

Georgian troops move into Abkhazia

by Konstantin George

The crisis in the Georgian region of Abkhazia, located on the Black Sea coast, has in the last days of August embroiled the entire Caucasus region in the prelude to a major shooting war that could easily exceed the carnage between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. This war will draw into its maelstrom every one of the Muslim mountain tribes of the Russian-ruled North Caucasus, and a Russian involvement is certain, the only questions being exactly how, and when.

The immediate background to this full eruption was the crisis that reached its first high point in July, when Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia. On Aug. 22-23, Georgian National Guards entered Abkhazia to crush the secession and seized its capital of Sukhumi. The government of Abkhazia and the head of its parliament, Vladislav Ardsinba, fled to the town of Gudauta, some 40 kilometers north of Sukhumi. They vowed to continue resistance in the form of a prolonged guerrilla war, and appealed for military aid from all the other Muslim tribes of the Caucasus, and from Russia as well.

That appeal was long expected, and the response of the Muslim mountain tribes of the Caucasus was well planned. These tribes had banded together into an organization called the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, led by the renegade general Djabar Dudayev, head of the self-proclaimed "Chechen Republic" in the North Caucasus, which seceded from Russia last autumn. This was the final step in ensuring an internationalized war over Abkhazia.

Dudayev's "regime" can tap huge financial resources, including foreign currency, courtesy of the "Chechen mafia," perhaps the single most powerful organized crime mafia in the former Soviet Union. Dudayev operates in a closely coordinated alliance with deposed Georgian dictator Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who in turn is backed by leading figures of the "Georgian mafia," and who, since his overthrow in January, has found refuge in the Chechen capital of Grozny. On the Georgian side of things, Abkhazia and the neighboring region of Mingrelia, together form the West Georgia bastion of the armed rebels loyal to Gamsakhurdia. It was these forces who initiated the fighting inside Abkhazia, setting the stage for Dudayev's "Confederation" to move in.

Caucasus-wide conflict begins

As the Georgian troops were occupying Sukhumi, on Aug. 22, the "Confederation of Mountain Peoples" convened in the Chechen capital of Grozny, chaired by Dudayev. All the tribes were represented: the Chechens, the Ingush, the Dagestanis, the Ossetians, the peoples of Kabardino-Balkar, etc. For Dudayev, this was a coup, as he had succeeded in uniting these tribes, many of which are hostile toward each other, on the one issue they could have been united around: support for the Abkhazians. The meeting adopted unanimously a resolution for the immediate dispatch of armed "volunteer units" to Abkhazia.

This caused an emergency session the next day of the Georgian State Council, chaired by President Eduard Shevardnadze, which adopted urgent countermeasures for what was threatening to become a major war. These measures included placing the Georgian National Guard on a state of alert, and ordering a general mobilization.

The provocations by armed rebels loyal to Gamsakhurdia and General Dudayev have thus accomplished their goal of embroiling the entire Caucasus in the conflict.

Through their military intervention to crush Abkhazian autonomy, the Georgian State Council under Shevardnadze, wittingly or unwittingly, fell for the trap laid by the Gamsakhurdia-Dudayev "axis," by creating the one situation where Dudayev could succeed in uniting all the mountain tribes behind him. By doing so, the full dimension of the Caucasus crisis has been extended onto Russian soil, forcing a strong Russian reaction to prevent the process of fragmentation from reaching inside the Russian Federation itself.

On the brink

By Aug. 26, the outbreak of all-out warfare appeared imminent. Abkhazian and Muslim tribe forces attacked the coastal town of Gagra. In very heavy fighting, at least 80 people were killed, according to the Russian news agency Interfax, and the Georgian garrison was under siege. The Georgian General Staff ordered warships to the town, to give fire support, and prepare for a possible evacuation by ship. On the same day, Abkhazian forces, together with armed tribal volunteers, re-entered Sukhumi and tried, unsuccessfully, to seize the main railroad station.

