
Clinton; US Will Help Georgia Develop Its Democracy, Resolve Its Conflict With Russia

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latimes.com - 5/7/2010

TBILISI, Georgia (AP) - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Monday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet state recovering from an August 2008 Russian military invasion and seeking to consolidate its democracy.

At a news conference with President Mikhail Saakashvili, 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.

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

Clinton also called on Russia to live up to the commitments it made in a cease-fire agreement following its August 2008 invasion - 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 said.

"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 earlier to a couple of hundred women from rights groups, political movements and other organizations, Clinton said the U.S.

"will stand with you" in pursuit of a stronger Georgian democracy. She did not mention Russia or its invasion until it was raised by a member of her audience.

The invasion 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 she said these were largely ignored by the administration of President George W. Bush.

"The United States always has a democracy agenda," 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," 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 invasion, she said. "I'm not going to stand here and tell you this is an easy problem, because it is not."

The key for Georgia going forward, she said, 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. Her unspoken point seemed to be that Georgia should resist any temptation to try to build up its military forces as a solution to the Russia problem.

Clinton advised that Georgia not take any actions that would offer Russia an excuse to perpetuate its occupation and its confrontational approach.

"I think it is a mistake to focus on the past," she said, alluding to the remaining anger over the August 2008 invasion.

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 is not 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 Medvedev calls a Russian zone of "privileged interest."

Georgia was the final stop on a Clinton tour that began Thursday in Ukraine and also took her to Poland, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In the Armenian capital of Yerevan earlier Monday, Clinton told human rights activists that Armenian government leaders told her they are open to liberalizing a recently enacted law restricting radio and TV journalists.

Clinton said she was given the assurance in a meeting with President Serge Sarkisian.

At a reception for Armenian rights groups representatives at a Yerevan arts center, Clinton said she wanted to encourage them to overcome the difficulties and frustrations of pushing their government to fully respect the right of free expression.

Earlier, Clinton paid her respects for the estimated 1.5 million Armenians who were killed during the final days of the Ottoman empire in what much of the world labels a genocide.

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/wire/sns-ap-eu-clinton,0,2152793.stor>
