

Russian Invasion of Georgia

Media and telephone intercepts confirm Russia started the war

Mounting evidence shows that Russian forces were first to move into the Georgian region of South Ossetia

Last updated on 20 September 2008

This document presents evidence gleaned from

- Publicly available Russian and western media sources and
- Telephone intercepts of the Georgian intelligence services, described as credible by Western intelligence agencies and not denied by Russia.

This document first presents a summary of the evidence. A second section follows listing the stories and their web links, reproducing extracts in the original language and, where necessary, adding a translation into English.

The intercepts and the stories confirm that units of the Russian 58th Army moved into South Ossetia first, forcing the Georgian Armed Forces to react.

The Evidence

Telephone intercepts

Early in the morning of August 7, at 3:41 am and 3:52 am, Georgian intelligence intercepted two mobile telephone conversations held by a South Ossetian border guard posted at the Roki tunnel by the name of Gassiev. His first name is unknown.

Georgia provided the intercepts to US and European intelligence agencies and senior American officials have already found them to be credible. The Russian Federation has disputed their importance, but has not denied their authenticity.

The *New York Times* independently translated and analyzed the transcripts. The full story appears in section 2.

At 3.41 a.m., Gassiev told a supervisor at the South Ossetian border guard headquarters that a Russian colonel had asked Ossetian guards to inspect military vehicles that "crowded" the tunnel. Mr. Gassiev said, "The commander, a colonel, approached and said, 'The men with you should check the vehicles.' Is that O.K.?" When asked who this commander was, Gassiev continued, "I don't know. Their superior. The one in charge there. The BMPs and other vehicles were sent here and they have crowded there. The men are also standing around. And he said that we should inspect the vehicles. I don't know. And he went out."

At 3:52, Gassiev spoke to the supervisor again and informed him that armored vehicles had left the tunnel, commanded by a colonel he called Kazachenko.

The supervisor asked Gassiev, "Listen, has the armor arrived or what?" Gassiev replied, "The armor and people." Asked if they had gone through the tunnel, he said, "Yes; 20 minutes ago. When I called you they had already arrived." Supervisor: "Are they a lot, much military vehicles?"¹ Gassiev: "Well, Tanks, armored carriers and that."

These intercepts show that significant Russian forces, enough to "crowd" the Roki tunnel, entered South Ossetia some 20 hours before Georgian forces counterattacked.

The *New York Times* reports that senior American officials find the intercepts to be "credible".

Significantly, Russia has not disputed the authenticity of the intercepts; merely their importance. The Russian explanation that these calls refer to a routine rotation of their peacekeeping troops is false. According to the peace agreement in force at that time, any rotation should have happened during daylight and all relevant parties should have been notified (i.e. the Georgian Government and OSCE) a month ahead of time. The previous rotation of Russian forces was in May 2008.

Furthermore, prior to the publication of these intercepts, the Russian side had never mentioned any rotation on August 7 in any of their communications (e.g. their timeline of events, public data or statements) and it insisted that its troops entered the region only at noon on August 8.

Western intelligence findings boost the credibility of these transcripts. Again according to the *New York Times*, the western services independently found that two battalions of the 135th Regiment moved through Roki either the night of August 7 or the early morning of August 8.

The *New York Times* story appears in the next section of this document.

Why is this evidence only coming to light now, a month after the war started?

The Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs monitors mobile communications in South Ossetia carried over the *Magti* mobile network. *Magti*, which is one of Georgia's three big providers, has an excellent network across the South Ossetia region, covering the territory with 20 cell towers. The local alternative is *Ostelecom*, a provider backed by the Russian *Megafon* network. It has a much more restricted reach based on a system of 5 cell towers, mostly serving the high-density areas around Tskhinvali. Crucially, it does not reach deep into the countryside. For that reason, *Magti* is widely preferred in the territory, especially by people who need to roam rural areas, such as officials, militia, border guards, truck and taxi drivers etc. They widely use *Magti* despite instructions by the separatist government to use *Ostelecom*.

The Georgian Interior Ministry seeks to monitor all communications between officials in the territory. In line with legal requirements, the Ministry of Internal Affairs monitored the

¹ The term used to refer to military vehicles is "техника". This is Russian slang, meaning military vehicles.

conversations of a significant number of officials of the paramilitary structures of the de facto authorities involved in illegal activities

Georgia's Interior Minister received a report on the intercepts from Georgian counter-intelligence within hours of recording. He relayed the information to the President and other members of Government.

The file with the recordings was lost during the war when the surveillance team moved operations from Tbilisi, the capital, to the central city of Gori. Georgian intelligence officers later sifted through 6,000 files to retrieve copies.

Media stories

The evidence gleaned from the telephone intercepts is corroborated by stories that have appeared in both Russian and Western media.

These are summarised here; the next section lists links and the Russian originals.

