

Pankisi In Uproar At Bombing Raids

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A Georgian security sweep in the Pankisi Gorge has been welcomed by locals - but Russia is sceptical.

On a hill outside the village of Pichkhovani in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, a large military camp has been pitched. Trenches and ditches have been dug and camouflaged equipment and artillery deployed.

When this journalist, together with two colleagues, tried to walk around the camp, some soldiers emerged from nearby woods and moved us away. "We are here to do exercises, but if we have to we will take part in an anti-terrorist operation," said a soldier named Giorgy Maisuradze, speaking informally, as the defence ministry has forbidden its men to give interviews.

Georgia has lauded the operation it launched in the lawless Pankisi Gorge on August 25 as a determined crackdown against armed criminals and militants hiding there. It began under intense pressure from Russia two days after a bombing raid near the gorge, in which one man died and seven were wounded. Georgia blamed Russia for the attack. Moscow has denied all responsibility.

President Eduard Shevardnadze visited the gorge on August 27, attending the funeral of the elderly victim of the bombing, 70-year-old Guram Otiashvili. Literally the whole of the local population turned out to greet him.

Around 2,000 soldiers from different security forces and several dozen artillery pieces, armoured vehicles and helicopters were sent to the Pankisi. Formally however, it is the interior ministry, which is engaged in what it calls an "anti-criminal operation" while the defence ministry is only there for training exercises.

This distinction seems not to make much difference on the ground. Irakly Aladiashvili, a commentator on military affairs with the weekly journal *Kviris Palitra*, said he believed the operation was "serious" and not merely a political exercise, "mainly because there is real coordination between all the structures taking part in it".

On August 30 the Georgian security ministry announced it had arrested an Arab of French citizenship, who may have links to Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist organization. Despite this success, no Chechen militants were detained. This is probably because the best-known Chechen fighters, including warlord Ruslan Gelayev, who was known to be in the gorge, had already moved away from the area.

"From the information we have, the fighters have already left the gorge, but even if they are not there, the operation is essential as part of the fight with the criminal groups acting there," said Aladiashvili. "A successful completion of this operation will restore a lustre to this region, which recently has been a blank spot on the map."

Moscow politicians have dismissed the significance of the Georgian operation and demanded Russia be given access to the Pankisi Gorge. "Our Georgian colleagues either don't want or can't fight these terrorist," said President Vladimir Putin on a visit to Siberia on August 28.

"The Taleban regime sheltered al-Qaeda, and it prepared criminal acts throughout the world; prepared and carried out the terrible terrorist act whose anniversary we will commemorate on September 11," Putin said. "Is the situation in Georgia any better for us, Russians? The same sort of terrorists are there, including, I repeat, foreign nationals, and they carry out attacks on our territory and make no bones about

it."

In Georgia the bombing raid has rallied support around President Shevardnadze and intensified anti-Russian feelings. Parliament called on the government to withdraw Russia's bases from the country, suspend the mandate of Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and leave the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Both the United States and the European Union have expressed great alarm at this latest confrontation between Russia and Georgia.

The area at the eye of this storm, the Pankisi Gorge, is less a gorge than a narrow strip of land. The most lawless part, in a bottleneck, at the northern end, is only seven kilometres long and situated between mountain ridges.

Three years ago, few even in Georgia knew about this area of four villages, which has been home since the 19th century to a population of ethnic Chechens, known as Kists, who have Georgianized their names and are full Georgian citizens.

The gorge became a focus of tension between Russia and Georgia at the end of 1999, when thousands of Chechen refugees, fleeing the start of the second war in Chechnya, crossed the Caucasus mountains and found sanctuary there. Moscow then accused the Georgians of giving shelter to Chechen fighters amongst the refugees.

In February this year, the row escalated after US charge d'affaires in Tbilisi Philip Remler said al-Qaeda elements from Afghanistan were taking refuge in the gorge. Since April, a team of US trainers have been here as part of a "Train-and-Equip" programme designed to tackle the problem.

The US personnel have no direct link to the operation in the Pankisi, but the Georgian General Staff confirmed that several officers, who had already been trained by the Americans, were taking part in the operation.

The first squadron of special forces to have been put through their paces by the US troops began field exercises on August 29.

One unexpected consequence of the operation is a change in mood amongst refugees from Chechnya, many of whom have declared that they are now willing to leave Georgia, as their presence is causing so many problems.

Khizir Aldamov, the official representative of Chechen rebel president Aslan Maskhadov in Georgia, told IWPR that refugees had held a big meeting in one of the villages of the Pankisi on August 26 and agreed to make an appeal to Georgia's state chancellery and parliament, according to which "refugees will leave in organised fashion for any country, which will agree to take them - except Russia, where the refugees are afraid to return".

Aldamov said that representatives of Georgia's ministry for refugees and resettlement had been invited to another meeting on August 29.

The elders of Pichkhovani also held a meeting a few days ago in which they not only welcomed the sending

of troops, but also proposed setting up special groups of support composed of the residents of surrounding villages.

"We think that now that a big contingent of interior ministry troops has been sent in, it will be calmer in the gorge," said Jaraf Khangoshvili, a Kist from the village of Duisi. He hoped that it "will help stabilise the situation and, moreover, Russia will finally understand that the Georgian authorities do control their own territory."

In his visit to the gorge, Shevardnadze promised that there would be no more bombing raids in the area, a statement which drew a loud ovation.

However, Georgia's military leaders do not share the president's optimism and say that more raids are possible. In the mountains, troops are testing anti-aircraft systems. All the same, the government's statements and actions do seem to have prevented panic. Before Shevardnadze visited, residents were already planning to leave their homes.

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