



WASHINGTON, D.C. August 13, 2008

TO: NCSJ Leadership and Interested Parties

FROM: Edward B. Robin, Chairman;
Lesley Israel, NCSJ President;
Mark B. Levin, NCSJ Executive Director

In Brief: Crisis in Georgia

Dear Friend,

Given the ongoing crisis in Georgia, we are sending you a special edition of the Weekly Update. In the last few hours I have spoken to a senior Georgian government official and a Tbilisi Jewish community leader about the current situation. Both report that the ceasefire brokered by French President Nicholas Sarkozy last night is not being adhered to by the Russian government. Russian soldiers and tanks remain in Georgia and appear to be moving toward Tbilisi. Also, the community leader reported that a small number of Jews remain in the Georgian city of Gori, refusing to leave their homes.

In order to better understand the reasons behind this conflict, we have included an excellent *New York Times* story detailing the long and complicated history between Russia and Georgia. Also, there are several stories about the courageous efforts of international Jewish relief organizations in meeting the needs of the Jewish population in Georgia.

This afternoon President Bush announced that the United States began a humanitarian relief airlift to Georgia and is sending Secretary of State Rice to Georgia to oversee American efforts in the region. We have enclosed reports on both Bush's and Rice's press conferences. Russia remains indifferent to the United States' and Europe's call to leave Georgia.

We will continue to keep you posted of the latest developments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Mark B. Levin'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mark B. Levin
Executive Director



Advocates on behalf of Jews in Russia,
Ukraine, the Baltic States & Eurasia

NCSJ WEEKLY NEWS BRIEF
Washington, D.C. August 13, 2008

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#1

Jewish Leaders Urge Immediate End to Georgian Conflict

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**NCSJ Joint Statement with the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations
August 11, 2008**

New York - The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations and NCSJ: Advocates on Behalf of Jews in Russia, Ukraine, The Baltic States and Eurasia are deeply concerned about the troubling developments of the past days in Georgia. We urge that the cease-fire be implemented fully and immediately and that the status quo ante be reestablished. We are pained by the loss of life and injuries to people on all sides and to civilian populations in the region. We urge the international community to assist the victims and those seeking refuge from the areas of conflict. We also believe that the territorial integrity of Georgia must be recognized and upheld.

In February of this year we visited Georgia, as we have other countries in the region in recent years. This was in recognition of the close ties between the United States and Georgia and its movement towards democratization. We have long had ties to the ancient Jewish community that has been in Georgia for more than 2,600 years. The personal relationships that we developed add to our anxiety over the ongoing violence. Any issues should be dealt with at the negotiating table.

We applaud the efforts of the United States government and other countries to resolve the current crisis and we support the redoubling of all efforts to bring about a speedy resolution.

#2

Taunting the Bear

Russia and Georgia were going to erupt. It was really just a question of when.

By James Traub

New York Times, August 10, 2008

The hostilities between Russia and Georgia that erupted on Friday over the breakaway province of South Ossetia look, in retrospect, almost absurdly over-determined. For years, the Russians have claimed that Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, has been preparing to retake the disputed regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and have warned that they would use force to block such a bid. Mr. Saakashvili, for his part, describes today's Russia as a belligerent power ruthlessly pressing at its borders, implacably hostile to democratic neighbors like Georgia and Ukraine. He has thrown in his lot with the West, and has campaigned ardently for membership in NATO. Vladimir V. Putin, Russia's former president and current prime minister, has said Russia could never accept a NATO presence in the Caucasus.

The border between Georgia and Russia, in short, has been the driest of tinder; the only question was where the fire would start.

It's scarcely clear yet how things will stand between the two when the smoke clears. But it's safe to say that while Russia has a massive advantage in firepower, Georgia, an open, free-market, more-or-less-democratic nation that sees itself as a distant outpost of Europe, enjoys a decisive rhetorical and political edge. In recent conversations there, President Saakashvili compared Georgia to Czechoslovakia in 1938, trusting the West to save it from a ravenous neighbor. "If Georgia fails," he said to me darkly two months ago, "it will send a message to everyone that this path doesn't work."

During a 10-day visit to Georgia in June, I heard the 1938 analogy again and again, as well as another to 1921, when Bolshevik troops crushed Georgia's thrilling, and brief, first experiment with liberal rule.

Georgians are a melodramatic people, and few more so than their hyperactive president; but they have good reason to fear the ambitions, and the wrath, of a rejuvenated Russia seeking to regain lost power. Indeed, a renascent and increasingly bellicose Russia is an ominous spectacle for the West too. While China preaches, and largely practices, the doctrine of "peaceful rise," avoiding confrontation abroad in order to focus on development at home, Russia acts increasingly like an expansionist 19th-century power, pressing at its borders. Most strikingly, Russia has bluntly deployed its vast oil and gas resources to punish refractory neighbors like Ukraine, and reward compliant ones like Armenia.

A senior American official said that while the United States and Russia have common interests, Russia has become "a revisionist and aggressive power," and the West "has to be prepared to push back." But the Bush administration also recognizes that Russia has legitimate security interests, and that Mr. Saakashvili has played a dangerous game of baiting the Russian bear. Officials were laboring into the weekend — in vain, they feared — to coax both sides back to their corners. For much of the diplomatic and policy-making world, the border where Georgia faces Russia, with South Ossetia and Abkhazia between them, has become a new cold war frontier.

Georgia ardently aspires to join the peaceable kingdom of Europe; but to talk to Georgians about Russia is to enter a cold war time warp. I was speaking one evening to the owner of a fine antiques shop in Tbilisi when the conversation somehow swerved to Russia. "These Russians are so stupid," he cried. "They do not know what is friend. They would rather have angry enemies than real friends." Russia's apparent hatred for Georgia provoked endless bewilderment, and no little bit of pride. I heard from three different people about a poll in which Georgia had just surged ahead of the United States as the country Russians identified as Enemy No. 1. Georgians insist that they are free of such zero-sum pathologies, though you might have thought otherwise if you had listened to the crowd in Betsy's Hotel in Tbilisi during the Russia-Holland quarterfinal of the Euro Cup; suddenly the Dutch were everyone's darling.

SUBMISSION AND REBELLION

The roots of this bitter relationship are deep and tangled, as is practically everything in the archaic world of the Caucasus. Modern Georgian history is a record of submission to superior Russian power. Threatened by the expanding Persian empire, in 1783 the Georgians formally accepted the protection of Russia; this polite fiction ended when Russia annexed Georgia in 1801. The chaos of the Russian Revolution finally gave Georgia a chance to restore its sovereignty a century later. The Georgians were Mensheviks — social democrats, in effect — and for three years enjoyed one of the world's most progressive governments. The Bolshevik government signed a treaty respecting Georgia's independence — which Europe, as President Saakashvili pointedly reminded me, naïvely insisted on taking at face value. By the time the Europeans woke up to reality, it was too late.

From the time of Pushkin, Russians viewed Georgia as a romantic, exotic frontier. During the long puritanical deep-freeze of Communism, Georgia served as Russia's Italy — a warm, lotus-eating sanctuary of singers and poets and swashbuckling gangsters. The elite had their beloved dachas on the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia. At the same time, Stalin, though himself Georgian, kept the republic subdued through brutal purges. The head of the Georgian Communist party was Lavrenti Beria, a cold-blooded killer who would become the master architect of Stalin's terror. The Georgians, though helpless, never accepted their Soviet identity, and preserved their language, culture, religious practice and sense of national identity, as they had under the czars. And when, at last, the Soviet empire collapsed as the czarist one had, Georgia immediately broke away and declared its independence, in 1991.

The infant country spent the next decade stagnating under the Soviet-style rule of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former foreign minister to Mikhail Gorbachev. But in 2003, Mr. Shevardnadze was peacefully overthrown in what came to be known as the Rose Revolution. Mr. Saakashvili was elected the following year. Since then, Georgia has become a poster child for Westernization. The growth rate has reached 12 percent. The countryside remains impoverished, but what the outside world sees of Georgia is delightful. Tbilisi is a

charming city, its ancient Orthodox churches restored to life, the lanes of the old city lined with cafes and art galleries. Mr. Saakashvili has also made Georgia one of the world's most — or few — pro-American countries. President Bush received a rapturous welcome when he visited in 2005, and the road to the airport has now been named after him, complete with a large poster of the president.