1. In a story from August 4, life.ru describes the relocation of units of the Russian 58th Army and of a regiment of the Pskov-based 76th Airborne Division to the Georgian border, adjacent to the northern entrance to the Roki Tunnel:

Several battalions of the 58th Army of the North-Caucasus Military District, with permanent bases in the territory of North Ossetia, have been brought to the border of South Ossetia. Soldiers and military hardware have been moved to the end of the Roki tunnel, the only route that connects the two Ossetian republics.

As was reported to LIFE.RU sources in the republic, the movement of military units started on the night of 2nd to 3rd August. Reportedly, convoys of military forces began moving out from their bases in the Kirov region of North Ossetia (in Elkhotovo village) and from Ardone. The relocation of Russian hardware to the proximity of the Roki tunnel means these troops can support the Peacekeeping Forces as quickly as possible.

2. In a story from September 11, newsru.com analyses the movements of the 58th Army and concludes as follows :

"On August 7, the Russian regiment received an order to move towards Tskhinvali. It was set on alert and before nightfall reached the positions prescribed. By midnight it was possible to see the outbreak of shelling in Tskhinvali from where regiment was located.

Between the Roki Tunnel and Tskhinvali there is only one such place [to see the shelling of Tskhinvali] : the village of Djava. So, the 135th regiment entered South Ossetia before the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali."

3. In an interview with the Russian Ministry of Defence's publication *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star), Russian armed forces Captain Sedristyi confirms his unit was ordered to Tskhinvali on August 7:

"We were at the exercises," captain Sedristyi starts his story. "It is not so far from the capital of South Ossetia, Lower Zaramakh—a nature preserve in North Ossetia. That's the place where we had our camp after the exercises, but on 7 August we were ordered to move towards Tskhinvali. We were raised on an alarm – and sent on a march."

Krasnaya Zvezda changed the date in its story from August 7 to August 8 following questions from Western media. Captain Sedristyi, it was explained, confused the dates because of an injury sustained during the fighting. According to the *New York Times*, Captain Sedristyi cannot be reached. The extract of the story in the next section quotes the original; the links to the doctored story and the original, kept in a Google cache, are given.

4. On August 15, the daily *Permskie Novosti*, reporting about the war, quotes a conversation between a soldier and his mother:

"I have very little time, - the kid went on. – Look: we are here since 7 August. Well, the whole of our 58th army."

5. On August 17, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* quotes Sergeant Alexander Plotnikov of the 693rd regiment of the 58th Army, who was interviewed in Rostov after being wounded in the fighting:

"The gossip that the war would start soon went around in our regiment in the beginning of August. Nobody spoke about it officially. We understood everything, though, after two companies of our regiment were sent to the mountains, not far from Tskhinvali."

6. On September 2, Vadim Rachkovsky, a journalist for *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, wrote on his blog:

"As to the tank column. I see nothing particular about that. Attention! This is verified and nobody makes a secret from the fact that the battalion-tactical group of 693rd regiment of 58th army used to regularly move towards South Ossetia for military duty. And that's from where they moved to Tskhinvali. Maybe this happened on August 7, maybe even earlier. This was not for the first time. Each time tension was rising, our tanks advanced to this direction. So, in this case Saakashvili says the truth."

7. According to *BBC Monitoring World Media Monitor*, on August 7, the Abkhaz separatist leader Sergei Bagapsh told *Rossiya TV* that a Russian battalion had entered the conflict zone:

Abkhaz leader says Russian troops deployed in South Ossetia

The president of the self-proclaimed republic of Abkhazia, Sergey Bagapsh, has said that a Russian military battalion has entered the Georgian breakaway region of South Ossetia. His remarks, made at a meeting of the Abkhaz security council, were broadcast by the Russian state-owned TV channel Rossiya on 7 August. "I have spoken to the president of South Ossetia. It [the situation] has more or less stabilized now. A battalion of the North Caucasian [Military] District has entered the area," Bagapsh said.

Source: Rossiya TV, Moscow, in Russian 1600 gmt 7 Aug 08

8. As the Russian military was preparing for the invasion, the Russian media was preparing to cover it. Said Tsarnayev, a freelance journalist working for Reuters, arrived in Tskhinvali on 7 August. In an article published on the website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Tsarnayev is quoted as saying:

"At the hotel we discovered that there were already 48 Russian journalists there. Together with us, there were 50 people," Tsarnayev said. "I was the only one representing a foreign news agency. The rest were from Russian media and they arrived three days before we did, as if they knew that something was going to happen. Earlier at the border crossing, we met one man who was taking his wife and children from Tskhinvali."

Conclusion

The telephone intercepts, their analysis and the Western and Russian media stories all indicate that the Russian armed forces entered the territory of Georgia in South Ossetia many hours before Georgia decided to counterattack at Tskhinvali. Some had progressed at least as far as Djava before nightfall on August 7.

The Georgian Armed Forces received intelligence on August 7 that Russian troops north of the border had received orders to roll into Georgia. They received this information hours before Georgia conducted its military operation in response to the Russian invasion.

