

GEORGIA: Pankisi Conundrum

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America and Russia both want to rid the Pankisi Gorge of its criminals and Islamic militants - but can't agree how.

There's been an escalation in tension between Washington and Moscow over the notorious Pankisi Gorge following a US decision to send military aid to Georgia.

Moscow and Washington are keen to crackdown on Islamic radicals and criminals sheltering in the gorge - which borders Chechnya - but they are deeply suspicious of each other's attempts to assist Tbilisi with the task.

Washington fears Russian military assistance would undermine Georgian independence, while Moscow does not want to see Western forces on its frontier with Chechnya.

On February 27, the Georgian security ministry confirmed that the United States has provided the country with ten modern combat helicopters. The same day, a senior American defence official, General Peter Pace, said the US was planning to send military advisers to Georgia.

The prospect of increased American military involvement in Georgia has drawn an angry reaction from Moscow. Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov said a US deployment in Georgia "could further aggravate the situation in the region which is difficult as it is".

Georgia's president, Eduard Shevardnadze, welcomed the prospect of US troops in his country as the fulfillment of a strategic objective, which he had been working at for many years.

However, both Georgia and US officials have played down suggestions that the American military personnel would be involved in combat operations in the Pankisi, insisting that they will be only be there in a training capacity.

Security minister Valery Khaburdzania said the ten UH-1 Huey helicopters supplied to Georgia were part of a technical assistance programme, which had been agreed long ago. And deputy defence minister Gela Bezhuashvili said the US military advisers would be part of a long-term "train and equip" programme for the armed forces. "The struggle against terrorism is just one of the components of this programme," he said.

The Pankisi Gorge has been the focus of increasing international attention since February 11, when the American charge d'affaires in Tbilisi, Philip Remler, told the weekly Georgian newspaper Akhali Versia that "tens" of foreign fighters, with links to Afghanistan and Khattab, a Saudi-born warrior, who is based in Chechnya, had taken refuge in the area.

This provoked a strong reaction in Moscow and even allegations that Osama Bin-Laden himself was hiding in the gorge - causing President Shevardnadze to remark sarcastically that perhaps the leading al-Qaeda suspect was living in the house of the mother of Igor Ivanov, who lives in Akhmeta, the nearest town to Pankisi.

In fact, the Pankisi problem has more to do with domestic lawlessness than the global struggle against terror. Chechen fighters began to cross into the gorge in 2000, at the beginning of Russia's second war with Chechnya. Officials say there are around 200 of them there - locals say the figure could be three times higher.

The fighters were amongst around 7,000 Chechen refugees, who chose to settle in Pankisi because of the proximity of their ethnic cousins, the Kists, the descendants of Chechens who moved there in the 19th century.

The gorge is a criminal enclave beyond the writ of the Georgian authorities. Locals have been engaged in the drugs trade and kidnapping. And Chechen fighters have become "hired hands" in the mafia-dominated economy, say Western officials.

The situation has been made far worse by the collusion of large numbers of the Georgian security forces in the criminal activities. The potential rewards for underpaid policemen are huge. According to the Tbilisi-based Liberty Institute, every large drug transit operation through Georgia to Europe brings dealers some 10-15 million US dollars.

The lawlessness has made the Pankisi an attractive place of refuge for the mujahedin. According to one Western diplomat, the foreign fighters have been in the area for about a year and their numbers have increased since the American attacks on Afghanistan.

The Georgian intelligence services admit that some Islamic militants may have entered Georgia, but strongly deny that there is an organized al-Qaeda presence in the country. According to an army representative on the Georgian-Azerbaijan border and local reports, several fighters have crossed the frontier there, either by bribing the guards or officials or with the help of local guides.

An ethnic Azerbaijani, who lives near Georgia's border with Azerbaijan, told IWPR that it is very easy to bring people into the country. Once on Georgian territory, foreign fighters make contact with local Chechens, who trade in a local market close to the village of Kabali.

President Shevardnadze now faces the awkward problem of trying to please both the Russians and the Americans, both of whom want the Pankisi Gorge to be cleaned up - but are deeply suspicious of each other's attempts to do so. He has repeatedly resisted Moscow's requests to send its troops across the Chechnya-Georgia border, a move which would undermine his domestic popularity.

Yet he is also well aware that his own security forces are not up to the job of carrying out a clean-up operation themselves. Recent commitments by the Georgian government to crack down in the Pankisi have so far ended in failure. On February 17, a police operation to arrest a local drug baron descended into farce, when four police officers ended up being taken hostage.

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