

LAST UPDATED: MAY 2, 2008 • 21:30 TBILISI

Georgia Appeals to UN & CIS as Russia Moves In More Troops

UN Observer Mission not informed about troop levels; Prime Minister of Georgia decries illegal militarization, world leaders voice concern

Georgia today asked the United Nations to verify how many new troops Russia has deployed in the Georgian region of Abkhazia, as Moscow's militarization of the region is causing acute concern in the international community.

Unofficial reports indicate that earlier this week Russia sent 1,500 additional soldiers to Abkhazia, in breach of its obligations under international agreements to seek Georgian consent for any increase. However, UN deputy spokesperson Marie Okabe said that Russia had failed to inform UNOMIG about the scale of its latest operation. "The CIS notified the UN Observer Mission in Georgia [UNOMIG] of the increase, but didn't specify troop numbers, so the UN cannot confirm the number of CIS troops deployed."

Ms. Okabe did confirm that new troops had been arriving in the rebel region. "UNOMIG has indeed observed movements of CIS personnel and equipment on both the train and road from Sokhumi to the conflict zone," she said. "At this point it is difficult to say whether these movements will continue and how many more soldiers and equipment will arrive."

Georgia also appealed directly to the CIS for more information.

While Russia has argued that its troop deployment comes in response to a buildup of Georgian forces near the conflict zone, the UN Observer Mission—which monitors Georgian personnel in and around the region—has not confirmed the allegation. Yesterday, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice likewise dismissed Russia's claims and characterized the troop deployment as needless: "I don't see the necessity of it," she said. "This is not a time to excite the environment."

Mr David Bakradze, Georgia's special envoy, said Georgia is being "pushed to the edge of a precipice," and called for a "credible and concerted reaction" from the international community. President Mikheil Saakashvili, meanwhile, urged Europe to use "all its diplomatic arsenal to deter the aggressive instincts of some politicians in Moscow."

The United Nations noted "concern [at] the current dynamics" and warned against any violations of Georgia's statehood. "All actions by the parties and member states should be in full compliance with the letter and spirit of the Security Council decisions, including with regard to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders," Ms. Okabe said.

Although Russia claims that the number of additional forces remains under the legal limit for peacekeepers, stipulated in the 1994 Moscow Agreement as 2,500-3,000, the troop increase nevertheless violates the agreement's terms since it was carried out without Georgia's consent.

In its appeal to the UN, Georgia noted that Russia's new troop deployment amounts to nine separate breaches of the multilateral agreements regulating the peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia. Additionally, the CIS commander who submitted notification of the force increase has been prohibited on the territory of Georgia since 2007, when he was declared *persona non grata*. His presence is therefore illegal in itself.

On April 30, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia issued a statement stressing that the Moscow Agreement entails "that peacekeeping operation[s] may take place exclusively with the consent of a state concerned." Therefore, "the stationing of armed contingent[s] on the territory of Abkhazia under the mandate of collective peacekeeping forces, without consent

of Georgia, will hence be considered as infringement of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty and interference in its internal affairs."

Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurguenidze warned of the destabilizing effect of Russia's latest moves in Abkhazia. "We consider Russia's move extremely irresponsible against the background of recent development," he said. "From now on, we will consider any additional soldier or military hardware [in the Abkhaz rebel region] as illegal, as potential aggressors, and a potential source of destabilization."

Like the United Nations and others in the international community, NATO's has responded sharply to Russia's escalation in Abkhazia and its attempt to effectively annex Georgian territory.

"The steps taken by Russia and the rhetoric that has been used concerning the threat of force have undermined Georgia's territorial integrity," said NATO spokesman James Appathurai on Wednesday. He made clear that Russian troop increases without the consent of Georgia have broken the 1994 Moscow Agreement.

After meeting with EU ministers in Luxembourg on Tuesday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened that Russia would take "retaliatory action" against Georgia to protect Russia's newly minted citizens in the rebel region. Russia has illegally issued its passports to many of Abkhazia's remaining residents, and is now using these "citizens" as a pretext for military action.