

## **Georgia-South Ossetia: Helicopter Attack Sparks Hostile Words**

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After a helicopter carrying the Georgian defence minister is nearly shot out of the sky by South Ossetian troops, neither side looks ready to back away from confrontation.

The already tense relationship between Georgia and the breakaway republic of South Ossetia has been aggravated by an attack on a Georgian helicopter – and revelations in Tbilisi that Georgian defence minister Irakli Okruashvili was on board.

The incident, which occurred on September 3 when an Mi-8 helicopter carrying Okruashvili came under fire from South Ossetian territory, has also worsened relations between Georgia and Russia, which Tbilisi accuses of backing the separatists.

Georgian officials said the aircraft made an emergency landing but no one was hurt.

The South Ossetians confirmed their troops were responsible for the attack, alleging that the helicopter concerned had entered their air space and fired shots at the ground. However, they did not suggest that the aircraft was targeted because of prior intelligence that Okruashvili was on board.

“Shots were fired from the ground in response to shooting coming from the helicopter,” said South Ossetian defence minister Anatoly Barankevich.

Shortly after the incident, the South Ossetian government’s press service issued a statement saying, “The helicopter’s crew ignored calls to land or change route.... and the Ossetian side responded appropriately.”

The statement accused Georgian aircraft of violating South Ossetian air space 240 times in the past five months.

Vladimir Ivanov, deputy commander-in-chief of the Russian peacekeeping forces based in South Ossetia, also said that Georgian military overflights had recently become “systematic and patently provocative”.

The Georgians, who do not recognise South Ossetia as a sovereign entity with its own airspace, denied the charge that shots had come from the helicopter. Okruashvili said Georgian planes could fly wherever they liked.

In the days that followed, there was little attempt at damage limitation on either side.

South Ossetia’s president Eduard Kokoity reportedly congratulated the troops who shot at the aircraft. However, the entity’s interior minister Mikhail Mindzayev dismissed as “utter disinformation” reports in the Georgian media that a 50,000 US dollar reward was to be offered for a successful downing, and half a million dollars for anyone who managed to hit Okruashvili.

“We are not interested in having either Okruashvili or [Georgian president Mikheil] Saakashvili killed, as they are helping us to achieve independence,” he added.

In Tbilisi, the chairman of the Georgian parliament’s defence and security committee, Givi Targamadze, said the international community needed to move more quickly to resolve the long-running territorial dispute.

“Otherwise Tbilisi may use force to bring the self-declared republic of South Ossetia back under its control,” warned Targamadze, who is close to both Okruashvili and Saakashvili.

His remarks were seen as the first time a senior Georgian figure had said publicly and unequivocally that military action to recapture South Ossetia was an option.

The South Ossetian authorities put their own forces on high alert, and accused the Georgians of massing troops nearby. Mindzayev said the Georgians were steadily building up their military strength “to capture the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval”.

“We are playing a chess game with the Georgian side,” he added. “We are taking counter-measures that will make them change their plans.”

An anonymous source in Georgia’s defence ministry denied there was any military build-up.

Aside from the belligerent talk in Tskhinval and Tbilisi, the incident also put further strain on Georgian-Russian relations.

The Russian foreign ministry suggested that Tbilisi itself was to blame for the incident, by allowing a helicopter to fly over the conflict zone. The Georgians’ actions were “provocative [and] clearly designed to undermine the peaceful resolution process, and show that Tbilisi is beginning to prepare the way for alternative ways of solving the problem,” the ministry said.

The Georgian foreign ministry described Russia’s position as “yet another demonstration of open support... of the separatist authorities in South Ossetia”.

Georgia’s state minister for conflict resolution, Merab Antadze, said, “The peacemaking operation led by Russia has not been contributing to efforts to establish peace in the conflict zone. The plan of the Russian political authorities is to ignite serious instability and military action in South Ossetia.”

The Georgians appealed for support to the wider international community, with Foreign Minister Gela Bezhushvili urging the incident to be recognised as “an act of terrorism”.

The speaker of parliament, Nino Burjanadze, called for an “appropriate response” from the international community, but gave an assurance that Georgia would not swerve from its policy of resolving the dispute peacefully.

Some opposition politicians were more hawkish, “The Georgian leadership must immediately prove that their security structures are effective,” said Zviad Dzidziguri, a member of parliament from the Conservatives. “The separatists must hand over the criminals who did this to us, or else the central [Georgian] authorities must arrest these people themselves.”

So far the only international response has come from the OSCE, which has military observers in the conflict zone. The head of the OSCE mission in Georgia, Roy Reeve, said there was an agreement in place banning flights over the conflict zone, but at the same time, firing at an aircraft was a breach of international standards.

Some politicians in Tbilisi were infuriated by what they saw as an unnecessarily even-handed response. “I think the OSCE’s assessment was not altogether appropriate,” said Kote Gabashvili, chairman of the Georgian parliament’s foreign policy committee.

The United States, too, got drawn into the affair, when the Georgian interior ministry suggested that in an earlier incident on August 28, the South Ossetians had tried to shoot down a helicopter carrying President Saakashvili and a US delegation led by Senator John McCain.

The US embassy in Tbilisi said the FBI had investigated the matter and found no evidence to confirm it was true.

Yet some kind of attack did take place. “It appears that another helicopter, which was on the way from Tbilisi to join the Senate delegation helicopters in western Georgia, was the intended target of the missile,” said an embassy statement.

Mindzayev told IWPR that orders to shoot down all intruders were issued only after the September 3 incident.

But he commented, “It makes no difference to us who is in these helicopters - we are defending our borders.”

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