



Recent Events in Georgia

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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(3:06 p.m. EDT)

SECRETARY RICE: Good afternoon. I'll soon take your questions.

Let me just reiterate the President's statement this morning of our strong support for the democratically elected Government of Georgia, for its territorial integrity and its sovereignty, that Russia must now end its military operations. There are concerning reports from around Georgia that Russia has not, in fact, in accordance with the pledge that it took to the French presidency -- to President Sarkozy, that Russia has not ended its military operations. Those operations must stop and must stop now.

You also know that the President has asked Secretary Gates to oversee a humanitarian mission that will be continuous and robust, led by the American military. We expect that Russia will respect the humanitarian nature of that mission, and that ports, sea lanes, air routes will all be open for humanitarian purposes -- another pledge that Russia has undertaken to the French.

And you know as well that I am going to leave this evening, first to meet with the French President and other members of the French Government in France. And then I will fly on to Tbilisi to underscore the strong support of the United States for the Georgian people and for their democratically elected government. With that, I will take your questions.

Yes, Anne.

QUESTION: The -- so far, the Russians have either already violated a ceasefire or appeared to, as both you and the President have said today. If that's the case, why is today's response humanitarian aid and further diplomatic outreach? Isn't the time -- hasn't the time come for you to say or do something that carries a larger threat?

And secondly, on behalf of the State Department Correspondents Association, we strongly urge you to take a full complement of reporters with you on a very important trip. Thank you.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you. Anne, I will leave the matter of travel arrangements to my chief of staff, who is sitting right there. You can assault him after this briefing. (Laughter.) We're doing our best. There are logistical difficulties because of the rapidity with which we've decided to do this, and so we'll do our very best.

As to the first question, if indeed Russia is violating a ceasefire -- and I have to say that the reports are not encouraging about Russia's respect for the ceasefire, for the pledge that it undertook -- that will only serve to deepen the isolation into which Russia is moving. It will only serve to deepen the very strong, growing sense that Russia is not behaving like the kind of international partner that it has said that it wants to be. And it's very clear to me that the consequences of that, which are already quite significant, because -- the way that Russia has brutally pushed this military operation well beyond the bounds of anything that might have related to South Ossetia calls into question Russia's suitability for all kinds of activities that it has said that it wants to be a part of.

And so we'll get to that matter in due course. Right now, the key is to remind Russia that it has an obligation to stop its military activities, remind Russia that it is not to further engage in activities that threaten the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia, that it should drop the language concerning the democratically elected Government of Georgia that has been thrown around by some Russian officials, and that it's time to stop this so that Russia can begin to dig out of the hole that it's gotten itself into.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, why aren't you going to Moscow? What does it serve -- if you're in the region, why wouldn't you go and try to pass the U.S. message along to the Russian leaders?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm going to France because we support very strongly the European presidency, which is France, in its mediation efforts. I think it's best that those mediation efforts now be in the hands of the French. We'll continue to support those.

I was, this morning, on the telephone with Sergey Lavrov, my counterpart from Russia. And we have open communication to the Russian Government and we're communicating, at very many different levels and through very many different channels, our concerns and our insistence that Russia live up to the obligations that it undertook just 24 hours ago.

Yes.

QUESTION: But how can you be an honest broker in the conflict when the Russians see you as too close to the Georgians? I think Lavrov said today that, you know, for the United States, this -- Georgia is their special project.

SECRETARY RICE: Georgia is a democratic government in the Caucasus that has elected its leaders. To call it a project of anyplace, of anybody, perhaps belies more about the way Russia thinks about its neighbors than the way it thinks about U.S. policy.

Yes.

QUESTION: President Saakashvili said today that America is losing the entire region. He went on to say that the U.S. made a major mistake by issuing too soft a statement from Washington early on that really gave Russia the green light to go ahead.

And just secondly, if I may, Senators Obama and McCain have been having conversations with leaders from Georgia and Russia as well. Does that help or hurt?

SECRETARY RICE: I've also been having conversations with Senators Obama and McCain. And I know that they are, at this moment of difficult diplomacy – that they are doing what they can to support the efforts of the Administration.