RUSSIA RESURGENT

It was, of course, at this very moment that another ambitious young figure was reshaping Russia's politics, economy and self-image. The combination of Vladimir Putin's reforms and the dizzying rise in the price of oil and gas have rapidly restored Russia to the status of world power. And Mr. Putin has harnessed that power in the service of aggressive nationalism.

Marshall Goldman, a leading Russia scholar, argues in a recent book that Mr. Putin has established a "petrostate," in which oil and gas are strategically deployed as punishments, rewards and threats. The author details the lengths to which Mr. Putin has gone to retain control over the delivery of natural gas from Central Asia to the West. A proposed alternative pipeline would skirt Russia and run through Georgia, as an oil pipeline now does. "If Georgia collapses in turmoil," Mr. Goldman notes, "investors will not put up the money for a bypass pipeline." And so, he concludes, Mr. Putin has done his best to destabilize the Saakashvili regime.

But economic considerations alone scarcely account for what appears to be an obsession with Georgia. The "color revolutions" that swept across Ukraine, the Balkans and the Caucasus in the first years of the new century plainly unnerved Mr. Putin, who has denounced America's policy of "democracy promotion" and stifled foreign organizations seeking to promote human rights in Russia. Georgia, with its open embrace of the West, thus represents a threat to the legitimacy of Russia's authoritarian model. And this challenge is immensely compounded by Georgia's fervent aspiration to join NATO, one of Russia's red lines. Russian officials frequently recall that President Bill Clinton promised Boris Yeltsin that NATO would not expand beyond Eastern Europe. Of course NATO is no longer an anti-Soviet alliance, and the fact that Russia views NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to its security is a vivid sign of the deep-rooted cold war mentality of Mr. Putin and his circle.

Still, they seem to mean it. Both Mr. Putin and his successor as president, Dmitri Medvedev, have reserved their starkest rhetoric for this subject. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has threatened that Georgia's ambition to join NATO "will lead to renewed bloodshed," adding, as if that weren't enough, "we will do anything not to allow Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO."

After Mr. Saakashvili, then 37, became president, Mr. Putin made no attempt to court him, and Mr. Saakashvili, made a point of showing the regional hegemon no deference. The open struggle began in late 2005 and early 2006, when Russia imposed an embargo on Georgia's agricultural products, then on wine and mineral water — virtually Georgia's entire export market. After Georgia very publicly and dramatically expelled Russian diplomats accused of espionage, Mr. Putin cut off all land, sea, air and rail links to Georgia, as well as postal service. And then, for good measure, he cut off natural gas supplies in the dead of winter.

ECHOES OF TRAGEDY

This new round of bellicosity struck Georgians as frighteningly familiar. Alexander Rondeli, the director of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, recited to me a thought he attributed to the diplomat-scholar George F. Kennan: "Russia can have at its borders only enemies or vassals." Here, for him, was further proof, as if it were needed, that imperialist expansion and brute subjugation are coded in Russia's DNA. The Georgian elite came to view Russia as an unappeasable power imbued with the paranoia of the K.G.B., from which Mr. Putin and his closest associates rose, and fueled by the national sense of humiliation over Russia's helplessness in the 1990s. "You should understand," Mr. Saakashvili said, mocking the Europeans who urge forbearance on him, "that the crocodile is hungry. Well, from the point of view of someone who wants to keep his own leg, that's hard to accept."

And yet the crocodile might have been held at bay were it not for Abkhazia and South Ossetia — the first a traditional Black Sea resort area that defined Georgia's western frontier, and the second an impoverished,

sparsely populated region that borders Russia to the north. Georgia is a polygot nation, and views both regions as historically, and inextricably, Georgian. Each, however, had its own language, culture, timeless history and separatist aspirations. When the Soviet Union collapsed, both regions sought to separate themselves from Georgia in bloody conflicts — South Ossetia in 1990-1, Abkhazia in 1992-4. Both wars ended with cease-fires that were negotiated by Russia and policed by peacekeeping forces under the aegis of the recently established Commonwealth of Independent States. Over time, the stalemates hardened into “frozen conflicts,” like that over Cyprus.

But the Georgians are intensely nationalistic, and viewed these de facto states on their border as an intolerable violation of sovereignty. Mr. Saakashvili cashed in on this deep sense of grievance, vowing to restore Georgia’s “territorial integrity.” Soon after taking office, he succeeded in regaining Georgian control over the southwestern province of Ajara. Then, in the summer of 2004, citing growing banditry and chaos, he sent Interior Ministry troops into South Ossetia. After a series of inconclusive clashes, the troops were forced to make a humiliating withdrawal.

Still, this violation of the status quo infuriated the Russians, and Mr. Saakashvili, for once listening to his few dovish advisors, agreed to seek a negotiated settlement in Abkhazia. By late 2005, a Georgian mediator had initialed an agreement: Georgia would not use force, and the Abkhaz would allow the gradual return of 200,000-plus ethnic Georgians who had fled the violence. But the agreement collapsed in early 2006, done in by hardliners on both sides. This chapter has been all but effaced from the history one hears in Georgia.

WAITING FOR A SPARK

This brief interval of talk came to an abrupt end two summers ago, when Mr. Saakashvili sent troops to retake the Kodori Valley in Abkhazia — in order, once again, to curb banditry (of which there was, in fact, a great deal). Both the Abkhaz and the Russians took this as a sign that Georgia was prepared to fight to regain its former province. Indeed, last year Mr. Saakashvili traveled to the Abkhaz border and promised a crowd of Georgian refugees that they would be back home within a year.

The breakaway regions were thus a stick of dynamite waiting to be lit. And Mr. Putin struck a match. Although Russia, as the peacekeeping power, was charged with preserving an international consensus that recognized Georgia’s claims over Abkhazia, Russia lifted sanctions on Abkhazia last March. This had nothing to do with local events: Mr. Putin had tried for years to prevent Kosovo from declaring its independence from Serbia, and when the Kosovars went ahead, with strong American and European support, last February, Mr. Putin responded by leveling a blow at America’s Caucasus darling.

Soon afterward, the Russian Duma held hearings on recognition of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, a pro-Russian breakaway republic in Moldova. Moscow argued that the West’s logic on Kosovo should apply as well to these ethnic communities seeking to free themselves from the control of a hostile state. And then, in mid-April, Mr. Putin held out the possibility of recognition for the breakaway republics.

Now things began to degenerate rapidly. On April 21, Mr. Saakashvili called the Russian leader to demand that he reverse the decision. He reminded Mr. Putin that the West had taken Georgia’s side in the dispute. And Mr. Putin, according to several of Mr. Saakashvili’s associates, shot back with a suggestion about where they could put their statements. Mr. Saakashvili, prudent for once, shied from uttering the exact wording, but said that Mr. Putin had used “extremely offensive language,” and had repeated the expression several times.

Mr. Saakashvili was shaken by the naked hostility. He already feared that the West, or at least Europe, would never rally to Georgia’s side in a crisis; and here was Mr. Putin saying that the West’s support meant nothing to him. Here, indeed, was 1938.

The atmosphere during the early spring was electric with tension. Georgia accused Russia of shooting down a drone aircraft over Abkhazia; a United Nations report later confirmed the claim. Russia loudly insisted that Georgia was preparing for war; the Georgians had, indeed, mobilized troops and prepared fuel dumps.

Russia responded to the apparent Georgian preparations by dispatching 400 paratroopers and a battery of howitzers to a staging area not far from the cease-fire line, provoking a strong protest from NATO. "At the end of the day, we were very close to war" on May 9, says Temuri Yacobashvili, the Georgian minister of reintegration and a Saakashvili confidant. In fact, diplomats in Georgia and elsewhere give somewhat more credence to the Russian claims than to Georgia's. State Department officials urged Mr. Saakashvili to calm down. Perhaps each side was trying to provoke the other into striking first, and thus losing the battle of public opinion. Of course, that's how wars often start.

Until last week, it was Abkhazia, not South Ossetia, that seemed the likeliest candidate for a war of inadvertence, and so I visited there in late June. It was hard to fathom what people were fighting over. In the capital, Sukhumi, population 40,000, relics of the fighting were everywhere, and the giant Soviet-era Parliament building was a scorched hulk. The streets were all but deserted.

