



EU/UN/OSCE-Sponsored Talks on Georgia

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Press Briefing at U.S. Mission Geneva
Geneva, Switzerland
October 15, 2008

Assistant Secretary Fried: Thank you all for coming this evening. I gather some or all of you may have listened to Ambassador Pierre Morel representing the EU who chaired the talks. You may have gone to the Russian Mission for Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin brief. I certainly hope so. So you will have the pleasure of comparing and contrasting the perspectives, but I think there will be a lot of points of agreement.

We welcome the start of international talks on security and stability arrangements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia co-hosted by the EU, UN and OSCE, which stems from the August 12th ceasefire arrangement that President Sarkozy of France negotiated with an assist by Secretary Rice. These talks underscore the broad international support with, of course, one exception, for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia.

It is also important to note at the outset that Russia has withdrawn from areas adjacent to Abkhazia and South Ossetia which was in keeping with its obligations under the September 8th agreement, part one of that agreement between Presidents Medvedev and Sarkozy. So this is a good step to note.

It remains true, however, that Russia is not yet in full compliance with all of the ceasefire of August 12th. As you remember, that ceasefire, particularly point five, sentence one, calls for all Russian forces to be pulled back to their lines prior to the outbreak of hostilities on August 7th/8th. The only Russian forces that are supposed to remain in South Ossetia and Abkhazia are the peacekeeping forces in the numbers previously set. So this requirement has not yet been met but we hope it will be. Still, there has been some forward movement which we should recognize.

The situation on the ground is not necessarily stable and it won't be stable all by itself. There are incidents that have been reported, various shootings, bombings. Even after the ceasefire on August 12th was agreed, Russian troops went into the Georgian town of Akhgori, which is in the administrative boundaries of South Ossetia, but had always been governed in fact by Tbilisi. This is a problem, potential flashpoint.

So there is a need in fact for the Geneva process and for the Geneva process to deal with practical steps on the ground, including mechanisms to prevent and resolve conflict, incidents as they arise. And it was in this constructive spirit that the United States was attending these talks. We were here not to make speeches, accusations, but to work for progress on the ground. This positive spirit I think gave us the hope that this would be a good session. Unfortunately, it ran into some problems, as you may have heard.

Russia did not attend the opening plenary. Georgia did not attend a subsequent informal informational session. Still, both Russia and Georgia, I think it fair to say, exhibited a practical spirit and a constructive spirit. It was clear that both the Russians and the Georgians were looking for ways to move forward and resolve problems rather than create them. That was my sense, meeting with both delegations and present at all the sessions.

Unfortunately, and I think you've already heard this, the de facto authorities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia who were present at the meeting. I'm sorry to say, did not exhibit such a constructive spirit. They chose, instead, to walk out of the informational session. They demanded, after they walked out, they demanded as a pre-condition for further talks basically treatment which would have meant that they were full national delegations which no one was prepared to do. Except for Russia, only one country has recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia – at one time it looked like Somalia was a second country, but now it looks like not, so we're down to one. This was unfortunate, so the session ended early because of this South Ossetian and Abkhaz walkout. But all parties agreed, including the South Ossetians and the Abkhaz – the Georgians, the Russians, we, the EU, OSCE and UN agreed to try to resume the talks on November 18th after consultations with the parties, and we hope that these talks can be put on track because there is a need, as I said earlier, for practical steps on the ground. That's the purpose of the talks.

I want to end by expressing deep appreciation for Ambassador Pierre Morel who arranged these talks, tried without fail, showing great creativity and determination, to find arrangements suitable to all sides to let this go forward, and he came up with every possible answer, did so creatively, constructively, and will devote himself to setting up the talks for the November 18th round. He will have the support of the United States. So we hope the process now launched moves into a constructive and practical phase.

That's my opening statement. I'm happy to take questions. I would appreciate it if you would identify yourselves and your organization when I call on you.

Question: You called that a Geneva process. So what kind of work should be done before the next talks which will take place on November 18th?

Assistant Secretary Fried: There will have to be arrangements made so that you don't have procedural issues blocking actual progress. Hopefully some arrangements can be made before November 18th which will allow this to go forward in a smooth fashion. A lot will depend, frankly, on the constructive attitude of the parties. No side can make absolute demands and pre-conditions. The Georgian government was firm in defending its principle of territorial integrity but actually constructive and creative trying to find ways within that principle to move forward. Listening to Minister Karasin it was clear that he was trying to find practical ways forward. His remarks were not polemical, they were practical and I appreciated that. I hope my remarks and believe my remarks were in the same spirit.

