

Georgia says Russia at 'War'

Charles Clover and Harvey Morris

S Ossetia sees worst fighting in 20 years

International attempts to avert wider turmoil

International diplomats were scrambling last night to avert a wider regional crisis after the Russian military clashed with Georgian government forces in South Ossetia in the worst fighting in the breakaway enclave for nearly 20 years.

In New York, the UN Security Council announced a second emergency session after failing to reach agreement in the early hours on a statement about the crisis, which could potentially bring Moscow into confrontation with Washington, which backs the Georgian government.

Russia intervened to back the separatist government in South Ossetia and a small Russian peacekeeping force, after the Georgian army began asserting control over the region on Thursday night.

Georgia said it reserved the right to use all means to protect its civilian population in the absence of a negotiated settlement. President Mikheil Saakashvili told CNN: "We have continuous Russian bombardment since yesterday... specifically targeting the civilian population ... Russia is fighting a war with us in our own territory."

In another televised address he put the Georgian death toll at 30.

In Beijing attending the Olympics opening ceremony, George W. Bush, US president, and Vladimir Putin, Russian prime minister, discussed the situation.

A White House spokeswoman said in a statement: "President Bush has been regularly updated on the situation. I want to reiterate on his behalf that the United States supports Georgia's territorial integrity and we call for an immediate ceasefire."

Mr Putin, meanwhile, condemned "aggressive actions" by Georgian troops and said Russia would be compelled to retaliate. "They have in effect begun hostilities using tanks and artillery," he added. "It is sad, but this will provoke retaliatory measures."

South Ossetia has had de facto independence from Georgia since the 1991 civil war, but after coming to power in 2004 Mr Saakashvili pledged to bring all Georgia's separatist regions under the control of his government.

Last spring Georgia began negotiations to join Nato, angering Russia.

Moscow has always supported the South Ossetian government, as well as the neighbouring breakaway region of Abkhazia, and Georgia accuses Russia of seeking to annex the two territories, which Russia denies.

Mr Saakashvili told CNN that Russia was fighting a war with his country and that Georgians were "looking with hope" to America, but he did not specifically appeal for US help.

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Battle of feints explodes into heavy fighting

After the worst hostilities in South Ossetia since 2004, Charles Clover looks at the origins of the tension

Hostility between Ossetians and Georgians stretches back at least as far as 1839 when Mikhail Lermontov, wrote "Demon", a poem about the enmities that pervaded life in the high mountains of the Caucasus.

When a Georgian prince was ambushed on his way to his wedding, "the wicked bullet of the Ossetian / found him in the darkness", Lermontov wrote. As Russia stood on the brink of war with Georgia over control of South Ossetia yesterday, the words were a useful reminder that things had changed little in 150 years.

Historically, Russia has played tribes and ethnic groups off against one another in a bid to divide and rule the troublesome region. The three-sided conflict between South Ossetia, Georgia and Russia harks back to old imperial policy.

Ossetia was independent of Georgia but was absorbed into the Russian empire with Georgia in 1801 and, when the Soviet republic of Georgia was formed, following the revolution of 1917, the southern part of Ossetia became part of it. North Ossetia stayed in Russia.

As the USSR collapsed in 1991, South Ossetians moved to reclaim their independence from Georgia and, aided by Moscow, fought a brief civil war, broke away and began running their own affairs.

The Georgian government claims Moscow supported and continues to support the rebels. After the introduction of Russian peacekeepers into the region, Georgia plausibly claimed that the Russian garrison of 1,000 tacitly supported the rebels.

For the 12 years following the civil war an uneasy truce reigned between Tbilisi and the breakaway capital in Tskhinvali. But this changed with the election of Mikheil Saakashvili as president of Georgia in 2004.

The US-backed Mr Saakashvili made restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia his priority. Neighbouring Abkhazia, another Russia-backed breakaway region, and South Ossetia again became the site of sporadic fighting as Tbilisi unsuccessfully tried to retake the regions. Its efforts included setting up a rival government to the Russian-backed Eduard Kokoity in South Ossetia.

Since November 2006 Tbilisi has supported an alternative de facto South Ossetian administration led by Dmitri Sanakoev.

With two competing governments struggling for legitimacy, an inexperienced and easily provoked Georgian government in Tbilisi, and an increasingly belligerent and assertive Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the situation was ripe to spiral out of control.

The flames were fanned by increasing distrust between Russia and the US as each jostled for influence in the region - the US supporting the Georgian government and Russia supporting the separatists.

This spring negotiations between Georgia and Nato over Georgia's possible accession to the Atlantic alliance shocked Russia, which is deeply opposed to the movement of Nato closer to its borders.

According to Dmitri Trenin, analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, the Russian position on Georgia's Nato bid was that "they can either be in Nato or they can have Abkhazia and South Ossetia".

Since the Nato bid, he said, the two sides had been engaged in a low-key battle of feints, deceptions and provocations - each trying to provoke the other into showing itself to be irresponsible and aggressive.

"The Georgians have been trying to get the Russians to show their true colours, that they are empire-minded and expansionist," Mr Trenin said. That would help the pro-western government convince the west that it needed the protection of Nato membership.

For their part, the Russians were doing their best to provoke the Georgian government "to show them to be irresponsible firebrands" and thus unfit for Nato membership, he said.

The spark came last Friday, with the heaviest fighting since 2004. A western diplomat in Tbilisi who had travelled to Tskhinvali said it was difficult to tell who started shooting first. "What is clear is that last Friday there was a bomb attack on a Georgian vehicle, which injured six people; a response from Georgia, which ended up killing six on the south Ossetian side; then a pause; and then heavy fighting resumed," the diplomat said.

With Georgian forces seemingly in a pitched battle with Russian peacekeepers around Tskhinvali, and the arrival of Russian forces as reinforcements, Mr Trenin said: "I am afraid this is just the beginning of a much, much bigger problem."

Fonte: Financial Times, London, August 9/ August 10 2008. Primeiro Caderno. p.1-2.

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