

Georgia and Russia Nearing All-Out War

By ANNE BARNAR

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Correction Appended

This article was reported by Anne Barnard, Andrew E. Kramer, and C. J. Chivers and written by Ms. Barnard.

GORI, Georgia — The conflict between Russia and the former Soviet republic of Georgia moved toward full-scale war on Saturday, as Russia sent warships to land ground troops in the disputed territory of Abkhazia and broadened its bombing campaign across Georgia.

The fighting that had sharply escalated when Georgian forces tried to retake the capital of South Ossetia, a pro-Russian region that won de facto autonomy from Georgia in the early 1990s, appeared to be developing into the worst clashes between Russia and a foreign military since the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Shortly before dawn on Sunday, Georgia's Interior Ministry said that Russian bombers had begun striking military facilities adjacent to the civilian airport at Tbilisi. The explosions could be heard in the city, said Shota Utiashvili, a ministry official.

He said that Russia had built up large forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia — breakaway regions that have support from Moscow — including as many as 300 artillery pieces in South Ossetia alone. Russian forces, he said, were also poised just over the border at Larsi, a checkpoint, where they could open a third line of ground attack.

As Russia moved more forces into the region and continued aerial bombing, it appeared determined to occupy both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, said Russia's ambitions were even more extensive. He declared that Georgia was in a state of war, and said in an interview that Russia was planning to seize ports and an oil pipeline and to overthrow his government.

Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin of Russia left the Olympics in China and arrived Saturday evening in Vladikavkaz, a city in southern Russia just over the border. State-controlled news broadcasts showed Mr. Putin meeting generals, suggesting that he was directly in charge of military operations, eclipsing the authority of President Dmitri A. Medvedev.

Mr. Putin said that dozens of people had been killed in South Ossetia and hundreds wounded, and tens of thousands were reported to be fleeing. Georgia's health minister said that more than 80 people had been killed, including 40 civilians who died in airstrikes in Gori, a city north of Tbilisi. Another Georgian official said at least 800 people, almost all of them civilians, had been injured. Each side's figures were impossible to confirm independently, as was an earlier claim released by South Ossetians and repeated by some Russian officials that 1,500 people had been killed in the territory.

The fighting, and the Kremlin's confidence in the face of Western outcry, had wide international implications, as both Russian and Georgian officials placed it squarely in the context of renewed cold war-style tensions and an East-West struggle for regional influence..

Western influence over Russia appeared minimal. The East and West were stuck in diplomatic impasse, even as reports of heavy civilian casualties indicated that the humanitarian toll was climbing. The United Nations Security Council was meeting Saturday to discuss the crisis, but with no resolution.

Georgian officials said their only way out of the conflict was for the United States to step in, but with American military intervention unlikely, they were hoping for the West to exert diplomatic pressure to stop the Russian attacks.

"Georgia is a sovereign nation, and its territorial integrity must be respected," President Bush said at the Olympics in Beijing. "We have urged an immediate halt to the violence and a stand-down by all troops. We call for the end of the Russian bombings."

Senior European Union officials were adamant on Saturday that both Russia and Georgia were to blame for the recent escalation of the conflict, and that finger-pointing was counterproductive. Cristina Gallach, a spokeswoman for Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign policy chief, said that the Union's immediate objective was to reach a cease-fire, and European envoys were reported to be en route to the region.

Other Western officials monitored the movements with alarm. "The record is crystal clear," said a Western official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "Russia has launched a full-scale

military operation, on air, land and sea. We have entered a totally new realm — politically, legally and diplomatically.”

Russia appeared to be opening a second front in Abkhazia, to the west of South Ossetia, and to be aiming to drive Georgian troops from the Kodori Gorge, a small mountainous area in Abkhazia that Georgia reclaimed by force in 2006. Georgian officials said 12 Russian jets were bombing the area, shortly after a Western official said United Nations peacekeepers had withdrawn from the area at the request of Abkhazia’s de facto government.

Russia also notified Western governments that it was moving ships of its Black Sea fleet to Ochamchire, a port on the Abkhaz coast. Georgian officials said they expected Russian troops to land there.

Mr. Putin made clear that Russia now viewed Georgian claims over the breakaway regions to be invalid, and that Russia had no intention of withdrawing. “There is almost no way we can imagine a return to the status quo,” he said in remarks on Russian state television.

Mr. Saakashvili, the Georgian president, said Russia’s oil riches and desire to assert economic leverage over Europe and the West had emboldened Kremlin country to attack. Georgia is a transit country for oil and natural gas exports from the former Soviet Union that threatens Russia’s near monopoly.