The South Ossetians and the Abkhaz de facto authorities cannot in fact demand to be treated as national delegations as a pre-condition for talks because the purpose, really, of the Geneva process is not to instantly emulate itself on grand principles for which there will not be an easy solution, but to find practical ways forward to stabilize the situation and help – this is especially important – for instance help IDP returns. There are thousands of people who need to be able to go back to their homes in a secure and safe environment, and we need to move very quickly to help them. A lot have gone back to areas that the Russians have recently evacuated; areas in the rest of Georgia. But there are IDPs that need to be able to return to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Winter is coming on so there is an urgency to this. We need the Geneva process to help these returns as well as take care of other practical steps.

Question: Do you envisage any talks happening before the November 18th meeting in Geneva? Especially any face-to-face talks between the Georgians and the Russians? Which I understand never took place today.

Assistant Secretary Fried: The Russians and Georgians were not in a formal meeting at the same time. I believe they may have passed each other, but I believe you are accurate, that they weren't actually in a formal or informal meeting. They weren't in the same room at the same time except in passing outside the meeting hall.

I don't know whether there will be direct Russian/Georgian talks. There certainly will be lots of talks. That is Pierre Morel will likely go out to the region, and I don't want to speak for him but I suspect he will. He will talk to me, he will talk to the Russians, we'll all be talking to each other. Minister Karasin and I have a very professional, good relationship. So a lot of us will be talking, a lot of people will be talking to a lot of people about practical problems. We won't be sitting with our hands folded until November 18th.

Question: You said that the South Ossetians and Abkhaz de facto authorities had made a demand to be treated as national delegations at the talks.

Assistant Secretary Fried: In effect.

Question, cont.: As a pre-condition for talks. Was that demand supported then by the Russian delegation? Or were these two, how would you describe the Russian support or lack of support for this?

Assistant Secretary Fried: The South Ossetians and Abkhaz walked out of the talks. Later, Ambassador Morel tried to work with them on arrangements which would allow the next phase of the discussions to go forward, which would have been working group discussions on one working group on security issues and another working group on IDP returns and humanitarian issues. In other words, groups for exactly the same kind of practical agenda I'd mentioned earlier.

The South Ossetians and Abkhaz had a lot of demands. I don't want to get into the details, but they amounted to a demand which would give them the status of recognized national delegations, in essence.

My sense was that the Russians would have preferred practical steps forward, and I think the Russians were prepared to do some work at the afternoon sessions at the working groups.

Of course Russia's position has been very supportive of the South Ossetians and the Abkhaz.

The U.S. government has said all along that Russian recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was a mistake. The European Union has condemned this move. The Foreign Ministers of the G7 also condemned this move. I think the unfortunate practical consequences of this recognition were manifest today where you had the Russians, I think it's fair to say, in a constructive mood in their national capacity seeking to resolve problems, certainly not making fiery speeches but being practically minded and yet being stymied, as we all were, by the excessive and really unrealizable demands of the South Ossetians and Abkhaz. I don't want to suggest that the Russians didn't support them but I did notice a constructive spirit in the Russian delegation which was similar to constructive spirits others were bringing to the table and I think it is unfortunate to look for excuses to walk out.

To be fair, this is a difficult process. This was the first meeting. I don't want to suggest that we were surprised by the difficulties, in fact we expected difficulties. So hopefully the next time around we will make more progress and we intend to keep trying.

Question: Just a little question. Was the U.S. participation in the talks on an observer level, a facilitator level? How --

Assistant Secretary Fried: No, we were full participants. I think the structure was 3+3. That is three international organizations that were the co-chairs, the EU with Pierre Morel as really the head and chief convener, the UN and the OSCE. Then there were three national delegations – the Russians, the Georgians and the United States. That was the 3+3 formula. At the informal sessions, there were various Abkhaz and South Ossetians represented and in fact they should be. There should be representatives both of the break-away regimes, but also South Ossetians and Abkhaz who regard South Ossetia and Abkhazia as part of Georgia and want to work with Georgia on the basis of autonomy for these regions. So you had both representatives, both groups of Abkhaz and South Ossetians here. And frankly, if you want to solve problems, you want to have the different sides there and find a formula to help bring the sides together to solve practical problems. It didn't prove possible this time, hopefully it will prove possible next time.