Military necessity dictated the choice of Tskhinvali as the objective for the Georgian counterattack, as any topographical map makes clear—it was the only way the Georgian army could move from its core territory to meet the advancing Russian columns. The counterattack aimed for military targets and did not significantly damage the town of Tskhinvali itself, as a study by the UN using satellite pictures makes clear.

(See

http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/freeproducts/Georgia/Russia_ConflictAug08/UNOSA_T_GEO_Village_Damage_Summary_Tskhinvali_19aug08_Highres.pdf.)

Moreover, the media stories and analyst reports support the view that the Russian military designed its exercises of July 2008 to prepare Russian troops for an invasion of Georgia. A leaflet entitled *Know Your Enemy*, which was distributed to participating

soldiers confirmed this view (see annex). The leaflet makes the target of the exercise clear, detailing the composition and main armaments of the Georgian Army.

Stories, translations and links

1. life.ru description of relocation of Russian units: <http://life.ru/news/27624/>
2. newsru.com analysis of the movements of the 58th Army

“All roads lead to the Roki tunnel: the war started on provocative territory “

11 September 2008

<http://newsru.com/russia/11sep2008/voshli.html>

The regiment, which has a permanent place of deployment in the village Prokhladni near Nalchik, was posted in Nizhny Zaramag after the exercises (2 August), writes *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star).

Nizhny Zaramag is located a few kilometers from the Roki tunnel's northern entrance. A checkpoint and customs post are located in this village. Russia and Georgia have different views as to whom the Roki tunnel belongs to. The Roki pass includes the Roki tunnel; an essential part of the Transcaucasian road. The Roki tunnel is the only connection linking South and North Ossetia. The Mamisoni pass is, in fact, the border between Georgia and Russia. These are extremely important strategic places from a military point of view. A regiment of the 58th Army was located in close proximity to this border, in the city of Zaramag close to the Transcaucasus roadway, and was able to cross the border of South Ossetia in the shortest time.

On August 7, the Russian regiment received an order to move towards Tskhinvali. It was set on alert and *before nightfall* reached the positions prescribed. By midnight it was possible to see the outbreak of shelling in Tskhinvali from where regiment was located.

Between the Roki Tunnel and Tskhinvali there is only one such place [to see the shelling of Tskhinvali] : the village of Djava. So, the 135th regiment entered South Ossetia before the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali.

Russian original:

Все дороги ведут в Рокский тоннель: война началась на провокационной территории

Полк, имеющий место постоянной дислокации в поселке Прохладный под Нальчиком, после окончания учений (2 августа) был размещен в Нижнем Зарамаге, пишет "Красная звезда".

Нижний Зарамаг находится в нескольких километрах от северного портала Рокского тоннеля; в этом поселке находятся пропускной пункт и таможня.

Принадлежность Рокского тоннеля Россия и Грузия рассматривают по-разному. Рокский перевал включает в себя Рокский тоннель - важнейшую

часть Транскавказской магистрали. Это единственная дорога, соединяющая Южную и Северную Осетию. Мамисоновский перевал - по сути, граница между Грузией и Российской Федерацией. Это крайне важные стратегические плацдармы с военной точки зрения. В непосредственной близости к границе в районе города Зрамаг на Транскаме был расквартирован полк 58-й армии, который в краткие сроки способен перейти границу Южной Осетии, отмечал накануне боевых действий LIFE.ru.

7 августа российский полк получил команду выдвигаться к Цхинвали, был поднят по тревоге и до исхода дня успел прибыть на предписанный рубеж выдвижения. После полуночи из расположения полка можно было наблюдать вспышки артиллерийского обстрела Цхинвали.

Между Рокским тоннелем и Цхинвали такое место только одно - Джава. И так, 135-й мотострелковый полк вступил на территорию ЮО до начала грузинской атаки на Цхинвали, полагают СМИ.

3. *Krasnaya Zvezda* interview of captain Sedristyi:

“Life Goes On”

By Irina Zhimova,

Krasnaya Zvezda

3 September 2008

Doctored story at http://www.redstar.ru/2008/09/03_09/2_03.html

Original story at

http://74.125.39.104/search?q=cache:http://www.redstar.ru/2008/09/03_09/2_03.html

“- We were at the exercises, - captain Sedristyi starts his story. – It is not so far from the capital of South Ossetia. Nizhnyr Zaramag - nature reserve in North Ossetia. That's the place where we had our camp after the exercises, but on 7 August we got orders to move towards Tskhinvali. We were raised on an alert – and sent on a march.”

Russian original:

“- Мы были на учениях, - начинает рассказ капитан Сидристый. - Это относительно недалеко от столицы Южной Осетии. Нижний Зарамах - природный заповедник Северной Осетии. Вот там после плановых учений и стояли лагерем, **но 7 августа пришла команда на выдвижение к Цхинвалу**. Подняли нас по тревоге - и на марш.”

