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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement for the FSC-PC on Georgia/Abkhazia

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley to the Joint Meeting of the Forum for Security Co-operation and the Permanent Council, Vienna, June 11, 2008

Thank you, Madam Chairman.

Tensions between Russia and Georgia over the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been a constant theme of discussion in the OSCE during the last year. We welcome the fact that both countries have sought to use the conflict – prevention mechanisms of the OSCE in order to air their differences and seek to de-escalate tensions. In that regard, this meeting, like the two that preceded it, is the culmination of one stage in the process.

We are asked to review the claims and counter-claims of both sides. For the U.S., one issue is clear. UNOMIG's report, as well as the independent analysis of all available data by a team including U.S. experts and representatives of other countries, leads to one clear conclusion: on April 20, a Russian fighter plane shot down a Georgian UAV over Georgia's sovereign airspace. Russia's efforts to cast doubts are completely unconvincing in light of the irrefutable evidence. This Organization, which has repeatedly stood up for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, should openly condemn this violation.

A second series of claims and counter-claims, addressed in meetings earlier today, revolve around the legality of the UAV flights themselves, and also other allegations of Georgian violations of the Moscow Agreement. The United States is not a party to that agreement, and we do not believe the OSCE can effectively pronounce itself on the intricacies of that agreement. UNOMIG has responsibility in this regard, and its own reports give a more nuanced picture than that presented in the Russian documentation. Although we understand unarmed UAV flights are not explicitly mentioned in that agreement, UNOMIG has declared they consider them to contravene the agreement, and we are heartened that the Government of Georgia declared before the UN Security Council that they were suspending any further such flights.

A third area of concern is the introduction of new troop concentrations into an already tense region. Here again, the record is clear: UNOMIG reports additional troops and heavy equipment being introduced by Russia into UNOMIG's area of operation, and there are credible reports of other weaponry not suitable for peace-keeping functions, such as surface-to-air missile batteries and long-range heavy artillery, being deployed to Abkhazia outside of UNOMIG's area of operation. The movement of ten or more trainloads of Russian Defense Ministry railroad troops into an area outside of UNOMIG oversight, and without consultation with or approval from the Georgian authorities is also a matter of concern.

But, fellow delegates, concern is not a policy.

We in the OSCE should use this meeting of the joint FSC-PC to engage in creative thinking. We should seriously consider how our Organization can contribute to easing tensions. That is where I would like to focus the rest of my intervention.

The gradual building of confidence, creation of clear channels of communication, flexibility on the part of all interested parties, and a significant contribution from the international community will be key to any lasting progress in Abkhazia. All parties will best be able to avoid conflict in the near term if each evaluates the actions of the other accurately – something which we fear has not been happening consistently, as the claims and the counter-claims we have seen during this process reveal. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) can provide avenues to share accurate information. We see this invocation of the Vienna Document process as a reassuring first step in that regard.

For example, given UNOMIG's limited mandate, the OSCE could perhaps coordinate with and supplement UNOMIG, should the UNSC concur, working in areas outside of UNOMIG's responsibility.

We should call for the withdrawal of military equipment recently sent to Abkhazia by Russia, and could task our Chairman-in-Office to lead negotiations aimed at that goal.

The Vienna Document offers suggestions for other types of measures that could complement such efforts, for example, inviting other OSCE states to visit areas of interest and/or concern. An important confidence-building step would be a Russian pledge to forego unilateral steps and to reduce its military presence in Abkhazia to the level that preceded the recent increase in tensions. In our view, this would be important to de-escalating the situation.

Clear declarations from the OSCE or our Chairman in Office encouraging the parties to avoid a return to inflammatory rhetoric could also be an important step toward de-escalation. The meeting between Presidents Saakashvili and Medvedev in St. Petersburg last week was an important step in this regard, but more should be done.

These steps, in our view, would all contribute to a de-escalation of the immediate tensions, and allow all sides to focus on reinvigorating the peace process through direct negotiations between the Abkhaz and the Georgian government. President Saakashvili recently unveiled new ideas that we consider worth pursuing further; they need to be elaborated on, and serious direct discussions between Tbilisi and Sukhumi should begin. An agreement on the non-use of force could be an element of that process, but should not be seen as an end in itself. A further confidence-building measure might include expanding the composition of the CIS peacekeeping force – perhaps first by including other members of the CIS, in an effort to boost Georgian confidence in the work of the peacekeepers. It is vital that the peacekeepers act to ensure the safe return of refugees to all parts of Abkhazia.

Other measures that could contribute to advancing negotiations might include humanitarian measures that focus on health concerns of the local population. As negotiations proceed along these lines, it will be helpful to broaden participation by the international community to ensure greater political (and economic) commitment to the negotiations process by actors outside the immediate region.

Madam Chairman, the FSC-PC format is a step above our previous debates on military technicalities in the FSC. This forum requires us to begin to lift our eyes above the debate about military matters, and to turn our attention to addressing the root problems. Military movements could well prove the spark, but in the long-run we need to clear away the tinder

that could turn this spark into a regional calamity. This meeting, if it is to have a lasting impact, must be the beginning of that process. We have offered our views in that spirit.

I request, Madam Chairman, that these remarks be placed in the journal of the day. Thank you.