Question: We have the clear impression from all this, though, that there was no discussion on points of substance on the issues that brought you here. Is that correct? And did you have any bilateral meetings with the Russians that might have identified avenues of progress in the future?

Assistant Secretary Fried: Sadly, you are correct, that we never got past the procedural and organizational issues because the South Ossetians and Abkhaz walked out, and we couldn't continue. However, I did have a side conversation with my Russian counterpart, and as usual, and we've worked together before, we emphasized practical steps. It's clear that there are, at least between our delegations, some areas of common interest where we would like to see this process go. Whether it's IDP returns or it's various security arrangements. The Russians, for their part, certainly seem interested in building on the non-use-of-force pledge which was part of the August 12th ceasefire, and a separate pledge by President Saakashvili in a letter.

So judging by that conversation I believe there are practical areas where we could work, and certainly talking to the Georgians, they seemed to be practically minded. They have done a lot of thinking about this, about practical issues. They've talked about the rule of law. Eventually arrangements for elections, return of IDPs in a safe and secure environment, possible models for people-to-people contact, economic rehabilitation. The Georgians have lots of practical ideas which they have addressed without demanding that all of the issues be resolved. They have their position, the Russians have their position about territorial integrity. But the Georgians seem to be practically minded, also concerned understandably, about the arrangements.

Question: Mr. Secretary, your Russian counterpart in his press conference a few moments earlier said that you were basically supportive of the idea of a document on the ground to have the no-use-of-force in the region. Secondly, he also mentioned about banning offensive weapons in the area. Thirdly, that there must be a document on the record and transparent on the future terms of reference for the three players in the region – the UN, the OSCE and the EU. Thank you.

Assistant Secretary Fried: It is certainly the case that a non-use-of-force pledge is now part of the set of agreements we're working from. It is part of President Sarkozy's negotiated August 12th ceasefire which we supported. It was also included in a letter from President Saakashvili. I believe to either the Russians or the European Union. I'm sorry, I can't remember the addressee of the letter but I do remember the letter. It is certainly something we want to build on. I expressed the support of my government for steps to build on the body of work already agreed and for practical steps forward.

The Russians raised a ban on offensive arms. I'm not sure quite what that means, but in fact given the overwhelming preponderance of Russian force, the fact that the Russians have announced that they're going to maintain troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in excess of what's allowed under the ceasefire, I'm not sure I understand the basis for that kind of a demand. That doesn't seem to me to be in the first line of practicality, given the Russian domination and military preponderance of force.

But there are areas in which we could work with the Russians and the different parties to these talks. It is our interest to build on common ground, not seek unerringly for areas on which we have divisions and differences.

Question: How sure are you that the November 18th session will happen? The Russian representative was hinting that he was hoping that procedural questions would be resolved before then. Is there a condition on the next meeting actually happening?

And I wanted to ask you also, is the Geneva process, the framework that you accept for discussing this point that was raised by the Russians about banning sales of offensive weaponry to Georgia?

Assistant Secretary Fried: As I already commented on the Russian notion of banning offensive weaponry, I don't know what offensive weaponry is. I do know that the Russians have overwhelming military force. They demonstrated that force when they invaded their neighbor. If they wish to lower tensions in the area they can adhere to all of the terms of the ceasefire and pull out of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as they're supposed to do. They can help us, and in the Geneva process indeed we can work on confidence building measures. There are certain flash points, I mentioned Akhalgori. There may be ways to ease tensions, to set up mechanisms for prevention of incidents or management of incidents as they arise. So there is a lot of practical work to do.

With respect to the November 18th meeting, I think Pierre Morel has some work to do. He's a very capable, creative person. He showed energy, focus, and he almost got us here. Nobody could have done a better job than Ambassador Morel. I have confidence that he will do everything possible.

That said, the talks won't happen unless the parties are willing to have them happen. We'll also look to the Russians because they have, let us say, a strong influence over their friends in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Question: You just mentioned the influence that the Russians have over the de facto administrations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but the Russians weren't able to convince those parties to abide by the previously agreed format of the talks today, as far as I understand.

