

GEORGIA UPDATE

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President Saakashvili made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan on Monday to meet Georgian troops serving with NATO; yesterday, three Georgian soldiers were killed by an insurgent attack in Helmand province. “Your service here directly strengthens Georgia and our armed forces, and creates a very solid foundation for Georgia’s future,” the President told the troops at Combat Outpost Shukvani. He joined soldiers in the army canteen, where he told them their presence in Afghanistan “offers us unimaginable experience.” The 31st infantry battalion is now in Helmand for its second, six-month deployment; Georgia has lost 15 soldiers since joining ISAF in 2009. It plans to send one additional infantry battalion, on top of 936 Georgian soldiers already serving in ISAF, thus making it the largest non-NATO contributor of troops.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

NEW YORK TIMES: Turmoil erupts in a Kremlin-protected enclave

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia hunts Israeli embassy car bomb plotters

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QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“New regional and local wars are being sparked before our very eyes. There are attempts to provoke such conflicts in the immediate vicinity of the borders of Russia and our allies.”

♦ Vladimir Putin writing in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, two weeks before Russia’s presidential election

“South Ossetia is strategically important in military terms, because controlling South Ossetia would mean control over the entire South Caucasus, as well as having a military base in South Ossetia would mean military control of the South Caucasus as well as of the North Caucasus.”

♦ International Crisis Group’s Medea Turashvili in a Feb. 17 interview

“Over the past year, Russian officials have often warned that foreign intervention in either Syria or Iran could lead to a ‘wider conflict’ in the region. Viewing the South Caucasus as its traditional buffer zone against the Middle East, observers say Moscow is now reasserting its presence in the region.”

♦ Nicholas Clayton writing Feb. 18 in *Global Post*

UPCOMING MILESTONES

Feb 27-28: FM Vashadze visits Israel

Mar 5: FM Vashadze visits Czech Republic

Mar 8: FM Vashadze visits Egypt

Mar 28-29: Next round of Geneva peace talks

May 15-22: NATO summit in Chicago

May 26: Parliament relocates to Kutaisi

Oct: Parliamentary elections

TOP STORIES

Three Georgian Soldiers Perish in Insurgent Attack in Afghanistan During NATO Operation

Three Georgian soldiers were killed in the southern Afghan province of Helmand yesterday, bringing to 15 the total number of Georgians who have given their lives in the NATO operation. "The Georgian military servicemen died while they were carrying out combat tasks," the defense ministry said in a statement. "Their combat vehicle exploded following an insurgent attack." The incident took place in one of Afghanistan's most violent provinces, which neighbours Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban.

President Saakashvili, who was in Helmand on Monday to meet his country's troops, said after the deaths that Georgia stood by its commitment to the increasingly unpopular war, dragged into its 11th year. "This is a very painful blow for me especially after my recent visit to Afghanistan, where I saw how bravely they were fulfilling extremely risky tasks," he said. "The sacrifice of Georgian servicemen is appreciated by the Georgian people... future generations will live in a united, much stronger and more successful country." Georgia has over 900 troops supporting the NATO-led war in Afghanistan, including 750 in Helmand. Another deployment of 600-700 will be sent this year, making Georgia the largest non-NATO contributor in the war. Georgian troops have been in Afghanistan since 2004, a commitment that underscores Tbilisi's ambition to join NATO, despite fierce opposition from neighboring Russia and waning enthusiasm among the coalition's member states.

[REUTERS: 3 Georgian Soldiers Killed In Afghanistan](#)

Georgia Breaks Off Relations With Tuvalu

Georgia cut diplomatic ties Friday with the tiny Pacific island state of Tuvalu after it recognized the Russian-occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia as independent. "The president has issued an order to cut diplomatic ties with Tuvalu," the Georgian foreign ministry said. One of the world's smallest states with a population of around 10,000, Tuvalu recognized Abkhazia and S. Ossetia as independent in September, although it is thousands of miles from the Caucasus. Only Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and another tiny Pacific island, Nauru, have recognized them. A third Pacific state, Vanuatu, also said it recognized Abkhazia last year but then reversed its decision. Meanwhile, Solomon Islands Foreign Minister Peter Shanell was dismissed on February 9, two days after he announced his country would be establishing diplomatic ties with Russia.

[AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE: Georgia Cuts Tuvalu Links](#)

Electricity Vouchers to Be Given to 1.2 Million Households

The government will start distributing electricity vouchers to about 1.2 million households this week, PM Gilauri announced on Monday. A week ago in Batumi, President Saakashvili said this year's bitterly cold winter has increased household electricity costs by 20-30%, a difference he argued should be covered from the state budget. Similar one-time electricity vouchers were distributed by the government last year as well. Recently, the government announced that 15 hydropower plants will be built in Georgia; it also is considering building coal power plants, with the aim of making Georgia an energy-exporting country.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Gov't Plans GEL 25m Electricity Bill Subsidy](#)

Remittances from Georgian Emigrants Rise 20.5% in 2011

Money transferred from abroad to Georgia last year amounted to a record high of \$1.26 billion, up 20.5% from 2010, according to figures released by Georgia's central bank. Money transfers from Russia, which have been the largest source of remittances for years, reached \$655.2 million. Remittances from Greece came in second at \$144.6 million, followed by Italy (\$109.1 million), the US (\$75.5 million), Ukraine (\$52.4 million), and Spain (\$30.9 million). Remittances hit \$84.4 million in January, a 13.4% year-on-year increase.

[CIVIL GEORGIA: Georgia Remittances Up 20.5% in 2011](#)



US Ambassador John Bass last week announced the winner of a logo contest dedicated to the 20th anniversary of relations between the US and Georgia. Tamar Makharashvili, 21, from Gori bested over 100 entrants in a competition open to 15-25 year-olds. "Over 20 years we have built a strong, enduring relationship between the people of the US and the people of Georgia," Bass said at the unveiling ceremony. "We will commemorate the anniversary with a series of events. So we decided to sponsor a competition amongst the future generation of Georgians, to create a logo that we will be using for all our events."

Richard Norland Nominated as Next US Ambassador to Georgia

President Barack Obama announced that he will nominate Richard Norland as the next US ambassador to Georgia. Norland most recently served as ambassador to Uzbekistan, prior to which he was deputy chief of mission in Afghanistan. He also has been deputy chief of mission in Riga, Latvia, and served in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, as the senior diplomat with the US Army Civil Affairs Team promoting political and economic reconstruction. Previously, Norland was director for European Affairs at the National Security Council for two years during the Clinton and Bush administrations. Earlier in his career he served as the US representative and acting mission head on the OSCE Mission to Georgia, working to resolve conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and later visited Chechnya in a similar capacity.

[RUSTAVI 2: Richard Norland to Replace John Bass in Georgia](#)

US Helps Georgia Train Electoral Commission Members

USAID Georgia Mission Director Stephen Haykin and Zurab Kharatishvili, Chairman of the Central Election Commission of Georgia, yesterday opened the last in a cycle of training sessions for district election commission members. The US Embassy said the initiative is part of USAID's four-year project on "Improving confidence in electoral processes," which aims at increasing the efficiency of the electoral administration, involving civil society and citizens in election-related issues, and helping reform Georgia's electoral code. The retraining of 380 members of 76 district election commissions will end this month.

[USAID: US Supports Training of District Election Commissions](#)

Japan Makes Latest in Series of Grants to Georgia

The Japanese embassy in Georgia last week held a special ceremony marking the launch of two Japan-funded development projects—one to help farm associations in Urbnisi village develop local farmland, and to a Tbilisi pediatric clinic to purchase modern medical equipment. The two grants were part of Japan's "People's Security Program," which aims to improve living standards for populations through small-budget projects. Georgia has received \$30 million in aid from Japan since 1997.

[TREND NEWS AGENCY: Japan to Allocate New Grants to Georgia](#)

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ON GEORGIA

NEW YORK TIMES: Turmoil erupts in a Kremlin-protected enclave

The opposition movement leader in the mountainous enclave of South Ossetia had planned to be inaugurated as its president on Friday in an unauthorized ceremony. Instead, she lay unconscious in a hospital with a possible rifle-butt blow to the head, her aides were under arrest and her organization was in disarray, crushed by police apparently acting on the Kremlin's orders. The crushing of the movement came at a delicate moment as Russia has struggled to install its favored leaders in South Ossetia as well as in other former Soviet separatist regions that are its de facto protectorates.

www.nytimes.com

AFP: Georgia hunts Israeli embassy car bomb plotters

Georgia vowed to track down those responsible for a thwarted bomb attack on an Israeli embassy car in Tbilisi, which coincided with a blast in New Delhi that injured an Israeli diplomat. "The investigation of this case is of the utmost priority for Georgia's law enforcement agencies," President Saakashvili's spokeswoman said. Police defused a "hand-made explosive device" attached to an embassy driver's car. The interior ministry said it would work with Israel on the investigation. "We will be actively cooperating with our Israeli colleagues in investigating this case," interior ministry spokesman Shota Utiashvili said.

