

GEORGIA UPDATE

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Foreign Minister Vashadze met with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Washington this week to advance the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Agreement and reinforce bilateral relations. “The US is very committed to our very strong relationship with Georgia,” Secretary Clinton said, adding that the countries shared common concerns and values. The two countries expect to achieve “concrete results” this year in the Charter’s implementation, she added. Vashadze and Clinton also discussed Georgia’s significant troop contributions to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, the country’s drive toward NATO, and pressing security concerns in Georgia’s Russian-occupied territories of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia.

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“The international community should increase its efforts to convince the de facto authorities and all parties involved in negotiations of the need for an on-the-ground, international presence in Abkhazia. The UN and OSCE both had a presence in Abkhazia that they were forced to withdraw shortly after the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. International representatives are essential in Abkhazia if human rights are to be monitored effectively and the rights of returnees are to be protected.”

◆ Human Rights Watch

“NATO should take note of Georgia’s sacrifice and understand that Georgia remains a valuable ally of the democratic world. Russia is increasing its provocation in occupied Georgian territories with new arms being installed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We want to see a reduction in tension in the entire region, but Moscow seems to insist on stoking up the fires in all of the Caucasus region.”

◆ Denis MacShane, UK Member of Parliament and former Europe Minister

“Only a dialogue is the path that can lead to long-term stability in the region. In this connection, we can only welcome the efforts of the Georgian president, who expressed readiness to begin talks with the leaders of Russia.”

◆ Peter Semneby, EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Feb. 25: FM Vashadze visits the Czech Republic

Mar. 3-4: Next round of Geneva peace talks

Mar. 15-17: Parliament Speaker Bakradze in Israel

Mar. 25-27: State Minister for Reintegration Tkeshelashvili attends Brussels Forum 2011

Apr. 15-20: Parliament Speaker Bakradze attends IPU meeting in Panama

TOP STORIES

Human Rights Watch Says International Presence Essential in Abkhazia; Concern for Georgians in Gali

Human Rights Watch is urging international leaders to resume monitoring missions in Abkhazia, saying that an international presence was “essential” to protect the rights of ethnic Georgians living in Georgia’s Russian-controlled territories. “The international community should increase its efforts to convince the de facto authorities and all parties involved in negotiations of the need for an on-the-ground, international presence in Abkhazia,” Human Rights Watch said in a report released last week.

Tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians, displaced by ethnic cleansing in the 1990s and during the 2008 Russian invasion, have been denied the right to return to their homes in Abkhazia. Georgians have only been allowed to return to Gali, in southern Abkhazia, where they face a dire situation, according to HRW. “Ethnic Georgian returnees face a number of problems that loom large in their decision whether to return to the area (in some cases, to stay) or leave it for good,” the report says. “Personal security and protection from crime is a daily anxiety.

Guaranteeing returnees’ security and upholding law and order in Gali has proved difficult. This is largely due to the weakness in the rule of law and administration of justice in the area and deep, mutual distrust between the Georgian population and Abkhaz security authorities.” The report continues: “Another source of anxiety for returnees is the need to obtain Abkhaz ID documents. Although Abkhaz passports are not internationally recognized, returnees require them before the authorities will extend certain civil and political rights, including property rights. The citizenship measures implemented by the de facto authorities discriminate on ethnic grounds, automatically granting ethnic Abkhaz the right to a passport but creating barriers for non-ethnic Abkhaz to obtain them. They also require ethnic Georgians to formally renounce their Georgian citizenship.”

HRW underscored the importance of re-instituting UN and OSCE observer missions in Georgia—both of which were forced to close by Russian vetoes—to protect and ensure the rights of ethnic Georgian IDPs seeking to return home. “International representatives in Abkhazia are essential in Abkhazia if human rights are to be monitored effectively and the rights of returnees are to be protected,” HRW said.

[HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: Georgians in Gali](#)

Georgia to Send Artillery Instructors to Afghanistan

Parliament has approved sending artillery instructors to Afghanistan, supplementing the country’s 950-strong troop commitment to the NATO mission. The instructors will train Afghan forces, and will serve under French command. The deployment reinforces President Saakashvili’s pledge to contribute to global security and help NATO forces in the fight against terrorism. Said Saakashvili at the Munich Security Conference earlier this month: “We’ve offered to send more troops, and we are willing to consider increasing our assistance in order to help the Afghan people achieve a sustainable peace and to prevent terrorists from again using that country as a base.” Georgia is the number one contributor of forces per capita to NATO’s Afghan mission.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia to Send Artillery Instructors to Afghanistan](#)

Bank of Georgia Raises Rates to Counter Inflation

Seeking to control inflation, the National Bank of Georgia increased the refinancing rate half a point to 8 percent. Strong inflation prompted the decision by the central bank’s monetary policy committee to raise rates. Consumer prices rose by 12.3 percent in January, year on year, up from 11.2 percent in December 2010, due to increasing food and fuel prices on the world markets. The key rate had remained unchanged for the past three months during a pause in tightening that began last May. The Georgian government has targeted 6 percent inflation for 2011.

