

South Ossetia: Tentative Steps to Peace

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Governments of South Ossetia and Georgia try to make a compromise agreement work, but the situation on the ground remains tense.

In a tentative move towards resolving the recent crisis over South Ossetia, both sides in the dispute this week attended a ceremony intended as a public show of demilitarisation.

On November 16, tractors and earth-moving equipment, accompanied by a crowd of local people, and Georgian and Ossetian journalists, moved into Tamarasheni, one of a group of ethnic Georgian villages near the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval

South Ossetian minister for special issues Boris Chochiev and Georgia's minister for conflict settlement Georgy Khaindrava arrived soon afterwards. By the evening, the bulldozers had filled in the trenches that were dug around the Tamarasheni's school over the summer.

"This action can be regarded as a first step by the Georgian side towards demilitarisation," said Leonid Tibilov, South Ossetia's secretary to the Joint Control Commission, which is responsible for negotiations over the disputed territory.

In talks held on November 5 in the Russian Black Sea city of Sochi, Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania and Eduard Kokoity, president of the unrecognised republic of South Ossetia, agreed that only forces remaining in the conflict zone would be peacekeepers and a limited contingent of policemen.

The deteriorating situation in South Ossetia in recent months is due in large part to the presence of hundreds of armed men on both sides. Each side has said the other maintained unauthorised militia forces, and each has accused the other of breaking the 1992 agreement under which peacekeeping troops are the only armed men permitted in the conflict zone.

In Sochi, the two leaders agreed that the demilitarisation process would be completed by November 20. Residents of Tskhinval told IWPR that South Ossetian militiamen have begun handing in weapons, but the defence ministry there could not confirm this.

Both sides accept that it will be very hard to implement the deal. "So far there has been no real demilitarisation, and we can hardly expect it to happen so quickly," Tibilov told IWPR.

Tibilov said that proper demilitarisation should get under way after the Joint Control Commission convenes in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, at the end of this week to hear reports about the location of military forces on both sides – what Tibilov called a "map" showing the distribution of armed men. A schedule for demilitarisation will then be agreed.

For weeks, the main highway connecting South Ossetia with Russia to the north has been empty, as South Ossetians, fearing violence, opted to travel to the border on a side road through the mountains.

Just outside Tskhinval, the highway runs through four Georgian villages – Tamarasheni, Achabeti, Kurta and Kekhvi – where it is still partially blocked by concrete blocks and sandbags so that cars can only pass

slowly.

The roadblocks have been here since violence flared up in the summer. In early November, residents of the four villages closed the highway completely for several days, saying a fellow-villager had been kidnapped by Ossetians. By way of reprisal, around 20 Ossetians were reportedly taken hostage and three of them were badly beaten.

Local residents say the hostage situation has now been resolved.

Cars reappeared on the road recently, though they still travel through the Georgian villages only in daylight.

Tensions remain high. On November 9, four days after the Sochi agreement, the Georgian authorities reported an explosion in the Georgian village of Kemerti, which injured two children. The cause of the blast has not been established.

Following the Sochi meeting, Kokoity said the two parties had “agreed not to make unrealistic demands and not to discuss, for example, the issue of the status of South Ossetia or restoration of the rights of refugees... The main thing is that fighting ends and does not resume.”

Kokoity said that “Zhvania admitted that the events of this summer had set back the issue of a peaceful resolution of the conflict”.

Later, however, Zhvania told Rustavi-2 television that, “Tbilisi cannot postpone a decision on the issue of status of South Ossetia for 10 or 14 years, and would like to return to this issue in the near future”.

In the last five months, the region has experienced its worst violence since 1992, when South Ossetia de facto seceded from Georgia, following bloody fighting.

South Ossetia went on to develop strong ties with Russia, while its borders with Georgia remained open. Trilateral Russian, South Ossetian and Georgian forces kept the peace.

This year, the new Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, who has declared that he wants to see Georgia’s territorial integrity restored, changed things by forcibly closing down South Ossetia’s main wholesale market as part of what he called a campaign to crack down on smuggling and moving police units into the area.

There were low-level skirmishes between armed groups in August, and several people were killed.

Ordinary people continue to live in fear. This is especially true of many of the families of mixed ethnicity who live in the region.

“There’s nothing good to be said,” said Lena Papilishvili, an ethnic Georgian. “A solution to the conflict has been put off now for many years. Our family is of mixed nationality and it affects us more than other people. I think the leadership in Georgia is stubbornly pursuing a line without reckoning with anyone’s interests or rights.”

Giuli Petoyeva, an Armenian housewife said, “This conflict is especially painful for me because in Tbilisi they have begun to call us, the local Armenians, traitors. And that’s only because we continue to live in South Ossetia.”

Irina Loloyeva, an Ossetian student who lives in the village of Dmenis, said, “When I come home from my institute in Tskhinval, I have to pass through three Georgian villages and I’m always afraid that something will happen to me. There have been incidents where documents were checked, and men were taken off the bus and beaten. Our people either don’t leave the village at all, or go to Tskhinval on the side road.”

Irina said in the recent violence, several houses had been destroyed in her village and a number of people wounded – but Georgians continue to live there.

Many people in South Ossetia say recent events have further alienated them from the idea of being ruled by Tbilisi, and instead drawn them closer to Russia.

Two young men from Tskhinval who asked not to be named said they had both joined the South Ossetian “people’s volunteers” over the summer.

“The situation today is still tense,” said one of them. “The solution completely depends on Russia and how it acts. Then we can ask them for help, put up frontiers, ask to be incorporated into Russia and so on. I don’t think negotiations will decide anything.”

Bessarion Vyazrov, a resident of Tskhinval, who works for North Ossetia’s scientific research institute, puts his faith in Russia, which he sees as a future ally of an independent South Ossetia.

“I believe it is a victory and an achievement for us that after so many months we are negotiating again, and we have a representative of the Georgian side at the table,” said Vyazrov. “The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe have already understood that we have to solve the conflict by restoring the economy and then moving to a political settlement.”

“In the future, once it has gained independence, South Ossetia will not fall out of the Russian sphere of influence. The West can’t offer us the same positive things that Russian politicians can.”

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