



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Events in Georgia

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 13, 2006

Thank you, Mr. Chairman,

The United States wishes to express its concern over current events in Georgia's South Ossetia region and the situation on the border between Georgia and Russia.

On July 8th, Russian officials closed abruptly the Verkhniy Lars/Zemo Larsi border checkpoint into Georgia. According to the Georgian Government, this action was taken without the three-month notification to the Georgian authorities called for in the 1993 border checkpoints agreement between the two countries. The closure of this checkpoint means that there are at present no points under the control of the Government of Georgia through which persons and goods can pass legally across the Georgia-Russia border. In order to avert crisis, the Government of Georgia has agreed to allow non-commercial traffic to enter Georgia through the Roki Tunnel until July 14th. It is doing its best to apply proper enforcement of its visa and border controls at Ergneti.

Although we are aware of reports by the Commander of the Joint Peacekeeping Force that Georgia has established other roadblocks and checkpoints within the Zone of Conflict in South Ossetia, the OSCE Mission reports that these allegations are unfounded.

Clearly, this situation is unacceptable and must be resolved quickly. The unilateral halt to the legal flow of people and goods across the Georgia-Russia border harms the economic and humanitarian interests of the people of the region and beyond, including the population of Armenia. We urge strongly the Russian government to reconsider its actions and to re-open the Verkhniy Lars/Zemo Larsi checkpoint as soon as possible.

In addition, this situation further underscores the need for the OSCE to promote Georgia's ability to exercise sovereign control over its borders in order to facilitate legal trade in the region and reduce the smuggling, criminal activity, and flow of weapons and dangerous materials that are a result of the persisting unresolved conflicts. As a first step, we call on the OSCE to support the recommendation of the OSCE Mission for the establishment of a permanent checkpoint at Didi Gupta. In addition, we believe there is an urgent need for a mechanism for joint and international monitoring of the Roki Tunnel, and we call on OSCE members, especially the Russian Federation, to take necessary steps, in cooperation with Georgia and the OSCE Mission, to establish this. We also believe expansion of the zone of activities of the OSCE monitors to include all of South Ossetia and an increase in the numbers of monitors would be helpful steps. As a neutral party, OSCE Monitors can help reduce tensions on all sides by reporting on violations in the Zone of Conflict and verifying developments on the ground.

In this regard, we are concerned by the July 11th incident in which South Ossetian security forces detained two OSCE observers at gunpoint outside of Dzari. Armed officials got into the OSCE vehicles and forced the observers to drive to the South Ossetian *de facto* Interior Ministry in Tskhinvali, before their release was secured. This incident, like other recent instances of interference in the freedom of movement of the OSCE monitors, is a violation of existing protocols. We call for the strict observation of agreements regarding the freedom of movement of the OSCE monitors.

Mr. Chairman, we are also disturbed by the July 9th killing of South Ossetian *de facto* official Giorgi Albarov by an explosive outside of his home in Tskhinvali. While the circumstances of this incident are not yet clear, the United States condemns strongly any kind of violence, which can only inflame an already volatile situation.

We urge all parties to exercise restraint -- both in their actions and in their rhetoric -- to prevent an increase in tensions as a result of this incident. It is particularly important, in this regard, for the parties to the conflict to proceed with plans for the next meeting of the JCC to follow up on the encouraging progress made at the last session, particularly in the area of law enforcement cooperation, which holds great potential for building confidence between the sides and preventing further violence and criminality in the region.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.