
US Gives Billion Dollars To Georgia As Russia Wins Ally

By Kerry Sheridan
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The United States on Wednesday announced a one billion dollar aid package for Georgia as Vice President Dick Cheney started a tour of ex-Soviet states by promising that Washington had a "deep" interest in the region's security.

Russia, meanwhile, secured an ally in its battle with Georgia and the West when Nicaragua became the first country to join it in recognising the independence of Georgian rebel regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"With our full support and the support of the entire free world, a democratic Georgia will survive, will rebuild and will thrive," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said as she announced the 690-million-euro package in Washington.

The United States has taken a lead role supporting Georgia since its five-day war with Russia in August over South Ossetia.

President George W. Bush will work with US lawmakers, who may have to approve the funds, to free up to 570 million dollars this year, with the remaining 430 million coming later, she said.

The European Union also plans an international donors conference for Georgia and the International Monetary Fund announced it would a 750-million-dollar package for Georgia, if its executive board approves.

The conflict cost Georgia about two billion euros (2.8 billion dollars), according to a new study by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (WIIW).

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, himself a former Marxist rebel, became the first foreign leader to recognise the independence of Georgia's rebel regions, local media reported.

Ortega slammed "political hegemonies" that he said were "trying to surround Russia" and investing millions of dollars through NATO to "build a military fence against Russia."

The West has expressed outrage at Russia's military action and its recognition of the rebel regions.

Cheney started a tour of strategic ex-Soviet states in oil-rich Azerbaijan. Following talks with President Ilham Aliyev, he said: "The United States has a deep and abiding interest in your wellbeing and security."

"Energy security is essential to us all and the matter is becoming increasingly urgent.

"Together with the nations of Europe, including Turkey, we must work with Azerbaijan and other countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia on additional routes for energy exports that ensure the free flow of resources."

Cheney was due to travel Thursday to Tbilisi for a meeting with Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was described as a "political corpse" by Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev on Tuesday.

In a new gesture of support, NATO announced that its chief Jaap de Hoop Scheffer would visit Georgia on September 15-16 and could discuss aid for the country. The visit was planned before the conflict erupted.

The Georgian parliament on Wednesday formally lifted a state of war declared when the hostilities broke out, but Russia and Georgia closed down diplomatic exchanges.

Russia suspended visas for Georgian citizens and repeated that it would pull troops out of Georgia only when a French-brokered peace plan was fully implemented.

Russia sent tanks and troops into Georgia on August 8, one day after a Georgian offensive to regain control of South Ossetia.

Moscow withdrew most of its forces under the ceasefire plan, but thousands of Russian troops that Moscow terms "peacekeepers" remain in the two rebel regions and in a buffer zone.

Moscow announced Wednesday that 71 Russian soldiers died in the conflict.

Medvedev will seek backing for his country's intervention at a Moscow summit of seven ex-Soviet states on Friday.

Russia hopes the meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation -- Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan -- will build on another gathering in Central Asia last week that included China, said presidential advisor Sergei Prikhodko.

Medvedev and French President Nicolas Sarkozy spoke by telephone Wednesday ahead of a meeting between the two next week to discuss Georgia.

Sarkozy is to travel with European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso and the EU's foreign policy chief Javier Solana for talks in Moscow on Monday to discuss the ceasefire agreement.