Do you think that those administrations are perhaps beyond the control of the Russians at the moment?

Assistant Secretary Fried: Given the overwhelming dependence of say South Ossetia on Russia, which is overwhelming to the point of exclusive, and similarly true in Abkhazia, I think the Russians have a lot of leverage and a lot of influence and I wish my colleague, Minister Karasin, all the best in encouraging the South Ossetians and Abkhaz de facto authorities to help this process work and behave in a way that is responsible.

Certainly the Georgians for their part were clearly working hard to try to have things go forward. They had a lot of concerns, but in the end they were clearly doing and trying to do the right thing and let things go forward.

Again, this is the beginning of a process. It is difficult. There are real differences here. There's been a war fought recently. There are refugees. To say that there are tensions and hard feelings is an understatement, so it's natural that there would be such tensions.

We want to keep this process going, but we will also – speaking for my own government – we are also working to support Georgia's economic recovery and stability. We're working with Georgia to support its, let us say, new and still vulnerable democratic institutions. So we are intent on developing our relations with Georgia and helping this country continue its performance path and I should add that in a couple of days I will be in Georgia following up on these discussions and helping pave the way for a productive process, hopefully to begin on the 18th of November.

A couple more questions.

Question: It's been a little bit difficult for us to patch together the actual sequence of events today. I just wanted to ask you, okay, you've said the Russians did not attend the plenary; the Georgians did not attend the subsequent informal session --

Assistant Secretary Fried: Correct.

Question, cont.: -- which by the way has been described to us by Karasin as a second plenary.

Assistant Secretary Fried: Well, he may have that view but he's the only one who does.

Question: Okay. At what point did the South Ossetians and Abkhaz leave the room?

Assistant Secretary Fried: You have the chronology right. The plenary started at 10:00 o'clock. It went, as I recall, 55 minutes. There was a five minute break. No, it went 50 minutes, there was a ten minute break. Then there was an informal informational session where people were identified as individuals rather than country name plates and it was in this formula that the South Ossetians, the Abkhaz were invited. That was, the Russians did not go to the plenary. The Georgians did not go to the information meeting because of disagreements about some of those arrangements. It was at that meeting and about two-thirds of the way through that the South Ossetians and Abkhaz got up and walked out. The Russians did not.

Following the walk-out there was a discussion of the best way to move forward with the working groups. We all agreed to try. But as you know, that didn't quite work out.

Question: [Inaudible] walked out?

Assistant Secretary Fried: It had to do with relatively, what they did not consider to be minor but everyone else considered to be relatively minor points. I don't know whether they had always planned to walk out, but it was sort of sudden and off they went.

That was, as I said, that kind of behavior was not – it was not shocking or unexpected given what we know of the difficulties of arranging things, but it was nevertheless quite unfortunate.

Then those discussions continued for a while, also I should say in a constructive rather than confrontational spirit. But Ambassador Morel's efforts to arrange the afternoon session did not succeed, and I've explained some of the problems. So I think that's, I've walked that through.

But there was one plenary and one information session and there was no lack of clarity on that point.

Question: Mr. Secretary, what do you think of the prospect of Georgia joining NATO? Do you think that process should slow down maybe so that current problems in Georgia can be resolved? Thank you.

Assistant Secretary Fried: The NATO Summit in April, NATO's leaders decided, well declared that Georgia and Ukraine will one day be members of the alliance. This was a very important declaration because it meant in essence that Georgia and Ukraine have a future in NATO, but that getting to NATO and getting ready to join NATO and meeting NATO's criteria is going to be up to them. Now the good news for them is it's up to them; the bad news for them is that both countries have a tremendous amount of work to do.

We all agree that NATO membership for these countries is years away. That's always been the case. They have much work to do. And in the case of Ukraine there are serious differences in the country about whether NATO membership is what they really want. It's our view that countries should have a right to choose for themselves whether they want to be in NATO. And if they do want to be in NATO then they have to meet NATO standards.

So the NATO declaration is an important statement. It is still valid. Leaders such as Chancellor Merkel of Germany have made clear that it is still valid. But there is a lot of work to do. As I said, this work will take years.

Thank you very much, and I hope it's been interesting and instructive.

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