

Handling crisis in Georgia

On 2 October, Georgian officials handed four Russian military officers, whom they had charged with espionage, over to the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht. The officers were then taken in OSCE vehicles to Tbilisi International Airport, where they boarded a Russian Emergencies Ministry aircraft and left the country. Martha Freeman, Spokeswoman of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, witnessed the events as they unfolded.

On the surface, this was an unusual course of action for the OSCE, but considering the rate at which tension had been escalating over the previous days, and the “diplomatic reach” and *raison d’être* of the Organization, it becomes clear why the OSCE was in a perfect position to broker an urgently-needed solution.

The row between Tbilisi and Moscow erupted on 27 September, when the Georgian Government arrested several Russian officers on espionage charges. The media and the public in both countries digested the story, as well as defiant comments from both sides. Russia dismissed the accusations. Georgia said it had evidence to back up the arrests. The two neighbours had staked out their positions unequivocally. Although agreement had to be reached quickly, neither side seemed prepared to back down.

On 29 September, the main channel for direct diplomatic dialogue on the ground was closed off when the Russian Ambassador to Georgia was recalled for consultations, and Moscow began evacuating Russian diplomatic staff and families, and stopped issuing visas to Georgian citizens.

At this point, the Chairman-in-Office was already engaged in intensive discussions with Georgian Foreign Minister Gela Bezhuashvili and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, as well as with

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and European Union High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, who were pressing for a diplomatic solution.

Two days later, Minister De Gucht’s Belgian Government plane touched down at Tbilisi International Airport. The Chairman-in-Office headed for the city, where he was to broker an unusual arrangement and peacefully resolve the crisis over the arrested military officers.

After meetings with the Georgian leadership, the Chairman-in-Office arrived at the Prosecutor-General’s Office, where the four Russian officers who were in custody were handed over to the OSCE at a ceremony organized in the presence of reporters and television cameras. President Saakashvili said he had ordered the four officers to be deported in what he called a gesture of goodwill.

Welcoming the release, Minister De Gucht said he was pleased that the OSCE had been able to find a

solution to the issue and to help defuse the considerable tension that had developed between the two States, adding: “Conflict prevention is a main focus for the OSCE. In terms of our comprehensive security agenda, it was logical and vital to help effectively manage this crisis.”



Tbilisi International Airport, 2 October 2006.

OSCE/STEVEN WEINBERG

At a joint press conference, President Saakashvili expressed gratitude to the OSCE for its efforts to resolve the situation. A few days later, Russian President Vladimir Putin wrote to Minister De Gucht to thank him for working closely with Minister Lavrov on the transfer of the Russian officers.

Minister De Gucht has made it clear that he is remaining in touch with both sides and is ready to use the OSCE’s proven good offices to help mediate between the two participating States, should they request it.

As he stated in an opinion piece in the *International Herald Tribune*, much work remains to be done. “End of story? Absolutely not. Tensions have not eased,” Minister De Gucht wrote. “It is not enough to return to the way things were before this crisis erupted.”