

US-Russian tensions in Caucasus erupt into war

By Bill Van Auken
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Long-escalating tensions between Russia and the former Soviet republic of Georgia erupted into full-scale war Friday, leaving hundreds if not thousands of civilians dead and turning thousands more into refugees, forced to flee for their lives.

The immediate focus of the fighting is the attempt by Georgia to militarily seize control of the enclave of South Ossetia, which has existed as a de facto independent entity for the past 16 years, and Russia's armed intervention to counter this assault.

Underlying this military confrontation, however, are far broader conflicts. Feeding the bloody confrontation in South Ossetia is US imperialism's drive to establish hegemony over the vast energy resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus through the assertion of American military power in the region. The Russian ruling elite, for its part, is seeking to reassert its grip over a region that was ruled by Moscow for two centuries before the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

This bitter rivalry between Washington and Moscow—the world's two greatest nuclear powers—lends the fighting in the Caucasus a particularly explosive and dangerous character. The tensions between the two countries have been exacerbated in the recent period by the Bush administration's drive to incorporate Georgia into the NATO alliance, a move that Moscow sees as part of an attempt to establish a military encirclement of Russia.

The US-backed Georgian regime of President Mikheil Saakashvili sent massed military units into South Ossetia on Thursday morning, after claiming that South Ossetian military forces had shelled Georgian villages, supposedly violating a unilateral cease-fire declared by Tbilisi.

While the Georgian regime initially claimed it was carrying out a "proportionate response," it quickly became clear that it had launched an all-out military offensive aimed at conquering the region. Using artillery, tanks, truck-mounted multiple rocket launchers and war planes, the Georgian military laid siege to the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali.

Much of the city was reportedly in flames Friday. The regional parliament building had burned down, the university was on fire, and the town's main hospital had been rendered inoperative by the bombardment. The International Red Cross reported that ambulances were unable to reach the wounded.

"As a result of many hours of shelling from heavy guns, the town is practically destroyed," Marat Kulakhmetov, the commander of Russian peacekeepers in the territory, told the Russian news service Interfax.

Eduard Kokoity, the South Ossetian leader, estimated late Friday that more than 1,400 civilians had been killed in the Georgian military

assault.

"I saw bodies lying on the streets, around ruined buildings, in cars," Lyudmila Ostayeva, 50, told the Associated Press after fleeing the city with her family to a village near the Russian border. "It's impossible to count them now. There is hardly a single building left undamaged."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov charged Georgia with utilizing massive violence with the aim of forcing the Ossetian population to flee. "We are receiving reports that a policy of ethnic cleansing was being conducted in villages in South Ossetia, the number of refugees is climbing, the panic is growing, people are trying to save their lives," said Lavrov.

According to Moscow, among the dead were ten Russian peacekeepers, while 30 more were wounded in the shelling of their barracks by the Georgian forces. The peacekeepers were deployed in the area as part of an agreement reached between Moscow, Tbilisi and South Ossetia to end the fighting that erupted following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent bid by the peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to separate from Georgia. The inhabitants in both regions feared the newly independent Georgian regime would abolish their autonomous status.

Since then, however, Tbilisi has charged that the Russian troops are backing the South Ossetian forces.

Russia seized upon the deaths of its troops and the civilian casualties as the justification for sending a tank column and infantry into South Ossetia, where they have become engaged in fierce combat with Georgian units for control of Tskhinvali.

"In accordance with the constitution and federal law, I, as president of Russia, am obliged to protect lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are located," Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told a meeting of his security council at the Kremlin. "We won't allow the death of our compatriots to go unpunished."

Meanwhile, Georgian authorities charged that Russian warplanes had struck the country's military bases, airfields and the main Black Sea port of Poti late Friday and early Saturday, killing some civilians. Bombs reportedly fell on the capital of Tbilisi and on the area of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline.

"All day today, they've been bombing Georgia from numerous warplanes and specifically targeting (the) civilian population, and we have scores of wounded and dead among (the) civilian population all around the country," Saakashvili told the US news network, CNN.

Saakashvili announced that he had called up the country's reserves, while sources in Georgia said he was expected to announce the imposition of martial law.

The timing of the Georgian incursion, on a day when world attention was focused on the opening of the Olympics in Beijing,

where both Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and US President George Bush are present, hardly seemed fortuitous.