Secondly, as to President Saakashvili, I was just on the phone with him. He welcomed the President's statement. I think if you look back a couple of days, you'll note that the United States was calling very early for a ceasefire, calling for forces to withdraw to the August 6th lines. We were at the Security Council already at the end of last week, just 24 hours or so after the major military operations began, and making a very strong statement. If you will look at what Zai Khalilzad and even the statements that were made before that, I don't think you can have any doubt but that the United States has, from the very beginning, believed that the South Ossetian situation needed to be resolved and resolved peacefully, as we've been working for months and months and months to do; but that Russia seriously overreached, that Russia engaged in activities that could not possibly be associated simply with the crisis in South Ossetia. Bombing civilian targets – bombing targets outside of the zone of conflict, some of which have civilian uses, the activities in Gori, the activities at Poti, destruction of Georgian infrastructure – these are hardly moves that are related to South Ossetia. So I think you will see that the United States has been saying that. We are also in very, very close contact with our European allies to try to get this mediation arranged last week.

Let me just – on the question of honest broker that you asked, I'm sorry I didn't answer that question. Look, the honest thing to do here is to call it as you see it. And what we see is that what has been a longstanding and somewhat volatile conflict did, in fact, boil over. That could have been handled. But now, Russia has pushed this well beyond the bounds of the conflict in South Ossetia. And that's what the President was reacting to today. That is why people are questioning the nature of the ongoing relationship with Russia. That's why people are talking about consequences for the kind of relationship that Russia has wished to build with the international community.

Yes, Sylvie.

QUESTION: Sergey Lavrov also said that the U.S. must choose between supporting the Georgian Government and a partnership with Russia on international issues, meaning that maybe you shouldn't count anymore on Russia's support on Iran, for an example. (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm not going to put words in Sergey Lavrov's mouth, but let me say this: It's striking to me that anyone would believe that Russia is involved in trying to keep Iran from getting a nuclear – technologies that could lead to a nuclear weapon as a favor to the United States. If indeed Russia is interested in a Middle East that is stable, if indeed Russia is interested in a Middle East in which the kinds of activities that we have promoted together in the Quartet are going to have any chance, then clearly, it's not going to be a Middle East in which there's an Iran with a nuclear weapon. And I think that's why Russia is involved in efforts to stop Iran from violating the Security Council resolutions that have been passed.

Similarly, on North Korea, I don't think Iran – I don't think the Russians want an unstable Korean peninsula. So let's be very clear whose interests are being served by the partnership that Russia and the United States have engaged in on Iran or North Korea. Again, it's not a favor to the United States.

And as to choosing, the United States has made very clear that it is standing by the democratically elected Government of Georgia. This is a small neighbor of Russia. It is a country that has made considerable progress in terms of its economy. It is still trying to secure its democratic institutions, and we've worked with Georgia on that. But if anyone had any doubts about our support for Georgia, you only have to look at the fact that it's a Millennium Challenge country, which is one of the most important designations that the United States can make that we believe in the future of that country.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, I have two questions. First, the Georgian President has said in the afternoon that the U.S. forces will control the airports and the ports in Georgia. Second, do you have any reaction on establishing diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on the later, we have long stood for the normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon on the basis of equality and respect for Lebanese sovereignty. One of the steps that has long been required is the establishment of a proper embassy for Syria in Lebanon, and vice versa. Now that the Syrians will go ahead and demarcate the border between Lebanon and Syria, and respect Syria's [1] sovereignty in other ways, then this will have proved to be a very good first step.

As to the first question, the – I think that the President was very clear about the nature of this mission. It is a humanitarian mission. We expect the air routes, the land routes, the sea routes to be open for humanitarian activities. But I think the Pentagon has already responded, noting that it is not the intention of the United States in some way to take control of facilities, port facilities and the like.

I'll come back. Yes.

QUESTION: The Russians are saying that by facilitating the return of Georgian troops from Iraq, you are already involved in the conflict. How do you respond to that?

SECRETARY RICE: We had an agreement with Georgia at the time of the Georgian deployment of its forces to Iraq that, if the Georgian Government requested their return for purposes that Georgia deemed a priority, that we would – we would do so, we would facilitate that. And so we carried through on our agreement.

The point that I made to my Russian counterpart and that others made is that, if there is a ceasefire, as there should be and as Russia has said it has stopped its military operations, then the return of those forces should be no concern to anyone. So we were simply living up to an agreement.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you. Today is a day of national mourning in Russia for the losses incurred in the regional aggression in South Ossetia by the Georgians. You well know that. Can you acknowledge the losses?

And also, it has been reported that before the war, the U.S. was urging the Georgians not to – not to respond to provocations, not to do anything

rash. So we all know what the Georgians did ultimately, so how did it happen? Did you – by the way, did you delegate responsibility, as has been reported, to junior staffers? Or before the war, did the Georgians listen to you and did their own thing, did not – did not follow your suggestions, or were the real suggestions different from what you said publicly?

