be interpreted as nothing else but a threat of the use of force, which represents an open provocation against Georgia.

Ukraine and Georgia reaffirm that resolution of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts is possible exclusively through peaceful means, in the framework of resolutions of the UN Security Council, in particular, the Security Council's Resolution N1808 of 15 April 2008. These resolutions call on the UN members states to respect the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders.

Russia's recent decisions prevent the implementation of these principles, create added tension and undermine efforts towards establishment of peace in the region, in which Russia itself participates. Ukraine and Georgia call on Russia to refuse to implement the announced plans with respect to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Ukraine is ready to consider the issue of its participation in the peacekeeping operations together with other parties concerned.

Ukraine supports the new initiative of the President of Georgia directed towards peaceful resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia and relies on constructive response of the Abkhaz side.