

TBILISI : Peacekeeping And Energy Top Security Concerns.

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Minister of Foreign Affairs
Gela Bezhuashvili

Two of the most frequent topics at the Georgian Security Forum, held on Friday and Saturday in Tbilisi, were energy security and Georgia's move to end Russia's role as the sole peacekeeper in Georgia's internal conflicts.

High-level Georgian officials at the forum said the parliamentary resolution condemning the ineffectiveness of the Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia is not an attempt to "slam the door" on Russia but rather a move to enhance security and speed up the conflict resolution process.

Speaking at the Georgian Security Forum on Saturday, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili called the resolution "flexible" and noted that his government is ready for a dialogue with Russia.

Saakashvili also pointed out that the peace plan for South Ossetia outlined by the Georgian government has been met with a positive response by both the OSCE and Russia itself.

"However, a week ago it turned out that the Russian Federation did not support our most recent peace plan but rather my UN speech of two years ago where I spoke about the three stages of conflict resolution. They particularly liked the phrase in the first stage where I said that we would exercise maximum patience. Is this a serious policy?" the president said.

Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli also lamented on Friday that the conflict settlement process has moved backwards, despite the fact that in December 2005 his government had high hopes that progress would be made.

Noghaideli said that the Russian authorities had misinterpreted the Georgian parliamentary resolution, noting that the main point of the document is to accelerate the conflict settlement process and strengthen the peacekeeping mission, and not the removal of the Russian peacekeepers.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Gela Bezhuashvili said the resolution should not be seen as "an excessively hard-line move or manifestation of a slammed-door policy towards the Russian Federation. Rather it should be seen as proof of our devotion to continue cooperating in a mutually responsible way."

Bezhuashvili thinks that changes in the peacekeeping structure and mandate are necessary if their deployment is to make any sort of real impact.

"The objective is not to maintain a meaningless, ineffective peacekeeping process just for the sake of it, but to create a genuinely effective, international peacekeeping operation that will cover not only the 15 kilometer zone but the whole territory of South Ossetia, including the Roki Tunnel between Russian North Ossetia and South Ossetia," he said.

Bezhuashvili confirmed the Georgian government would be applying to both the UN and the OSCE to take part in the peacekeeping mission.

"The notorious inefficiency of the peacekeepers has not only not helped alleviate the situation, but in fact it frequently exacerbates tension in the area. The fact that the South Ossetian and Abkhaz regimes have been allowed to accumulate modern military equipment is a blatant violation of every document signed by all sides as well as by the chief mediator," the minister said in his speech on Friday.

Bezhuashvili also expressed dismay over the upcoming JCC meeting which is scheduled to be held in Vienna. At the moment, the Russians are refusing to go there, and have proposed a meeting in Moscow instead. "The reluctance of our Russian friends to discuss issues in an open forum worries me," he said.

Talking about Georgian-Russian relations, the Georgian president admitted Saturday that Georgia is inextricably linked with Russia.

"In the long run we will always have more Russians than Australians skiing in Georgia and more Russians than French drinking Georgian wine," he said.

Energy security

Issues of energy security are high on the agenda both in Georgia and abroad, participants at the Georgian Security Forum said.

The NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia Robert Simmons said Saturday that energy security "will become an increasingly important topic for NATO."

Since January's energy crisis Georgian officials have increasingly noted the importance of diversifying the country's energy supply, particularly as Russia remains Georgia's main supplier of gas and electricity.

The gas supply contract that the Georgian government signed with Iran - a country viewed by many in the west as a borderline rogue state - during the energy crisis was the subject of many questions from forum participants. However, Noghaideli brushed these concerns aside noting that "it was natural gas after all and not a supply of nuclear power."

Senior Jamestown Foundation fellow and Wall Street Journal columnist Vladimir Socor thinks that recent events have proved Russia's unreliability as an energy partner from the political, economic and even physical points of view. He referred to three recent episodes -

Russia's dispute with Ukraine over gas prices; Russia's temporary inability to fulfill its energy contracts with the European market because of the cold winter; and the sabotage of gas pipelines on its territory which disrupted supply to Georgia and Armenia - to support this argument .

"If we ignore Iran's gas potential we'll fall into one-sided dependence on Russia," Socor said, defending Georgia's right to get gas from any country.

Socor recommended looking for other potential energy sources and called on the United States to refocus on Caspian energy.

"The eastern shore of the Caspian Sea has reserves that are almost equivalent to Gazprom," Socor said. He added that Turkmenistan is set to explore 80 billion cubic meters of gas in 2006. Uzbekistan is another potential source, he said.

At the same time Socor admonished the EU to get more involved in discussing energy security as a top priority.