SECRETARY RICE: First of all, I am very sorry for any loss of innocent life in any part of the zone of conflict, in Georgia or in any other area surrounding this conflict. That is one reason that it is so important to end the fighting.

The Georgians, some time ago, agreed to a ceasefire and to the withdrawal of their troops back to the August 6th lines. Russia needs to do the same, and it needs to honor the agreement that it made with the French President.

As to the U.S. diplomacy concerning this conflict, you must understand that this has been a volatile area for some time. It has been volatile now for more than a decade. And what we have tried to do is to propose and to push any number of peace plans. There was a Georgian peace plan for South Ossetia that the United States tried to press. I myself was there in Georgia to try to put together elements of a peace plan with Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German Foreign Minister, to try to solve that conflict. Because I think we all recognize that there was volatility in this region, there was a lot of back-and-forth in this region, and that it was a dangerous situation.

Now, as I said, this is something that, had it been about South Ossetia, could have been resolved within certain limits. Russian peacekeepers were in the area; that is true. And Russia initially said it needed to act to protect its peacekeepers and its people. But what Russia has done is well beyond anything that anyone could say is for the protection of those people and for those peacekeepers. Indeed, by prolonging the conflict, the innocents in the area are in greater danger. And so, again, what would be very useful and is absolutely necessary at this point, and indeed the United States insists that Russia live up to the obligations that it took just 24 hours ago to end its military operations.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, many people in Washington would say what you did after 9/11 was very disproportionate to the threat and to the actual loss that you incurred. So the Russians are trying to ensure the security of their forces and their citizens and their peacekeepers. And they – they are moving, they are creating a buffer zone. What's wrong with that? Why can't you do this in --

SECRETARY RICE: I am not going to sit here and judge each Russian military operation. I am going to say that when you start bombing ports and threatening to bomb airfields and bombing a city like Gori and bringing troops in a flanking maneuver on the western flank of Georgia and tying up the main roads between Georgia – between Tbilisi and Gori, that's well beyond anything that is needed to protect Russian peacekeepers. And that is why Russia is starting to face international condemnation for what it is doing.

This is not 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, where Russia can threaten its neighbors, occupy a capital, overthrow a government, and get away with it. Things have changed. And so, what Russia, I think, is seeing is that to the degree that this is about South Ossetia, about even Abkhazia, let's accept that it is time to move the forces back. Let's accept that it's -- first to end the fighting, move the forces back to August 6th, and then have an international mediation to try to resolve these conflicts within the context of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia.

I fully recognize that the people of South Ossetia and the people of Abkhazia have concerns, even grievances, and they can be addressed within international mediation. And the United States has stood very strongly for the proper treatment of minorities.

Yes, Helene?

QUESTION: You just said that this is not 1968, where Russia can do this and get away with it, and you've talked of consequences, but we have yet to really see any. When – at what point – how far – how much further can Russia continue to go before we actually see the United States do something?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let me just expand on the comment for a moment, Helene. Look, the Russia today, I have said many, many times, is not the Soviet Union, and that means many things. But one of the things that it means is that Russia has sought integration, as the President said early in -- earlier into diplomatic, political, economic, security institutions of the international system. And it has sought it because it is in Russia's interest, if it is to modernize and become a fully functioning state.

And so I have to say, and I think you'll -- if you read the President's statement, it's pretty clear that that's at risk. And so I'm not to go any further at this point in time. I think we need to concentrate on getting this -- stopping the Russian military operations. We need to concentrate on getting those forces back to the August 6th lines. We will concentrate on sending our strong support for the French mediation and for the Georgian democratically elected government for dealing with the humanitarian concerns of the Georgians to starting to look at what they will need for reconstruction. But I don't think that there is any doubt that Russia has already, in its actions, called into question some of its desire to be integrated into these institutions. I would hope that they won't continue to call that into question. And that, as I said, they're going to stop this and stop digging this hole.

Yes.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, you say that -- again, that this is not 1968, but you've been -- for several months, have been noticing Russia's actions towards Georgia. Officials in the building have been very concerned not just about South Ossetia, but also about intentions towards -- towards Georgia. And in -- and since these attacks, officials have said that it seems to be premeditated, pre-planned, and that the swiftness with which Russian forces moved into Georgia show that it wasn't necessarily only about South Ossetia, but something larger.