THE SPIRAL DOWN

Talking to the Georgians about Abkhazia, and the Abkhaz about Georgia, was like shuttling between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The Georgians said that they were "always there," that Abkhazia was a Georgian kingdom, and that only by expelling the ethnic Georgians at the end of the war did the Abkhaz make themselves a majority in the province. The Abkhaz said that they are the descendants of a "1,000-year-old kingdom," that they were the victims of a massive campaign of Russian deportation in the 1860s, and then that Stalin forced them into the Georgian yoke. The Abkhaz talk about the Georgians pretty much the same way that the Georgians talk about the Russians. On that point, the Abkhaz share much with the South Ossetians. For them, as for the Ossetians, Georgia is the neighborhood bully.

It's a pretty safe bet that Georgia and Abkhazia will not resolve their conflict on their own. Both breakaway regions are quite willing to live with the Russian-enforced status quo, but even relatively moderate Georgian officials consider that status quo utterly unacceptable. When I asked Temuri Yacobashvili, a cultivated man who is one of the country's leading art patrons, why Georgia couldn't focus on the threat from Russia and let the Abkhaz have their de facto state, he said, "These are not two different things, because it's not amputating hand, it's amputating head, or heart. No Georgian president could survive if he gave up on Abkhazia." And, he added, "if the international community by its inaction will not leave any other option for Georgia, then we have to make decision."

If the West, that is, won't induce Russia to stop using the border region as a pawn, Georgia will be left with no choice save war. And how will the West do that? Mr. Saakashvili suggests sanctions, like travel bans, on individual Russian leaders. When I posed the same question to Giga Bokeria, another confidante who is deputy minister for foreign affairs, he said, "If Russia ceases to be an empire." These are not serious answers.

The situation in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia took yet another turn down the spiral of confrontation in July, when mysterious acts of violence plagued both regions. There were bombings in Abkhazia. There were shootings in South Ossetia. Who was behind the string of attacks? Criminal gangs? Provocateurs? Georgian secret agents? No one knew, but that didn't stop the accusations from flying. Abkhazia closed the cease-fire line, then cut all ties with Georgia. On July 8, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice about to visit Georgia, Russia sent fighter jets over South Ossetia. Georgian Interior Ministry forces squared off against civilians in South Ossetia. The pot was boiling. And then, last week, the lid blew in South Ossetia, for reasons that remain unclear. Diplomats are now laboring mightily to prevent the war from spreading, though hostilities may serve too many different interests to be easily contained.

THE WEST GETS SCARED

There is real alarm in the West about the deteriorating situation in the Caucasus. Diplomats from Washington and the major European capitals, as well as from the United Nations, the European Union and NATO, have been crisscrossing the region trying to bring the parties together. In July, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the foreign minister of Germany, the lead nation of the United Nations secretary general's "Group of Friends" of Georgia, approached the Georgians and the Abkhaz with a peace plan similar in outline to the one that failed two years ago. The Georgians agreed to a meeting in Bonn; the Abkhaz, presumably with Russian support, refused. Mr.

Saakashvili himself had tried to show a more conciliatory side, proposing guarantees of autonomy for Abkhazia within a federated Georgia, as well as the establishment of a jointly controlled free economic zone adjacent to the cease-fire line. (The Abkhaz rejected the offer, not only because they insist on independence, but because they assumed, perhaps correctly, that Mr. Saakashvili was posturing for the West.)

What is striking, though, is the growing consensus about Russian behavior. The United Nations, the European Union and NATO have all sided with Georgia in the disputes over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Mr. Saakashvili was deeply disappointed when NATO declined in early April to put Georgia and Ukraine on the path to membership, but he says that the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, explained to him that while the Germans “don’t want to be pushed” on NATO, they might offer their support later this year. Almost as satisfying to Mr. Saakashvili was his discovery that Ms. Merkel “gets it” about Russia — “because she knows Russia from her own experience.”

In a recent essay, the archrealist Henry Kissinger argued that Putin-era policy had been driven not by dreams of restored glory, but by “a quest for a reliable strategic partner, with America being the preferred choice.” Some Russia experts on the left, like Stephen Cohen of Princeton, have taken a similar view. But Russia’s bellicose behavior, and now the hostilities along its border, make it increasingly difficult to act on such a premise without seeming naïve.

People of all political persuasion now seem to get it about Russia. In “The Return of History and The End of Dreams,” Robert Kagan, the neoconservative foreign policy expert who is advising John McCain, writes of Mr. Putin and his coterie: “Their grand ambition is to undo the post-cold war settlement and to re-establish Russia as a dominant power in Eurasia.” Michael McFaul, a Russia expert at Stanford who is advising Barack Obama, also views Russia as a premodern, sphere-of-influence power. He attributes Russia’s hostility to further NATO expansion less to geostrategic calculations than to what he says is Mr. Putin’s cold war mentality. The essential Russian calculus, he says, is, “Anything we can do to weaken the U.S. is good for Russia.”

For the West, the core issue is the survival of democratic, or at least independent, states along Russia’s frontier. But for this very reason, even the United States, which has been Georgia’s most steadfast ally, distinguishes between the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the one hand, and Russia’s threat to Georgia’s autonomy and integrity on the other.

HOPING FOR PATIENCE

Administration officials have regularly cautioned Mr. Saakashvili to be patient on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even as they have given private and public reassurances about NATO membership. It would, in fact, be surprising if Georgia had consciously provoked a war in South Ossetia, since Mr. Saakashvili understands that doing so would almost certainly put an end to the NATO bid; indeed, Russia may well calculate that NATO will continue to exclude Georgia so long as the country is embroiled in hostilities along its border.

Georgia’s predicament seems very simple from the vantage point of Tbilisi — 1921, 1938 — but extremely complicated from a great remove. Russia threatens Georgia, but Georgia threatens Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia looks like a crocodile to Georgia, but Georgia looks to Russia like the cats’ paw of the West. One party has all the hard power it could want, the other all the soft. And now, while the world was looking elsewhere, the frozen conflict between them has thawed and cracked. It will take a great deal of care and attention even to put things back to where they were before.

#3

Israel playing down Georgia ties

By Roy Eitan

JTA, August 10, 2008

TEL AVIV - As Russian and Georgian forces battle over South Ossetia, Israel finds itself on the defensive.

Though a favored armed supplier for the former Soviet republic, the Jewish state now appears to be at pains to play down these ties rather than risk a crisis with Moscow.

It is more than just sound diplomacy.

With Russia widely expected to supply Tehran with advanced anti-aircraft missiles that could fend off a pre-emptive strike on Iranian nuclear sites, Israel has a vested interest in not appearing to be in Georgia's corner and losing whatever lobbying power it has in Moscow.

With troops, tanks and warplanes clashing in the Caucasus over the weekend in the worst armed face-off Europe has seen in decades, the Russian media queried where their Georgian foes had acquired weapons and tactical wherewithal.

Israel's name came up.

The link is well known. Aside from Israel's prowess in military matters, it enjoys a personal rapport with a number of senior colleagues to Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, who has been trying to align his country with the West.

Saakashvili's defense minister, Davit Kezerashvili, is a Jew who spent several years living in Israel. So is another Cabinet minister, Temur Yakobashvili.

According to Jerusalem sources, the Georgian governments, enriched by Caspian oil, has long sent emissaries on "shopping trips" to the arms firms in Israel.

In parallel, Tbilisi has employed retired Israeli generals such as Israel Ziv and Gal Hirsch as consultants on how to build up Georgian armed forces.

"The Israelis should be proud of the fact that Georgian soldiers received Israeli education and training and are fighting like I don't know what," Yakobashvili, speaking Hebrew, told Israel's Channel 10 television in a telephone interview.

The full extent of Israel's defense exports to Georgia is an official secret, but Jerusalem sources were keen to dispel the sense of a strategic alliance against Moscow.

"We have good relations with both countries and are loath to upset either," said one.

The sources insist that when Georgia-Russia tensions began spiraling several months ago, Israel decided to scale back its arms sales.

That move roughly coincided with the Russian air force's shooting down of a Georgia spy drone that, it emerged, had been manufactured by the Israeli firm Elbit.

