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## Borders Key Issue For Clinton's Tour Through Caucasus

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Diving into the knotty regional politics of the South Caucasus, the U.S. secretary of state has slammed what she called Russia's "occupation" of two breakaway Georgian regions and urged a quick resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reassured Georgia on Monday with a pledge of continued support, saying Washington is "steadfast" in its commitment to the former Soviet country's territorial integrity amid disputes with Russia over two rebel regions, Agence France-Presse reported.

Georgia was the final stop on Clinton's tour of Eastern European and Caucasus-region countries, a trip that has also taken her to Ukraine, Poland, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Hours earlier in the Armenian capital of Yerevan, President Serge Sarkisian told Clinton that the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh was the single most important issue for his country - echoing almost word-for-word a statement made hours earlier by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev.

Clinton appealed to both Yerevan and Baku for a peaceful resolution on the Karabakh issue despite the lack of any outward signs of fresh diplomatic progress.

"The final steps toward peace often are the most difficult, but we believe peace is possible," the Associated Press quoted her as saying Sunday at a news conference in Baku with her Azerbaijani counterpart, Elmar Mammadyarov.

The Karabakh issue risks escalating to warfare and has caused diplomatic problems beyond the two countries' borders. Shuttling between their capitals, Clinton told the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders Sunday to act quickly to settle the matter.

'Russian actions wrong'

On her first visit to Georgia as secretary of state, Clinton also called for Moscow to abide by a cease-fire agreement that stipulates its forces must return to positions held before the 2008 Georgia-Russia War.

"The United States is steadfast in its commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity," Clinton said at a joint press conference with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili during a visit to Tbilisi. "We continue to object to and criticize actions by Russia that we believe are wrong and on the top of the list are the invasion and occupation of Georgia. The United States supports the Georgian people; we support Georgian democracy."

Clinton also told a group of women leaders that Washington would keep pushing for further democratic reforms in Georgia, saying a vibrant democracy and economy were key for it to regain control of the rebel territories.

"The more vibrant and effective a democracy and economy Georgia becomes, the greater contrast there will be between South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia," she said.

The U.S. secretary of state was due to meet opposition leaders in Georgia, who have accused Saakashvili of stepping back from democratic reforms after coming to power in the country's 2003 pro-Western Rose Revolution. Saakashvili enjoyed extremely close ties with former U.S.

President George W. Bush, who famously declared the country a "beacon of liberty" in a 2005 speech to thousands of cheering Georgians in central Tbilisi.

Georgia has even named a main road from the airport after Bush.

Relations have cooled under President Barack Obama, however, after Saakashvili's international reputation was damaged by a 2007 crackdown on opposition protesters and by his handling of Georgia's 2008 war with Russia.

Georgia has downplayed the cooling in relations and contributed nearly 1,000 troops to fight alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan in a bid to build closer ties with the new administration.

After the war, Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, a move that has been followed by only a handful of countries. Russia has since established permanent military bases and deployed hundreds of troops and border guards in the regions.

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Compiled from Agence France-Presse and Associated Press stories by the Daily News staff.

BOX: Nagorno-Karabakh: A region under occupation A flashpoint of the Caucasus, the region known as Nagorno-Karabakh is a constituent part of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia since the end of 1994. While internationally recognized as Azerbaijani territory, the enclave has declared itself an independent republic but is administered as a de facto part of Armenia.

The region has had an Armenian population since the 5th century, but most historians agree Armenians only achieved majority status in the area after a resettlement that followed annexation by Russia in the 19th century. Before Russian annexation, the area was governed by a series of Turkmen, Azeri and Persian rulers. The lowland regions surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, also occupied by Armenia, were, until the most recent war, predominantly Azeri in population.

The briefly independent Azeri and Armenian states fought a series of short wars over the region during World War I. The series of treaties ending the war acknowledged the area as Azeri territory, a status reaffirmed under Soviet rule, which began in 1921 and continued until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Nagorno-Karabakh War from 1988 to 1994, and the subsequent occupation by Armenia, led to the deaths of more than 30,000 and created nearly 1 million refugees, who largely remain in temporary settlement camps and facilities in Azerbaijan.

Years of negotiations involving Russia, the United States and Europe, as well as Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders themselves, have failed to resolve the enclave's status or enable the return of refugees. Turkey closed its border with Armenia in 1993 in support of its close ally Azerbaijan in the conflict. ISTANBUL - Hurriyet Daily News

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