[FINANCIAL TIMES: Georgia Raises Rates to Counter Inflation](#)

Armenia, Georgia Agree to Jointly Control Border

Armenia and Georgia formalized plans last week to jointly operate their three border crossings in an effort to facilitate trade and transport between the countries. “We agreed with the prime minister that we must organize these processes in a way that minimizes inconveniences for our business entities and citizens,” Armenian PM Sarkisian said after meeting with PM Gilauri in Yerevan, regarding negotiations to simplify border crossing requirements and enhance trade. Cross-border travel has been complicated by current regulations imposed by both countries, such as a tax on heavy trucks and a requirement to conspicuously post proof of insurance. Gilauri applauded the border deal and expressed hope that the final agreement would be similar to the one Georgia’s recently signed with Turkey, which reduces to almost zero the number of stops at border crossings. The two governments plan to start discussions on a corresponding bilateral agreement in coming months.

[RADIO FREE EUROPE: Armenia, Georgia to Jointly Control Border](#)
[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgian PM Visits Armenia](#)

Three suspects with Ties to Russia Arrested in Terror Attacks

Georgian authorities arrested three more suspects in a series of terror attacks in Tbilisi and western Georgia; all are believed to have ties to Russian security forces. “Three Georgian men, organizers of terrorist acts committed in 2009 and 2010 by the Russian special services in Georgia, were arrested as a result of a special operation,” interior ministry spokesman Zura Gvenetadze said, referring to a chain of explosions that occurred near railway targets, the US embassy, the Labor Party office, and a grocery store. Among those arrested was Merab Kolbalia, described as one of the “key figures responsible for terrorist acts organized by Russian intelligence forces.” Police also arrested two other men in connection with the failed attempt to bomb a railway bridge in Georgia’s Samegrelo region, and a supermarket blast in Tbilisi last November. Six other people were also arrested in December on suspicion of coordinating last years’ blasts near the US embassy and at Tbilisi’s central railway station, explosions that left one person dead.

[AFP: Georgia Arrests "Russian-Backed" Terror Suspects](#)

[BLOOMBERG: Georgian Authorities Arrest Three for Explosions in 2009, 2010](#)

Qatar, Georgia Thicken Economic Ties With Deals on Energy, Air Transport

Georgia and Qatar this week signed two key economic agreements, deepening bilateral relations and promoting investment in Georgia’s energy industry. The deal is part President Saakashvili’s drive to attract foreign investment in order to boost Georgia’s economy and stimulate growth. The president has secured a pledge from the UAE to invest \$1 billion in Georgia over the next three years, and a promise from Qatar to invest “heavily” in the country’s burgeoning energy sector. Meanwhile, Georgia and Qatar also signed last week a major “open skies” air transport agreement to eliminate restrictions on tariff and the number of flights between the countries. Qatar Airways will be the first Gulf carrier to fly to Tbilisi, with flights expected to start by the end of the year. “We are planning to make Tbilisi an aviation hub, as Doha is in the case of Qatar,” Economy Minister Vera Kobalia said. “On that scale, there are plenty of growth opportunities for Qatar’s national airline.”

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia, Qatar Sign Air Transport Deal](#)

[BLOOMBERG: Georgia, Qatar to Sign Economic Agreements, Mainly in Energy Sector](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

THE INDEPENDENT: Mikheil Saakashvili—“The land they took is rocky. Its only use is for attacking us”

Nearly three years since Russia's invasion of Georgia, Russian troops have consolidated their positions in Georgia's occupied regions of S. Ossetia and Abkhazia. “They don't recognize our borders, they don't recognize our government, they don't recognize the ceasefire,” President Saakashvili said in an interview. “The Russians have just deployed missiles 40 kilometers away, enough to destroy this place 20 times over. This is not just a performance, it's a big issue.”

www.independent.co.uk

NEW YORK TIMES: Georgians build ties with Russian Caucasus

Unlike Georgia's other channels, the recently debuted First Caucasus News is broadcast in Russian—its target audience includes viewers north of its border, in the mountainous and restive Russian region known as the N. Caucasus. The launch is part of a strategy President Saakashvili rolled out last fall, when in a speech at the UN General Assembly he envisioned a union of the North and South Caucasus that would “join the European family of free nations, following the Georgian path.” Georgia went on to drop visa requirements for residents of the N. Caucasus, allowing them to enter the country freely for 90 days. The offer attracted more than 12,000 visitors in the next three months.

