

Moscow, Tbilisi Clash Over Bases

Talks are bogged down on the closure date of two Russian bases on Georgian soil.

Hopes of a resolution of the long-standing issue of Russia's military bases in Georgia were dashed this week following inconclusive talks between Georgian officials and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in Tbilisi.

The only positive result that Moscow and Tbilisi could announce after two days of talks was that the bilateral commission on the bases, which has not functioned for a year, would resume work and that in two months it would present proposals to the presidents of both countries.

Givi Targamadze, chairman of the Georgian parliament's defence committee, expressed a widely-shared opinion in Georgia when he urged his government to take a tougher line with Moscow and to start a blockade of the two Russian bases remaining on Georgian territory.

Georgia maintains that Moscow gave a firm promise at the Istanbul summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, OSCE, in 1999, to shut down the bases. Russia maintains that a strict timetable was not agreed on.

The continued presence of Russian soldiers in Georgia, more than a decade after the country achieved independence and as it aspires to join western institutions, is intensely resented by most Georgians.

However, local attitudes towards the two bases - that of the 12th Division on the Black Sea coast of Ajaria, and the 62nd military base in the Armenian-majority town of Akhalkalaki in the mountains of southern Georgia, are very different.

In Ajaria, the majority of locals want to see the base removed, while that in Akhalkalaki remains a major source of jobs for the local community in a region of high unemployment.

Moreover, many in the 100,00-strong local Armenian population traditionally regard the Russian military as their protectors from a hypothetical invasion of Turkish invaders from just across the Georgia-Turkey border.

Following the OSCE summit in 1999, the Russian base at Vaziani outside Tbilisi was closed down under international supervision and that at Gudauta in Abkhazia - the breakaway territory no longer under control of Tbilisi - was also reportedly shut down, though without any international monitoring.

In Tbilisi, Lavrov said that progress had been made on a number of bilateral issues, including the idea of an "anti-terrorist centre" and a framework treaty between Tbilisi and Moscow. "I am beginning to feel a cautious optimism," he said at a press conference on February 18. "I hope that I am not mistaken."

The Georgian side was more downbeat. "In the negotiations with Russia we have reached agreement only on the final result, the complete withdrawal of the bases from the territory of Georgia," said David Sikharulidze, the deputy defence minister. "However the Russian side has a completely unconstructive approach and they are suggesting a term of 11 years to complete the process."

Georgia is proposing a deadline of three years. “We have proposed that they initially remove all the heavy equipment to Russia or Armenia and then spend two years gradually removing the staff,” said Sikharulidze. “Moreover, our specialists have calculated that it should take only five or six months to dismantle these bases technically.”

In Akhalkalaki, many view the proposed closure with foreboding.

“Personally I am against the withdrawal of Russian forces,” said Samvel Gogorian, who runs a small shop on the territory of the base. “You have to worry what will happen to our business if they leave. My shop won’t have the kind of income it has now.”

Georgian expert Paata Zakareishvili blames the Tbilisi government for not paying due attention to the issue of the closure of the Akhalkalaki base.

“Up until now no one in Georgia has done any proper research about how local people depend economically on the base and how to overcome that,” he said. “There is not even any precise data on how many local people work there.”

The only information IWPR was able to receive about what the Georgian government intends to do when the base is closed came from Deputy Foreign Minister Merab Antadze who said that there were no plans to replace the Russian base with a Georgian one and that there was a project to create a “special economic zone” in the region.

In Akhalkalaki, a large poster hangs over the entrance to the base bearing a quotation from the 19th century Russian general Ivan Paskevich, proclaiming, “Govern this land without fear, the Russian army will defend you!”

However, the relationship between the locals and the Russian army is deteriorating, say observers. One resident of Akhalkalaki told IWPR that locals were in a state of “voluntary slavery” to the Russian military. “People are helpless and don’t mind if a dirty boot steps on them so long as they get a wage,” he said.

“Because of Russia’s incorrect behaviour, there is no longer trust for the Russian generals,” said Ararat Yesoyan, a well-known civil activist in the town. “For locals it is the one of very few places of work, but you could only find work there by paying a bribe – and quite a large one at that. And over the last year the management of the base has begun to send locals to Russia, saying that they are rotating personnel.”

Until recently several regiments in Akhalkalaki were staffed with local Armenians. Artur Akhvdalian served in one of them, the 12th Infantry Regiment. But when he, alongside many others, was told that he would be sent to serve in the North Caucasus, he refused and lost his job.

“We were picked on ethnic grounds,” Artur told IWPR. “If you are an Armenian, that means you should be transferred.”

Artur said he had been told that many of those Armenians who were transferred out of Georgia were sent to serve in Chechnya and were forced to live in sub-standard accommodation, while their children were not admitted to Russian schools.

IWPR repeatedly asked the military command of the base for comment but was told to seek permission from the defence ministry in Moscow before an interview would be granted. No permission was given.

Koba Liklikadze, a military analyst with Radio Liberty, pointed out that politically the Russian bases are now becoming more and more irrelevant.

He noted that last May, when the pro-Moscow leader of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze, was ousted after protests organised by the new Georgian government, the Russian military did not intervene to defend him.

“Before many Georgian politicians thought that Russia was keeping its military bases here so as to blackmail the Georgian leadership and use it as a way of bringing pro-Moscow forces to power,” Liklikadze told IWPR. “But that’s no longer the case. Today the Russian bases cannot change the political landscape in Georgia.”

Olesya Vartanian and Artur Paspandian are correspondents with the newspaper Southern Gates in Samtskhe-Javakheti region, supported by IWPR.

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