4. *Permskie Novosti* interview of the mother of a soldier:

“Soldiers from Perm got into the epicenter of the war”

By Irina Kizilova

Permskie Novosti

15 August 2008

<http://www.permnews.ru/story.asp?kt=2912&n=453>

During the morning of 10 August one of the mothers, who sent her son to Alania [in North Ossetia] less than 3 months ago received a call. “

– Mom, I am just back from Tskhinvali.
– What do you mean, from Tskhinvali?! There's war down there! You were not supposed to be sent there!
– I have very little time. Look: we are here since 7 August. Well, the whole of our 58th army. You are probably watching TV to find out what is going on over there? Today, we battled through from Tskhinvali to Vladikavkaz for arms supplies. Now we are going to fight through back there. That's all, I am being called. Regards to everyone from me. Kiss you...

Russian original:

Утром 10 августа в доме одной из матерей, отправившей меньше трех месяцев назад своего сына в Аланию, раздался звонок. – Мама, я только что из Цхинвали. – Как из Цхинвали?! Там же война! Вас не должны были туда отправлять!

– У меня очень мало времени, – продолжал мальчишка. – Слушай: **МЫ ТАМ С 7 АВГУСТА**. Ну, вся наша 58-я армия. Ты же, наверное, смотришь по телику, что там происходит? Сегодня мы пробились из Цхинвала во Владикавказ за вооружением. Сейчас будем обратно пробиваться. Всё, зовут. Передавай всем привет. Целую...

5. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* interview of Sergeant Alexander Plotnikov:

“We knew even in the beginning of August that the war would start”, Maria Zhuykova,

Komsomolskaya Pravda

17 August, 2008

<http://www.kp.ru/daily/24147/364238/>

“The gossip that the war would start soon went around in our regiment in the beginning of August. Nobody spoke about it officially. We understood everything, though, after two companies of our regiment were sent to the mountains, not far from Tskhinvali.”

Russian original:

“- Слухи о том, что, скоро будет война, стали ходить в полку в начале августа. Никто официально об этом не говорил. Но мы все поняли, когда две роты нашего полка переправили в горы, недалеко от Цхинвала.»

6. Blog of Vadim Rachkovsky, the journalist with *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*:

2 September 2008

<http://voynodel.livejournal.com/33871.html?thread=916559#t916559>

Question: Vadim...what about this strange column of tanks or some other heavy armored vehicles that allegedly entered South Ossetia through Roki Tunnel in the evening of August 7? Georgian representative to UN is mentioning this on every session.

Answer: As to the tanks column. I see nothing particular about that. Attention! This is verified and nobody makes a secret from the fact that the battalion-tactical group of 693rd regiment of 58th army used to regularly move towards South Ossetia for military duty. And that's where from they moved to Tskhinvali. Maybe this happened on August 7, maybe even earlier. This was not for the first time. Each time tension was rising, our tanks advanced to this direction. So, in this case Saakashvili says the truth. What else to do? Wait until these tanks would pass through Roki tunnel?

Russian original:

И что слышно насчёт этой непонятной танковой колонны или каких-то бронемашин, которые якобы прошли в Рокский туннель 7 августа вечером в сторону Южной Осетии? Грузинский представитель в ООН на каждом заседании говорит об этом?

А насчёт танковой колонны. На самом деле вообще ничего особенного в этом факте не вижу. Внимание! Доподлинно известно и этот факт особо даже не скрывается что батальонно-тактическая группа 693-го полка 58 армии регулярно выдвигалась в сторону Южной Осетии на боевое дежурство. Оттуда они и на Цхинвали пошли. Может это было 7 августа, а может и раньше. И это случилось не впервой. При любом обострении обстановки наши танки туда выдвигались. Так что Саакашвили в данном случае говорит правду. А что ж на делать прикажете? Ждать, когда его танки в Рокский тоннель пройдут?

7. BBC Monitoring 7th August report separatist leader Sergei Bagapsh interview on Rossiya TV:

BBC World Monitor is a subscription service. No link can therefore be given.

8. Interview of Reuters photographer Said Tsarnayev, in Tskhinvali on 7 August:

Scene At Russia-Georgia Border Hinted At Scripted Affair

By Brian Whitmore

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY

August 23, 2008

Said Tsarnayev stumbled into a war.

A Chechen freelance photographer with the Reuters news agency, Tsarnayev arrived in the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, during the day on August 7. Travelling together with a colleague, Tsarnayev said he planned to take photographs of the environment and natural surroundings in the area for a project he was working on.

Once in Tskhinvali, he discovered a virtual army of Russian journalists at his hotel.

Speaking to RFE/RL's North Caucasus Service, Tsarnayev, a resident of the Chechen capital, Grozny, said the Moscow-based reporters had been sent from various Russian media outlets days earlier, and were preparing to cover something big.

