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Russia Keeps Troops in Georgia, Defying Deal

By C. J. CHIVERS
Published: April 2, 2009

TBILISI, Georgia — Nearly eight months after the war between Russia and Georgia, Russian troops continue to hold Georgian territory that the Kremlin agreed to vacate as part of a formal cease-fire, leaving a basic condition of that agreement unfulfilled.



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Pool photo by Irakli Gedenidze
Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, spoke to reporters on Thursday after touring the U.S.S. Klakring in the port city of Batumi.



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The New York Times
Russia holds land in the Kodori Gorge and outside Akhlagori.

The Russian military, working with the governments and the small military forces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two separatist regions in Georgia, has stationed forces in two large swaths of territory that were under Georgian control before the war. Observers and diplomats say Russia has also used attack helicopters and stationed tanks in areas where none existed before the war.

The sustained Russian military presence on land captured last summer — evident during two recent days spent in the area by two reporters — provides a backdrop of lingering disagreement between the West and Russia at a crucial time: The Obama administration is pledging to recalibrate the relationship with Russia, restore cooperation in other areas and explore a new treaty on nuclear arms.

It also underscores the strength of Russia's military position in the southern Caucasus and its enduring confidence in undermining President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia and standing up to the West, even as Mr. Obama and President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia have signaled an intention to improve relations. Mr. Obama and Mr. Medvedev met on Wednesday, and exchanged warm remarks and pledges to cooperate, raising questions in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, about whether the United States would push to have the cease-fire plan fully honored.

Under the conditions of the cease-fire, the armed forces of all sides were to return to the positions they held before the war, which erupted Aug. 7. The agreement required a cessation of fighting, corridors for aid delivery and no use of force. It also granted Russia a loosely defined permission to take further security measures while waiting for international monitors.

In the weeks after open hostilities ended, Russia did withdraw many armored and infantry units to prewar boundaries, including units posted along Georgia's main

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highway and or near Georgia's military bases.

The withdrawal eventually allowed many displaced Georgian civilians to return to villages that had been behind the Russian positions.

But even though European monitors have long been on the ground, Russia still holds large areas that had irrefutably been under Georgian control, and thousands of Georgians have not been allowed free access to homes far from the disputed territory where the war began.

Several areas under Russian control are at odds with the terms of the cease-fire plan. The most obvious examples are in the Kodori Gorge and the agricultural valley outside the town of Akhlagori — two large parcels of land dotted with Georgian villages that were partly deserted over the winter. No Russian forces were in either place before last August.

Russian armor remains in defensive positions on the road to Akhlagori, blocking access to the valley beyond. The checkpoint is jointly administered by Russia and South Ossetia, and the senior official present during a visit last week by two The New York Times journalists identified himself as a Russian Army major.

Russia also holds a fortified position and checkpoint at Perevi, and an observation post near the village of Orkhosani that overlooks Georgia's highway.

Further, in recent months, Russia has conducted military patrols on territory it did not hold, landing helicopter-borne units just behind the boundary, according to the [European Union Monitoring Mission](#), which was established after the war.

The Russian military also conducts aviation patrols just inside the line with helicopter gunships, the monitoring mission said, and has built a military highway through the mountains linking the Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, with Akhlagori.

The Russian government declined multiple requests to explain the composition and roles of its forces.

Gilles Janvier, deputy head of the European monitoring mission, said in an interview that Russia had told diplomats that it had entered its own military agreement with the two breakaway regions in Georgia, which the Kremlin recognizes as independent states, and that these newer arrangements rendered the troop withdrawal component of the cease-fire plan obsolete.

"They say there is now a new bilateral agreement between them and South Ossetian and Abkhaz forces that lets them station troops," Mr. Janvier said.

The posture has frustrated diplomats and the Georgian government alike. A senior American official said that Secretary of State [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) raised the subject in her meeting in early March with Sergey V. Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, to no apparent effect.

Olesya Vartanyan contributed reporting.

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The official also said that European leaders had been reluctant to confront Russia over the cease-fire plan. Instead, they have appeared willing to accept the cessation of open fighting and the withdrawal of Russian forces from other positions as significant steps.

"My own sense is that they were happy that the fundamentals were done, and moved on," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the issues remain politically delicate and the position of the United States is publicly unresolved.

The Bush administration declared that Russia was not in compliance with the cease-fire. The Obama administration, which has been exploring options for cooperation with the Kremlin, has not yet taken a clear public position.

The public indecision was predictable, one independent analyst said, even though the cease-fire plan "is obviously not being fulfilled."

"It's business as usual," said the analyst, Lawrence S. Sheets of the [International Crisis Group](#). "Georgia is a country of four million people without any energy resources, and Russia is a country of 140 million people and with the ability to turn off Europe's natural gas."

Georgian officials have not been publicly critical of the United States. They have made clear, however, that their own ability to get Russia to comply with the agreement is essentially nonexistent.

Asked what tools were available to Georgia, Shota Utiazhvili, who heads the analysis section of Georgia's Interior Ministry, answered with a single word: "None."

The Georgian Defense Ministry said that several thousand troops remained in the conflict area, and that Russia had a presence in at least 51 villages that it did not occupy before last summer.

The Ossetian government does not allow European monitors on its territory, and it denied access to a Times reporter seeking to cross the boundary; for these reasons, the Georgian numbers and assertions could not be independently confirmed.

With the situation at a stalemate, Irakli Alasania, who was Georgia's ambassador to the [United Nations](#) during the war but now is in the opposition to Mr. Saakashvili, said the Russian occupation of territory beyond the old boundaries had settled into a new status quo.

The immediate question, he said, is whether the situation will get worse.

"The only thing we can do now, and the only thing we can hope for," he said, "is to

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