

AGREEMENTS SIGNED ON RUSSIAN MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM GEORGIA

by Vladimir Socor

On Friday, March 31, Georgia's First Deputy Defense Minister, Mamuka Kudava, and Russia's Ground Forces Commander-in-Chief, Colonel-General Alexei Maslov, signed a set of agreements on the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases and other Russian military installations in Georgia.

The agreements concern the implementation of the May 30, 2005, Joint Statement, signed by Georgia's then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Salome Zourabichvili with her Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, on the cessation of functioning of those bases and installations and withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia by 2008. The Russian side carried out an initial stage of the withdrawal last July and August (see *EDM*, June 3, August 1 and 16, 2005).

The documents just signed in Sochi include an agreement on the timeframe and modalities of functioning and withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia and an agreement on the transit of Russian military cargoes and personnel through Georgia's territory.

The Akhalkalaki base is to be emptied of most of its heavy equipment during 2006 and to be completely closed by October 1, 2007, with a possible extension until December 31, 2007, subject to weather conditions. The Batumi base is to ship out most of its heavy equipment during 2007 and to be completely closed before the end of 2008. The two garrisons total approximately 3,000 Russian military personnel at present. The Batumi base will be the last to close because it serves as an evacuation point for heavy equipment by sea to Russia from other points in Georgia.

For the duration of the withdrawal process, the Russian side shall retain:

- a) the Gonio exercise range on the Black Sea shore outside Batumi, to be used for logistical operations related to the evacuation, not for military exercises;
- b) the Russian officers' hostel in Mtskheta near Tbilisi, a way-station on the Russian forces' evacuation route toward North Ossetia;
- c) the Soviet-era Kojori communications station also near Tbilisi, to be used jointly by Russia and Georgia under Georgian jurisdiction; and
- d) the Tbilisi building of the Headquarters of the Russian Group of Forces in the Transcaucasus, in order for that headquarters to manage the withdrawal process.

All of these installations are also to be handed over to Georgia in 2008. The Batumi and Akhalkalaki bases shall function during this period "in a withdrawal mode," i.e., without conducting firing practice or other combat exercises; essentially, for packing up. Russia shall allocate 2.166 billion rubles from its state budget in 2006 through 2008 to finance the withdrawal of its forces from Georgia. For its part, Georgia authorizes the use of its air space, highways, railroads, and ports for the transport of Russian military equipment and personnel out of Georgia.

It is informally understood that most of the Russian military personnel and some two-thirds of the hardware shall relocate to Russia's North Caucasus Military District, while about one-third of the hardware is to be transferred to Russia's base at Gyumri in Armenia. The Russian side undertakes not to transfer that equipment to another party, meaning Armenian forces.

Russia retains limited, strictly regulated transit rights to supply its forces in Armenia through Georgian territory in the future. Any Russian military equipment transported via Georgia to Armenia is not to be handed over to other forces (i.e., Armenian) and not to be deployed in any conflict zone (i.e., Karabakh

and Armenian-occupied territories inside Azerbaijan). The content of Russian military transit cargoes shall be agreed by Russia and Georgia one year in advance. Cargoes must not include mass-destruction weapons, their components, or any dual-use nuclear, chemical, or biological substances. Georgia has the right to refuse the transit of any Russian cargo that poses a threat to national security or violates any of those conditions.

The March 31 agreement (like the May 30, 2005, Joint Statement) does not stipulate closure of Russia's Gudauta base, which is located in Abkhaz-controlled territory. Moscow has claimed since 2002 that it "closed" that base, but has not allowed international verification at the site. In fact, a Russian garrison has continued to be stationed at the base all along, with weapons stockpiles and helicopters. Moscow seeks OSCE approval for the base to be assigned to Russia's "peacekeeping" troops in Abkhazia. Georgia's Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili noted during the March 31 agreement's presentation, "They've been lying for years, telling us that the Gudauta base was closed ... We will not allow them to kick sand in our face" (Imedi TV, Rustavi-2 TV, March 31).

On March 28, unidentified Abkhaz gunmen stole arms from the Gudauta base and some of them were wounded in an exchange of fire with the Russian garrison during the getaway. The March 31 agreement does not pertain to Russia's "peacekeeping" troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian parliament and government are seeking a formula for replacing those troops with genuine, international peacekeeping contingents.

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