

Georgia Angry at Russia's Kodori Dash

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The sudden deployment of Russian troops in Abkhazia's Kodori Gorge causes a dangerous downturn in Russian-Georgian relations.

Georgia's president Eduard Shevardnadze said this week that a new outbreak of fighting had been narrowly averted in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia, after Russia withdrew peacekeeping troops it had unexpectedly deployed in the mountainous Kodori Gorge region.

"If the situation had not been resolved peacefully then large-scale military action could have started in the Kodori Gorge," said Shevardnadze in his weekly national radio interview on April 15, a day after Moscow completed a pullout of around 80 soldiers from the gorge.

"If the events of Friday and Saturday had led to the loss of the Kodori Gorge, it would have detonated the situation in Tbilisi, especially amongst the mass of refugees from Abkhazia, and...throughout the whole of Georgia."

The crisis was defused after a series of telephone calls between Shevardnadze and Russian president Vladimir Putin and the intervention of the United Nations, the main international mediator in the Georgia-Abkhazia dispute.

Moscow moved 78 peacekeeping troops into the upper part of the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia on April 12, only a day after Georgia had withdrawn 300 of its own soldiers, as agreed under a UN-brokered deal eight days before.

The Georgian authorities reacted with fury, especially to initial reports that Russian paratroopers had landed there by helicopter. Speaking to journalists in the town of Poti, the defence minister, David Tevzadze, said, "in connection with the landing of Russian paratroopers in the Kodori Gorge, the command has been given to the detachments from the defence ministry which remain there to open fire, if the Russian forces make any moves, which have not been agreed on."

Shevardnadze then personally flew to the gorge and gave the Russians an ultimatum to leave or he would withdraw all support for Moscow's peacekeeping operation in Abkhazia, which was introduced in 1994.

The Russians said that they were merely setting up a peacekeeping post in the Kodori, as part of a monitoring mission, set out in the agreement of April 2 between the parties in the dispute. But the UN special envoy on the Georgia-Abkhazia dispute, Dieter Boden, said that "Russian peacekeepers are obliged to inform Georgian as well as the UN observers about their actions in advance", and he had not been told about the deployment.

The Georgian foreign ministry also said that the head of UN military observers in Abkhazia, Pakistani general Ahmed Anis Bajwa, had expressed indignation at the Russian deployment.

Tbilisi officials saw Moscow's move as the latest in a series of attempts to undermine Georgian security and its latest overtures to the West. Foreign minister Irakli Menagarishvili called the deployment in the Kodori an "irresponsible provocation", designed to disrupt the planned arrival of US military advisers, which could happen as early as the end of this month.

In protest at Moscow's action, Menagarishvili broke off talks with the chairman of the Russian parliamentary committee on the CIS, Boris Pastukhov. Pastukhov himself, after a meeting with Shevardnadze, called the troop deployment a "grave mistake".

The upper part of the Kodori Gorge is the only part of the breakaway republic of Abkhazia, which Tbilisi more or less controls. It contains a small population of Svans, an ethnic group closely related to Georgians. Last autumn, it was the scene of fighting between a group of Chechens, Georgians and Abkhaz forces.

Tbilisi said it needed to maintain a troop presence in the gorge in order to protect the security of the local villagers. However, it agreed to pull the soldiers out, as their presence contravened a 1994 agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia. In return, the UN and the two-thousand-strong Russian peacekeeping force agreed to begin joint patrols of the area.

Even though Georgia withdrew its regular troops, it kept behind up to 200 border guards, saying their presence was allowed under the accord - something the Abkhazian authorities strongly deny. There are also around 950 armed local men in the upper part of the gorge.

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