Whereas previously Georgia was allowed to buy offensive weapons such as tactical missiles, the deals were limited to "purely defensive" systems, the sources said.

A sale of Israeli tanks to Georgia that was proposed by Roni Milo, a former Tel Aviv mayor turned entrepreneur, was nixed by the Defense Ministry.

"When the issues in the balance included completing the construction of the nuclear reactor in Bushehr and supplying Iran and Syria with advanced defense systems, it was clear to everyone that with all due respect to the Israel Military Industries' profits, there are a few things that are just a bit more important," said Yoav Limor, an Israeli defense analyst.

Israel's annual military dealings with Tbilisi are worth approximately \$200 million a year, a defense source said, adding the figure is dwarfed by Georgian purchases from other arms suppliers such as the United States.

The Russian government has not openly accused Israel of arming its enemy, but there has been a menacing subtext to the rhetoric from Moscow.

In his speech to the U.N. Security Council, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin darkly denounced the Georgian commando units' "foreign trainers."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said those who supplied Georgia with weapons should bear responsibility for the bloodshed.

But Israel Radio on Sunday quoted the spokesman for the Russian Embassy in Tel Aviv as voicing satisfaction with Jerusalem's policies regarding Georgia.

#4

Jews caught in Russia-Georgia conflict

By Grant Slater

JTA, August 11, 2008

MOSCOW – Russian and Georgian troops continued to fight a pitched battle Monday that has spilled beyond the borders of South Ossetia and toward the Georgian city of Gori, where Jewish relief organizations continued to make contact with local Jews.

More than 200 Jewish residents fled the Russian bombardment over the weekend. More have decided to leave amid fears that the Russian army is advancing toward them.

Jews on either side of the conflict zone expressed starkly contrasting impressions of the battle as the war-weary Caucasus region weathered its latest conflagration -- Russia's largest use of force outside its borders since 1989.

On Aug. 8, Russian tanks and soldiers poured into South Ossetia, a breakaway republic that fought a war for independence from Georgia in the early 1990s. Russia said it was protecting its citizens and peacekeepers from a Georgian attempt to secure the capital, Tskhinvali.

Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, had made the reunification of Georgia with its breakaway republics a central plank of his campaigns as he cultivated close ties with the West, sending soldiers to U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as seeking entry to the NATO alliance.

Saakashvili's distance from Russia chafed at then-President Vladimir Putin of Russia, and Moscow holds little love for the poster child of democracy in the former Soviet sphere.

Jews are caught on both sides of the conflict.

Alex Katz, the Jewish Agency for Israel's liaison to the former Soviet Union, visited Gori on Monday and met with the few holdouts in the city closest to the Ossetian border. He said Russian troops were nine miles north of the city.

Katz visited with a community leader, Vissarion Manasherov, trying to convince the stragglers to leave the area and offering them a chance to immigrate to Israel. One family agreed, and another decided to remain in Gori, he said. A third family could not be found.

"The situation is tense now -- very, very tense," Katz told JTA. "We are used to this as Israelis, but it is a very complicated situation now."

During his conversation with JTA, Katz's vehicle was fleeing Gori with a convoy of Georgian soldiers on the way back to the republic's capital of Tbilisi. The convoy passed a hospital with long lines of wounded soldiers, Katz said.

Gori had been used as a staging ground for Georgian troops during their initial offensive on Tskhinvali.

Most of the more than 200 Jewish refugees who have made their way to Tbilisi are staying with relatives and friends there. Between 10,000 to 12,000 Jews live in Georgia, mostly in the capital.

Speaking from a central planning room in Israel, Jewish Agency spokesman Alex Selsky said more than 60 people had applied to make aliyah at the agency's behest. A group of eight emigres arrived Sunday night in Israel from Georgia, but their relocation already had been planned, he said.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee has a 10-person team in the region dispensing food and other humanitarian aid, as well as assisting those fleeing the war-torn areas.

The JDC, which assists 1,500 elderly and 735 children at risk and their families in the region, has deployed additional workers to tend to the elderly in areas most affected by the fighting. It also is working with the local Jewish community to absorb and provide assistance to the estimated 100 Jewish refugees who left Gori for Tbilisi.

Meanwhile, the government of Israel is also sending two consular representatives to Tbilisi, according to the Jewish Agency.

Arkia Israel Airlines said Monday it could not fly out 100 Israeli nationals waiting to leave Georgia because the airport radar had been bombed beyond function, Ha'aretz reported.

The airline is working to reroute passengers through Azerbaijan, another pro-Russian breakaway republic on Georgia's border with the Black Sea.

Georgian troops withdrew Sunday from South Ossetia, a pro-Russian de facto state since 1992. Russia has issued passports to South Ossetian citizens for years and served as a peacekeeping force in the region.

Before wave after wave of ethnic conflict shook the foundations of Tskhinvali starting in 1992, there was a growing Jewish community of more than 2,000 people in the city of 30,000.

That number has dwindled to about 15, said Mark Petrushansky, the chairman of the Jewish community for Vladikavkaz, the closest Russian population center to the conflict zone.

Petrushansky said he visited Tskhinvali last month and spoke with community leaders. He has not been able to find any members of the community since the fighting broke out Aug. 8, though Petrushansky said that at least one prominent member was in Moscow with family.

Leaders from South Ossetia and Abkhazia have sought recognition of the initial assault on Tskhinvali as genocide.

According to estimates from the Georgian and Russian governments, the death toll in the conflict is near 2,000, though there has been no independent confirmation of the numbers.

Russia television has broadcast near-constant footage of wounded Ossetians while Prime Minister Vladimir Putin flew from the Olympic Games in Beijing directly to Vladikavkaz to meet with refugees.

Petrushansky said he saw television footage of a Jewish child he knew from a local school fleeing Tskhinvali with her grandmother to Russia. Incensed, he placed the blame on Georgia and Saakashvili for starting "this horrible massacre."

"The American agencies are broadcasting and we're watching these lies meant to manipulate people," he said by telephone Monday.

Russian media have portrayed Saakashvili, the Columbia University-educated president who has courted U.S. favor and sought Georgia's membership in NATO, as a puppet of the West. They have broadcast a loop of his interviews with Western news organizations such as CNN and pronouncements from his presidential desk in English.

Petrushansky also had heard reports that Israel had provided weapons and military training to Georgia, which he likened to Germany under Hitler.

"Why is Israel helping Georgia? I'm so embarrassed about this," he said. "This is a war against Jews and they don't even understand it."

The Israeli daily Ha'aretz cited an anonymous senior defense official who said Israel feared that further aid to Georgia would provoke Russia into providing more advanced weaponry to Iran and Syria. Israel has sought to distance itself from Georgia since the conflict began.

Israel has a longstanding defense relationship with Georgia and over the years has sold rockets, night vision and aerial drones to the former Soviet republic. A drone that was shot down by Russian forces in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia earlier this year came from Israel.

In contrast, soldiers and citizens in the midst of the fighting in northern Georgia have expressed a sense that the United States betrayed them by not providing more support as the conflict unfolded.

They see Russia's actions as heavy-handed, a return to the Soviet mentality in which neighbors are either puppets or enemies.

"Russia is in the middle of an act of aggression against Georgia," said Gregory Brodsky, the Jewish Agency's emissary to Tbilisi. "The attempt to take Abkhazia and Ossetia is obvious to the whole world as an attempt to create anew the Russian empire."

Russian planes bombed targets across Georgia on Monday, including bridges, roadways and military facilities on the outskirts of Tbilisi, Brodsky said.

In Abkhazia, Russian forces have demanded that soldiers in the Georgia-controlled regions lay down their weapons -- a sign that Russia may be ready to open a second front in the war.

The Abkhazian capital Sukhumi is home to some 120 Jews who are no stranger to tanks and rebel armies prowling across the hilly seaside region, though the capital is on the coast far from where border skirmishes would take place.

Alexander Glusker, the chairman of Sukhumi's Jewish community, told JTA that he and his fellow Jews are "Abkhazian patriots," though he shrugged at the possibility of Abkhazian independence in the near future. He said he had seen too many wars, three or four at last count, to become too excited.

