

## **South Ossetia Crisis Abates**

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Tbilisi and Tskhinvali step back from the brink after Georgian police enter South Ossetia.

The Georgian authorities are declaring that a three-day flare-up with the breakaway republic of South Ossetia is over, but tensions remain high after one of the angriest confrontations between the two sides in more than a decade.

After day-long negotiations on June 2 in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali, Georgia's minister in charge of conflict resolution Goga Khaindrava said the crisis was over. He said that Tbilisi's main quarrel was not with the South Ossetian government but with Russian peacekeepers who are stationed there. The Russian general in charge of peacekeeping is now being removed.

However, South Ossetia is still fearful of the Tbilisi government's intentions.

All eyes have been turned on South Ossetia over the last month, following the peaceful resolution of the crisis between Tbilisi and the Black Sea republic of Abkhazia. The authorities in Tskhinvali said they were bracing themselves for a military offensive by the Georgians.

South Ossetia seceded de facto from Georgia in 1992 after fighting that left several thousand dead.

The latest crisis began on the morning of May 31, when several Georgian interior ministry units unexpectedly landed by helicopter in the villages of Tkviavi, Pkvenisi, Nikozi and Eredvi, all of which are populated by ethnic Georgians and are located in the southern part of South Ossetia. The units – which belonged to the ministry's financial crime squad – proceeded to set up roadblocks in the villages.

The Georgian interior ministry later explained that their sudden intervention was a “measure to halt smuggling coming from Tskhinvali”, but both the South Ossetians and the Russian peacekeepers reacted with alarm.

South Ossetia is the main transit route for road traffic from Russia to Georgia and is widely reported to be a smuggler's haven. The Ergneti market, which is entirely beyond the control of Tbilisi, is the largest retail centre in the whole of the Caucasus.

Several hours later, the situation escalated when General Svyatoslav Nabdzorov, commander of Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia, declared that the roadblocks must be removed, by force if necessary.

Georgia responded by sending in interior ministry troops to reinforce the roadblocks, and interior minister Giorgi Baramidze announced that his men were ready “to use weapons if they encounter resistance”.

South Ossetia's minister responsible for negotiations, Boris Chochiev, accused Tbilisi of breaking earlier agreements and called the Georgian move a “provocation.”

The following day the South Ossetians also condemned a visit by Georgian first lady Sandra Roelofs-Saakashvili as provocative.

That evening, the situation calmed down when the Georgian units were withdrawn. The two sides then bridged some of their differences at talks on June 2.

“The incident that occurred was not between the Georgian and Ossetian sides but between the law-enforcement agencies of Georgia and the peacekeepers,” said Goga Khaindrava after the meeting. “The reason for the upsurge in tension was the intemperate behaviour of Russian General Nabdzorov. A decision has now been taken that a new figure will head the peacekeeping forces. It has also been confirmed that certain forces were involved in smuggling. The conflict has now been sorted out.”

“A meeting of the Joint Control Committee, the main body that regulates the peace process, has been planned for the middle of June,” Khaindrava told IWPR. The minister also said he would soon visit the Russian republic of North Ossetia, and deliver an invitation for its president Alexander Dzasokhov to come to Tbilisi.

“I hope that during Dzasokhov's visit to Tbilisi, definite decisions will be taken to collaborate on the fight against smuggling,” said Khaindrava.

After the talks, the secretary of Georgia's national security council Vano Merabishvili said that Tbilisi would increase its contingent of peacekeepers based in Georgian villages in South Ossetia from 100 to 500.

This is perhaps the most serious trouble in South Ossetia since a truce ended the conflict in 1992. Since then, the peace has been monitored by a mixed contingent of Russian, Ossetian and Georgian troops.

South Ossetia has been worried by the coming to power of Georgia's energetic new president, Mikheil Saakashvili, especially after he forced out the veteran pro-Russian leader of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze.

Saakashvili told journalists that the interior ministry operation had been necessary "to defend to the end the borders and economic system" of Georgia. "Tskhinvali and neighbouring territories have long been a centre for smuggling."

At the same, the Georgian president has begun trying to woo back South Ossetia with positive measures. In his recent Independence Day speech, Saakashvili addressed the Ossetians as "brothers" and spoke in the Ossetian language. Georgian state television has begun broadcasting in the language, South Ossetians are being offered Georgian pensions, and work has begun to restore the long-defunct railway line between Tskhinvali and Gori.

All this has been viewed with some suspicion in South Ossetia, as a unilateral strategy carried out entirely without coordination with the unrecognised republic itself.

The unexpected visit by the president's wife only increased such suspicions. "No one invited her and no one expected her," said South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity. Her visit follows an unexpected trip that Saakashvili made to Tskhinvali during his presidential election campaign, which alarmed the South Ossetian authorities.

Irakli Machavariani, who represented Tbilisi for seven years in talks with South Ossetia, told IWPR that it would have been advisable to warn the Ossetian authorities in advance of a visit of this kind.

He believes that peaceful resolution of the South Ossetian dispute depends on Georgia and Russia coming to terms.

Both the Russian foreign ministry and the Russian parliament, the State Duma, strongly condemned the Georgian interior ministry's actions as "provocative."

Political analyst Paata Zakareishvili said that the Georgian operation, though it looked spontaneous, had probably been well planned in advance. He called Saakashvili "a tactical grandmaster" who is capable of performing well in an emergency situation.

"But do our authorities have a strategy?" asked Zakareishvili.

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