

Annex E.8.30

Public

The war in Georgia

A Caucasian journey

Our correspondent travels the route north from Tbilisi to Beslan

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THE road from Tbilisi to Vladikavkaz (see map)

told several stories this week: of Russia's advance into Georgia, of Georgia's economic success and its disastrous foray into South Ossetia, of the biggest confrontation between Russia and the West since the cold war. In Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, cafés and business hotels overflowed with foreign journalists and diplomats, mulling over the war. The drive to Tskhinvali, the ruined capital of South Ossetia, along a modern, almost empty highway then stopped abruptly after 26 miles (40km) at the village of Igueti, where about a dozen Russian armoured personnel carriers blocked Georgia's main artery.

Russian armour had advanced to the edge of Tbilisi on August 15th, the day that Condoleezza Rice, America's secretary of state, demanded an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops. The clear message was: "Nobody will tell us what to do here." More than a week after agreeing to a ceasefire, the Russian army still occupied swathes of Georgian territory, including the town of Gori. On August 19th Russia and Georgia exchanged prisoners-of-war, but soon afterwards the Russians bound and blindfolded another 21 Georgian soldiers in the port of Poti. The Georgians, said Shota Utiashvili, a spokesman, were there to protect the port from looting.

The road from Tbilisi is repeatedly signposted to Sukhumi, as a pointer of the political aim of Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Sukhumi is the capital of Abkhazia which, with South Ossetia, Mr Saakashvili had promised to reintegrate into Georgia. The Tbilisi-Sukhumi highway was part of this plan. It was this kind of stunt that made the Abkhaz so suspicious of Georgia. And, even as Russian soldiers sat by the unfinished flyover, the Abkhaz were raising their flag in the upper Kodori gorge, previously held by the Georgians. Neither of the two separatist regions is likely to rejoin Georgia for many years.

The Russian advance towards Tbilisi was unchallenged, as the Georgian army had withdrawn from the conflict. Russian soldiers chatted with Georgian police armed with handguns and automatic rifles. The soldiers said they were paid about \$1,000 a month, complained about lack of work, high inflation and corrupt officials “who steal from us”, and envied the Georgian police uniforms. “We have to buy our own kit and boots, because what they give us is rubbish,” said one. This may explain the looting of Georgian military bases. “They are taking everything, old shoes, even the lavatories. Why do they need those?” asked Mr Utiashvili.

The Russian soldiers in Igueti came from the 71st motorised rifle regiment stationed in Chechnya. Many were recruited from nearby Dagestan and Ingushetia. “I respect the Georgians. They are proud people and they helped our Imam Shamil. We really should not be here,” says a soldier from Dagestan. Few Russian soldiers could say why they were in Georgia. The Georgian police were generally calm. “I have never been to

Is it time to pull out yet?AP

Tbilisi,” said one Russian soldier. “I will take you and show you good time if you take off your uniform,” replied a Georgian policeman. Mr Saakashvili's anti-Russian rhetoric has never been that popular in Georgia. But whatever goodwill Georgians had for Russians has been destroyed by the war.

Past Igueti on the way to Gori, Georgian fields and woods were burning. The fertile land was turning into smoke and black earth, a sight even more depressing than the ruined houses. The Georgians accuse the Russians of burning the ancient forests of Borjomi, admired by the old Russian aristocracy. Gori has been largely empty except for Russian troops. Russia bombed Gori a few times; it dropped a cluster bomb, outlawed by many countries, killing several civilians and a foreign journalist. Cluster bombs kill people but cause little other damage, so the town's statue of Stalin was undamaged.

The entry into South Ossetia proper is now marked by Russian and South Ossetian flags. Here the smell of smoke was overpowered by the smell of death, with rotting corpses still strewn around Tskhinvali. Parts of this town of some 10,000 people look like Grozny, in Chechnya, after the Russians flattened it. The residents wandered through the rubble and shattered glass that marked their old homes.