"Russia will never let Georgia join NATO, and this is why we have the conflicts and the bombs in our South," he said. "We know there is tension in the mood but we're used to it. It's nothing. I think that everything will be civil before too long."

#5
U.S. has few military options in Russia response
Aggression in Georgia may be met with diplomatic and economic retaliation, U.S. officials say.
By Peter Spiegel and Julian E. Barnes
Los Angeles Times, August 12, 2008

WASHINGTON — With President Bush warning Russia that its push into Georgia could jeopardize relations with the U.S. and Europe, the administration signaled Monday that any retribution would be aimed at the Russian economy and prestige.

Russia's pummeling of Georgian troops has left Washington with few palatable military options, said administration officials who requested anonymity when discussing internal policy decisions. Acknowledging that military aid to Georgia was off the table and sanctions against Russia were impractical, they insisted the U.S. could take longer-term economic and diplomatic measures that would hit the Kremlin hard.

"Just because we are not rushing to place U.S. infantry in Tbilisi does not mean the world is impotent in the face of this aggression," said a senior Pentagon official.

Officials said the most likely ways to pressure Russia were through global institutions. Russia is attempting to join the World Trade Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Membership now is likely to be blocked, they said.

Others raised the possibility of kicking Russia out of the Group of 8, the annual gathering of leading industrialized nations.

In brief remarks from the White House Rose Garden, Bush said that if reports of Russian troops threatening Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, were accurate, it would mark a "dramatic and brutal escalation" of the conflict. Moscow's actions in Georgia "have substantially damaged Russia's standing in the world," the president said.

But his heated rhetoric contained few concrete proposals, short of backing a French-led diplomatic effort to get Russia to agree to a cease-fire, a plan the Kremlin appears to have already rejected.

A senior U.S. official directly involved in policymaking cautioned that because Bush had just returned from Beijing on Monday, final decisions on a course of action had not been made.

Over the last 48 hours, Russia experts and former military and diplomatic officials have proposed a wide range of ways to push back Russian troops -- from instituting a no-fly zone over Georgian airspace to supplying the Georgian military with air defense systems.

But administration officials said the list of measures actually under consideration -- such as sending humanitarian aid and rebuilding the Georgian military once fighting ends -- is far narrower.

"The regular tool kit does not really work here," said a U.S. government analyst who specializes in Russia's relations with its former republics. "The Russians have plenty of money now, and we need their oil more than they need our credits."

The senior Pentagon official put it more bluntly: "Are you going to go to war with them?"

The U.S. continued to provide a limited amount of help Monday; the last of the 2,000 Georgian troops that had been deployed to Iraq were expected to land in their home country on U.S. military transport planes last night.

The U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi also began distributing its supplies of disaster relief -- unlikely to last more than a day, said a State Department spokesman -- and the administration was working with the U.N. to fly in U.S. medical supplies from Germany.

But beyond that, and a decision not to withdraw the 100 or so U.S. military trainers from Tbilisi, most of the support offered by Washington has been rhetorical.

In the short term, U.S. officials believe financial markets will exert their own pressure on Russian behavior. A Democratic Senate aide said the conflict should push up insurance rates for the 2014 Winter Olympics, to be

held in the nearby southern Russia town of Sochi, to prohibitive levels. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's efforts to create a financial center in Moscow could also be snuffed out.

The U.S. could continue to deny Russia normalized trade status, which is blocked by a statute known as Jackson-Vanik. The 1974 amendment to the Trade Reform Bill, which is still on the books, tied the Soviet Union's trade status to whether it freely allowed Jewish emigration. An administration official familiar with the thinking of Bush and other senior officials predicted the international community would unite against the Russian action, saying the Kremlin miscalculated by thinking its control of vast stores of oil and natural gas gave it license to throw its military weight around.

"We'll get cold, but how do you [the Russians] expect your economy to stand without selling oil and gas?" the official said. "Did I hear someone say they're buying Russian cars? Russian fashion? It's like putting a gun to your own head and saying, 'Stop or I'll shoot.' "

The senior U.S. official involved in policymaking added that although Russia may have the military upper hand over Georgia, its heavy-handed treatment of a small neighbor may backfire in the long term.

"It will be chilling to many countries, but also will, I think, steel their determination not to lose the sovereignty that they've so painfully won and maintained since the end of the Soviet Union," said the official.

Getting the international community to back a policy of isolating Russia could prove difficult, analysts said.

Stephen Sestanovich, senior envoy to the former Soviet states during the Clinton administration, noted that statements issued by European leaders so far have only criticized Russia's "disproportionate" use of force or decried the humanitarian crises.

"We're talking about the kind of language that is used, for example, when countries put down an insurrection in their own territory," said Sestanovich.

An appeal for humanitarian assistance, he said, "calls attention to a real need, but it deflects attention to some extent from the real issue, which looks like conquest."

Current and former officials suggested that the U.S. could take more drastic action if Russia moved to take Tbilisi and overthrow the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili. Under that scenario, the U.S. government analyst said, providing aid to a rebel Georgian army would probably be considered.

Charles Wald, a retired Air Force general and former deputy head of U.S. European Command, said the United States will need to step up its private communications with Russia and warn that it will do more to protect Georgia if military action continues.

But he also said the U.S. should have been paying closer attention to escalating tensions in Georgia.

"Retrospectively, if we allowed Saakashvili to think we are strategically going to protect him, we probably made a big mistake," Wald said.

Times staff writer James Gerstenzang contributed to this report.

#6

Relief groups assist refugees caught in Caucasus conflict

By Grant Slater

JTA, August 12, 2008

MOSCOW – Vissarion Manasherov left his city as the bombs were falling.

One day later, on Monday, with bombs still falling, he returned to Gori, a city at the edge of war, to convince the few Jewish families still in the area to leave. The Russians were at their doorstep, he told them.

Manasherov, the community's leader and a local emissary for the Jewish Agency for Israel, said he fled to the Georgian capital of Tbilisi with a wave of 200 Jews, leaving fewer than a dozen compatriots behind.

"I was the last to leave," he said. "But I went back. And we'll go back."

As the conflict between Georgia and Russia moved toward an uneasy stalemate Tuesday, the migration of refugees away from the devastated capital of the breakaway republic of South Ossetia spread further and more Jews emerged from the fog of war.

Ossetians and Georgians fled north to Russia through a mountain tunnel or south to Tbilisi, while others boarded planes to Israel.

The evacuation effort has been a lightning, joint project of international Jewish organizations working in close conjunction with the Israeli government. The Israeli Embassy has become a hub of activity where leaders and refugees have shuttled to and from since the conflict began.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, one of the agencies working on the ground, estimates that more than 700 Jews have been displaced in recent days.

Jews caught on both sides of the conflict looked back at the damage with starkly different political viewpoints.

"Who's at fault? Who bombed whom? Who fired the first shot?" Manasherov said by telephone from the Israeli Embassy in Tbilisi. "War is war. It's hard to say who is right and who is at fault."

Russia has taken a hard line against Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, branding his initial incursion into South Ossetia as genocide and strongly defending its campaign into undisputed Georgian territory.

Following days of fighting, which left an estimated 2000 dead and scores more wounded, leaders from Georgia and Russia took tentative steps toward ending the latest conflagration in the war-weary Caucasus region -- Russia's largest use of force outside its borders since 1989.

On Tuesday, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced an end to attacks beyond Georgia's border with South Ossetia while Saakashvili pressed a cease-fire agreement. Saakashvili also announced to thousands in Tbilisi that Georgia would leave the Commonwealth of Independent States, an umbrella organization largely controlled by Russia.

The conflagration began Aug. 8 when Russian tanks and soldiers poured into South Ossetia, which fought a war for independence from Georgia in the early 1990s. Russia said it was protecting its citizens and peacekeepers from a Georgian attempt to secure the capital, Tskhinvali.

Amid the uncertainty, Jewish rescue and relief agencies worked throughout the fighting and planned to continue their work to assist refugees in need.

The Jewish Agency helped evacuate 31 Georgians to Israel aboard special flights Tuesday. The agency said others have applied to make aliyah and their paperwork is being expedited.

Alex Katz, the Jewish Agency's emissary to the former Soviet Union, accompanied Gori's community leader Manasherov to the city on Monday and saw columns of Georgian troops leaving the city.

