

Shevardnadze Quells Mutiny

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A protest staged by disaffected guardsmen on the eve of Georgian Independence Day is followed by riots in downtown Tbilisi

Eduard Shevardnadze has pledged to improve conditions in the Georgian army after 500 crack troops mutinied and seized control of a key military base.

During a face-to-face meeting with the mutineers on Saturday morning, the president also gave reassurances that they would not be prosecuted for their action.

But some leading politicians claim the protest over pay and living conditions was in fact a smokescreen for an attempted political coup.

A battalion of the National Guard, led by Colonel Koba Otanadze, seized the base in Mukhrovani, 30km north-east of Tbilisi, on the morning of May 24.

Manned by a force of 1,000 conscripts, the base houses an estimated 50 per cent of the Georgian military arsenal including tanks, APCs and Shilka missiles.

National Guard officers were sent to negotiate with the mutineers but were greeted by warning shots from inside the compound.

The Georgian parliament promptly held a closed session to discuss the crisis which security minister Vakhtang Kutateladze described as an attempt to overthrow the government.

And parliamentary chairman Zurab Zhvania agreed that the seizure of heavy weaponry by a force of armed men could only be interpreted as a political coup.

He told deputies that the guardsmen were putting forward political demands and claimed the secret services already had information that the mutineers were being supported by "certain political forces".

Meanwhile, parliamentary vice-speaker Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, spokesman for the parliamentary minority, assured journalists that the opposition had no intention of supporting a coup d'etat.

The putsch theory was reinforced when the Prime News agency reported that the mutineers were attempting to contact former Guards officers including Valery Galdava and Temur Otiashvili -- both allies of the ex-defence minister, Tengiz Kitovani.

According to Vakhtang Kutateladze, the mutiny had been masterminded by Colonel Otanadze, a former member of the security ministry collegiate who has links with the one-time security minister, Shota Kviraya.

However Irakly Batiashvili, a former head of the intelligence service, who held preliminary talks with the troops, reported that the move was, in fact, a protest against the appalling conditions endemic in the Georgian army.

Batiashvili said the troops were demanding improvements in living conditions and payment of wages which were more than a year in arrears. "The mutineers do not intend to use force," he added.

The Georgian government is currently trying to implement a reform programme aimed at demobilising around 3,000 servicemen. However, according to deputy defence minister Nugzar Kevkhishvili, the army is owed around 17.5 million in backpay and cuts cannot be made until the money is found. He admitted that many soldiers had not been paid for 12-14 months.

However, security minister Vakhtang Kutateladze said that these demands were nothing but a smokescreen for a more sinister political agenda. He believes the mutineers changed their tactics because they were left in the lurch by their political backers.

It then emerged that the mutineers were demanding a meeting with President Shevardnadze.

According to Nugzar Sadzhaya, secretary of the Security Council of Georgia, the president made his decision to meet the guardsmen without consulting council members.

During the meeting, Shevardnadze pledged that the mutineers would not be prosecuted for their actions, explaining that the state had a moral responsibility to address the problems.

He agreed to meet with the guardsmen again on Monday together with the finance and economics ministers.

The Mukhrovani crisis was followed by further upheaval in Tbilisi. On Saturday, the 10th anniversary of Georgian independence, eight people were injured when police clashed with 400 supporters of ousted president Zviad Gamsakhurdia on Republic Square.

One injured officer told Prime News that the protesters attacked police with sharpened sticks and wooden crosses. The victims included Merab Bagaturia, head of the anti-organised crime task force in Tbilisi.

The Zviadists had previously staged a series of protest meetings in Senaki, Western Georgia, to demand the release of supporters of Colonel Akaky Eliava, killed by police during a 1998 mutiny.

The latest developments have also coincided with fresh accusations from Moscow that the Georgian government is harbouring Chechen rebels.

Recent reports in Itar Tass and Interfax claimed that Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev recently met with Georgian officials in the resort of Likani, near Borzhomi. The news agencies explained that Basaev's mission was to establish new channels for smuggling arms into Chechnya.

Interior minister Kakha Targamadze dismissed the allegations as "ravings" and said any such talks were "completely out of the question".

Some sources have also claimed that the National Guard battalion was planning to decamp to the Pankisi Gorge, where Chechen rebels are thought to be hiding - rumours which have been dubbed "provocation" by the mutineers themselves. They point out that Mukhrovani is more than 100km from the gorge.

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