

Georgian Protest Threatens Abkhaz Peace

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Protests by Georgian refugees against the Russian-led peacekeeping force in Abkhazia are causing new tensions.

A wave of protests by refugees on Georgia's border with Abkhazia is raising the temperature in the long-running dispute over the breakaway Black Sea region.

Hundreds of Georgians displaced from Abkhazia, joined by students and army veterans, have blocked the bridge over the River Inguri, the only route into the separatist province from Georgia.

They are demanding that the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States, CIS, peacekeeping force on the other side of the river should either be withdrawn or redeployed further north to the River Galizdga, a move that would lead to the de facto return of the Gali district in southern Abkhazia to Georgian control.

Over recent days, the protests have swelled, attracting up to 1,000 people and the participation of politicians, such as Londer Tsaava, prime minister of Georgia's Abkhazian government in exile. Georgian partisans have threatened to mine the roads leading to Abkhazia.

Hundreds of Russian peacekeepers, heading a force nominally under the aegis of the CIS, have been in Abkhazia since 1994, but most Georgians believe they are supporting the Abkhazians. Last October, the Georgian parliament passed a resolution calling for the Russians to be withdrawn. The peacekeeping formally expired at the end of the year and is up for renewal at the forthcoming CIS summit in March.

The protests have put Georgia's president, Eduard Shevardnadze, in an awkward position. A range of opposition politicians, including the popular ex-justice minister, Mikeil Saakishvili, have backed the protestors and accused Shevardnadze of passivity.

The Georgian leader said on January 28 that he supported the removal of the Russian peacekeepers in principle - and added that Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, was also prepared to see them go. But Shevardnadze said that it would be a mistake for the peacekeepers to be pulled out at the moment, as it might lead to a repeat of the events of May 1998, when fighting resumed in the Gali region and tens of thousands of Georgians fled. "We should be more patient and more careful," he said.

The Abkhazian government in Sukhumi opposes any change in the status of the peacekeepers and has said that the protests on the Inguri will make no difference. "In the end the refugees will disperse and the peacekeepers will stay where they are now, on the Inguri River," said Astamur Tania, the Abkhazian presidential aide on January 29.

The demonstrations come just as the United Nations is making a new push to restart the mediation process. Last week the UN secretary general Kofi Annan said that he favoured the continued presence of the Russian forces, who also provide security for the UN monitoring force in Abkhazia. Annan also called on Georgia to withdraw the 350 soldiers it has in the Kodori Gorge, the only part of Abkhazia it controls, on the grounds that their presence there was in the breach of the agreement made in 1994.

Behind the protests lies a smouldering frustration and anger in Georgian society about the lack of progress over the dispute. Hundreds of thousands of Georgians were expelled from Abkhazia during the war of 1992-3. Many complain that the government has failed to honour pledges it made to return them to their

homes on the other side of the Inguri River.

According to a website poll, published on January 30 by the Prime News agency, only 10 per cent of respondents believe that the UN was contributing to a settlement, while 39 per cent think that the UN is causing the peace process to stagnate.

Although the protests are the most serious for several years, it seems that the situation will change only when the Russian position on Abkhazia changes. Last October, it was widely reported that Russian planes have bombed groups of Georgian partisans and Chechen fighters, who made an incursion into Abkhazia. Since then, however, Moscow has shown signs of wanting to be more cooperative with Georgia over Abkhazia.

President Shevardnadze has said that there is increasing mutual understanding between his government and the Kremlin on the Abkhazia issue.

After much foot-dragging, the Russian foreign ministry has also given its backing to a confidential document drafted by the UN envoy Dieter Boden on the framework for a solution to the conflict.

"It is too early to talk about some plan to return Abkhazia to Georgia with Russia's support, and speculate about mutual benefits, but the recent cooperation between Russia and Georgia shows that changes on Abkhazia can be expected very soon," said one diplomat in Tbilisi.

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