
Russia says Georgia NATO bid will not solve regional problems

RIA Novosti - 25/4/2008

MOSCOW, April 25 (RIA Novosti) - Russia's foreign minister said Friday Georgia's NATO membership will not solve its problems with its breakaway regions which are in far deeper crisis than relations between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Georgian-Russian ties hit a new low on Monday, when Georgia accused Russia of downing an unmanned reconnaissance drone in Georgian airspace. The move follows calls by Russian President Vladimir Putin for closer ties with the two regions, which has infuriated Georgia.

"I can see no crisis in Russian-Georgian relations, but we are witnessing an obvious crisis in relations between the Georgian leadership on one side and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other. The Georgian leadership is unable to maintain civil dialogue with Abkhazia and S. Ossetia and instead announces that NATO membership will solve all its problems, which is seriously aggravating the situation," Sergei Lavrov said during a news conference with his Finnish counterpart.

The two republics, which broke away from Georgia in 1991, have been a bone of contention between the ex-Soviet neighbors. Both have stepped up their calls for international recognition, following Kosovo's declaration of independence in February.

Georgia has been seeking NATO membership, backed by the U.S., ever since President Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2004 on the back of a bloodless revolution. At a NATO summit in early April, NATO powers voted against admitting Georgia to the alliance's Membership Plan, but said they would review the bid at the end of the year.

The Russian minister said he hoped that those who were "unnaturally" pushing Georgia towards NATO were aware that Tbilisi has refused to sign documents, proposed by the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe and the UN, renouncing the use of force in conflict resolution with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

"I want to hear these people react to statements by Georgian leaders that unmanned aircraft have flown and will continue to fly over the conflict zone in Abkhazia," Lavrov said.

Georgia claims that a Russian MiG-29 Fulcrum fighter from the Gudauta military base in Abkhazia, where Russian peacekeepers have been stationed since the end of a bloody conflict in the early 1990s, on Sunday shot down a Georgian drone.

Abkhazia claimed responsibility for the downing of the aircraft. Russia's Air Force has dismissed Georgia's allegations.

Viktor Dolidze, Georgia's envoy to the OSCE, said live on Rustavi-2 TV on Friday that the organization's Permanent Council had decided to send an international group of military experts to investigate the incident.

"We raised the issue at a council meeting and demanded a thorough investigation because we consider the operation by the Russian MiG-29 an act of aggression against sovereign Georgia," the envoy said.
