



Fact Sheet
Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs
Washington, DC
March 31, 2008

The United States and the South Ossetian Conflict

U.S. Policy and Role

The United States supports the territorial integrity of Georgia and a peaceful resolution of the separatist conflict in South Ossetia. The United States views Georgia's autonomy proposal as an important step in a peace process that should be marked by direct and frequent negotiations between the two sides. The U.S. encourages the sides, with the help of the international community, to intensify their efforts to find a sustainable and peaceful solution to the conflict.

Background

The contemporary armed conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia can be traced to 1920, when a South Ossetian attempt to declare independence from Georgia as a Soviet Republic ended in several thousand deaths. Following the 1921 Red Army invasion of Georgia, the Soviet Government declared South Ossetia to be an autonomous oblast within Georgia in April 1922.

During the Soviet period, South Ossetians were granted a certain degree of autonomy over matters of language and education in their territory. At the same time, however, nationalist groups in Georgia were beginning to accumulate support, leading to renewed South Ossetian-Georgian tensions, which would come to a head in the late 1980s.

The South Ossetian Popular Front was created in 1988 as a response to increasing nationalist sentiments in Georgia. By 1989, the Popular Front came to power in South Ossetia and on November 10, 1989, demanded that the "oblast" be made an autonomous "republic." The Georgian Government immediately rejected this decision, leading to protests and demonstrations on both sides.

A South Ossetian declaration of independence (within the U.S.S.R.) in September of 1990 was met with a firm negation from the Georgian Government, and in December Georgia abolished South Ossetia's status as an autonomous oblast and declared a state of emergency in the region.

Armed conflict began in January of 1991 and continued until June of 1992. At that point, a cease-fire (the Sochi Agreement) was agreed upon by Russian, Georgian, and South Ossetian representatives, Georgia having declared independence in April of 1991.

The June 24, 1992, Sochi Agreement established a cease-fire between the Georgian and South Ossetian forces and defined both a zone of conflict around the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali and a security corridor along the border of South Ossetian territories. The Agreement also created the Joint Control Commission (JCC), and a peacekeeping body, the Joint Peacekeeping Forces group (JPKF). The JCC was charged with demilitarizing the security zone in the conflict region and facilitating negotiations; it is Co-Chaired by Georgian, Russian, South Ossetian, and North Ossetian representatives. The JPKF is under Russian command and is comprised of peacekeepers from Georgia, Russia, and Russia's North Ossetian autonomous republic (as the separatist South Ossetian government remained unrecognized). South Ossetian peacekeepers, however, serve in the North Ossetian contingent. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) agreed to monitor the ceasefire and facilitate negotiations.

Recent Developments

The cessation of hostilities brought on by the Sochi Agreement held fast into 2004. At that point, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze had been replaced by Mikheil Saakashvili, who expressed a renewed interest in reintegrating Georgia's separatist regions. In keeping with this policy, the Georgian Government placed a special emphasis on the regulation and monitoring of trade within and through South Ossetia, closing down a particularly large South Ossetian market which had been used for unregulated trade. South Ossetian forces retaliated by closing highways and detaining Georgian troops within South Ossetian borders. Tensions between the sides escalated, and exchanges of mortar fire in late July and August 2004 killed dozens.

A cease-fire signed by the parties in August of 2004 ended the violence and led to some demobilization, but the situation remains unsettled.

South Ossetian President Eduard Kokoity met in November of 2004 with Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania. During the meeting, both sides expressed concern at the violence and reaffirmed their interest in a peaceful resolution, before reaching a series of agreements designed to strengthen relations between the two sides and to demilitarize the zone of conflict.

In September 2004, Georgian President Saakashvili put forth a proposal for an autonomous status for South Ossetia within Georgia in a speech to the United Nations, which received wide praise within the international community. However, with the de facto authorities in Tskhinvali expressing little interest in the proposal, the Georgian Government gradually turned its attention to a parallel de facto administration emerging under the leadership of Dmitri Sanakoyev, an ethnic Ossetian who advocated the pursuit of South Ossetian autonomy within the state of Georgia. In April 2007, this parallel administration received formal Georgian backing and was transformed into the Provisional Administrative Unit for South Ossetia, with its base of operations in Kurta, South Ossetia.

OSCE Involvement

The OSCE maintains a presence in South Ossetia with a mandate to promote negotiations between the conflicting parties, monitor the activities of the JPKF, assist the Georgian Government in fulfilling its OSCE commitments on human rights, rule of law, and democratization, and provide regular analyses and reports on developments in the region. The OSCE also funds several cross-community development projects to help promote economic development and improve living conditions in South Ossetia through its Economic Rehabilitation Program. At a specially convened conference in Brussels in June 2006, the international community pledged approximately \$15 million for implementation of these projects. Projects currently under way aim at developing small businesses and agriculture, as well as improving infrastructure for water supply, schools, and medical facilities.

