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## Abkhaz leader says no direct talks with Georgia in Berlin for now

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There will be no direct talks between Georgian and Abkhaz representatives at an upcoming meeting in Berlin, the president of the Georgian breakaway republic said Thursday.

The German Foreign Ministry confirmed on Wednesday media reports concerning preparations for a meeting involving high-ranking representatives of Georgia and Abkhazia to be mediated by Germany. At the same time, the ministry did not specify the time and venue and who would participate, but did not rule out the meeting could be held in Berlin.

Sergei Bagapsh said the talks would be between Georgia and the Group of UN Secretary General's Friends on Georgia (the U.K., Germany, Russia, U.S. and France) and between Abkhazia and the Group.

"We will separately meet with the Group of UN Secretary General's Friends, and the Georgian side will also hold separate meetings," Bagapsh said, however. He was unable to state who would represent Abkhazia at the meeting.

Answering Georgian claims that Abkhazia had also been unable to settle on a date for the meeting, Bagapsh said, "The meeting was initially planned for July 28-29. However, this didn't suit us. We have settled on August 15-20 for the meeting."

Abkhazia broke away from Georgia in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Between 10,000 and 30,000 people were killed in the subsequent hostilities. The two sides signed a ceasefire in 1994 in Moscow.

In April, then-Russian President Vladimir Putin called for closer links with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, another Georgian breakaway republic, provoking anger in Tbilisi, which accused Moscow of trying to annex the regions.

A plan proposed by Germany in July, backed by the EU, stipulated a non-violence agreement, confidence-building measures over the next year to lead to a determination of Abkhazia's status, and the return of Georgian refugees.

The plan was rejected by Abkhazia. "We are not going to discuss Abkhazia's status. Abkhazia is an independent state," Bagapsh said.

Some 300,000 Georgians fled Abkhazia in 1991-93 amid accusations of ethnic cleansing. On May 15 this year, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution acknowledging ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia and called for the return of Georgian refugees.

Both Abkhazia and Russia have rejected calls for the return of the refugees.

Bagapsh said that the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia could only start only after the withdrawal of Georgian troops from the Kodori Gorge and the signing of a non-aggression pact. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said the return of the refugees is at present "unrealistic."

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