

Extra Feature Story

Conflict in Georgia Puts Focus on Tensions in the Caucasus

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Tension between Georgia and Russia exploded into violence last week when Georgia sought control over the breakaway South Ossetia province, but Russian tanks moved in to defend the pro-Russian enclave. The fighting has brought renewed attention to lingering tensions between Russia and former Soviet states.

Russian President Dimitri Medvedev announced Tuesday that Russian forces had stopped their march from the breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia, but Georgian officials claimed Russian troops were still launching attacks.

Meanwhile, the diplomatic community, including the United Nations and the European Union, rushed to help broker a cease-fire agreement.

Conflict erupts

The conflict began in early August when the Georgian military attacked rebel forces in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, a pro-Russia breakaway province of Georgia. Russia responded by sending tanks and warplanes to defend the region. As the conflict continued, Russian forces reportedly moved beyond South Ossetia and into undisputed areas of Georgia.

President Bush strongly urged Russia to stop threatening Georgia and its democratically elected government in a statement late Monday. He asked Russia to hammer out a cease-fire agreement.

"Russia's actions this week have raised serious questions about its intent in Georgia and the region," Mr. Bush told reporters. "These actions have substantially damaged Russia's standing in the world, and these actions jeopardize relations with the United States and Europe."

In a television appearance Tuesday with Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, Medvedev said Russian military operations would halt in Georgia, but did not rule out more fighting.

"The goal of the operation has been achieved. The security of our peacekeepers and civilians has been ensured," he said, according to the New York Times. "Whenever hotbeds of resistance and other aggressive plans emerge, make the decision and eliminate them."

Both sides have accused each other of killing civilians during the conflict, CNN reported.

"Right now, I can state that Georgia is in full regime of self-defense against full-blown, unfounded and totally illegitimate aggression from the Russian Federation. Our troops are attacked by thousands of troops coming in from Russia," Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili said.

Complicated past

The Russia-Georgia clashes come after months of simmering tensions between the two neighbors. Georgia, located near the Caucasus Mountains, used to belong to the Soviet Union.

South Ossetia has tried to exert its independence for years. The province broke away from Georgia during a civil war in 1991-92 following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, it has operated in a state of de facto independence.

"The Georgian government really exercises no administrative ability in South Ossetia. They don't deliver services; they don't teach in schools; they don't pick up the garbage; they don't ensure security. None of that is done by Georgia, with the exception of a few Georgian villages in South Ossetia," Columbia University professor Lincoln Mitchell told the NewsHour.

The Ossetians are a distinct ethnic group originally from the Russian plains, according to a BBC profile. Many South Ossetians would like to join their ethnic counterparts in North Ossetia, an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation.

Another breakaway Georgian province, Abkhazia, has also been drawn into the recent clashes. In 1992, efforts of the Abkhaz people to secede from Georgia and strengthen ties with Russia were quashed when the Georgian army sent in troops.

Political tug of war

South Ossetia and Abkhazia are still major points of contention between Russia and Georgia. Saakashvili promised to take control of both regions as part of his presidential campaign, Georgetown University professor Christine Wallander told the NewsHour.

Still, Russia's motivations for getting involved in the conflict are more complicated and have wider consequences for the international community.

"As long as Georgia's territorial integrity is in a sense unsettled, because of these separatist conflicts, it makes it more difficult for Georgia to build relationships with - and not just military relationships, but economic relationships, political relationships with Europe, with the United States, and more broadly with the outside world," Wallander said. "And so Russia's stake in this is showing that it's the major player, that Georgia can't get around Russia. It has to deal with Russia, whether it wants to or not."

Georgia has moved toward joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance formed by the U.S. and Western European nations. Russia sees Georgian NATO membership as an effort to weaken Russia's influence, according to the Associated Press.

The U.S. has supported Georgia as it has moved from being a former Soviet territory to a pro-Western democracy. Georgia also has approximately 2,000 troops aiding the U.S.-led involvement in Iraq – the third largest of any country participating in the coalition.

"What ultimately happens in Georgia and what Russians do there will affect Russia's relations with us, with Europe, with the rest of the international community," U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Zalmay Khalilzad told the NewsHour.

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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