www.afp.org

MOSCOW TIMES: From South Ossetia to war with Georgia

If civil war in Syria is followed by an Israeli strike against Iran, Putin is likely to seize the opportunity to stage his long-awaited attack on Georgia. There are clear signs of contingency planning for this attack. The 58th Army is under new command, and almost all of its weaponry has been modernized. What's more, waging a war directly after the March 4 presidential election is the best way to stir up a patriotic frenzy and destroy Russia's "radical opposition" at the same time. If this leads to the end of a democratic Georgia, as well as to the grassroots freedom movement in Russia, the blame must fall not only on the Kremlin, but also on the cowardly commission headed by Heidi Tagliavini and other European bodies. It was they who shamelessly failed to say clearly in their official investigation who attacked whom in the Russia-Georgia war of 2008.

www.themoscowtimes.com

EURASIA DAILY MONITOR: Moscow's policy in South Ossetia adds insult to the Ossetians' injury

Despite their heavy dependence, South Ossetians voted against the Kremlin's candidate, largely because of their disillusionment with Kokoity's regime, which failed to deliver on rehabilitation of the war-torn territory and was closely associated with the Kremlin. The government attack on the opposition leader in S. Ossetia highlighted the striking commonality between the situation in S. Ossetia and Russia. The very fact that the authorities in S. Ossetia reacted in such a brutal way to Jioeva's impending self-inauguration was an indication of their nervousness and lack of legitimacy. Events in a tiny territory like South Ossetia could have an impact on a big country like Russia. The Kremlin appears to understand this.

www.jamestown.org

EURASIANET: South Ossetian unit to serve in Russian military

The Russian military base in S. Ossetia will soon include a battalion for Ossetians, which officials say will act as a "forge" to build a capable military in the occupied region, but which looks just as much like a blow against the territory's fragile sovereignty. What does it mean, those who want to "continue to serve"? Does that imply that S. Ossetia's own defense forces are to be discontinued? This move was announced just a few days after would-be president Alla Jioiyeva says she was badly beaten (with Moscow's apparent consent) for her independent political ambitions. All this suggests that whatever shreds of sovereignty Tskhinvali once exercised are disappearing, and that Russian control is becoming more formalized.

www.eurasianet.org

**EURASIANET: Soaking up the dying tradition of massage in Tbilisi**

Tbilisi's baths were a tradition that quickly caught on, helped by the city's historic position at the epicenter of the Old Silk Road. By the 13th century, there were 63 baths in the area. In the early 19th century, Russian visitors described 10, about the same number as today. The Abanotubani baths are built along Persian traditions, but unlike the water in Persian baths, which are manually heated, the water in Tbilisi comes from the earth from between 75-107 degrees Fahrenheit. Massage techniques also follow Persian styles, though only one masseur still walks on bathers' backs, a technique he learned from his grandfather.

www.eurasianet.org

WALL STREET JOURNAL: Russian literati plot activist role

The emergence of Chkhartishvili and other literary and cultural stars at the head of anti-Kremlin street protests is the most dramatic return of intellectuals to Russia's political stage since the final years of the USSR. They have helped galvanize large crowds and unite a fractious opposition behind a single overarching cause—clean elections. But Putin, who has little interest in high culture or respect for its creators, couldn't resist a swipe at Chkhartishvili. He said it was understandable that the writer's ethnicity—he was born in Georgia, which Russia invaded in 2008—might give him a dim view of the Kremlin leadership. The writer said he took no offense. "In some sense I was pleased," Chkhartishvili said in an interview. "Putin shot himself in the foot."

online.wsj.com

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE: Georgia hosts US students

Since it began in 2010, the Teach and Learn With Georgia program has hosted more than 800 Americans from 46 states, plus several hundred English speakers from 38 other countries—with a goal of attracting 10,000 volunteers over the next three years. Most are recent college graduates, but others are mid-career professionals. The government of Georgia, which made English a mandatory language in its public schools as part of sweeping educational reforms, is investing \$6 million a year in the program. "Georgian leaders really want to raise the profile of the English language and generate a new Anglophone culture that can plug in to the world," said an American participant.

www.sfgate.com

HERITAGE FOUNDATION: Time for a Georgia-US free trade agreement

The most recent US trade agreements, with Colombia, Panama, and South Korea, each took more than five years to develop. The deal with Georgia could get done in a fraction of that time. Georgia is already relatively open to international trade and investment, and the volume of trade that would be affected by an FTA is relatively small. In 2010, the US collected just \$226,000 in tariffs on imports from Georgia on \$193 million in imports, making our average tariff on imports from Georgia far less than 1%. Georgia is our 113th-biggest trading partner, ranking just between Iceland and Benin. An FTA would be a win-win for the US and Georgia. It would benefit Georgia, which gained independence in 1991, by making the country a more attractive destination for international investment. It would also send a signal to Russia that Georgia is viewed by Washington as an important friend.

blog.heritage.org