"At the hotel we discovered that there were already 48 Russian journalists there. Together with us, there were 50 people," Tsarnayev said. "I was the only one representing a foreign news agency. The rest were from Russian media and they arrived three days before we did, as if they knew that something was going to happen. Earlier at the border crossing, we met one man who was taking his wife and children from Tskhinvali."

Late that night, armed conflict broke out between Russia and Georgia.

'No Relationship To Reality'

Tsarnayev's account could not be independently confirmed. But it is consistent with mounting indications that Russia had been planning an attack on Georgia in advance, and was just waiting for a pretext to carry it out.

Russia's state-controlled media seemed extremely well-prepared to cover the outbreak of armed conflict in Georgia. Television networks immediately presented elaborate graphics with news anchors and commentators appearing to stick to disciplined talking points accusing Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili of aggression, and the Georgian armed forces of genocide and ethnic cleansing.

The country's best English-speaking officials were made readily available to Western media, where they relentlessly pushed Moscow's line on the conflict: Russia was simply protecting its citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia from atrocities at the hands of Georgia's military.

In an interview with RFE/RL in the early days of the conflict, Steven Pifer, a former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine who is now a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, said Moscow's rhetoric and media narrative suggests they were preparing a large-scale operation.

"The rhetoric that is coming out of Moscow, ethnic cleansing and genocide, is just way over the top," Pifer said. "It's almost approaching the point where there is just no relationship to reality. But again, certainly the rhetoric is appropriate to a larger operation against Georgia to just stop and reverse whatever military gains the Georgians made in South Ossetia on [August 7]."

The apparently well-prepared media narrative is only part of the picture.

On August 3, authorities in Georgia's Moscow-backed separatist province of South Ossetia began evacuating hundreds of children to Russia. At the time, Georgian officials said the move could be a signal that separatist authorities, and their patrons in Russia, were preparing an offensive.

South Ossetian authorities said at the time that the evacuations were a precaution in case Georgia attempted to retake the province by force -- something Moscow and Tskhinvali had been accusing Tbilisi of plotting to do.

Speaking at a news conference in Moscow on August 21, the deputy head of Russia's General Staff, Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, reiterated Moscow's claims that the Georgian side was preparing to use force.

"We have complaints against the OSCE regarding the initial stage of the conflict -- they were informed by the Georgian side that there would be an invasion, but they

didn't warn the Russian peacekeepers," Nogovitsyn said.

In remarks reported by "The Washington Post," Georgian Defense Minister Davit Kezerashvili said he gave the order for Georgian forces to "go out from their bases" at 6 p.m. local time on August 7, just one hour before Saakashvili announced a unilateral cease-fire.

Months In The Works

Kezerashvili said the Georgian troop movement was designed to deter South Ossetian separatists, who were firing across the de facto border into Georgian-controlled villages.

But observers say the march toward war on Moscow's side began months earlier.

In fact, hostilities began escalating soon after NATO delayed granting Membership Action Plans -- a key phase before full membership -- to Georgia and Ukraine at its summit in early April.

Less than two weeks later, Vladimir Putin, who was in the last month of his presidency, signed a decree authorizing direct relations with and assistance for Georgia's two pro-Moscow separatist provinces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Later in April, Russia deployed 1,500 additional troops, some of them heavily armed, to its "peacekeeping" contingent in Abkhazia without Georgia's consent -- an express violation of the 1994 cease-fire agreement.

Russia also began shooting down Georgia's unmanned drone aircraft that were conducting reconnaissance over Abkhazia. Russian military aircraft also began regularly violating Georgian airspace near the separatist territory.

In June, Russia deployed unarmed troops to Abkhazia to rebuild a rail link between Sukhumi and Ochamchira. At the time, Moscow presented the move as a humanitarian gesture to improve Abkhazia's transportation infrastructure. But U.S. and Georgian officials later pointed out that the railway was used to transport military equipment and munitions into Georgia during the conflict.

Then, with everybody watching Abkhazia, the focus abruptly shifted to South Ossetia.

In July, Russia's armed forces began massive military training exercises in the north Caucasus involving 8,000 servicemen and 700 pieces of military hardware. Russia's 58th Army, which would later spearhead the incursion into Georgia on August 8, was the key unit in those maneuvers.

The 58th Army remained in the North Caucasus after the exercises. Shortly thereafter, Georgian and South Ossetian separatist forces began exchanging artillery, mortar, and sniper fire across the de facto border. Georgian officials accuse the separatists of instigating the exchanges, but South Ossetian authorities deny the allegation.

Pifer said it appears that Russia laid a well-prepared trap for the Georgians, and Tbilisi took the bait.

"The Georgian leadership made a mistake on [August 7]. They should have understood from what they have seen from the Russians that the Russians were looking for a pretext. They [the Georgians] gave them that pretext when they decided to go in a fairly large way into South Ossetia," Pifer said. "The speed of the Russian response suggests that the Russians were ready, they were just waiting for the reason and they took that as the reason."