www.nytimes.com

US NEWS & WORLD REPORT: Study shows that defensive military alliances enhance peace

Countries that enter into defense pacts with other nations are less likely to be attacked, according to new research from Rice University. The study's lead researcher believes that this research has current policy relevance for the US, for instance, in Georgia's accession into NATO. “Some analysts are concerned about the US making such a commitment, and some believe that having a commitment of assistance from the US could encourage Georgia to behave aggressively toward Russia, making war more likely,” said political science professor Ashley Leeds. “The study suggests that this is not the most common general pattern. In fact, a defensive commitment to Georgia should, according to the study, make war between Russia and Georgia less likely.”

www.usnews.com

PROJECT SYNDICATE: Arms or allies?

Is it wise for EU and NATO members to enhance the capacity of non-allies to project their military power? After all, only two-and-a-half years ago, Russia invaded Georgia, a country that NATO had named as a potential future member, and has occupied part of it ever since. Arms sales and technology transfers, such as France's Mistral warship sale to Russia, inevitably raise complex moral and ethical questions such as these. That is all the more reason to seek open, confidence-reinforcing discussions among allies. Solidarity cannot be achieved when our most important institutions are excluded. Indeed, some of the most dangerous decisions taken in both the EU and NATO are those that are not openly discussed beforehand.

www.project-syndicate.org

EU OBSERVER: EU-Georgia trade talks proving difficult, minister says

Eight months since the start of talks on an EU-Georgia Association Agreement, progress has been made in several chapters, but the preliminary negotiations of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement are stuck, said Deputy Foreign Minister Tornike Gordadze. During talks with European Commission officials in charge of trade, Gordadze got the impression that they have changed the preconditions. “Now the ones that were set for concluding the negotiations are the same for starting the negotiations,” he said. “Some people also say the change could be some sort of indirect pressure from the EU to drop our objections in Russia's WTO bid. I hope this is not the case.”

<http://euobserver.com>

**SKI CHANNEL: Experience skiing Georgia in the Caucasus**

Georgia is a small country in the Caucasus mountains, independent since the early 1990s. It's just south of Russia, and contains several of the highest peaks in the Caucasus mountains, including Kazbek. The capital, Tbilisi, is very close to the mountains and they get plenty of snow for their 3 major ski resorts; Gudauri, Bakuriani, and Mestia.

www.theskichannel.com

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Luger's tragedy still haunts hometown

In Nodar Kumaritashvili's hometown, there is still sadness about his tragic death at last year's Olympic Games in Vancouver. But there is also anger, after new allegations last week that organizers of the games were warned almost a year in advance that athletes could be “badly injured or worse” on the track where he died. “They tried to portray him as an inexperienced young sportsman. That's absolute rubbish,” his father declared. “I want Nodar to be remembered as who he actually was: a fearless, skilled and dedicated sportsman.”

www.france24.com

GULF TIMES: Georgia air deal boost for Qatar Airways

Qatar and Georgia signed last week a major air transport agreement based on “open skies,” which facilitates an unrestricted number of flights between the two countries. “As of now, it will be about Qatar Airways and they will hopefully be flying to our capital city,” Economy Minister Vera Kobalia said. “We are planning to make Tbilisi an aviation hub, as Doha is in the case of Qatar. On that scale, there are plenty of growth opportunities for Qatar's national airline.”

www.gulf-times.com

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Kasparov wins Georgian TV quiz show

Former chess champion turned Russian opposition leader Garry Kasparov has won a big-money charity TV quiz in Georgia. His entire winnings of \$11,265, a large prize in Georgia, will go to fund medical care for local children. “Georgia has gone a long way with democratic reforms and its economy has achieved progress, but Russia has missed all the opportunities to become a democratic country,” he said.

uk.news.yahoo.com

NEW YORK TIMES: Giya Kancheli—Themes from the songbook

“Georgian film is a strange phenomenon, special, philosophically light, sophisticated, and at the same time childishly pure and innocent,” Federico Fellini once said. There is certainly an element of whimsy and nostalgia permeating the imaginative, gentle arrangements featured on “Themes From the Songbook.” The disc is inspired by “Simple Music for Piano,” a collection published in 2009 by the Georgian composer Giya Kancheli in which he reprised melodies from his large catalog of music for film and theater. It was arranged as a surprise 75th-birthday present for the composer by Sandro Kancheli, his son, and Manfred Eicher, the ECM producer.

www.nytimes.com