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# Clinton Pledges Support For Georgia

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TBILISI, Georgia-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton pledged American support for this former Soviet state, which is recovering from a 2008 war with Russia and seeking to consolidate its democracy.

At a news conference with President Mikhail Saakashvili, Mrs. Clinton delivered what she called a message from President Barack Obama and herself. "The United States is steadfast in its commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United States does not recognize spheres of influence," she said, referring to Russia's claim that it has privileged interests and special influence in former Soviet states like Georgia.

Mrs. Clinton said she and Mr. Obama stressed those points to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev when he was in Washington last month.

The secretary of state also called on Russia to live up to the commitments it made in a cease-fire agreement following the August 2008 war-including withdrawing its troops to the positions they held before the attack. Russia also should permit humanitarian access to the portions of Georgia its troops still occupy, she added.

"We're calling on the Russians to enforce the agreement they signed back in 2008," she said, adding the U.S. opposed Russia's building of more permanent military bases in the sectors of Georgia that its forces are still occupying.

Speaking to several hundred women from rights groups, political movements and other organizations earlier in the day, Mrs. Clinton said the U.S. "will stand with you" in pursuit of a stronger Georgian democracy. She didn't mention Russia or the 2008 war until it was raised by a member of the audience.

The war remains a point of contention between Washington and Moscow, and complicates U.S. relations with Georgia.

During a question-and-answer session, one woman asked if the Obama administration has a "real democracy agenda" for Georgia. She said her country suffers from a range of human-rights abuses and that these were largely ignored by the administration of former U.S. President George W. Bush.

"The United States always has a democracy agenda," Mrs. Clinton responded. "Continuing to try to perfect democracy is one of the key challenges for any country-both its government and its citizens."

She applauded recent progress in Georgia, but added that the administration "raises as a friend" its concerns about limits on freedom of expression. "We take seriously threats to democracy, wherever they occur," Mr. Clinton said. "So we're going to continue to support democracy here in Georgia."

In her give-and-take with the advocacy groups, one woman asked about Russia's continued "occupation" of parts of Georgia. "The United States was appalled and totally rejected" the Russian military invasion, Mrs. Clinton said. "I'm not going to stand here and tell you this is an easy problem, because it is not."

The Obama administration is trying to strike a balance between pressing the Russians to withdraw their forces from the breakaway Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and convincing the Georgian government that building up its military isn't the right solution.

At the center of the Russia-Georgia tensions is an effort by Moscow to reassert its influence in the region, to preserve what President Dmitry Medvedev calls a Russian zone of "privileged interest." The U.S. rejects the notion of a Russian sphere of influence.

Mrs. Clinton said the key for Georgia going forward is to concentrate on improving its democracy and solving its internal problems and its economic prospects. "That is the rebuke that no one can dispute," she said.

Georgia was her final stop a tour that began Thursday in Ukraine and has also taken her to Poland, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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