

Georgia to pull out all troops from Iraq

AFP, Kut

Georgia will withdraw its entire 2,000-strong military contingent from Iraq within three days to help battle South Ossetian separatist rebels, a senior Georgian military official said yesterday.

"We are actually in the stage of preparing our departure," Colonel Bodo Maisuradze, chief of Georgia's military operations in Iraq, told AFP.

"It will definitely not be today. We are discussing with the Americans the conditions of our departure which may take place tomorrow or the day after tomorrow," said Maisuradze in Baghdad.

The US military has agreed to help with the logistics of the Georgian redeployment, Maisuradze added.

The move came as Georgian and Russian forces were locked in combat on Saturday over the breakaway Georgian province.



A building burns yesterday in Gori, central Georgia, during the armed conflict between Georgian troops and South Ossetian separatist troops.

US, Europeans scramble to prevent Georgia-Russia war

AFP, Washington

The United States and European Union are leading a diplomatic push to prevent all-out war between Georgia and Russia, calling for a ceasefire as Russian tanks rolled into a rebel Georgian province.

Envoy from the US, EU and Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) were being deployed to Georgia to seek an end to the fighting in Russian-backed South Ossetia, a breakaway region of Western-backed Georgia.

On Friday, Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte summoned Russian Charge d'Affaires Alexander Darchiyev to the State Department to press Moscow to cease military operations in

Georgia.

"The United States calls for an immediate ceasefire to the armed conflict in Georgia's region of South Ossetia," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a statement Friday.

"We call on Russia to cease attacks on Georgia by aircraft and missiles, respect Georgia's territorial integrity, and withdraw its ground combat forces from Georgian soil," she said.

The United States was working actively with its European allies to launch international mediation to end the crisis, Rice said, adding that senior US officials have spoken with the parties in the conflict.

"We underscore the international community's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial

integrity within its internationally recognised borders, as articulated in numerous UN Security Council resolutions," she said.

US president George W. Bush spoke to Rice and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley about the crisis from Beijing, where he is attending the Olympic Games, White House spokeswoman Dana Perino told reporters.

Russian tanks and troops surged into South Ossetia on Friday to repel a Georgian offensive to reclaim the region amid fighting said to have left hundreds dead.

On Saturday, the Russian army announced it had "liberated" the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali as Georgia declared a "state of war."

South Ossetia broke from Georgia in the early 1990s. It has

since been a constant source of friction between Georgia and Russia, which disputes Tbilisi's hopes of joining Nato.

South Ossetia has long sought unification with North Ossetia which is inhabited by the same Ossetian ethnic group but ended up across the border in Russia after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Georgian government, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili, announced it would withdraw its 2,000 troops that are part of the US-led coalition in Iraq to help the fight in South Ossetia.

The EU presidency said it was in contact with all protagonists and working to secure a ceasefire "so as to avoid an extension of the conflict."

History behind South Ossetia's push for independence

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Why has fighting broken out in South Ossetia?

The South Ossetians and Georgians have been sniping at each other, both with words and guns, for several weeks now, and patience on both sides has finally snapped. South Ossetia and Georgia's other breakaway region, Abkhazia, have had de facto independence since the early 1990s, but Tbilisi has never recognised the loss of its territory. The dispute between Georgia and the two regions was called "the frozen conflict" because the issues remained unresolved but there was no fighting. The ice began to melt, and the heat to rise, earlier this year when the west recognised Kosovo, against Russia's advice. The South Ossetians and Abkhazians argued that if Kosovo

could be independent, then so could they, and renewed their struggle for freedom.

What is the basis of the regions' claim to independence?

The Ossetians are descendants of a tribe called the Alans. Like the Georgians, the Ossetians are orthodox Christians, but they have their own language. In Soviet times the Ossetians had an autonomous region within Georgia. The Georgians say the Ossetians cooperated with the Bolsheviks and tended to be more pro-Soviet. Their ethnic kin live across the border in the Russian region of North Ossetia, so they feel more drawn to Russia than to Georgia - and many have Russian passports. Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast also had autonomy within Georgia during Soviet times. Because of its sub-tropical climate, it was the playground of Soviet leaders and is

popular with Russian tourists today. It has a mixed population of Abkhazians, Mingrelians, Greeks, Armenians, Russians and Georgians, and a small but significant Muslim minority. Thousands of ethnic Georgians fled their homes in Abkhazia during the civil war at the beginning of the 1990s and now live as refugees in Tbilisi and Moscow.

Why has Russia become involved?

