
Azerbaijan : Baku Eyes Georgia Violence With Caution

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Public sentiment in Azerbaijan is clearly on the side of neighboring Georgia, but the Azerbaijani government is treading lightly, not wanting to do or say anything that might provoke Russia. Baku, which is intent on recovering its own separatist territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, is concerned about how the fighting in Georgia will impact the fates of Georgia's break-away entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Azerbaijani leaders and energy executives are also trying to play it safe concerning oil and natural gas pipelines that cross Georgian territory.

With Russian troops and armor remaining in Georgia proper, the signs are mounting that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be formally partitioned from Georgia, and perhaps even annexed by Russia. From Baku's perspective that would be a dire development. Khazar Ibrahim, an Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry spokesperson, has spoken repeatedly in favour of maintaining the status quo. "We support Georgia's territorial integrity and the restoration of the peace process," Ibrahim said at a press briefing in Baku on August 11.

Beyond the territorial question, the Azerbaijani government has refrained from commenting on the violence in Georgia, either about Georgia's actions in sending troops into the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, or the massive Russian response. Officials strike a neutral tone, not going beyond statements of support for international efforts to broker a ceasefire in Georgia.

Ibrahim also said that Baku had no intention of seeking a change to the current structure of the OSCE Minsk Group, which oversees the Karabakh peace process. Russia is one of the Minsk Group co-chairs. "Russia will stay as [a co-chair] of the Minsk Group," he said.

Opposition leaders in Baku, meanwhile, have been outspoken in their condemnation of the Kremlin's behavior. "Georgia is being punished for its NATO aspirations and its democratic choice," said Sulhaddin Akper, a leader of the Musavat Party. He urged swift action by the United States and NATO to bolster Georgia.

Over the past few days, various public groups, youth organizations and individuals have participated in rallies outside the Russian Embassy in Baku in support of Georgians. Some attendees at a recent rally carried placards with slogans such as "Stop Russian Aggression," and "Russia: Get Out of The Caucasus." Local media commentaries have tended to be critical of the Russian military actions.

On a practical level, Azerbaijan has become a destination for foreigners seeking to flee the fighting. Ibrahim, the Azerbaijani diplomat, put the number of foreigners trying to cross the border in the hundreds. "These people receive all possible support," he said.

The economic impact on Azerbaijan of the Russian incursion into Georgia is a source of concern in Baku. Some officials privately worry that recent developments in Georgia are troubling for Azerbaijan's energy independence.

Shipments of oil and natural gas via pipelines connecting Azerbaijan to Turkey via Georgia have been suspended. A statement issued by the energy

giant BP said the pipelines have not been damaged, adding that energy flows will remain suspended until the "the situation in Georgia normalizes." Oil flows via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline stopped even before the outbreak of the Georgian-Russian conflict, due to an explosion at a compressor station in Turkey. Azerbaijan's state energy entity, SOCAR, also announced that it has temporarily halted oil deliveries to Georgia.

Production at oil and gas fields in Azerbaijan has been impacted by the Georgia conflict, but state officials and energy consortium representatives have not specified the current volume of production.
