

Russian-Georgian tensions escalate

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There is mounting evidence that London and Washington are encouraging the Georgian government to challenge Russia's presence in the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Strategically situated between the Black Sea and the oil-rich Caspian, and sitting astride two key oil and gas pipelines, Georgia borders Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Since being installed in power following a US-backed coup last December which usurped former President Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili has made clear that he intends to reunify his fractured republic by force if necessary.

Having wrested back control over the coastal region of Adjara and the major port of Batumi in May, Georgia has stepped up its threats against Abkhazia and there have been reports that its troops are massing on the border with South Ossetia where Russian troops are stationed.

In the early hours of Thursday August 12, at least three people were killed after an exchange of fire on the Georgian side of the border, near the village of Eredi. South Ossetia said that Georgian forces had opened fire first, injuring seven people on its side of the border. But a Russian colonel was initially quoted as stating that South Ossetia had fired first, although he later changed his account.

The deaths come after tensions between Tbilisi and Moscow had reached new depths in the last weeks. On July 20, Saakashvili threatened to renounce the 12-year-old deal whereby Georgian, Russian and South Ossetian forces have patrolled the breakaway republic. And on Tuesday August 3, Saakashvili announced on television that his forces were ready to attack ships that "illegally" enter the waters off Abkhazia.

Georgia lost control of the waters over a decade ago. Nonetheless Saakashvili warned, "I earlier ordered... that we should immediately open fire on, and sink,

every ship which enters Abkhazia."

The Black Sea coast is a popular destination for Russian holidaymakers arriving by boat from the nearby Russian resort of Sochi. Russian tourists should "pay attention" to his words, Saakashvili threatened. Just days earlier a Georgian patrol boat had fired at a civilian vessel in the Black Sea.

A Russian foreign minister said that the threats showed "Tbilisi wants to play with fire". In a statement Moscow warned, "Any attempts to injure or threaten the lives of Russian citizens will receive the necessary rebuff."

Just two days after making his provocative remarks, Saakashvili was meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington. Despite claiming that he wanted to avoid any confrontation with Russia, and was seeking to "calm tensions", Saakashvili again warned Russian tourists that, "Abkhazia is no place for rest. It is a war zone, from where 300,000 Georgians have been expelled".

Saakashvili has boasted of his daily contact with Powell and US National Security adviser Condoleezza Rice and obviously feels emboldened by his links with the western powers. In recent months Georgia has strengthened its ties with NATO and has received some \$1 billion in aid from the European Union.

Tbilisi has demanded that its forces control the South Ossetian entrance to the tunnel beneath the Caucasus linking North Ossetia, in Russia, to South Ossetia in Georgia, supposedly to clamp down on the trade in contraband.

Exacerbating this potentially explosive situation is the fact that British and US military forces are currently involved in training the Georgian army, effectively inciting them to challenge the Russian presence in the breakaway republics.

During his visit to London last month for talks with Prime Minister Tony Blair, Saakashvili stated brazenly

that, “Britain is becoming more involved in the region and not only on the (Trans-Caucasus) pipeline. We just had last week joint training of UK Special Forces together with the Georgian army”. Saakashvili boasted that Britain was now the third biggest contributor to the Georgian armed forces after the US and Turkey.

According to the *Times* newspaper, it is believed that approximately 160 British troops are involved in training Georgian forces. Simulated military operations, named the “Georgian Express 2004”, took place July 5-18 at a military base in Vaziani. During exercises soldier’s practised techniques in establishing checkpoints and patrols—all of which have been essential to the Georgian army’s recent incursions into South Ossetia.

In a qualitative deepening of the relationship between Tbilisi and London, Saakashvili also revealed that British General Sir Garry Johnson was now permanently based in the Georgian Defence Ministry to co-ordinate ongoing military assistance. A light infantry detachment took part in exercises with Georgian commandos and further exercises are scheduled with British advisers training Georgian officers and NCOs.

Earlier in the year the Pentagon decided to privatise its military presence in Georgia by contracting the work to a group of retired US military officers. At the time a senior western diplomat told the *Guardian* newspaper, “One of the goals is to make the army units capable of seizing and defending a given objective”.

The US has maintained a presence in Georgia since 2002 when military trainers and advisers arrived in the country, ostensibly to combat Al Qaeda forces said to be in the Georgian Pankisi Gorge on the border with Chechnya.



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