The JDC, meanwhile, has eight representatives in the region helping to locate and rescue local Jews, as well as provide food and medical relief in both Georgia and Russia.

The head regional representative said the JDC had helped evacuate a Jewish family from a bombed-out building in Gori on Monday.

Most of the more than 200 Georgian Jewish refugees who have made their way to Tbilisi are staying with relatives and friends there. Between 10,000 to 12,000 Jews live in Georgia, mostly in the capital.

The local Chabad community, headed by Rabbi Avraham Michaelashvili, organized a three-day blood drive for victims, and Chabad rabbis have worked to ensure safe passage for a group of 50 Israeli tourists vacationing on the Black Sea, according to reports from the Chabad Web site.

In the South Ossetian city of Tskhinvali, the JDC listed the number of Jews at 19, as of one month ago. Before wave after wave of ethnic conflict shook the foundations of Tskhinvali starting in 1992, there was a growing Jewish community of more than 2,000 people in the city of 30,000.

Nothing was heard for days from these refugees.

But the JDC representative in Vladikavkaz, the Russian regional capital closest to the conflict, said they had located five of the Tskhinvali Jews, including girls aged 6 and 16. The girls had made their way to the Russian city with the younger girl's grandmother after spending several days huddled in a basement without food or water.

The representative, who spoke on condition of anonymity owing to safety concerns, said the experience of hiding from the shelling in the Ossetian capital had badly shaken the teenager.

On the Russian border, the representative said the Russian government was refusing help from international aid organizations and the JDC was the only nongovernmental organization operating in Vladikavkaz.

In the United States, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, alongside a group that advocates for Jews in the former Soviet Union, NCSJ, released a statement rebuking Russia for its forays into Georgian territory and calling for an end to the hostilities.

"We urge that the cease-fire be implemented fully and immediately, and that the status quo be re-established," the statement said.

Local Jewish groups were more reluctant to take sides.

#7

Russia's War of Ambition

Editorial

New York Times, August 12, 2008

No one is blameless in the dangerous game that has erupted into deadly war in the Caucasus.

Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, foolishly and tragically baited the Russians — or even more foolishly fell into Moscow's trap — when he sent his army into the separatist enclave of South Ossetia last week. The Bush administration has alternately egged on Mr. Saakashvili (although apparently not this time) and looked the other way as the Kremlin has bullied and blackmailed its neighbors and its own people.

There is no imaginable excuse for Russia's invasion of Georgia. After pounding both civilian and military targets with strategic bombers and missiles, Russian armored vehicles rolled into Georgia on Monday, raising fears of an all-out assault on the capital and Mr. Saakashvili's democratically elected government.

Moscow claims it is merely defending the rights of ethnic minorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been trying to break from Georgia since the early 1990s. But its ambitions go far beyond that.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (who has shouldered aside Russia's new president, Dmitri Medvedev, to run the war) appears determined to reimpose by force and intimidation as much of the old Soviet sphere of influence as he can get away with.

Mr. Saakashvili — with his pro-Western ambitions and desire to join NATO — has particularly drawn Mr. Putin's ire. But the assault on Georgia is also clearly intended to bully Ukraine into dropping its NATO bid and frighten any other neighbor or former satellite that might balk at following Moscow's line.

The United States and its European allies must tell Mr. Putin in the clearest possible terms that such aggression will not be tolerated. And that there will be no redivision of Europe.

Given Russia's oil wealth and nuclear arsenal, the West's leverage is limited, but not inconsequential. Russia still wants respect, economic deals and a seat at the table, including membership in the World Trade Organization and a new political and economic cooperation deal with the European Union. Moscow is also eager to complete a civilian nuclear cooperation deal with the United States that could be worth billions.

There can be no business as usual until Russian troops are out of Georgia, fighting has ended and all sides have agreed on a plan for calming the tensions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At a minimum, that means international mediation, more autonomy for both regions and the stationing of truly neutral international peacekeepers — not Russian troops.

Mr. Saakashvili will have to abandon his ambitions to reassert control over the two regions. Because of his miscalculation, his army has been routed and his country badly damaged.

The United States and Europe also need to take a hard look at their relationship with Russia going forward. Neither has protested loudly or persuasively enough as Mr. Putin has used Russia's oil and gas wealth to blackmail its neighbors, throttled Russia's free press and harassed and imprisoned opponents.

The Bush administration has made Mr. Putin's job even easier, feeding nationalist resentments with its relentless drive for missile defense. The Europeans, who are far too dependent on Russian gas supplies, have deluded themselves into believing that they alone will be safe from Moscow's bullying.

The West wants and needs Russia as a full responsible partner. For that, Russia needs to behave responsibly. And the United States and Europe must make clear that anything less is unacceptable.

#8

Russia, in Accord With Georgians, Sets Withdrawal By Andrew E. Kramer and Ellen Barry New York Times, August 13, 2008

TBILISI, Georgia — The presidents of Georgia and Russia agreed early Wednesday morning on a framework that could end the war that flared up here five days ago, after Russia reasserted its traditional dominance of the region.

Declaring that "the aggressor has been punished," President Dmitri A. Medvedev of Russia announced early Tuesday that Russia would stop its campaign. Russian airstrikes continued during the day, however, and antagonisms seethed on both sides.

By 2 a.m. on Wednesday, Mr. Medvedev and his Georgian counterpart, Mikheil Saakashvili, had agreed on a plan that would withdraw troops to the positions they had occupied before the fighting broke out.

Whether the agreement holds or not, Russia has achieved its goals, effectively creating a new reality on the ground, humiliating the Georgian military and increasing the pressure on a longtime antagonist, Mr. Saakashvili.

Russian authorities make no secret of their desire to see Mr. Saakashvili prosecuted on war crimes in The Hague, and could well try other measures to undermine him. Mr. Medvedev also authorized Russian soldiers to fire on “hotbeds of resistance and other aggressive actions.” As the conflict cools and hardens, the two separatist regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, could wind up permanently annexed by Russia.

But in signing on to an accord, Russia appears to have stopped short of a full-scale invasion that would have set off a broader cold-war-style confrontation with the West. Its actions have already aroused widespread alarm about Russia’s redrawing of the geopolitical map, and some fear that they could undermine democratic gains in a region that was once part of the Soviet sphere. But Mr. Saakashvili’s military attack on the South Ossetians has also drawn criticism as needlessly provocative.

“The tanks should go. I hope they will,” said Mr. Saakashvili, emerging from a meeting with President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, who carried the document from Moscow to Tbilisi.

“There was a degree of constructive ambiguity” in the document that allowed the announcement to be made, said a senior European diplomat, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. Western negotiators, who had shuttled between the Georgian and Russian governments for days, said they were optimistic that the crisis was under control.

“Traditionally, we will see a few skirmishes, but frontal attacks and positioning will end,” said Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb of Finland, the chairman of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Bush administration is expected to cancel a scheduled naval exercise with Russia and to press NATO to prohibit a Russian warship from joining a separate alliance exercise. A cancellation would be the first concrete reprisal against Russia for its military actions in Georgia.

As the news of an impending cease-fire filtered across Georgia on Tuesday, citizens reacted with relief and defiance. At a rally in Tbilisi, a euphoric crowd waved signs that read “Stop Russia,” and Mr. Saakashvili announced Georgia’s withdrawal from the “Russia dominated” Commonwealth of Independent States.

“I saw Russian planes bombing our villages and killing our soldiers, but I could not do anything, and this will always be with me,” he said. “I promise that I will make them regret this.”

The presidents of five former Soviet satellite states — Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine and Poland — flew into Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, and appeared beside Mr. Saakashvili in a show of solidarity.

“I am a Georgian,” said Toomas Hendrick Ilves, the president of Estonia.

In Gori, citizens ventured out of their hiding places and began to sweep up glass and debris. Cars began to move on the streets of the city, where five people were killed Tuesday. Izmar Chivolidze sat on a curb that was stained with blood and strewn with broken glass.

“Putin did this,” he said, speaking of Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. “Putin created this circus.”

Other areas of the country remained on a war footing. In the port of Poti, bombing was heard an hour after Mr. Medvedev’s statement early Tuesday morning. Georgia withdrew its remaining forces from the Kodori Gorge after four days of attacks by Abkhaz and Russian forces, said Shota Utiashvili, a spokesman for Georgia’s Interior Ministry. He said 22 civilians had been killed during the day.