How did the U.S. miss the signals that this was some kind of large-scale invasion of Georgia? And are you concerned that the Russians feel that it is 1968 and they're trying to invade other -- are you concerned that they might invade other countries, such as Ukraine or other areas, where they have so-called citizens that they're concerned --

SECRETARY RICE: I really do believe that the Russians understand that they're -- that pushing the envelope here would have significant consequences for Russia's standing in the international system, which I think it already has had consequences for that, and for any future hopes that Russia might have to be fully integrated into the international system.

But as to the -- what led up to this, we have been concerned for some time -- I think you will remember, Elise, that we spoke about the presidential decree of President Putin in April of -- April 16th. We spoke about the railway troops that had been deployed. We spoke about the so-called reinforcement of peacekeepers. And we have been constantly speaking with the Russians about all of those elements.

Now, this is a volatile region, and the flashpoint that took place here could have been kept under control but for the Russian decision to push well beyond the bounds of what dealt with South Ossetia and to use these disproportionate tactics and disproportionate force.

I don't think anybody missed that the Russians were putting pressure -- or trying to put pressure on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. I had a number of -- a number of discussions with my Russian counterpart about precisely that. But again, that Russia can use its overwhelming regional military power in this way against a small neighbor is obvious. That Russia can do that and bear no consequences for it or that Russia can push far enough to try and destroy the Georgian state, I think that is what is different. Russia cannot succeed in those.

QUESTION: But what if they don't care about these consequences? I mean, the U.S. -- Russia has obvious --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we'll see. The --

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, Russia has obviously, despite repeated warnings from the U.S. not to go this far, has obviously made the choice to escalate this conflict despite the threats of consequences from the United States and the Europeans. So what if they don't care about these consequences?

SECRETARY RICE: I've heard the Russian President say that he is -- his military operations are over. I am saying that it is time for the Russian President to be true to his word.

QUESTION: Can I ask a question?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

SECRETARY RICE: I'll take -- okay, both, yeah. Go ahead.

QUESTION: On the Balkans, Madame Secretary, anything to say on the name issue between Athens and Skopje? And on the irredentist issue raised the other day by the Skopjian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to the Greek Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis, in a crucial period during which Skopje would like to become a NATO member?

SECRETARY RICE: Let's -- I'll have to reset here for a moment about Macedonia. All right. Look, we -- you know our position, which is that the Macedonians should be admitted into NATO. That was the position in Bucharest. The hope is that the name issue can be resolved very quickly now. I've spoken both to my Greek colleagues, the Macedonians were here. This is something that should not get in the way of the admission of Macedonia to NATO, and that's what we're working on.

And I just would note, to make a link between the two discussions, one of the reasons for NATO Membership Action Plan and, ultimately, for NATO membership, is that it allows states to overcome longstanding difficulties, differences and conflicts under the umbrella of a collective security organization, defense organization of democracies. I have noted before that had anyone said that you would be able to resolve, for instance, differences between Hungary and Romania, between Bulgaria and Turkey in peaceful ways -- no one would have believed it when the Soviet empire broke up. But in fact, under the umbrella of NATO, that has been taking place.

And so if you now look across Central and Eastern Europe, one thing that is also very different from just a few decades ago is that the countries that were liberated after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, countries like the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, the Baltic states and the aspirants -- Albania, Croatia, Macedonia and others are now -- have made the transition and are making the transition into transatlantic institutions. That allows them both to resolve their differences and to have a reason, a spur, for internal reform and further democratization, the appropriate relationship between civilian and military leaders and so forth and so on. That is why Membership Action Plan has been so valuable, and it's why the United States continues to stand for Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine.

Charlie, you have the last question.

QUESTION: Yes. You've mentioned several times that Russia could have done what it said it wanted to do and stopped and that they've overreached. As, among other things, an analyst of Russians and, before that, the Soviets, what do you think this is about? In that case, since they've still continued, what do you think it's about? And how long do you think it will take for them to reach what they're trying to reach?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, they told the French President that their military operations had ended. And I assume that they said that knowing what it is their military forces are doing, so I expect that they're going to live up to that pledge.

Now, I'm not going to try to speculate on Russian motives, but let me just say the following. To the degree that there was intended to be some message beyond the frozen conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the message is not that Russia can use its military power in a brutal way against a small neighboring state. The message is that Russia has perhaps not accepted that it is time to move on from the Cold War and it is time to move to a new era in which relations between states are on the basis of equality and sovereignty and economic integration.

Now, Russia has said that that is the future that it wishes, that that is the future it wishes with the EU, that is the future it wishes with the United States and with any number of international organizations. So the message, unfortunately, that is being sent is that it is important to think again about whether, in fact, Russia will be committed to the kind of behavior that would make its involvement in those institutions appropriate.

Thank you very much.

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