

South Ossetia Standoff Continues

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Tskhinval blames Georgia for “provocations” designed to undermine the breakaway republic’s credibility.

Angry villagers in South Ossetia’s ethnic Georgian enclave of Tamarasheni have barricaded the settlement and are protesting loudly at a decision to hand a man suspected of murdering two of their number over to the Russian-led Joint Control Commission, JCC.

“All of South Ossetia is defending this man!” one villager said bitterly. “Is murdering a Georgian not considered to be a crime here?”

IWPR was only able to reach Tamarasheni by travelling with an escort of armed peacekeepers, as it is presently no longer safe for Ossetians to travel through the region’s Georgian enclaves.

All routes to and from Tskhinval had been sealed off by Tamarasheni’s Georgians on January 25 in protest against Tbilisi’s decision to hand murder suspect Alexander Pukhaev over to the JCC in the South Ossetian capital.

Georgian police had been holding the Ossetian suspect in custody in connection with the deaths of two ethnic Georgians from Tamarasheni.

“The people Pukhaev murdered were Georgian construction workers,” said one Tamarasheni villager, speaking to IWPR on condition of anonymity. “But Ossetian television tells the public every evening that he is innocent.”

The latest upsurge in tension in this troubled region was sparked by Pukhaev’s arrest by Georgian police on January 19. In response, Ossetians allegedly kidnapped Georgian police officer Lado Chalaouri. The situation escalated when the officer’s relatives apparently seized several Ossetians in retaliation.

The JCC, which was formed recently to defuse mounting tensions between Georgia and its breakaway former autonomous region of South Ossetia, held a series of negotiations which ended with the safe release of all those being held. However, part of the deal included handing Pukhaev from Georgian to JCC custody – angering Tamarasheni and triggering the barricading of the village.

“At our meeting [with the Georgian side] we have also agreed to exchange Georgians for Ossetians who have already been convicted and imprisoned,” said JCC co-chair Boris Chochiev.

But despite these promising results, few in Tskhinval believe that this is the beginning of a real breakthrough.

South Ossetia’s deputy foreign minister Alan Pliev told IWPR that he believed the Georgians were “deliberately provoking instability”.

“They are presenting [us] as a pack of criminals and separatists unable to keep things under control,” he

said. "They seem to think the only way to restore law and order in South Ossetia is to make it part of Georgia again."

Pliev believes the current crisis was engineered to give Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili more leverage in the run-up towards his January 26 address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, PACE, where he presented his new settlement plan for the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.

In it, Saakashvili promises extended autonomy for South Ossetia, which broke away from Georgia in the early Nineties and remains unrecognised.

The Georgian government proposes that South Ossetia has its own parliament; its ethnic culture is conserved; and, in the future, pledges to grant the territory free economic zone status and simplified border-crossing procedures with Russia.

However, under the Georgian settlement, Tbilisi keeps full responsibility for borders, defence, public security and order.

"If South Ossetia declines this initiative, no one will have the right to accuse Georgia of ignoring the peaceful settlement effort," Saakashvili told the PACE meeting.

However, on the same day as the address, South Ossetia's president Eduard Kokoity dismissed the proposal as an attempt "to complicate" the Georgian-Ossetian settlement process.

"The Ossetian people determined the status of South Ossetia at the 1992 referendum, having voted 99.8 per cent in favour of independence from Georgia," he said.

"Saakashvili would be acclaimed as the national hero of South Ossetia if he officially recognises its independence. This would be a great boost to his stock as a liberally minded ruler. Ossetians would welcome him to Tskhinval and strew his path with roses."

But analysts believe that Georgia's real plans for the region differ markedly from those unveiled in Strasbourg.

Conflict management consultant Dina Alborova said, "Saakashvili hopes to convince the international community that South Ossetia is ruled by criminals, that people get kidnapped here, and Georgians are targeted. According to [him], this calls for the deployment of Georgian troops.

"Villages mostly populated by Georgians are frequently visited by emissaries from Tbilisi, who provoke and incite unrest, urging the locals to rally and close roads."

South Ossetian officials confirm that many kidnappings do take place, but claim that the perpetrators are unknown.

Meanwhile, the continued uncertainty over the final status of the area is having an effect on South Ossetia's citizens.

“Our government has been excessively passive and weak,” said Zaur Gagloev, a languages student at the state university in Tskhinval.

“The roads are still blocked by the Georgians. Why can’t we make them go away? People are tired of this uncertainty - it’s time to make tough decisions that would really help relieve the tension.”

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South Ossetia
Russia
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