“Russia has said it has ended its invasion, but in reality, it has not,” Mr. Utiashvili said. “We should all prepare for the worst.”

The long-running dispute between Russia and Georgia boiled over on Thursday, after Mr. Saakashvili ordered Georgian forces to move into South Ossetia, a breakaway region with strong ties to Russia. Russian authorities say 2,000 people were killed in fighting around Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital, and more than 30,000 refugees fled over the Russian border.

These numbers could not be confirmed independently, and some analysts believe that Russia is citing them to bolster its war crimes allegations against Mr. Saakashvili.

By Tuesday morning, Georgian forces were in retreat. The road from Gori to Tbilisi was completely clear of Georgian forces, except for vehicles that had been abandoned.

During the talks throughout the day between Mr. Saakashvili and Mr. Sarkozy, the French leader had to call Mr. Medvedev twice to clarify points that had concerned the Georgian president. Mr. Saakashvili insisted that Russian peacekeepers remaining in the disputed territories be the same ones previously stationed there, and not crack troops swapped in anticipation of fighting.

He also insisted that there be no discussion of the breakaway regions seceding from Georgia. Finally, the two made an oral agreement for a document, which will provide a structure for further negotiations.

Once Russian and Georgian forces pull back, international mediators will have to confront a flurry of problems. Will Russian and Georgian troops withdraw to their positions of last Thursday, before the latest fighting broke out, or to their positions in 1991, when the dispute over Georgia's enclaves began?

Who will enforce a cease-fire — the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which currently monitors South Ossetia; the United Nations, which monitors Abkhazia; or some other organization, like the European Union?

Diplomats have tried to keep the parties to the conflict focused on short-term practical steps — first, a cease-fire, second, allowing humanitarian aid into the war zone, and third, withdrawing troops. Only then, Mr. Stubb said, would Russian and Georgian officials begin a peace effort to address the actual causes of the conflict.

Sergei Markov, of Moscow's Institute for Political Studies, said Western pressure had some effect, but Kremlin strategists became worried about doing permanent damage to Moscow's already troubled relationship with Georgia.

"Our relationship with Georgia is more important, so that Russia will have influence over the whole south Caucasus, just as it has for centuries," he said.

The cease-fire negotiations coincided with bombing and artillery barrages that landed mostly on the outskirts of the city of Gori, and in villages in a plain to the north. Five people, including a Dutch journalist, were killed when a missile landed on Stalin Square.

Mr. Medvedev made little mention on Tuesday of Abkhazia. South of the Abkhaz border, Russian troops drove through the port city of Poti, digging into positions on the city's outskirts.

There were reports that Russian troops were engaged in similar activities in the western Georgian towns of Zugdidi and Kareli, an American official said.

A dozen armored vehicles guarded a bridge connecting Poti to Batumi, another Black Sea port. The troops, who spoke Russian and wore patches indicating they were paratroopers, said they were peacekeepers.

A Georgian police official, who did not give his name because he was not authorized to speak, appeared downcast. He said he had had no contact with the Russians.

"We have no orders to talk to them," he said. "They came here themselves."

Andrew E. Kramer reported from Tbilisi, and Ellen Barry from Moscow. Reporting was contributed by Thanassis Cambanis from Moscow; Michael Schwartz from Poti, Georgia; Nicholas Kulish from Tbilisi; C. J. Chivers from New York; and Thom Shanker from Washington.

#9

Georgia On Our Minds

By The Editors

NY Jewish Week, August 13, 2008

In a world beset with so many other conflicts, it's hard to get our minds around recent developments in faraway Georgia. How many of us have even heard of the breakaway province of South Ossetia? How many care about events in Tbilisi?

But the Jewish community should care. There are Jews scattered across what was once the Soviet Union — including up to 15,000 in Georgia, according to NCSJ, a Jewish human rights group. And their new freedoms could be imperiled by recent developments in the region.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin may have given up the presidency, but he remains the dominant power in Moscow and is continuing his relentless drive to limit freedoms at home and reassert Russia's role as a dominant and domineering player in world affairs.

That combination represents a potential threat to Jews across a region where autocracy, nationalism and traditional anti-Semitism have for so long combined to produce tragic results. World Jewry needs to appreciate that, given Russia's apparent eagerness to reassert its military might, Jews throughout the former Soviet Union could be in peril.

Complicating matters is Georgia's strategic and geographic position. It is an ally of the United States and friend to Israel, and the site of vital oil pipelines, which may be a factor in the current crisis. It is a burgeoning democracy bordered by Russia, Iran and Turkey. Georgia may be remote, but it is hardly irrelevant to U.S. and Israeli strategic interests.

The Jewish state has been a supporter of the Georgian government, as well as a key arms supplier. At the same time, it continues to use diplomacy to press for a more responsible Russian approach to Mideast issues, starting with the effort to stop Iran's nuclear program.

Israel has a clear interest in working with the Georgians, but it also must be extraordinarily careful not to get drawn into a regional conflict in a way that could compromise its other vital interests.

The Georgian situation also poses difficult dilemmas for U.S. policymakers. President George W. Bush struck the right tone in warning Putin against continuing the military assault. But the U.S. hardly seems willing to extend its own military reach, already overstretched, to engage in this conflict, and Russia knows it.

Reasonable voices call for diplomacy, not warfare. This crisis, though, that touches on U.S. and Israeli interests, forces us to reflect on how best to respond when Russia flexes its military muscles.

#10

Israelis, New Olim Airlifted From Tbilisi

By Stewart Ain

NY Jewish Week, August 13, 2008

El Al Airlines evacuated a total of 400 Israelis — plus 30 new Jewish immigrants — from the Georgian capital of Tbilisi Tuesday in an emergency airlift just hours after Russia ordered a cease-fire.

"The new immigrants told me that there were many more people who are considering aliyah," said Michael Jankelowitz, a spokesman for the Jewish Agency, which oversees Israeli immigration. "There are 12,000 Jews in Georgia. Our office in Tbilisi is still operating and we anticipate that more people will apply for aliyah," he told The Jewish Week by phone from Israel.

The Israeli Foreign Ministry arranged for two El Al Boeing 757 airplanes to carry out the airlift after Arkia, an Israeli carrier, reportedly canceled its regularly scheduled flights because Russian bombs had damaged the radar at the Tbilisi airport.

Georgia Airlines was also able to fly Tuesday and brought out 100 Israelis. Jankelowitz said all of the Jews on the three planes — except for the 30 immigrants — had Israeli passports and were either vacationing or doing business in Georgia.

Among the immigrants were Robert and Nana Djanasheili of Tbilisi who came out with their grandchildren, Chava, 10, and Yossi Djanasheili, 13. Jankelowitz said the children, who live in Holon, Israel, had been vacationing with their grandparents.

When fighting erupted last week, he said, their parents called and “said come home and bring your grandparents with you.”

Also making aliyah was Levan Magalashvili, a dentist, and his wife, Nata, a doctor, both of whom practiced in Moscow.

“They had planned to make aliyah from Moscow with their 18-month-old child, but they had to go to Gori to get a certificate from the local rabbi saying they are Jewish,” Jankelowitz said. “They left the kid with her parents in Moscow.”

When the fighting started, the couple fled Gori for Tbilisi before Russian jets bombed Gori Tuesday. One of them plans to fly to Moscow to pick up their child, Jankelowitz said.

On Monday, about 200 Jews left Gori at the urging of Vissarion Manasherov, the community’s leader. He told JTA that fewer than a dozen Jews remained in the city.

“I was the last to leave,” he said.

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) estimates that more than 700 Jews have been displaced in recent days. The JDC has eight representatives in the region to help relocate local Jews.

During the bombing of Gori Tuesday, a bomb fell near a group of journalists standing near the town square. One was killed and two injured, including Tzadok Yehezkeli, 52, a reporter with the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Achronot. He was evacuated to Tbilisi, where he was reported in serious but stable condition after surgery.

#11

President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia, Urges Russia to Cease Military Operations

The White House, August 13, 2008 11:10 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. I've just met with my national security team to discuss the crisis in Georgia. I've spoken with President Saakashvili of Georgia, and President Sarkozy of France this morning. The United States strongly supports France's efforts, as President of the European Union, to broker an agreement that will end this conflict.

