

Georgian 'Terrorist' Dilemma

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Tbilisi is under pressure from Moscow to tackle Chechen rebels believed to be hiding out in Georgia

In the wake of last week's hijacking tragedy in the US, Georgia's president Edvard Shevardnadze is being accused of double standards over terrorism.

Georgian Defence Minister David Tevzadze said Shevardnadze announced in a closed meeting that he is willing to allow NATO troops to use Georgian territory and air-space, if necessary, for anticipated attacks on Afghanistan. But, at the same time, the president is being criticised for not helping Russia chase down Chechen fighters Moscow, and now Georgian deputies, say are hiding out in Georgia.

"It turns out that on the one hand the Georgian leadership is proclaiming its solidarity with the US, which suffered from the unprecedented terrorist attack, and on the other protecting terrorists," said Djemal Gogitdze, a minority opposition leader.

For the first time, Georgian deputies have admitted that the country is being used as a base by Chechen rebels who in recent weeks stepped up their campaign against the Russian military.

The guerrillas are long believed to have used Pankisi Gorge, in the north-east of Georgia, as a base since thousands of refugees fled there in 1999. There are also reports that Chechen fighters are helping Georgian partisans in the west of the republic fight Russian-backed Abkhazian forces in the Kodori Gorge region, a spit of Abkhazian territory on Georgia's western border.

The Russian foreign ministry this week urged Georgia to help it hunt down Chechens operating in Georgia. The inhabitants of areas, where they are thought to be based, now fear that Russia will launch attacks on their villages and towns.

"Georgia is on the verge of war," said Djemal Gogitidze, leader of Georgia's opposition party grouping, admitting that he knew there were around a thousand Chechens in western Georgia. The comment which appeared in an interview with the Georgian Prime News agency caused a sensation.

Until now Shevardnadze has turned a blind eye to the Chechen rebel presence on Georgian territory. But it seems likely he will be unable to avoid the issue for much longer with such reports doing the rounds.

Although it has been common knowledge for some time that Chechen groups have been using the Pankisi Gorge on the Chechnya border to shelter and train rebels, Georgia has largely left the lawless region - run by ethnic Chechens known as Kists - to its own devices.

Now Shevardnadze has an additional problem. The troops Gogitidze is referring to are Chechens from Pankisi Gorge supposedly helping Georgians in the west of the country in an ongoing conflict with Abkhazia over the Kodori Gorge.

Spurred on by US comments last week, right-wing politicians in Moscow have sought to pressure Georgia to address the issue.

State Duma deputy Boris Nemtsov, speaking on Russian television, said that Moscow had a right to conduct anti-terrorist operations on Georgian territory without the latter's compliance. Nemtsov said that President Shevardnadze's "weak state, weak army and weak police" were incapable of dealing with the fact Chechens had "occupied part of Georgia's territory". Though this is certainly not the official view many believe that what Nemstov is saying is actually what many Russians are thinking.

Tbilisi is struggling to play the situation down. Shevardnadze denied September 17 that there were any Chechen fighters on Georgian territory. He lashed out at accusations made by "neighbouring countries", countering by claiming that Moscow was in fact harbouring terrorists wanted in Georgia.

The Tbilisi foreign ministry further lambasted Moscow for using the US tragedy as a means of soliciting support for armed incursions into Georgian territory. "Nemtsov's statement radically contradicts common principles of international law and is an attempt to fulfil Moscow's political goals in the region by means of force," said a ministry official.

"Georgia will not allow any foreign state to use its territory for military operations," continued the official, in apparent contradiction to Georgia's comments about allowing NATO forces onto its territory.

Relations between Russia and Georgia really took a turn for the worse when Tbilisi refused to block its border with Chechnya back in 1999 when the second Chechen war broke out. Parliamentary external affairs spokesman, Nino Burdjanadze, said that Georgia's decision was made to avoid being dragged into the conflict.

But Burdjanadze also admitted that it was possible that Chechen guerilla fighters made their way into Pankisi Gorge along with the thousand of refugees who fled to the areas populated by ethnic-Chechen Kists in 1999.

Although the OSCE has a monitoring mission on the border and reported "no border violations since winter 2000", reports have been received by IWPR of Chechen rebels launching their late summer campaign from bases inside Georgia in August.

"It is impossible to block the (81 kilometre) border with Chechnya 100 per cent, but statements that caravans of Bin Laden's mercenaries are passing Georgia on their way to Chechnya is plain slander," said Burdjanadze.

The Chechen question is throwing the inhabitants of Kodori Gorge into a high state of anxiety. " We are afraid that Russia will start bombing our villages because of the presence of Chechen fighters," said villager Avtandil Dzachvliani. He believes there are around 500 well armed Chechens in the area.

The first reports about the concentration of Chechen fighters in the regions bordering Abkhazia appeared at the end of August . (see CRS 96, Russia Stokes Abkhaz Conflict). Russian military sources said that a 500 strong unit of Georgian partisans joined 300 Chechen fighters to attack Abkhazia.

On September 15, the Georgian defence and security parliamentary committee repeatedly called on the Georgian interior ministry to disclose what was happening on the border with Abkhazia. "The reason for our requests are the recent media reports talking about hundreds and even thousands of Chechen fighters there, in particular in Tsalendzhikhi region and in Kodori Gorge," said the committee's chairman Giorgi Baramidze.

Shevardnadze is due to visit to the US on October 5 to meet President Bush. At this point more light should be shed on the US position on this issue. Analysts in the region say Georgia might be pressured into repatriating refugees from Chechnya, or even forced to conduct special operations against Chechen fighters, which, in turn, could seriously destabilise in the country.

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Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgian-terrorist-dilemma>