

Georgia sends troops to border with South Ossetia

Richard Tyler
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Georgia's dispute with the breakaway republic of South Ossetia moved a step nearer to military conflict this week.

The Georgian government denied it was amassing troops on the border with the breakaway region, maintaining it was simply sending reinforcements for its 150 peacekeepers stationed in accordance with the 1994 settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. A defence ministry spokesman said that Georgia was sending a further 350 "peacekeepers" and associated military equipment to the Tskhinvali area, comprising tanks, armoured vehicles and several multiple-launch rocket systems. The spokesman said this was within the agreed quotas for peacekeeping forces.

The troops and materiel were being deployed to Gori, a Georgian military town a few miles from South Ossetia's border.

"We are carrying out a series of planned tactical security missions," defence ministry spokesman Irakli Chikovani told *Agence France Presse*, bringing Georgia's peacekeeping force up to the full 500 strength allowed.

Other government figures said the dispatch of soldiers to the border was to curb contraband traffic in the region.

Georgian government minister Georgy Haindrava had earlier denied reports that it was concentrating thousands of troops and transferring additional military hardware to the city of Gori, near the border with South Ossetia. He called such reports "absurd," saying that the equipment was simply being returned to Gori following a May 26 military parade in Tbilisi marking Georgia's independence from the former Soviet Union.

Regardless of the official explanations in Tbilisi, the move is widely regarded as part of the drive by newly elected Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili to

reunify his fractured republic, if necessary by force. This follows the Georgian government wresting back control in early May over the coastal region of Adjara and the major port of Batumi.

According to South Ossetian information and press committee spokeswoman Irina Gagloyeva, many more Georgian troops have been sent into the region: "Their strength has reached 5,000 men. The troops and the special forces have been deployed outside the 10-kilometre dividing zone controlled by the peacekeepers, approximately 15 kilometres away from the border."

Eduard Kokoity, head of the separatist South Ossetia region, vowed his militia would attack Georgian troops should they decide to cross over the contentious border. "We are in full control of the situation," he told Russia's *NTV* television.

"I, as the commander-in-chief, have issued an order to revert to the use of force in case the border of South Ossetia is crossed," Kokoity said.

Russia's foreign ministry accused Georgia of using "excuses" to station its troops on South Ossetia's borders and stated that "the situation was only being destabilised" in the region. Russian peacekeepers patrol inside South Ossetia, where many hold Russian passports.

"Tbilisi must acknowledge the seriousness of the unfolding situation, which can trigger violence and bloodshed, the full responsibility for which will lie on the Georgian side," the Russian spokesman added. Moscow also expressed concerns that Georgia was using US-trained troops in the operation against the secessionists "that were supposed to be deployed in the fight against international terrorism."

Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvaniya rejected Moscow's criticism, saying, "Our Russian colleagues

should understand that the matter concerns the territory of Georgia rather than some autonomous republic of the Russian Federation.”

“We can set up checkpoints where we deem appropriate, in order to shut down the functioning of these black holes [of smuggling] that have been destroying the economy,” Zhvaniya said.

In a nationally televised address, Saakashvili said that “we have no plans to attack, or to have a war with Ossetia.”

Electricity supplies, which Georgia predominantly obtains from Russia, failed across the country late Monday, May 31. Although such power failures are a frequent occurrence, their timing on this occasion leaves the impression that it was linked to the sharp exchange of words between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Russian newspaper *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* was not satisfied with Moscow’s harsh words, regarding the moves by Saakashvili to regain control over the breakaway region as part of “a well thought-through strategy of tearing the Caucasus away from Russia.”

“But what policy does the Kremlin pursue? In words, it defends Russia’s national interests; in deeds it drags along in the wake of American interests in the region like Tabaqui the jackal behind Shere Khan the tiger.”

Georgia has indeed become the stage on which the US is seeking to extend its influence in the Caucasus, given the geopolitical importance of the country, through which the Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan pipeline will bring oil from Azerbaijan once completed.



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