

Annex E.8.24

Public

SPIEGEL ONLINE

08/08/2008 11:45 AM

War in the Caucasus

Russia Marches into South Ossetia

Russian tanks on Friday rolled into South Ossetia in an effort to stop Georgian forces from taking the breakaway region in the Caucasus. The latest outbreak of violence comes after days of rising hostilities between South Ossetian separatists and Georgian soldiers that had left almost 20 people dead

The Russian Defense Ministry confirmed Friday afternoon that it has deployed reinforcement troops to South Ossetia in the Caucasus in order to beef up what it describes as its "peacekeeping troops" already present in the region. The development comes one day after heavy fighting broke out in South Ossetia as Georgian troops invaded the breakaway region on Thursday night.

The Russian news agency Ria Novosti and a journalist from AFP reported earlier Friday that a convoy of Russian tanks had made its way into the crisis-plagued province and were only a few hours away from the regional capital Tskhinvali. And Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili claimed that 150 Russian tanks and armored vehicles had entered South Ossetia. Saakashvili also claimed that Georgians had shot down two Russian fighter jets, and a high-ranking Georgian security official told the news agency Reuters that Russian jets had bombed an air force base outside Georgia's capital city of Tbilisi.

"All day today, they've been bombing Georgia from numerous warplanes and specifically targeting the civilian population, and we have scores of wounded and dead among the civilian population all around the country," Saakashvili told American cable news channel CNN in an interview on Friday. "My country is in self-defense against Russian aggression," he replied when asked if his country was at war. "Russian troops invaded Georgia."

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on Friday his country would defend its "compatriots" in the breakaway region, where most hold Russian passports. "Under the constitution and federal law ... I must protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are," he said. But Medvedev did not say what steps his country would take, promising instead not to "allow their deaths to go unpunished. Those responsible will receive a deserved punishment."

For months, tension has been rising in the breakaway region, which is located on Russia's southern border. South Ossetia and equally poor Abkhazia are seeking with Russia's help to declare full independence from Georgia.



Map: Conflict in the Caucasus

Late Thursday, the tensions erupted into war, when Georgian ground forces, reinforced from the air, attacked separatist troops in an effort to re-establish control of the tiny region. Intense fighting has continued into Friday and there are reports of 15 civilian deaths, along with casualties among Russian peacekeepers stationed in the region.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili said Friday that his army had "freed" parts of the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. His prime minister, Lado Gurgенidze, said the offensive would continue until a "durable peace" had been established. A Georgian military leader said on TV that the operation aimed at "establishing a constitutional order in the region."

With Russia backing the South Ossetians, however, the violence threatens to become a larger regional war. Georgia has long said Russian "peacekeepers" stationed in South Ossetia were unwelcome.

On Friday the Interior Ministry in Tbilisi claimed that three Russian jets flew into Georgian airspace and dropped bombs on the Georgian side of South Ossetia's border. Saakashvili said that several Georgian villages had been hit.

"A full-scale aggression has been launched against Georgia," Saakashvili said in a televised address. "Georgia will not yield its territory or renounce its freedom."

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin promised that there would be a Russian response to the Georgian operation. "The Georgian leadership has resorted to very aggressive actions in South Ossetia," Putin

said from Beijing, where he was attending the Olympic opening ceremony on Friday. "In fact, it started warfare using heavy armor and artillery." He mentioned Russian casualties, and said, "This is very sad, and this will incur a response."

The outbreak comes after days of rising hostilities between South Ossetian separatists and Georgian soldiers which had left almost 20 people dead. Saakashvili has long promised to reintegrate the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia, both of which rebelled in the early 1990s and established close relations with Moscow. Indeed, most residents of South Ossetia have Russian passports and the Russian news agency Interfax reported on Friday that hundreds of volunteers from North Ossetia -- on the Russian side of the border -- were streaming into South Ossetia to help with the fighting.

Georgia has said it occupied numerous villages near the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali and is moving on the center of the city. Tbilisi has called for a full mobilization of its troops and called up its reservists. South Ossetian officials said Georgia had fired truck-launched missiles at the capital and that several buildings were ablaze in the city.

Russia called an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council in New York on Thursday night, hoping for a unified statement calling on Georgia to immediately cease fire. On early Friday morning, though, current council president Belgian Ambassador Jan Grauls announced that no agreement had been reached.

According to news reports, the US, Britain and some other members of the Security Council threw their support behind Georgia, which has followed a pro-Western course in recent years under Saakashvili. They opposed a clause in the draft statement that would have required both sides to "renounce the use of force." According to European Union diplomats in Brussels, the EU expects an immediate cessation of violence and is "very alarmed" at the fighting.

In Germany, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier interrupted his vacation on Friday to call representatives on both sides of the conflict. "I am emphatically calling on everyone involved to cease with the use of violence without delay and to take appropriate steps to pacify the situation," Steinmeier said after telephone calls with Georgian President Saakashvili and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. He added that both sides should tone down their rhetoric and mutual accusations in order to avoid a further escalation. "I am calling on both parties to enter into a direct dialogue without delay," he said.

But German diplomats said the minister had the impression that the positions of both sides were "diametrically opposed." The Russian foreign minister, sources said, accused Georgia of having broken all the rules -- and even firing at residential areas. Lavrov called on the Georgians to restore conditions as they were before the current escalation.

Georgian President Saakashvili was no less forceful in his statements, blaming the current conflict on the Russians. He accused Moscow of breaking agreements and provoking Georgia. Sources within the German Foreign Ministry said they were unclear how best to proceed in the situation. Steinmeier wants to continue talks with both parties.

South Ossetia is 3,900 square kilometers (1,500 square miles) in size -- or about as big as the smallest US state Rhode Island -- and has been de-facto independent since a 1992 war. The region has not been recognized internationally. The independence movements in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia have resulted in numerous diplomatic flare-ups in the region in recent years.

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