9. New York Times analysis of the telephone transcripts:

Georgia Offers Fresh Evidence on War's Start

New York Times

DAN BILEFSKY, C...J. CHIVERS, THOM SHANKER and MICHAEL SCHWIRTZ

September 16, 2008

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/16/world/europe/16georgia.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

This article was reported by Dan Bilefsky, C. J. Chivers, Thom Shanker and Michael Schwartz and written by Mr. Chivers.

TBILISI, Georgia — A new front has opened between Georgia and Russia, now over which side was the aggressor whose military activities early last month ignited the lopsided five-day war. At issue is new intelligence, inconclusive on its own, that nonetheless paints a more complicated picture of the critical last hours before war broke out.

Georgia has released intercepted telephone calls purporting to show that part of a Russian armored regiment crossed into the separatist enclave of South Ossetia nearly a full day before Georgia's attack on the capital, Tskhinvali, late on Aug. 7.

Georgia is trying to counter accusations that the long-simmering standoff over South Ossetia, which borders Russia, tilted to war only after it attacked Tskhinvali. Georgia regards the enclave as its sovereign territory.

The intercepts circulated last week among intelligence agencies in the United States and Europe, part of a Georgian government effort to persuade the West and opposition voices at home that Georgia was under invasion and attacked defensively. Georgia argues that as a tiny and vulnerable nation allied with the West, it deserves extensive military and political support.

Georgia also provided audio files of the intercepts along with English translations to The New York Times, which made its own independent translation from the original Ossetian into Russian and then into English.

Russia, already facing deep criticism and the coolest audience in European capitals since the cold war, is arguing vigorously against Georgia's claims. Last week, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin expressed bafflement at what he saw as the West's propensity to believe Georgia's version of events.

In an interview arranged by the Kremlin, the Russian military played down the significance of the intercepted conversations, saying troop movements to the enclave before the war erupted were part of the normal rotation and replenishment of longstanding peacekeeping forces there.

But at a minimum, the intercepted calls, which senior American officials have reviewed and described as credible if not conclusive, suggest there were Russian military movements earlier than had previously been acknowledged, whether routine or hostile, into Georgian territory as tensions accelerated toward war.

They also suggest the enduring limits — even with high-tech surveillance of critical battlefield locations — of penetrating the war's thick fogs.

The back and forth over who started the war is already an issue in the American presidential race, with Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska, the Republican vice presidential candidate, contending that Russia's incursion into Georgia was "unprovoked," while others argue that Georgia's shelling of Tskhinvali was provocation. Georgia claims that its main evidence — two of several calls secretly recorded by its intelligence service on Aug. 7 and 8 — shows that Russian tanks and fighting vehicles were already passing through the Roki Tunnel linking Russia to South Ossetia before dawn on Aug. 7.

By Russian accounts, the war began at 11:30 that night, when President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia ordered an attack on Russian positions in Tskhinvali. Russian combat units crossed the border into South Ossetia only later, Russia has said.

Russia has not disputed the veracity of the phone calls, which were apparently made by Ossetian border guards on a private Georgian cellphone network. "Listen, has the armor arrived or what?" a supervisor at the South Ossetian border guard headquarters asked a guard at the tunnel with the surname Gassiev, according to a call that Georgia and the cellphone provider said was intercepted at 3:52 a.m. on Aug. 7.

"The armor and people," the guard replied. Asked if they had gone through, he said, "Yes, 20 minutes ago; when I called you, they had already arrived."

Shota Utiashvili, the director of the intelligence analysis team at Georgia's Interior Ministry, said the calls pointed to a Russian incursion. "This whole conflict has been overshadowed by the debate over who started this war," he said. "These intercepted recordings show that Russia moved first and that we were defending ourselves."

The recordings, however, do not explicitly describe the quantity of armor or indicate that Russian forces were engaged in fighting at that time.

Competing Accounts

Gen. Lt. Nikolai Uvarov of Russia, a former United Nations military attaché, who served as a Defense Ministry spokesman during the war, insisted that Georgia's attack surprised Russia and that its leaders scrambled to respond while Russian peacekeeping forces were under fire. He said President Dmitri A. Medvedev had been on a cruise on the Volga River. Mr. Putin was at the Olympics in Beijing.

"The minister of defense, by the way, was on vacation in the Black Sea somewhere," he said. "We never expected them to launch an attack."

As for the claim that Russian forces entered the enclave early on Aug. 7, General Uvarov said military hardware regularly moved in and out of South Ossetia, supplying the Russian peacekeeping contingent there.

"Since we had here a battalion, they need fuel, they need products; naturally you have movement of troops," he said. "But not combat troops specifically sent there to fight." He added, "If it were a big reinforcement, then we wouldn't have lost about 15 peacekeepers inside."

Georgia disputed the Russian explanation, saying that under peacekeeping documents signed by both sides in 2004, rotations of the Russian peacekeeping battalion could be conducted only in daylight and after not less than a month of advance notification. There was no notification, Mr. Utiashvili said.