Georgian reinforcements were also pouring in. On Aug. 25, the commander of Georgian National Guard troops in Abkhazia, issued an ultimatum to the president of the Abkhazian parliament, Vladislav Ardsinba, demanding that he surrender or else Georgian troops would attack his stronghold in the town of Gudauta. Ardsinba and the Abkhazian government had fled there Aug. 22-23, after Georgian troops occupied Sukhumi. Abkhazia has rejected the ultimatum.

A parallel ultimatum was issued by Shevardnadze, demanding that all armed "volunteer" units sent into Abkhazia from the "Confederation of Mountain Tribes," be immediately withdrawn from Abkhazia. This ultimatum was likewise



Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. His military intervention in Abkhazia unified all the mountain tribes against him, expanding the scope of the conflict.

rejected, and the stage is set for large-scale fighting. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, some 1,000 such armed "volunteers" were in Abkhazia by Aug. 25, including some 500 in Gudauta, to defend the Abkhazian government. Their existence in Gudauta was confirmed, when mountain tribe units attacked the token Georgian detachments in Gudauta, killing six guardsmen. Another 80 were hastily evacuated by Russian military helicopters. The first armed clashes were reported on the Russian-Abkhazian border on Aug. 25, as Georgian troops tried to stop the infiltration of armed tribesmen from the North Caucasus.

Direct Russian involvement is now only a matter of time, in the form of Russian Cossack "volunteers," as confirmed in a statement by the organization of Russian Cossacks that they would move into Abkhazia to "protect Russians," if they are attacked or threatened. Both sides in the conflict, the Georgian government and the Abkhazians, have appealed for Russia to intervene on their side. As an editorial in the Aug. 25 newspaper *Trud* stated, "Russia is staying neutral so far, but it remains to be seen for how long. . . . Both sides are appealing to Russia, asking for its help, or warning that an Abkhazian secession from Georgia may signal the beginning of Russia's breakup into separate states."

An emergency meeting between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Georgian President Shevardnadze to try and settle the crisis peacefully has been set for Sept. 3. No one is betting on its success.

'Khalistan, Inc.' suffers heavy losses

by Ramtanu Maitra

Despite occasional blusters issued by U.S. Reps. Dan Burton (R-Ind.), Wally Herger (D-Calif.), and a few others who are politically funded by "Khalistan, Inc.," and despite the presence of a sad-faced president of the Council of Khalistan, Gurmit Singh Aulakh, at the Republican Party Convention in Houston, all is not well with the foot soldiers of the Sikh secessionist movement in India. The Sikh secessionists claim the Indian state of Punjab as their nation of Khalistan.

According to available information, in 1992 alone, the Punjab Police have gunned down at least 20 top Khalistani terrorists. Among the militant luminaries, some of whom were wanted for 200 murders or more, are the chief of the Babbar Khalsa; chief and deputy chief of the Khalistan Liberation Front; and chief of the Bhindranwale Tiger Force of Khalistan.

It is difficult to pinpoint why these militants, who had been rampaging along merrily for almost a decade, have suddenly begun to bite the dust. One possible answer is the revamping of the Punjab Police, now under a crop of young officers, which enabled the security forces to successfully infiltrate the rank and file of various terrorist groups. Now, the Khalistani militant organizations, built around cult-like figures, have been turned into leaderless packs, though they still possess a great deal of killing power.

The Sibia revelations

Another explanation came from one Gurdip Singh Sibia, a Sikh of British nationality, who claims to be the chief organizer of the Babbar Khalsa International. Sibia recently surrendered to Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh before a large crowd, after he had come to realize that the security services were hot on his trail, and he would soon be annihilated.

At the time of his surrender, Sibia gave up the fight only after fully realizing Pakistan's role. Sibia told journalists that, while Pakistan was providing arms and training to the militant Sikhs, it had refused to bring the Punjab issue to the international forums. Sibia said that finally it dawned on him that, while the Pakistani government in Islamabad is interested in getting back the Indian part of Kashmir, which borders Punjab, support to the Khalistanis was provided mainly to destabilize India.