

---

September 16, 2008

# Georgia Offers Fresh Evidence on War's Start

By C.J. CHIVERS

This article was reported by Dan Bilefsky, C. J. Chivers, Thom Shanker and Michael Schwartz and written by Mr. Chivers.

TBILISI, [Georgia](#) — A new front has opened between Georgia and [Russia](#), now over which side was the aggressor whose military activities early last month ignited the lopsided five-day war. At issue is new intelligence, inconclusive on its own, that nonetheless paints a more complicated picture of the critical last hours before war broke out.

Georgia has released intercepted telephone calls purporting to show that part of a Russian armored regiment crossed into the separatist enclave of South Ossetia nearly a full day before Georgia's attack on the capital, Tskhinvali, late on Aug. 7.

Georgia is trying to counter accusations that the long-simmering standoff over South Ossetia, which borders Russia, tilted to war only after it attacked Tskhinvali. Georgia regards the enclave as its sovereign territory.

The intercepts circulated last week among intelligence agencies in the United States and Europe, part of a Georgian government effort to persuade the West and opposition voices at home that Georgia was under invasion and attacked defensively. Georgia argues that as a tiny and vulnerable nation allied with the West, it deserves extensive military and political support.

Georgia also provided audio files of the intercepts along with English translations to The New York Times, which made its own independent translation from the original Ossetian into Russian and then into English.

Russia, already facing deep criticism and the coolest audience in European capitals since the cold war, is arguing vigorously against Georgia's claims. Last

week, Prime Minister [Vladimir V. Putin](#) expressed bafflement at what he saw as the West's propensity to believe Georgia's version of events.

In an interview arranged by the Kremlin, the Russian military played down the significance of the intercepted conversations, saying troop movements to the enclave before the war erupted were part of the normal rotation and replenishment of longstanding peacekeeping forces there.

But at a minimum, the intercepted calls, which senior American officials have reviewed and described as credible if not conclusive, suggest there were Russian military movements earlier than had previously been acknowledged, whether routine or hostile, into Georgian territory as tensions accelerated toward war.

They also suggest the enduring limits — even with high-tech surveillance of critical battlefield locations — of penetrating the war's thick fogs.

The back and forth over who started the war is already an issue in the American presidential race, with Gov. [Sarah Palin](#) of Alaska, the Republican vice presidential candidate, contending that Russia's incursion into Georgia was "unprovoked," while others argue that Georgia's shelling of Tskhinvali was provocation. Georgia claims that its main evidence — two of several calls secretly recorded by its intelligence service on Aug. 7 and 8 — shows that Russian tanks and fighting vehicles were already passing through the Roki Tunnel linking Russia to South Ossetia before dawn on Aug. 7.

By Russian accounts, the war began at 11:30 that night, when President [Mikheil Saakashvili](#) of Georgia ordered an attack on Russian positions in Tskhinvali. Russian combat units crossed the border into South Ossetia only later, Russia has said.

Russia has not disputed the veracity of the phone calls, which were apparently made by Ossetian border guards on a private Georgian cellphone network. "Listen, has the armor arrived or what?" a supervisor at the South Ossetian border guard headquarters asked a guard at the tunnel with the surname Gassiev, according to a call that Georgia and the cellphone provider said was intercepted at 3:52 a.m. on Aug. 7.

"The armor and people," the guard replied. Asked if they had gone through, he said, "Yes, 20 minutes ago; when I called you, they had already arrived."

Shota Utiashvili, the director of the intelligence analysis team at Georgia's Interior Ministry, said the calls pointed to a Russian incursion. "This whole conflict has been overshadowed by the debate over who started this war," he said. "These intercepted recordings show that Russia moved first and that we were defending ourselves."

The recordings, however, do not explicitly describe the quantity of armor or indicate that Russian forces were engaged in fighting at that time.

### Competing Accounts

Gen. Lt. Nikolai Uvarov of Russia, a former [United Nations](#) military attaché, who served as a Defense Ministry spokesman during the war, insisted that Georgia's attack surprised Russia and that its leaders scrambled to respond while Russian peacekeeping forces were under fire. He said President [Dmitri A. Medvedev](#) had been on a cruise on the Volga River. Mr. Putin was at the Olympics in Beijing.

"The minister of defense, by the way, was on vacation in the Black Sea somewhere," he said. "We never expected them to launch an attack."

As for the claim that Russian forces entered the enclave early on Aug. 7, General Uvarov said military hardware regularly moved in and out of South Ossetia, supplying the Russian peacekeeping contingent there.

"Since we had here a battalion, they need fuel, they need products; naturally you have movement of troops," he said. "But not combat troops specifically sent there to fight." He added, "If it were a big reinforcement, then we wouldn't have lost about 15 peacekeepers inside."

Georgia disputed the Russian explanation, saying that under peacekeeping documents signed by both sides in 2004, rotations of the Russian peacekeeping battalion could be conducted only in daylight and after not less than a month of advance notification. There was no notification, Mr. Utiashvili said.

Why, he asked, was the duty officer at the Roki Tunnel apparently caught off guard, if this was, as the Russians said, a routine deployment of peacekeepers?

Georgian officials said they provided the materials last week to the United States and France, which holds the rotating presidency of the [European Union](#), in addition to two reporters for The Times. The Times hired an independent Ossetian linguist in Russia to translate the recordings.

Vano Merabishvili, Georgia's minister of interior, said he was told of the intercepts by Georgian intelligence within hours of their being recorded. The information, he said, was relayed to Mr. Saakashvili, who saw them as a sign of a Russian invasion.

