



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Developments in Georgia

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 17, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Georgian President Saakashvili recently elaborated peace proposals for Abkhazia. The United States strongly supports these proposals. They are a constructive and responsible attempt to offer maximal autonomy to Abkhazia within Georgia, including linguistic and cultural autonomy, veto power over legislation dealing directly with Abkhazia, and guaranteed senior positions in the central government, including a proposed Vice Presidency.

The Saakashvili plan offers a clear path to resolving the conflict and ensuring the legitimate interests of the Abkhaz while restoring Georgia's territorial autonomy and allowing the safe and dignified return of over 200,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It is regrettable that the Abkhaz have rejected the initiative out of hand, and refuse to negotiate with Georgia in general.

We note with concern the Russian Presidential instructions issued April 16th allowing the Russian government to create "mechanisms" to "protect" the interests of Russian citizens and other residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and which, to this end, envision contacts with the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatist authorities on promotion of trade and educational and scientific exchanges. In this regard, the written document does not elaborate where such mechanisms would be located and where such services would be carried out.

While we appreciate assurances we have received from Russian government officials that there are no plans to locate these "mechanisms" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the immediate future, the text of the instructions leaves open this possibility. It indicates that regional affiliates of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Krasnodar and North Ossetian regions may provide consular services to permanent residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

We are also concerned by the statement in the instructions that Russian authorities will recognize as legally valid various documents and decisions taken by the governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This would have the effect of legitimating the actions and legislation of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatists. Georgia understandably views the instructions as a provocation and a serious challenge to its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Mr. Chairman, this move, coupled with Russia's recent lifting of CIS sanctions that opens the possibility for military assistance to Abkhazia, has significantly increased tensions in an already volatile region. In this regard, we expect Russia to live up to its recent assurances that Russia will abide by its international commitments and responsibilities not to supply weapons to conflict zones and to maintain Russian sanctions on the transfer of military services and equipment to separatist regions. Russia is supposed to be facilitating a peace process in Georgia but is instead openly siding with the separatists, calling into question Russia's facilitator role.

We urge Russia to respect Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to repeal the April 16th instructions, to play a constructive role in accordance with its commitment to act as a facilitator to the peace process, and to work with Georgia to encourage the Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders to engage on Georgia's new proposals for a peaceful settlement of the conflicts as a basis for finding a way forward.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.