

South Ossetia Tensions Still High

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Another armed clash is averted, but the peace process in South Ossetia has been badly damaged.

The residents of Tskhinvali say that on the night of July 11-12 “a truce began” in this town at the centre of the suddenly resurgent Georgian-Ossetian conflict. For the first night in two weeks, they did not hear a single shot. The next day top officials left for Tbilisi and Moscow to try to resume a negotiating process that is now in severe trouble.

Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, meanwhile, headed for London on July 12, telling journalists, “International pressure and coordination with Kremlin have allowed us to avoid Georgia being sucked into a new war.”

The day before, South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity told a meeting in Tskhinval, “I am glad that in South Ossetia both Ossetians and Georgians are joining to oppose the military preparations of Georgia,” referring to ethnic Georgians on his territory.

On July 14, the Joint Control Commission, the multi-lateral body that seeks to regulate the conflict, held a top-level meeting in Moscow to try to settle differences between its four members, South and North Ossetia, Georgia and Russia.

All sides reportedly agreed that any armed men, whose presence had not been agreed with the control commission, should be removed from the conflict zone. “We flew to Moscow so that peace could be absolutely and unconditionally guaranteed in this region. The key is in the hands of Moscow,” said Georgia’s minister for conflict resolution Giorgi Khaindrava.

South Ossetia, which last saw open conflict 12 years ago, has witnessed nothing comparable in a decade. In the last week, thousands of Georgian and Ossetian police have moved through the conflict zone and there was frequent shooting.

Many had been expecting tension in South Ossetia after new Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili successfully unseated pro-Moscow leader of Ajaria Aslan Abashize in May.

The new crisis began in mid-June when the Georgian authorities launched an “anti-smuggling operation” against the unrecognised republic. (See *South Ossetians Fear War*, CRS No. 238, June 16 2004) The large wholesale market at Ergneti, which was used by both Georgians and Ossetians and which was a major destination point for tax- and customs-free goods from Russia, was shut down.

The Georgians said they planned to set up a customs post on the South Ossetian section of the Georgian-Russian border. The South Ossetians retaliated by shutting down traffic for several days on the so-called “road of life”, the main highway connecting Russia and the South Caucasus.

The dispute worsened on July 2 when the Georgian police impounded several vehicles being used by Russian peacekeepers in the conflict zone, claiming they were delivering arms in contravention of agreements. Moscow said they were there legally and accused Tbilisi of stealing its property. The vehicles have not yet been returned.

The next day the South Ossetian police force seized and detained several dozen Georgian interior ministry troops – the Ossetian side says 38, the Georgian 50 – and took them to prison in Tskhinval. They were accused of illegally entering South Ossetia. Pictures of the men on their knees in captivity were shown on television. All but three were later released.

A week of turmoil followed with daily shooting incidents taking place. On July 9, skirmishes were fought on the road connecting the Georgian town of Gori and Georgian-populated villages in the Bolshoe Liakhvi gorge. Several people were wounded.

Arguments then broke out inside the Joint Control Commission.

The Georgians accused Svyatoslav Nabzdorov, commander of Russian peacekeeping forces, of taking an anti-Georgian position. “The Russian peacekeepers are fully on the side of the separatists and there’s no doubt about that,” said President Saakashvili. “The time has come to review the mandate of the peacekeeping operation in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.”

Georgians were also riled by the lower house of the Russian parliament, the State Duma, passing a resolution expressing support for “the people of South Ossetia”, most of whom have taken up the right to receive Russian passports.

In its turn, the South Ossetian leadership accused the OSCE, which is mediating in the dispute, of siding with the Georgians.

On July 12, Znaur Gassiev, speaker of parliament of South Ossetia told IWPR, “The deputies are almost on a war footing. Parliament is considering approving a decree by the president of South Ossetia to introduce a state of emergency in the republic. But of course it’s better not to bring in something like that, we want to calm down the situation, not to exacerbate it.”

Vladimir Dzutsev, commander of one of the South Ossetian units that fought the Georgians in the early Nineties, told IWPR, “For the time being those of us who fought at that time are not being given weapons but if the situation gets worse, I think we will get them.”

The unrecognised republic’s deputy foreign minister Alan Pliev said that they were receiving support from the republics of the North Caucasus and from Abkhazia and Transdniestria. Both the latter are also unrecognised republics that have broken away from Georgia and Moldova respectively.

The crisis facing South Ossetians has alarmed their ethnic kin across the border in the Russian autonomous republic of North Ossetia. The latter’s nationalities minister Sergey Tabolov told IWPR that the South Ossetians would “not remain without our help” however the crisis developed.

Just as many were fearing a new outbreak of violence though, both sides returned to the negotiating table and agreed to meet in Moscow.

South Ossetia, nevertheless, remains in a state of high alert.

Pyotr Gassiev, adviser to the president of South Ossetia, said, “The conflict in South Ossetia did not begin here, it began in Ajaria. Georgia decided to repeat the same scenario here. They thought they would move through the conflicts from the least to the most complex, first Ajaria, then South Ossetia and then

Abkhazia.

“All the details are exactly the same, suddenly the authorities in Georgia decided to worry about the state of agricultural, non-governmental organisations, the ordinary people of South Ossetia. Previously NGOs in the republic had difficulties getting any grants from international organisations in Tbilisi but now they’ve begun to get a massive number of offers to finance any project they want. No one has any doubts – they want to form a fifth column in the republic.”

With fundamental differences remaining few are optimistic that the conflict is near resolution.

“These two or three weeks have actually fundamentally changed the political canvas (of the South Ossetian dispute),” said Georgian political analyst Giorgy Robakadze.

“Over 12 years of a sluggish peace process the positions of the two sides have been unclear in many instances. Now their stances are as clear as they could be. Concrete declarations have been made, backed up by concrete steps.”

He said both sides were now regrouping and studying the other, but that soon “we can expect a new phase of the conflict. And possibly quite soon”.

In London, Saakashvili said that “right now the job has been done” and he was satisfied with the anti-smuggling operation. However, he has also declared that it is a priority for him to see the breakaway territories return to Georgian control within his first term as president, or even sooner “but without spilling blood”.

South Ossetia, though, appears determined to resist any such move.

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