Why, he asked, was the duty officer at the Roki Tunnel apparently caught off guard, if this was, as the Russians said, a routine deployment of peacekeepers?

Georgian officials said they provided the materials last week to the United States and France, which holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, in addition to two reporters for The Times. The Times hired an independent Ossetian linguist in Russia to translate the recordings.

Vano Merabishvili, Georgia's minister of interior, said he was told of the intercepts by Georgian intelligence within hours of their being recorded. The information, he said, was relayed to Mr. Saakashvili, who saw them as a sign of a Russian invasion.

Pressed as to why more than a month passed before the conversations came to light, Mr. Merabishvili said the file with the recordings was lost during the war when the surveillance team moved operations from Tbilisi, the capital, to the central city of Gori. Georgian intelligence officers later sifted through 6,000 files to retrieve copies, he said.

The Times provided a range of American government and military officials with copies of the independent translations for comment. They cautioned that while the conversations appeared to be from genuine cellphone intercepts, no complete or official assessment could be made without access to the entire file of cellphone audio gathered by the Georgians. They said the question of provocation and response in the conflict remained under scrutiny in Washington.

"We continue to look at that, both in terms of our intelligence assessment and then from what we get from on the ground," said one senior American military officer who follows the situation in Georgia and agreed to discuss the matter on the condition of anonymity because it involved intelligence matters. "We have not been able to establish the 'Who shot John?' — the first shot."

Talk of Armor in Tunnel

Georgia said its main evidence consisted of two conversations on Aug. 7 between Mr. Gassiev at the tunnel and his supervisor at the headquarters.

In the first conversation, logged at 3.41 a.m., Mr. Gassiev told the supervisor that a Russian colonel had asked Ossetian guards to inspect military vehicles that "crowded" the tunnel. Mr. Gassiev said: "The commander, a colonel, approached and said, 'The guys with you should check the vehicles.' Is that O.K.?"

Asked who the colonel was, Mr. Gassiev answered: "I don't know. Their superior, the one in charge there. The B.M.P.'s and other vehicles were sent here and they've crowded there. The guys are also standing around. And he said that we should inspect the vehicles. I don't know. And he went out." A B.M.P. is a tracked armored

vehicle that vaguely resembles a tank. It was one of the principal Russian military vehicles seen in the war, and in the peacekeeping contingent.

At 3:52 a.m., Mr. Gassiev informed the supervisor that armored vehicles had left the tunnel, commanded by a colonel he called Kazachenko. The colonel's first name was not mentioned. According to unrelated Russian press reports after the war, Col. Andrei Kazachenko served in the 135th Motorized Rifle Regiment. The regiment provided peacekeepers in South Ossetia and fought in Tskhinvali during the war, General Uvarov said. The general said he had no information about Colonel Kazachenko.

Georgia's claims about Russian movements appear to be at least partly supported by other information that emerged recently. Western intelligence determined independently that two battalions of the 135th Regiment moved through the tunnel to South Ossetia either on the night of Aug. 7 or the early morning of Aug. 8, according to a senior American official.

New Western intelligence also emerged last week showing that a motorized rifle element was assigned to a garrison just outside South Ossetia, on Russian territory, with the aim of securing the north end of the tunnel, and that it may have moved to secure the entire tunnel either on the night of Aug. 7 or early in the morning of Aug. 8, according to several American officials who were briefed on the findings. On Sept. 3, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the official newspaper of the Russian Defense Ministry, published an article in which a captain in the 135th Regiment, Denis Sidristy, said his unit had been ordered to cease a training exercise and move to Tskhinvali on Aug. 7.

After a query by *The Times* about the article, the Russian newspaper published an article last Friday in which the captain said the correct date for the advance to Tskhinvali was Aug. 8. Efforts to reach Captain Sidristy were unsuccessful.

A U.S. Official's Account

Matthew J. Bryza, the deputy assistant secretary of state who coordinates diplomacy in the Caucasus, said the contents of the recorded conversations were consistent with what Georgians appeared to believe on Aug. 7, in the final hours before the war, when a brief cease-fire collapsed.

"During the height of all of these developments, when I was on the phone with senior Georgian officials, they sure sounded completely convinced that Russian armored vehicles had entered the Roki Tunnel, and exited the Roki Tunnel, before and during the cease-fire," he said. "I said, under instructions, that we urge you not to engage these Russians directly."

By the night of Aug. 7, he said, he spoke with Eka Tkeshelashvili, Georgia's foreign minister, shortly before President Saakashvili issued his order to attack. "She sounded completely convinced, on a human level, of the Russian presence," Mr. Bryza said. " 'Under these circumstances,' she said, 'We have to defend our villages.' "

General Uvarov, the senior Russian official, contended that the Georgians had acted rashly and without a clear understanding of their own intelligence.

According to the cease-fire agreement signed in the 1990s after the first war between Georgia and South Ossetia, Russia was allowed to maintain a 500-member

peacekeeping force in the region, he said. And 300 reserve peacekeepers can be deployed in emergency situations, he said.

