

Fear and Defiance Mingle on Tbilisi Streets

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Rumour adds to the mood of uncertainty gripping the Georgian capital.

The Georgian capital Tbilisi awoke with an almighty bang just after 4.40 this morning. Russian war planes had hit radar installations on the centrally-located Mount Makhata, and the blast reverberated across the city.

City residents had slept only lightly for the last few nights, and this was the second air strike on targets in the city.

On August 10, Russian jets dropped bombs near Tbilisi's international airport, on an airstrip belonging to a factory that in Soviet times was used to assemble Sukhoi planes. Ironically, some of the bombs fell on a road known as Moskovsky Prospekt, or Moscow Avenue.

The incident created panic at the civilian airport, and incoming passenger planes from Frankfurt and Athens were diverted to the Armenian capital Yerevan.

Fortunately, neither this nor the August 11 attack on radar installations caused any casualties.

During the day, the mood in the capital was tense. Very few people or cars were to be seen on the streets. Everyone seemed to be at home watching television for news of fresh air raids.

When local resident Merab Kordaya went to the market to stock up on food on August 11, he found the central market almost empty. Very few traders were still doing business, and prices had gone up.

His wife Dodo tries not to let their two sons out of the house in case there are more air raids. And she has made a point of finding out where the nearest bomb shelter is located

"Yesterday some plane flew low over our homes," she recalled. "All the neighbours ran out into the street. We were all expecting it to attack."

Dodo said many people were mistrustful of the calm tone adopted by government officials.

Georgia's mobile phone network is faltering under the overload of calls, and it is now very difficult to get hold of friends and relatives to see how they are.

Word-of-mouth is now a prime source of news for people here – often relaying accurate information from hotspots like Gori and Zugdidi faster than the TV channels, but also the source of wild rumours.

In response to some of these stories, deputy interior minister Eka Zguladze asked Georgian journalists to double-check the information they put out, and warned that those who disseminated inaccurate news could face prosecution. In particular, she denied rumours that people were being evacuated from Sololaki, a district in the centre of the capital.

Mzia Kupunia has lived in Tbilisi for several years, but comes originally from Zugdidi in the west, where there have been reports that Russian troops have crossed over from Abkhazia, effectively opening up another front.

Kupunia is glued to her computer, contacting friends back in Zugdidi to see if they can find out how her relatives are.

“I’m begging my parents to come here,” said Kupunia. “They say everything is quiet and as normal over there. There’s nowhere you can go really; they can get you anyway and explosions can happen anywhere.”

As for news from the other side of the conflict, Russian websites have been blocked since Moscow moved its forces into South Ossetia on August 8, and are only accessible via proxy sites.

The plug has also been pulled on Russian TV channels formerly rebroadcast in Georgia. According to the speaker of parliament, David Bakradze, “they are unfriendly; they belong to a country that is at war with us”.

Despite the imposition of martial law, President Mikheil Saakashvili has promised the local media to respect press freedom. “It isn’t a state of emergency,” he said. “There will be no restrictions on the press or on the movement of citizens. This is a democratic country and we will not do those things.”

If Moscow was calculating that Georgians would buckle under its overwhelming show of force, it has so far been proved wrong.

According to Tbilisi resident Otar Beridze, “Russia was hoping that Saakashvili didn’t have as much support as before. They saw all the opposition rallies and demonstrations there have been in Georgia over the last few months, and Russia thought that after all that’s happened, everyone would take a stand against Saakashvili.

“What they didn’t reckon with was that in this situation, no one is going to come out against him. On the contrary, not even the opposition is criticising him. That’s for another time – right now we have a war to defend the fatherland.”

Another resident, Nani Kvilitaya admitted to “cursing” Saakashvili when Georgian troops launched their initial assault on the town of Tskhinvali overnight on August 7-8, but added, “Now I’m not interested in that side of things – the main thing is for Russian soldiers to leave my country and for the war to end.”

In a campaign to keep international attention focused on Georgia, thousands of people have gathered for rallies every evening in central Tbilisi, and also outside the Russian embassy and the United Nations mission.

The main slogan at these events is “Stop Russia”, while at the most recent event held on August 10, tens of thousands of people simply chanted “Sakartvelo” (“Georgia”) in unison.

Outside the Russian embassy, Georgian protestors have formed a circle round the premises, holding lighted candles.

Meanwhile, the world of Georgian stage and film met in the famous Shota Rustaveli theatre to add their names to the Stop Russia campaign.

“Could we ever have imagined we’d live to see a war between Russia and Georgia,” asked one participant. “Why are Russian cultural figures silent when their Georgian friends are being bombed?”

Zuriko is a 30-year-old-man whose family fled Abkhazia in the bloody separatist war of the early Nineties. He has not been attending the rallies of recent days, nor is he much interested in news reports about when and where a Russian attack might come from.

However, he has signed up for a volunteer paramilitary unit and is just waiting for the phone call telling him to head for the front.

His choice of an irregular unit over the Georgian army is deliberate. “Why bother collecting all their official papers and going to the army recruitment centre, when there’s no certainty they’ll actually call me up?” he asked. “This way I know for definite I’m off to the forests. I’ll get a weapon and kill those who are attacking us.”

At a hairdressers’ shop on Dolidze street, this correspondent asked where Dato the barber had gone. The response from the elderly lady on duty there was, “They’ve taken him for the war with Russia.”

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