Pressed as to why more than a month passed before the conversations came to light, Mr. Merabishvili said the file with the recordings was lost during the war when the surveillance team moved operations from Tbilisi, the capital, to the central city of Gori. Georgian intelligence officers later sifted through 6,000 files to retrieve copies, he said.

The Times provided a range of American government and military officials with copies of the independent translations for comment. They cautioned that while the conversations appeared to be from genuine cellphone intercepts, no complete or official assessment could be made without access to the entire file of cellphone audio gathered by the Georgians. They said the question of provocation and response in the conflict remained under scrutiny in Washington.

"We continue to look at that, both in terms of our intelligence assessment and then from what we get from on the ground," said one senior American military officer who follows the situation in Georgia and agreed to discuss the matter on the condition of anonymity because it involved intelligence matters. "We have not been able to establish the 'Who shot John?' — the first shot."

#### Talk of Armor in Tunnel

Georgia said its main evidence consisted of two conversations on Aug. 7 between Mr. Gassiev at the tunnel and his supervisor at the headquarters.

In the first conversation, logged at 3.41 a.m., Mr. Gassiev told the supervisor that a Russian colonel had asked Ossetian guards to inspect military vehicles that "crowded" the tunnel. Mr. Gassiev said: "The commander, a colonel, approached and said, 'The guys with you should check the vehicles.' Is that O.K.?"

Asked who the colonel was, Mr. Gassiev answered: "I don't know. Their superior, the one in charge there. The B.M.P.'s and other vehicles were sent here and they've crowded there. The guys are also standing around. And he said that we should inspect the vehicles. I don't know. And he went out." A B.M.P. is a tracked armored vehicle that vaguely resembles a tank. It was one of the principal Russian military vehicles seen in the war, and in the peacekeeping contingent.

At 3:52 a.m., Mr. Gassiev informed the supervisor that armored vehicles had left the tunnel, commanded by a colonel he called Kazachenko. The colonel's first name was not mentioned. According to unrelated Russian press reports after the war, Col. Andrei Kazachenko served in the 135th Motorized Rifle Regiment. The regiment provided peacekeepers in South Ossetia and fought in Tskhinvali during the war, General Uvarov said. The general said he had no information about Colonel Kazachenko.

Georgia's claims about Russian movements appear to be at least partly supported by other information that emerged recently. Western intelligence determined independently that two battalions of the 135th Regiment moved through the tunnel to South Ossetia either on the night of Aug. 7 or the early morning of Aug. 8, according to a senior American official.

New Western intelligence also emerged last week showing that a motorized rifle element was assigned to a garrison just outside South Ossetia, on Russian territory, with the aim of securing the north end of the tunnel, and that it may have moved to secure the entire tunnel either on the night of Aug. 7 or early in the morning of Aug. 8, according to several American officials who were briefed on the findings.

On Sept. 3, Krasnaya Zvezda, the official newspaper of the Russian Defense Ministry, published an article in which a captain in the 135th Regiment, Denis Sidristy, said his unit had been ordered to cease a training exercise and move to Tskhinvali on Aug. 7.

After a query by The Times about the article, the Russian newspaper published an article last Friday in which the captain said the correct date for the advance to Tskhinvali was Aug. 8. Efforts to reach Captain Sidristy were unsuccessful.

#### A U.S. Official's Account

Matthew J. Bryza, the deputy assistant secretary of state who coordinates diplomacy in the Caucasus, said the contents of the recorded conversations were consistent with what Georgians appeared to believe on Aug. 7, in the final hours before the war, when a brief cease-fire collapsed.

"During the height of all of these developments, when I was on the phone with senior Georgian officials, they sure sounded completely convinced that Russian armored vehicles had entered the Roki Tunnel, and exited the Roki Tunnel,

before and during the cease-fire,” he said. “I said, under instructions, that we urge you not to engage these Russians directly.”

By the night of Aug. 7, he said, he spoke with Eka Tkeshelashvili, Georgia’s foreign minister, shortly before President Saakashvili issued his order to attack. “She sounded completely convinced, on a human level, of the Russian presence,” Mr. Bryza said. “‘Under these circumstances,’ she said, ‘We have to defend our villages.’”

General Uvarov, the senior Russian official, contended that the Georgians had acted rashly and without a clear understanding of their own intelligence.

According to the cease-fire agreement signed in the 1990s after the first war between Georgia and South Ossetia, Russia was allowed to maintain a 500-member peacekeeping force in the region, he said. And 300 reserve peacekeepers can be deployed in emergency situations, he said.

As the Georgians began their attack, about 100 reserve peacekeepers from the 135th Regiment were put on alert and moved close to the tunnel, he said. They were ordered through the tunnel to reinforce forces in Tskhinvali around dawn on Aug. 8, he said.

The first Russian combat unit — the First Battalion of the 135th Regiment — did not pass through the Roki Tunnel until 2:30 p.m. on Aug. 8, more than 14 hours after the Georgians began shelling Tskhinvali, he said.

The battalion, he said, did not reach Tskhinvali until the next evening, having met heavy Georgian resistance. Georgia disputes that account, saying it was in heavy combat with Russian forces near the tunnel long before dawn. One thing was clear by then. The war had begun.

*Dan Bilefsky and C. J. Chivers reported from Tbilisi, Georgia; Thom Shanker from Washington; and Michael Schwirtz from Moscow.*