As the Georgians began their attack, about 100 reserve peacekeepers from the 135th Regiment were put on alert and moved close to the tunnel, he said. They were ordered through the tunnel to reinforce forces in Tskhinvali around dawn on Aug. 8, he said.

The first Russian combat unit — the First Battalion of the 135th Regiment — did not pass through the Roki Tunnel until 2:30 p.m. on Aug. 8, more than 14 hours after the Georgians began shelling Tskhinvali, he said.

The battalion, he said, did not reach Tskhinvali until the next evening, having met heavy Georgian resistance. Georgia disputes that account, saying it was in heavy combat with Russian forces near the tunnel long before dawn. One thing was clear by then. The war had begun.

Dan Bilefsky and C. J. Chivers reported from Tbilisi, Georgia; Thom Shanker from Washington; and Michael Schwartz from Moscow.

Annex: "know your enemy" leaflet distributed to soldiers participating in the exercises in the north Caucasus in July 2008

ВОИН, ЗНАЙ ВЕРОЯТНОГО ПРОТИВНИКА!

С 2001 года руководство Грузии резко изменило свой курс на добрососедские и дружественные отношения с Россией. Избрав направление на эскалацию отношений с нашим государством, руководство Грузии всяческими путями стремится вступить в состав НАТО, активно проводит милитаризацию страны.

Состав ВС Грузии: сухопутные войска, военно-воздушные силы и ПВО, военно-морские силы, национальная гвардия.

Численность ВС Грузии — 32 700 чел.

Бюджет министерства обороны на 2008 год — \$970 млн.

Сухопутные войска

Численность 22 000 чел.

Сухопутные войска Грузии включают 5 бригад и 8 отд. батальонов

-1-я пехотная бригада (г. Гори). В 2002-2004гг. прошла обучение по американской программе GTER, в 2005-2006гг. - частично по американской программе GSSOP.

-2-я пехотная бригада (н.п. Сенаки и г. Батуми). В 2005г. прошла обучение по американской программе GSSOP, в 2005-2006гг. прошла «обкатку» в Ираке.

-3-я пехотная бригада (г. Кутаиси и н.п. Ахалцихе). В 2006г. прошла обучение по американской программе GSSOP II, в 2006-2008гг. прошла «обкатку» в Ираке, 32-й батальон в 2007г. был в Косово.

-4-я пехотная бригада (г. Тбилиси и н.п. Мухровани). Сформирована из военнослужащих бывших внутренних войск.

-5-я пехотная бригада (г. Батуми и г. Поти).

На вооружении грузинской армии состоит:

танки:Т-72Б1, Т-72М Т-72АВ (по плану министерства обороны Грузии все 165 единиц Т-72 проходят модернизацию до уровня Т-72-SIM-1).

БМП: БМП-1, БМП-2, БТР-80, МТЛБ, БРДМ-2, броневые автомобили Кобра.

Ствольная артиллерия: 203-мм 2С7 САУ "Пион", 152-мм 2С19 САУ Мста-С, 152-мм буксируемая гаубица 2А65 Мста-Б, 152-мм 2А36 буксируемая пушка Гиацинт-Б, 152-мм САУ DANA, 122-мм 2С3 САУ Акация, 22-мм буксируемая гаубица 2А18 Д-30, 100-мм буксируемая пушка МТ-12, 40 85-мм буксируемая пушка Д-44.

РСЗО: 262-мм М-87 РСЗО "Оркан", 122-мм-160-мм РСЗО Лар-160 "Град-лар", 122-мм РСЗО RM-70, 122-мм РСЗО BM-21 Град, 128-мм М63 РСЗО "Пламен".

26 января 2008 года Грузия объявила об отказе от автоматов Калашникова в пользу автоматических винтовок М-4 американского производства.

Сильные стороны:

- подготовка многих подразделений сухопутных войск Грузии инструкторами НАТО;
- оснащение ВС Грузии современным американским, французским и турецким вооружением и техникой. Имеющиеся образцы вооружения и техники советского образца усовершенствуются или заменяются новейшими;
- финансирование подготовки войск США и НАТО;
- наличие боевого опыта подразделений 2-й и 3-й полевых бригад в Ираке, Косово в составе войск НАТО.

Слабые стороны:

- низкое состояние воинской дисциплины и морально-психологическое состояние военнослужащих. Имеются случаи дезертирства, проявления неуставных взаимоотношений, пьянства в подразделениях сухопутных войск;
- как показали опубликованные недавно опросы военнослужащих ВС Грузии, самой большой и светлой мечтой грузинского солдата является не претворение в жизнь агрессивно-милитаристских планов "саакашистов", а командировка в Ирак. По итогам такой поездки каждый грузинский воин может привезти домой около 10 тысяч долларов США и существенно поправить бедственное положение своей семьи;
- низкая обученность личного состава подразделений, в которых нет американских инструкторов.

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