Much of the damage was done by the Georgians, says Human Rights Watch (HRW), a monitoring group. Shortly before midnight on August 7th Mr Saakashvili ordered a bomb barrage using Grad multiple-rocket launchers. This lasted through the night. Even his

supporters agree that the use of indiscriminate Grad rockets, which killed civilians, was disproportionate and merciless. Mr Saakashvili said he was restoring “constitutional order”. But then so did Russia when it bombed Grozny in 1994. That Russia provoked Mr Saakashvili consistently is clear, but it is equally clear that Mr Saakashvili allowed himself to be provoked. “He wanted to fight,” says one of his allies.

Perhaps Mr Saakashvili did not count on Russia's response; perhaps he banked on America's support. If so, say some observers in Georgia and Russia, America bears some responsibility for allowing Mr Saakashvili to interpret its backing as a security guarantee and for failing to restrain him. That Mr Saakashvili could make such a decision by himself also testifies to the excessive concentration of power in his hands, and to the weakness of proper democratic institutions that can hold him accountable for his actions.

When Russian troops pull out of Georgia, as President Dmitry Medvedev has promised they will by the end of this week, Mr Saakashvili will face tough questions from his one-time supporters, including Nino Burdjanadze, a former speaker of parliament. “When this is over, we will have to build a different country here with proper institutions,” says one of his own supporters. Ironically, what is now keeping Mr Saakashvili in power is the presence of the Russian army on the ground.

It is hard to imagine either Vladimir Putin, the Russian prime minister, or Mr Medvedev facing similar questions about Russia's disproportionate use of force in Georgia. If Georgian democratic institutions are weak, Russian ones are feebler. When Mr Medvedev, Russia's commander-in-chief, held an emergency meeting of security chiefs on August 8th, Russian jets were already bombing Georgia's positions in South Ossetia and beyond. Only an hour after Mr Medvedev pledged to protect his citizens (Russia has long been distributing its passports among South Ossetians) Russian news agencies reported that Russian tanks had arrived in Tskhinvali. (The journey from the Russian border takes more than two hours by car.)

Russia first claimed that 2,000 people were killed as a result of what it calls Georgia's “genocide” in South Ossetia. HRW says these figures are wildly inflated (Tskhinvali's city hospital registered just 44 dead and 273 wounded). Now even the Russians are talking of only 133 civilian deaths. HRW also cannot confirm many other atrocities ascribed by the Kremlin to the Georgians. Most residents in Tskhinvali who hid in basements tell identical stories of Georgian horrors, stoked by the Russian media, but few witnessed them at first hand. Although the Russian army is keen to show the damage inflicted by the Georgians, it is less keen for foreign journalists to see Georgian villages torched and looted by the South Ossetian militia and Russian irregulars.

Yet the evidence of ethnic cleansing of Georgians is obvious. In the neighbourhood of Tskhinvali, many Georgian villages have been burnt and most homes destroyed. “Forward to

Tbilisi,” says a sign in Russian painted on the gates of one ruin. As one South Ossetian intelligence officer told an HRW representative, “we burned these houses. We want to make sure that they [the Georgians] can’t come back, because if they do come back, this will be a Georgian enclave again and this should not happen.”

As a group of foreign journalists made its way up to the Roki tunnel, a long convoy of armoured vehicles, tanks and lorries rumbled back towards Tskhinvali. Shortly before the journalists arrived at the tunnel, the Russian media said the Georgians were preparing a provocation there. “Rubbish,” said the Russian military intelligence officer guarding the entrance to the tunnel. “There are so many lies here.” Days later Russia's security services gave warning of a possible Georgian terrorist attack (which might justify a new invasion).

This journey ends not in Vladikavkaz but in nearby Beslan, where four years ago some 330 Russians, mostly children, were killed by Chechen terrorists when the Russian security services stormed the school. In a way, it also started there. Beslan prompted Mr Putin to take more powers into his own hands and to accuse foreigners of scheming to weaken Russia. The war in Georgia is best understood as part of the chain of events that followed.

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