“They need control of energy routes,” Mr. Saakashvili said. “They need sea ports. They need transportation infrastructure. And primarily, they want to get rid of us. ”

In turn, Russian officials said that ties to the United States had emboldened Mr. Saakashvili, who wants to make Georgia part of NATO, into sparking the conflict. But there were signs that Mr. Saakashvili was feeling the limits of how much American help he could expect for his country’s assistance in the war in Iraq.

Pentagon officials said late on Friday that Georgia had requested assistance in airlifting home the approximately 2,000 Georgian troops now in Iraq. The request was under review, and standard procedures would indicate that the United States government would honor the request, officials said.

Alexander Lomaya, secretary of Georgia's National Security Council, said conflict arose because Russia sought to "thwart its neighbors' movement toward Western society and Western values" and framed the stakes in expansive terms that were reminiscent of the cold war.

"If the world is not able to stop Russia here, then Russian tanks and Russian paratroopers can appear in every European capital," he said. Russian officials, however, blamed outside meddling for stoking the conflict, and said their goals were narrow.

President Medvedev said Russia was acting to restore peace and protect its citizens and peacekeeping troops who had come under Georgian attack.

In a news conference, Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov of Russia said Georgian attacks on what he called "Russian citizens" in South Ossetia "amounted to ethnic cleansing." He reserved some of his harshest language for Georgia's allies, referring at one point to "Mr. Saakashvili and his Western friends" — an apparent reference to the United States, which has provided Georgia with extensive military aid since Mr. Saakashvili took office in 2004.

With Russia's Black Sea fleet, warplanes and tanks bearing down on the small, mountainous country, Georgian officials acknowledged they were taken by surprise by the intensity of the Russian response.

But Russia, too, found itself facing resistance. Russia acknowledged that Georgian forces had shot down two Russian warplanes, while Mr. Lomaya said the Georgians had destroyed 10 Russian jets.

A close ally of Mr. Saakashvili's, Gigo Bokarianot, a Parliament member, said Georgia was shifting its tactics to focus on air defenses. In Gori, people cheered as a Russian pilot ejected from an airplane that was shot down. Georgian television later showed a pilot's bloody helmet and said a pilot had been captured.

Russian strategic bombers were seen over Georgia for the first time in the three-day conflict. Georgian tanks attacked the lone road linking South Ossetia to Russia, trying to cut off Russian

supply routes. But Russia continued to flow forces into Georgia, and appeared on track to at least double the number of troops there. Georgian officials said at least 2,500 Russian troops were already in South Ossetia.

Along a military highway entering Georgia from Russia, military transports and armored vehicles were backed up for several miles. They were flying both Russian flags and plain red flags. The mood was buoyant.

“I am going to help our people,” said Zelimkhan Gagiev, 27, an irregular fighter in a maroon four-wheel drive who said he had family trapped in Tskhinvali. “If I can, I’ll fight to the death.”

The columns were headed to the Roki Tunnel, which gives access to South Ossetia.

Civilians came under fire on both sides. Georgian troops shelled the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, with artillery. Russian television footage showed damaged houses and apartment buildings.

Russian warplanes struck at least five Georgian cities. Witnesses said they struck a train station in Tsenakhi, five apartment buildings in Gori, and the Black Sea port of Poti.

Georgian officials said that Russian warplanes had attacked the major Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, operated by British Petroleum, that carries oil to the West from Asia, but that the pipeline had not been struck.

The Russian authorities said their forces had retaken the South Ossetian capital from Georgian control during the morning hours, while Georgian officials said they had withdrawn from the area voluntarily. But heavy fighting resumed there later Saturday, with Georgian tanks and heavy artillery attacking from the south, Russian television reported.

Twelve Russian troops were killed, according to Anatoly Nogovitsyn, a colonel general in the Ministry of Defense. When asked whether Russia was in a state of war with Georgia, General Nogovitsyn said it was not.

Roads were clogged with refugees, as South Ossetians fled north into Russia and Georgians from Gori fled southeast to Tbilisi. Russia said 30,000 people had fled South Ossetia.

Andrew E. Kramer reported from Gori and Tbilisi, Georgia, and Anne Barnard from Moscow. Reporting was contributed by Michael Schwartz from Gori; Ellen Barry from Moscow; Matt Siegel from Vladikavkaz, Russia; Steven Lee Myers from Beijing; and Katrin Bennhold from Paris.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: August 13, 2008

Because of an editing error, an article in some editions on Sunday about the outbreak of armed conflict between Russia and Georgia misspelled the surname of a spokeswoman for Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign policy chief, who said he was urging both sides to agree to a cease-fire. The spokeswoman is Cristina Gallach, not Gallack.