Saakashvili, however, suggested that it was Russia that had chosen the date, calling it a “brilliant moment to attack a small country” and charging that the quick response by the Russian military demonstrated Moscow’s preparations for an intervention.

The Georgian president declared that his country was “looking with hope” to the US. The armed confrontation with Russia, he claimed, “is not about Georgia anymore. It’s about America, its values... America stands up for those freedom-loving nations and supports them. That’s what America is all about.”

Under the Bush administration, Washington has attempted to forge close ties with Georgia, particularly since the US-backed “Rose Revolution” that paved the way for Saakashvili’s rise to power.

US imperialism’s main interest in Georgia is as an American bridgehead into the oil and gas-rich Caspian Basin and as a strategic transit route for funneling energy supplies out of the region, while bypassing Russia.

To cement its ties with the Georgian regime, Washington has provided hundreds millions of dollars in military aid, while sending in large numbers of US military trainers for the country’s growing armed forces.

Georgian troops, meanwhile, account for the third largest contingent participating in the US occupation of Iraq, numbering some 2,000. Tbilisi indicated Friday that it would seek US help in bringing at least 1,000 of these soldiers back to participate in the fighting in South Ossetia.

Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov alluded to the US military support for Georgia, declaring, “Now we see Georgia has found a use for these weapons and for the special forces that were trained with the help of international instructors.” He added, “I think our European and American colleagues... should understand what is happening. And I hope very much that they will reach the right conclusions.”

Last month, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice paid a provocative visit to Tbilisi, denouncing Russia and reiterating US backing for Georgian NATO membership. Washington’s NATO allies in Western Europe, however, have greeted the proposal coolly, seeing it as an unnecessary provocation against Russia, upon which they depend for energy supplies.

Whether Rice during her visit gave an explicit green light for the intervention in South Ossetia, or whether the Georgian regime felt the demonstration of US support gave it the assurance of Washington’s backing for such a military action, is not known.

In the wake of Friday’s assault, Washington has stopped short of providing explicit support for the Georgian action, but has made it clear that it backs the position of its client state in the Caucasus.

The United Nations Security Council failed to support a Russian-backed resolution calling for an end to the fighting because of Washington’s opposition to a clause calling on all sides to “renounce the use of force.” The clear implication is that the US is backing Georgia’s right to take military action.

Secretary of State Rice, meanwhile, issued a statement effectively condemning Russia, while providing tacit justification for Georgia’s intervention. “We call on Russia to cease attacks on Georgia by aircraft and missiles, respect Georgia’s territorial integrity, and withdraw its ground combat forces from Georgian soil,” she said. “We underscore the international community’s support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.”

The eruption of war in the Caucasus is the end product of the increasingly aggressive policy pursued by US imperialism in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR nearly 17 years ago. Washington has systematically manipulated national conflicts in the region to further its own aim of military and economic hegemony. This began with the bloody wars in the former Yugoslavia.

All of the arguments used by Washington to justify its support for Bosnia and Kosovo and its military assault on Serbia during the Balkan wars of the 1990s could be employed just as effectively to condemn Georgia’s intervention and defend South Ossetia, as well as Russia’s military intervention on its behalf.

In this case, however, Washington has elevated Georgia’s “territorial integrity” as the paramount principle in the conflict, effectively justifying Georgia’s military intervention and an assault on the province’s Russian population that Moscow has branded as “ethnic cleansing.”

The apparent contradiction between these two policies only underscores the fact that US imperialism’s supposed aversion to ethnic cleansing and the suppression of ethnic enclaves is entirely dependent upon who is doing it and whether or not it serves US strategic interests.

There is a direct link between this latest war and those waged by the US in the Balkans. In February, the US and the West recognized Kosovo’s “independence” based on its unilateral secession from Serbia, in direct violation of various UN resolutions. The aim in backing this secession—as in its support for the suppression of similar secessionist entities in Georgia—was to further US military plans for the encirclement of Russia and the securing of access routes to the Caspian Basin.

In the run-up to Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, Moscow had repeatedly warned that it would set a precedent for similar actions by other territories in the former USSR—Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in particular. In its aftermath, the Russian regime stepped up its support for both territories.

Now, the eruption of war in South Ossetia poses the threat of a regional conflagration that can bring the world’s two biggest nuclear-armed powers, the US and Russia, into direct military confrontation, with the immense dangers that such a conflict poses to humanity.

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