
Georgia urges Western backing in territory row

By Anne Penketh, Diplomatic Editor
Independent.co.uk Web - 25/4/2008

Friday, Georgia is seeking Western support in a worsening dispute with Russia over the "creeping annexation" of breakaway territories. The move follows the shooting down of a Georgian spy plane over the separatist region of Abkhazia.

"It's clear that now is the moment of truth for the EU and Nato, to prove that they are willing and capable of protecting their values and principles," said Giorgi Baramidze, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Western-leaning former Soviet republic.

Mr Baramidze, who spoke to The Independent in London after holding talks in Brussels, is one of several Georgian officials dispatched to Western capitals as the UN Security Council met to discuss the dispute.

Georgia called for the Security Council meeting after accusing Russia of shooting down a pilotless drone flying over Abkhazia earlier this week, in what the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, described as "unprovoked aggression". Although a video released by Georgia shows a jet flying towards the Georgian drone and firing a missile, Moscow denies that the plane was a Russian MiG-29 and insists that the drone was shot down by Abkhazian air defence forces.

The incident forms part of a deepening crisis triggered by a Russian decision on 16 April to establish legal ties with two rebel provinces in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Mr Baramidze charged that the decree was signed by President Vladimir Putin in direct response to the international recognition of Kosovo independence and to the decision by a Nato summit to commit to discussing eventual Georgian membership of Nato.

"This is a very dangerous move and extremely provocative," he said. "This means the legalisation of the de facto annexation" of the two regions, he added.

Russia rejected a joint call from Britain, the US, France and Germany for the decision to be revoked during the closed-door Security Council discussions.

Russia's UN ambassador, Vitaly Churkin, said: "This is, of course, a tall order, and I think that they themselves understand that this is something that is not going to happen. In fact, this is not a kind of thing which we would expect from our international partners. Clearly, this is not diplomatic recognition or international recognition of Abkhazia or South Ossetia."

Mr Putin's moves to strengthen links with "the de facto authorities" in the two regions were "in order to improve the living standard of the population of those two regions," said Mr Churkin.

Mr Saakashvili, who has made recovering Georgian sovereignty over all its territory a priority of his administration since coming to office in 2003, called for an international force to replace Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia.

Russian forces have been deployed since 1994 under a deal that ended a two-year separatist war in which hundreds of thousands of Georgians became refugees.

But Robert Simmons, Nato's special envoy for the south Caucasus and central Asia, told a news conference in Tbilisi: "I cannot say that Nato is looking for a direct role in peacekeeping or in dealing with conflicts in this region."

Mr Baramidze said Georgia also sought Western support for a peace plan for Abkhazia which offers autonomy for the territory in a new federal state, guarantees for the Abkhaz language and culture and a free economic zone. Asked whether Georgia could expect the West to sacrifice relations with Russia in favour of Tbilisi, he said: "This is the test for Western democracy. Georgia is unlucky to be in the front line."
