

LAST UPDATED: MAY 9, 2008, 15:00 • TBILISI

Calls Grow for International Mediation & Change of Peacekeeping Format, as Russian Troop Numbers Increase

World leaders continue to criticize Russia's annexation of Abkhazia region, offer unqualified support for Georgia's sovereignty and independence

Calls grew Wednesday in Europe for the international community to mediate the crisis in Georgia's Abkhazia region and to send an international peacekeeping force to replace the compromised Russian contingent. The Chairman of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, called on the UN Security Council to establish an independent international peacekeeping force and for the EU to consider an ESDP mission.

EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, meanwhile, took a firm line against Russia's actions. Moscow's decision to strengthen links with separatist rebels in Georgia "represents an erosion of Georgia's territorial integrity," she said, urging Russia to rethink its decision or at least not to implement it. "These measures have increased expectations of future recognition in the two separatist regions [Abkhazia and South Ossetia] and therefore undermined efforts to find a peaceful solution."

Last week, Russia illegally deployed a large troop contingent—including 440 paratroopers, heavy artillery and anti-aircraft systems, and armored vehicles—into Abkhazia. On Thursday, the Russian Defense Ministry threatened to send more troops and to use force if necessary—despite the fact that Georgia has repeatedly stressed its peaceful intentions, and both the UN Observer Mission and international journalists on the ground have refuted Russia's claims of a Georgian military buildup.

"We are very concerned about what Russia is doing in Georgia, a series of actions which we have labeled... provocative," said Stephen Hadley, the U.S. National Security Adviser, on Wednesday. "We think Russia needs to back down from those items."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov threatened on April 29 that Russia would take "retaliatory" actions against Georgia to protect Russia's newly minted citizens in Abkhazia; Russia has illegally issued its passports to many of the rebel region's remaining residents, and is now using these "citizens" as a pretext for military action.

Russia's other provocative moves in the past month include blasting an unarmed, unmanned Georgian aircraft out of Georgian airspace on April 20, and instructing Russian ministries on April 16 to establish formal links with the Georgian separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Leaders around the world have explicitly urged Russia to reverse its April 16 decision, which constitutes an egregious violation of international law, and to reconsider its military deployment.

Meanwhile Wednesday, lawmakers in both the European Parliament and the U.S. Congress criticized Russia's aggressive actions and urged stronger defense of Georgia. Mr. Saryusz-Wolski of the European Parliament said Russia's steps "violate existing agreements and the territorial integrity of Georgia, undermining international peace efforts." He called on Russia to withdraw its additional forces and reverse its decision to establish official ties with the separatists.

In the U.S., the House of Representatives passed a resolution criticizing the Kremlin's "consistent effort to undermine the sovereignty of a neighbor" and urged the United Nations to investigate the April 20 drone incident. The resolution called Russia's moves toward Georgia's rebel regions a "thinly veiled attempt at annexation."

Both the White House and the U.S. State Department have characterized the Russia's recent steps as "provocative." On May 6, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said, "These steps have significantly and unnecessarily heightened tensions in the region, and run counter to Russia's status as a facilitator of the U.N. Friends process on Abkhazia."

In a statement regarding the inauguration of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev on May 7, US Senator John McCain noted opportunities for improving U.S.-Russia relations and urged Mr. Medvedev to break with the Kremlin's recent foreign policy trends: "I hope President Medvedev will take steps to ease tensions with Georgia by reversing recently announced measures that undermine Georgia's internationally-recognized sovereignty, which have rightly caused great concern among our European allies."

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. **Highlights of European Parliament debate on Georgia:**
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/infopress_page/030-28501-128-05-19-903-20080507IPR28481-07-05-2008-2008-false/default_en.htm
2. **U.S. House of Representatives Resolution 1166:** http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_bills&docid=f:hr1166ih.txt.pdf
3. **Press release of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia, May 8:**
http://unomig.org/data/file/979/PR_2008_90_eng.pdf
4. **Reuters article on the situation in Kodori Gorge (Upper Abkhazia):**
<http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSL02495128>