Tensions mount between Georgia and Russia

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Deteriorating relations between Georgia and Russia were exacerbated last week when Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili accused the Russian airforce of the "bombardment" of Georgian territory. The Georgian government accused Moscow of firing a Raduga Kh-58 guided missile at the village of Tsitelubani in the Gori region, about 35 miles northwest from the capital Tbilisi.

Georgian Foreign Minister Gela Bezhuashvili announced to the media, "We confirm the fact of a bombing on Georgia's sovereign territor.... We have incontrovertable evidence that the bombing occurred."

Bezhuashvili told reporters that both radar and eyewitness evidence indicated that two planes violated Georgian airspace on the evening of August 6, local time. Allegedly a Russian Sukhoi-24 fighter-bomber aircraft fired the missile, with a 140-kg warhead that failed to explode.

Local resident Ilia Psuturi told Reuters news agency: "I was sitting in my garden...when I saw a plane in the sky. I then saw smoke rising from the ground up to the sky and only then did I hear the explosion. The plane then turned around."

In Tbilisi, the Georgian foreign ministry summoned the Russian ambasador and presented him with a formal complaint. On August 8, President Saakashvili travelled to Tsitelbani to tell the press, "All this provocation is aimed at stiring up panic to weaken the stability of Georgia and to change the country's policies."

Interior Ministry spokesman Shota Ustiashvili told the BBC the planes had flown some 70 kilometres (43 miles) over Georgia. Ustiashvili said the jets flew from a Russian base in the North Caucasus before firing the missile, which landed in a corn and potato field just metres from a house.

"It has become common practice for the Russian air force and for the government troops to sneak into the Georgian territory," Ustiashvili said. "But what is different in this incident...is that they have threatened Georgian airspace much deeper, and that they have used a very powerful bomb," he continued.

Moscow denies all involvement. "Russia's air force neither on Monday nor Tuesday flew flights over Georgia," said Colonel Alexander Drobyshevsky, aide to the chief of the Russian air force.

Tsitelubani is close to the border of the breakaway Georgian province of South Ossetia, which relies on political and military support from Moscow.

The government of the province, which has been separated from Georgia since a civil war in 1994, is not internationally recognised. The leader of South Ossetia's de facto government, Eduard Kokoiti, said Georgian planes fired the missile in an elaborate attempt to discredit Russia. "This is a well-planned provocation," claimed Kokoiti. "A Georgian military plane crossed into South Ossetia on Monday, performed manoeuvres above Ossetian villages and dropped two bombs," he told Russia's Interfax news agency.

Alexander Rondeli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, said: "As always the Russians pretend the bomb appeared from New Zealand or Mars but we know our great neighbour enjoys sending us these little gifts. This was a message from Russia to the west that this is our sphere of influence and you have to know your place."

Georgian authorities had suggested that the alleged missile, which is designed to hit radar systems, was intended to target an area where Georgia keeps part of its radar network. However, the Georgian media has subsequently reported a story that the two Russian air force planes had been flying over the southern part of South Ossetia, allegedly a common occurrence approved of by the provincial administration, when they were attacked from the ground by South Ossetian militias linked to Moscow. In an attempt to out-maneuver what was probably a shoulder-fired rocket, one of the jets dumped its Raduga Kh-58 missile.

The commander of Russia's garrison in South Ossetia, General Marat Kulakhmetov, said that an unknown aircraft dropped the missile after it had flown over South Ossetia and had come under ground fire. He claimed that

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the identity of the aircraft was unknown, but that it had come from Georgia, not Russia.

Another explanation, stemming from some initial Georgian Interior Ministry reports, is that the unexploded missile that landed in the village might have been a surface-to-air rocket that had been fired at the two alleged Russian planes— from either South Ossetia or Georgia itself.

A Russian military provocation should not be ruled out, as Moscow has turned to increasingly hostile and reckless means of attempting to assert its status as the dominant power in the area of the former Soviet Union. The Putin administration has a long and bloody history of violent provocations in the Caucasus region, especially in the neighboring Russian republic of Chechnya, where the Kremlin has waged two brutal wars in the past 15 years to maintain its control.

But whether it was a genuine Russian attack or a Georgian ploy, the episode expresses the deep tensions that exist in the Caucasus region of the former Soviet Union. It has been used by all sides to ramp up tensions in existing disputes over the sovereignty of Georgia's two unofficially autonomous provinces allied to Moscow.

Relations between Russia and Georgia were already soured by a dispute earlier this year when Georgia deported four Russian army officers on suspicion of spying, and Moscow responded by throwing out several thousand Georgian workers and banning imports of fruit and wine that are vital to the Georgian economy.

Last year, the uneasy relationship in Tsitelubani between Ossetian villagers and Georgian villagers was strained by referenda organised by the two ethnic groups, one seeking independence from Georgia and the other federation within it. Following the civil war in the early 1990s, around 160,000 ethnic Georgians left South Ossetia, with fewer than half having returned home.

In another incident in March of this year, the Georgian government accused Russia of using military helicopters to launch an attack on its territory in the Kodori Gorge, a disputed area of Abkhazia, the other breakaway area of the country under Russian suzerainty.

About 500 Russian troops are based in South Ossetia. There have been unconfirmed reports that Moscow has moved military hardware into the region. Georgia has at times moved its armed forces close to the breakaway provinces.

The present Georgian government came to power with the backing of the United States as a result of the so-called "Rose Revolution" in 2003. President Mikhail Saakashvili is a close regional ally of Washington, where his regime is viewed as a barrier to the expansion of Russian interests in the hydrocarbon-rich Central Asian region. As a token of this relationship, Georgia currently has the third largest contingent of troops in Iraq, after the US and Britain.

After the missile landed, Saakashvili was quick to point out that the situation was not solely a Georgian problem, "but for European security as a whole," urging help from Europe and the US for his regime's disputes against Russia. After the alleged attack, Foreign Minister Bezhuashvili telephoned around various Western capitals in an attempt to elicit support for a United Nations Security Council session to discuss the incident.

US Deputy Assistant Seretary of State Matt Bryza condemned the attack, but Washington and the European Union called on both sides to remain calm.

There is an ongoing and deepening stand-off between Moscow and Washington over a host of issues, including the location of an American missile system in eastern Europe, Western access to Russian oil and gas, the fate of the Serbian region of Kosovo and Iran's plans for a nuclear reactor.

Georgia has also applied to join NATO and the European Union, a move that Moscow bitterly opposes as an encroachment into its "near abroad" by US and European imperialism.

With such great-power rivalries brewing in the region, further dangerous episodes are inevitable, with all the attending potential for igniting further ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus.

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