Russia says it cannot stand aside because many of the people in the breakaway regions are now its citizens. Georgia says Russia is meddling in its internal affairs and supporting the separatists, although Russia's peacekeepers are supposed to be neutral. Georgia accuses Russia of double standards in suppressing its own separatist rebellion in Chechnya while encouraging separatists in Georgia. Russia has become more engaged in the region since

Georgia expressed an interest in joining Nato, an idea that Russia staunchly opposes.

What might happen next?

So far, this has been a proxy war, with Russia encouraging the separatists, but Moscow and Tbilisi could find themselves in direct conflict. Russia's prime minister, Vladimir Putin, today accused Georgia of aggression and warned that a response was inevitable.

Georgia said Russian jets had started bombing its territory.

What are the wider implications? The conflict could widen to bring in other Soviet republics, the US and Europe. The root of the problem is that the international community cannot agree on rules for the independence of small regions. Russia said that granting independence to Kosovo would set a dangerous precedent. Moscow now seems determined to prove it was right all along.

Timeline

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

1237-40 - Mongols invade Russia, forcing Ossetians to migrate south over the Caucasus mountains to present-day Georgia.

1918 - Georgia declares independence following the Russian revolution.

1990-91 - South Ossetia declares its intentions to secede, leading to more clashes.

1991 - The Soviet Union collapses. 1992 - South Ossetians vote in favour of independence in an unrecognised referendum.

November 1993 - South Ossetia drafts its own constitution.

November 1996 - South Ossetia elects its first president.

December 2001 - South Ossetia elects wrestling champion Eduard Kokoity as president in unrecognised elections.

2002 - Kokoity asks Moscow to recognise the republic's independence and absorb it into Russia.

2003 - The Georgian president, Eduard Shevardnadze, is toppled in the rose revolution.

2004 - Mikheil Saakashvili wins Georgian presidential election and declares his intentions to bring breakaway regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Ajara back into the fold.

2006 - South Ossetians vote overwhelmingly in favour of independence from Tbilisi in an unrecognised referendum.

October 2007 - Talks hosted by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe between Georgia and South Ossetia breakdown.

March 2008 - South Ossetia asks the world to recognise its independence from Georgia.

March 2008 - Georgia's bid to join Nato prompts Russia's parliament to urge the Kremlin to recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

April 2008 - South Ossetia rejects a Georgian power-sharing deal and insists on full independence.

August 2008 - Fighting breaks out between Georgian and separatist South Ossetian forces.

The tussle for South Ossetia

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

South Ossetia, about 60 miles (100 km) north of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, broke away from Georgia in a 1991-92 war that left several thousand people dead. It has close ties with the neighbouring Russian region of North Ossetia.

The majority of the roughly 70,000 people living in South Ossetia are ethnically distinct from Georgians. They complain that they were forcibly absorbed into Georgia under Soviet rule and want self-determination.

A peacekeeping force made up

of soldiers from Russia, Georgia and North Ossetia monitors a 1992 truce. Tbilisi accuses Russian peacekeepers of siding with separatists, something Moscow denies. Sporadic clashes between separatist and Georgian forces have killed dozens of people in the last few years.

The Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, has proposed a peace deal that would give South Ossetia "a large degree of autonomy" within a federal state. But the separatist leader, Eduard Kokoity, says he wants full independence.

In November 2006, Georgian-controlled villages inside South

Ossetia elected a rival leader, the ex-separatist Dmitry Sanakoyev. While he is endorsed by Tbilisi, his authority only extends to a small part of the region.

Russia has found itself pitted against the west for control of the Caucasus region, which is increasingly important as an energy transit route.

This tension has been heightened by Georgia's pro-western government, and more recently its application to become a member of Nato, which would bring western forces right up to Russia's borders.

