

## **Georgia Must Be Whole and Free**

By Yousif Ghafari, U.S. Ambassador

Every four years, the world traditionally puts aside its disputes to cheer on its athletes during the uplifting quadrennial spectacle of the Olympic Games. During this Olympic year, however, we've been treated to a spectacle that has been anything but uplifting, as Russian tanks, troops, and planes have swept across the border of one of its small neighbors. Although the neighbor was Georgia, not Czechoslovakia, and the tanks bore Russian, not Soviet Union markings, the scene was chillingly reminiscent of 1968.

The aftermath of these events has been equally disturbing. Russian troops have refused so far to leave, and have dug in to positions not only in Georgia's disputed areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but also in Georgia proper, all in violation of Georgia's territorial integrity.

On Tuesday, NATO foreign ministers issued a strong statement in support of Georgia's territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty, as well as its democratically elected government. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the statement also "sent a message to Russia that NATO will not permit a new line to develop in Europe between those states that are a part of the transatlantic structures and those states that still aspire."

The world's attention now is focused on two urgent objectives: Bringing a halt to all hostilities and abuses in the conflict area, including those committed by "irregulars" in Russian-controlled areas, and helping the survivors of the conflict. Both Georgia and Russia have signed a ceasefire agreement, but the world is still waiting for Russia to honor it. Meanwhile, there is an urgent need to allow humanitarian workers in. The United States and other countries have already begun delivering medical care and supplies, food, shelter, and other assistance to the survivors. While the exact number of dead and wounded is still unknown, it is clear that the people of Georgia are facing a humanitarian crisis in the swath of destruction left behind.

Georgia's separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have had a long history of tension. But anyone who takes a closer look at the events of the past year should not be surprised by the events of the last few weeks. Moscow has been steadily intensifying pressure on Georgia economically, politically, and militarily, launching trade embargos and suspending air and ground transport links. In the spring, Russia issued a government order to increase its official ties with the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, completely bypassing the Georgian authorities.

Russia's challenges then became more ominous. Last April, a Russian fighter jet shot down a Georgian drone over Georgian airspace, and in that same month, Russian combat troops and artillery began moving into Abkhazia, all on the pretext of augmenting the peacekeeping force – but without any consultation with Georgia. In May, Russia sent railroad construction troops into Abkhazia – with no apparent legal mandate – to repair

the railway leading south from Russia to the conflict zone, ostensibly for “humanitarian reasons.” By July, incidents of violence were occurring in South Ossetia, including attacks on Georgian police vehicles and an attempted assassination of a pro-Georgian South Ossetian leader.

Throughout this period, U.S. officials urged the Russian and Georgian governments to exercise restraint and find a way to resolve their differences peacefully. On August 7, after Georgia responded to shelling of Georgian villages that came from Russian peacekeeper-controlled territory in South Ossetia and moved to reclaim parts of South Ossetia, an overwhelming Russian force swarmed through South Ossetia and into Abkhazia and Georgia proper. Russia is now questioning Georgia’s territorial integrity and intimating that it may recognize the independence of both disputed areas, despite numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions aimed at resolving their status diplomatically.

The scenes of Russian aggression – and now the threats, both direct and indirect, against other countries such as Poland and Ukraine – have brought back frightening memories to the former captive states which have since chosen a Western model of freedom and democracy. But the world we live in today is different from 1968, when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. Since then, Europe, the transatlantic community, and the world have moved forward. Russia has sought to integrate into the diplomatic, political, economic, and security structures of the 21st century, and the United States has strongly supported those efforts.

But through its actions Russia has now put its international reputation and aspirations at risk. The impact of its actions is already being felt as questions are being raised about Russia’s suitability for admission into the World Trade Organization, and the prestige of an eighth seat at the G-7 economic forum. Some critics are even questioning the appropriateness of Russia hosting the next Olympics in Sochi, which is only a marathon’s race away from the disputed territory of Abkhazia. The Russian people may learn that the cost of last week’s aggression will be measured in ways that their leaders never considered.

If Russia wants to repair the damage to its reputation – and to its relations with the rest of the world – the first step it must take is to respect the ceasefire its president has signed and stop all hostilities, including those committed by irregulars in the areas it is now occupying. In accordance with the terms of that ceasefire, it must immediately remove from Georgia the troops it introduced after August 6. It must also permit international monitors and a more robust international presence in South Ossetia; allow humanitarian aid to be delivered; and adhere to Russia’s previously professed policy of supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity.

Without those actions, Russia will further isolate itself. As Sec. Rice said after the NATO meeting: “There can be no business as usual with Russia while this kind of activity is going on.”