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Russian general to Georgia: Russian peacekeepers' patience running out



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The Associate Press

A senior Russian general warned Thursday that Russian peacekeepers in Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia province will not maintain restraint if they continue to face "provocations."

Lt. Gen. Alexander Burutin's statement came in response to the brief detention of four Russian peacekeepers near Abkhazia, which Moscow angrily protested. The warning reflected growing tension between pro-Western Georgia and Russia, its giant northern neighbor.

Georgian authorities detained the four soldiers Tuesday on charges of carrying unauthorized weapons to a buffer zone near Abkhazia. The soldiers were released the next day but Georgian authorities kept the anti-tank missiles they seized from the Russians.

In footage broadcast by Georgian and Russian TV, burly plainclothes men descended on a Russian military truck, dragging young soldiers out, taking their weapons and putting one of the Russians face down on the ground. The Russians did not seem to offer any resistance.

"We can't guarantee that the Russian peacekeepers will show the same restraint if the provocations continue. Their patience has limits," Burutin said. "The consequences could be grave, involving bloodshed. The Georgian side will bear all responsibility for that."

Burutin described Tuesday's detention as a "gang-style assault" and warned that the Russian peacekeepers have the right to use weapons in self-defense.

Georgian officials said the Russians were not authorized to take the weapons into the area. The Russian military insisted the weapons were part of the peacekeepers' standard equipment, for which no special permission was needed.

Relations between Russia and Georgia have deteriorated since Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in 2004. Saakashvili's push for Georgia's integration into the West and its NATO military alliance has vexed Moscow, which sees Georgia as part of its sphere of influence.

Georgia, in turn, has long accused Russia of aiming to annex Abkhazia and another separatist

Georgian region, South Ossetia. Both have been outside the Georgian government's control since the end of separatist wars in the mid-1990s.

Russia does not formally recognize either region's separatist government, but it maintains close contacts with them and has granted passports to most of the regions' residents. Russia has peacekeeping forces in both regions; Georgia accuses the Russian forces of supporting the separatists.

Moscow recently sent in additional forces, a move Saakashvili denounced as "aggression."

Georgia has said it suspects Russia of using peacekeeping troops as a cover to bring artillery and other heavy weapons into Abkhazia, and has flown pilotless reconnaissance drones over the breakaway region.

Georgia accused Russia of shooting down a spy drone last month, which Russia denied. U.N. observers studied video footage and concluded that a Russian fighter did shoot down the drone.

Russia warns Georgia over peacekeepers



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Christian Lowe, Reuters

Russia warned on Thursday it might have to use force against Georgia if Russian peacekeepers were attacked again in its southern neighbor.

General Lieutenant Alexander Burutin, first deputy of the military general staff, told reporters in Moscow that peacekeeping troops in Georgia showed "considerable restraint" when they were detained earlier this week.

"In the future we cannot guarantee that our servicemen will act in this patient way. Their patience is not limitless. The consequences will be grave and there could be bloodshed. Responsibility for that will be entirely on the Georgian side," Burutin said.

Georgian police on Tuesday detained a group of Russian soldiers who they said were transporting weapons without permission. They later released them.

Russia has had peacekeeping troops in Abkhazia since the end of a separatist war in the 1990s, and the region is a source of friction between the two countries.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on Wednesday warned his Georgian counterpart Mikheil Saakashvili in a phone conversation that Moscow would not stand for "provocations" against its

peacekeepers.

Moscow alleges Tbilisi has been preparing to attack Abkhazia, but Georgia's pro-Western government, which has been promised eventual NATO membership, says it has no plans, and accuses Moscow of trying to annex the region.

(Writing by Chris Baldwin, editing by Diana Abdallah)