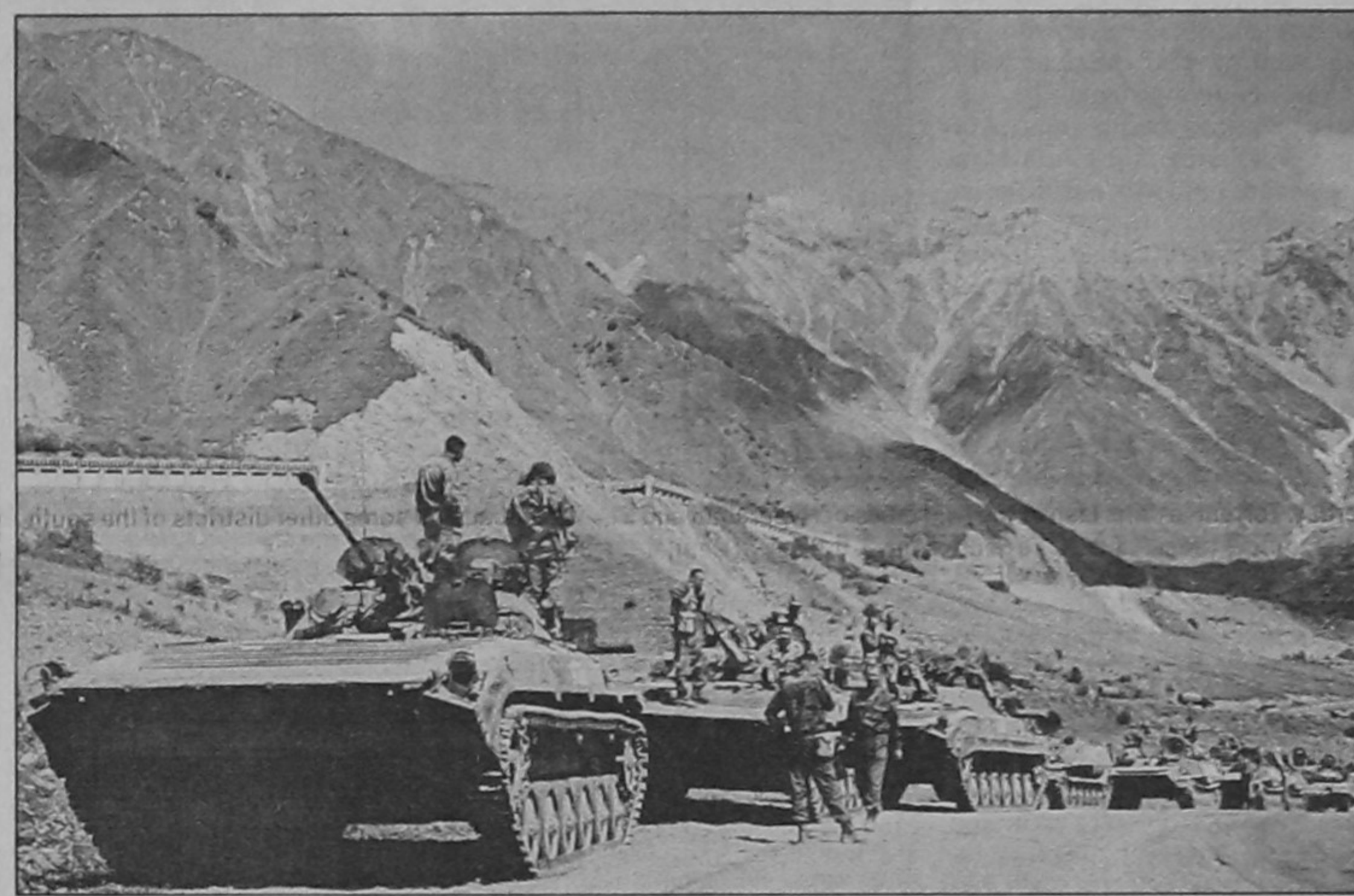


PHOTO: AFP

A convoy of Russian troops makes its way through the mountains toward the armed conflict between Georgian troops and separatist South Ossetian rebels in the South Ossetian village of Dzhaba yesterday. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili declared a "state of war" as his troops battled it out with Russian forces over the breakaway province of South Ossetia.

Ex-US candidate Edwards admits adulterous affair

AFP, Washington

Two-time Democratic presidential candidate John Edwards, whose wife is ill with incurable cancer, admitted Friday he had had an extramarital affair but denied fathering the woman's baby.

Edwards, 54, apologized profusely for the affair, which he had repeatedly denied, and admitted that life on the campaign trail had made him "increasingly egocentric and narcissistic."

Iran in new oil money move to dodge sanctions

AFP, Tehran

Iran's government has ordered the state oil company to deposit oil revenues only in selected banks in a bid to dodge toughening sanctions over its nuclear drive, local media reported on Saturday.

The state-run National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) had been free to choose where to deposit the tens of billions of dollars Iran receives annually in earnings from its crude oil exports.

But a new government directive said the NIOC could now deposit the foreign currency only in foreign banks previously selected by the central bank.

"NIOC is from now on obliged to deposit 100 percent of crude oil export income in foreign bank accounts that are chosen by the Central Bank of Iran," state television quoted the new government directive as saying.

The order did not say on which criteria the foreign banks would be

selected.

Iran said on Friday talks on its controversial nuclear drive with top UN atomic watchdog official Olli Heinonen were "positive", as EU governments imposed fresh sanctions on the Islamic republic.

Heinonen, deputy head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), wrapped up two days of meetings with Iranian nuclear officials who did not give further details on the nature of the talks in Tehran.

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