Flanked by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, President George W. Bush delivers a statement in the Rose Garden Wednesday, Aug. 13, 2008, regarding efforts by the United States to resolve the crisis in Georgia. White House photo by Joyce N. Boghosian The United States of America stands with the democratically elected government of Georgia. We insist that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia be respected.

Russia has stated that changing the government of Georgia is not its goal. The United States and the world expect Russia to honor that commitment. Russia has also stated that it has halted military operations and agreed to a provisional cease-fire. Unfortunately, we're receiving reports of Russian actions that are

inconsistent with these statements. We're concerned about reports that Russian units have taken up positions on the east side of the city of Gori, which allows them to block the East-West Highway, divide the country, and threaten the capital of Tbilisi.

We're concerned about reports that Russian forces have entered and taken positions in the port city of Poti, that Russian armored vehicles are blocking access to that port, and that Russia is blowing up Georgian vessels. We're concerned about reports that Georgian citizens of all ethnic origins are not being protected. All forces, including Russian forces, have an obligation to protect innocent civilians from attack.

With these concerns in mind, I have directed a series of steps to demonstrate our solidarity with the Georgian people and bring about a peaceful resolution to this conflict. I'm sending Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to France, where she will confer with President Sarkozy. She will then travel to Tbilisi, where she will personally convey America's unwavering support for Georgia's democratic government. On this trip she will continue our efforts to rally the free world in the defense of a free Georgia.

I've also directed Secretary of Defense Bob Gates to begin a humanitarian mission to the people of Georgia, headed by the United States military. This mission will be vigorous and ongoing. A U.S. C-17 aircraft with humanitarian supplies is on its way. And in the days ahead we will use U.S. aircraft, as well as naval forces, to deliver humanitarian and medical supplies.

We expect Russia to honor its commitment to let in all forms of humanitarian assistance. We expect Russia to ensure that all lines of communication and transport, including seaports, airports, roads, and airspace, remain open for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and for civilian transit. We expect Russia to meet its commitment to cease all military activities in Georgia. And we expect all Russian forces that entered Georgia in recent days to withdraw from that country.

As I have made clear, Russia's ongoing action raise serious questions about its intentions in Georgia and the region. In recent years, Russia has sought to integrate into the diplomatic, political, economic, and security structures of the 21st century. The United States has supported those efforts. Now Russia is putting its aspirations at risk by taking actions in Georgia that are inconsistent with the principles of those institutions. To begin to repair the damage to its relations with the United States, Europe, and other nations, and to begin restoring its place in the world, Russia must keep its word and act to end this crisis.

#12

Bush, Rice demand Russia quit Georgia

By Matthew Lee

Associated Press, August 13, 2008

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration demanded Wednesday that Russia end all military activities in neighboring Georgia and dispatched U.S. aid to devastated Georgians.

"This is not 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia where Russia can threaten a neighbor, occupy a capital, overthrow a government and get away with it," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said. "Things have changed."

Despite her words, the United States seems to be struggling to find a way to convince Russia to honor a cease-fire and halt military moves toward the Georgian capital after six days of war over two breakaway provinces in the former Soviet republic.

"I have heard the Russian president say that his military operations are over. I am saying it is time for the Russian president to be true to his word," Rice said at a State Department news conference just hours before traveling to France to deal with the crisis.

Earlier, President Bush had announced he was sending Rice to Europe and then to Georgia, a strong U.S. ally.

"The United States stands with the democratically elected government of Georgia and insists that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia be respected," Bush said during brief but stern remarks delivered from the White House Rose Garden. Moscow's apparent violation of a cease-fire in neighboring Georgia puts its global aspirations at risk, he said.

"To begin to repair the damage to its relations with the United States, Europe and other nations and to begin restoring its place in the world, Russia must keep its word and act to end this crisis," Bush added.

He also announced a massive U.S. humanitarian effort that would involve American aircraft as well as naval forces. A U.S. C-17 military cargo plane loaded with supplies landed in Georgia on Wednesday, and Bush said that Russia must ensure that "all lines of communication and transport, including seaports, roads and airports," remain open to let deliveries and civilians through.

Rice said Russia needs to respect the U.S. aid effort to help the people of Georgia. The top U.S. diplomat also made a point of noting that the presidential candidates have offered support for the Bush administration.

Asked if conversations by Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama with Georgian and Russian leaders help or hinder administration efforts, Rice said: "I've also been having conversations with Senators Obama and McCain. And I know that they are at this moment of difficult diplomacy that they are doing what they can to support the efforts of the administration.

#13

Georgia accuses Russia of breaking ceasefire

By Margarita Antidze and Matt Robinson

Reuters, August 13, 2008 4:16pm EDT

TBILISI - Georgia accused Russia of breaking a ceasefire in their six-day-old conflict on Wednesday, a claim denied by Moscow, as chaos reigned around an undefended key Georgian town west of the capital.

U.S. President George W. Bush mounted his strongest show of support yet for his close ally Georgia, sending Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to the former Soviet republic and pledging to airlift aid in military planes.

"Russia must keep its word and act to end this crisis," Bush said, referring to Moscow's announcement the previous day of a halt to military operations, part of a French-sponsored ceasefire.

The conflict began last Thursday, when Georgia made a surprise attempt to recapture the pro-Russian rebel province of South Ossetia, which broke away from Georgia in the 1990s. Moscow launched a huge counter-offensive, which overwhelmed the far smaller Georgian forces.

On Wednesday, Moscow strongly denied its troops and armor had advanced on the Georgian capital or looted the key town of Gori, 60 km (35 miles) west of Tbilisi, as claimed by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

Witnesses saw Russian tanks and armored vehicles moving outside Gori, briefly traveling along the main road to Tbilisi before turning off. The Moscow General Staff said they were attempting to secure an abandoned Georgian ammunition dump and had no intention of advancing on the capital.

Adding to the confusion, photographers south of Gori saw irregular troops driving around in armored vehicles among the traffic. Most had no identification, but one soldier had the South Ossetian flag on his arm.

Human Rights Watch, a U.S.-based organization with staff on the ground in Georgia, said its researchers had witnessed looting of ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia, the rebel province at the heart of the conflict.

"We saw looting with our own eyes, they were taking household items, loading electric heaters, bicycles and carpets," Anna Neistat of Human Rights Watch told Reuters by phone from Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway region.

The United States said it had credible reports of continued violence in South Ossetia and urged Russia to restrain "irregular forces" from attacking civilians.

Moscow said it would allow no looting.

Saakashvili also said Bush's pledge to airlift relief supplies to Georgia in military aircraft meant that Georgian ports and airports would be taken under U.S. military control -- a claim swiftly denied by the Pentagon.

Russia said it had shot down two spy drones over South Ossetia and vowed to continue to destroy any such craft it encountered because they violated Georgian assurances of an end to military action.

The fighting in the Caucasus, an important transit route for Caspian oil, has unnerved the United States, NATO and the European Union and rattled investors.

It has also led to increasingly sharp exchanges between old Cold War foes Moscow and Washington.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the United States needed to choose between partnership with Moscow or the Georgian leadership, whom he described as a "virtual project".

In Brussels, the European Union backed sending peacekeeping monitors to South Ossetia to supervise the French-brokered ceasefire. It also agreed to step up humanitarian aid.

"We are determined to act on the ground," French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said after briefing an emergency meeting on his country's mediation efforts as EU president.

The moves masked deep divisions within the 27-nation bloc, with Britain and some former communist nations demanding tough action against Moscow, while close Russian trade partners France, Germany and Italy favored a more diplomatic approach.

Flags flew at half mast in both the main parties to the conflict on Wednesday as Russia and Georgia mourned their dead.

Russia says 1,600 civilians died when Georgia attacked South Ossetia, though the figure has not been independently verified. Moscow's General Staff says it lost 74 soldiers in the fighting, with 171 wounded and 19 missing.

Tbilisi puts deaths on its side at over 175, with hundreds injured. That figure does not include South Ossetia.

In and around South Ossetia's capital Tskhinvali, which was devastated during the Georgian attack, occasional small-arms fire resounded but there were no major incidents.

"The situation is purely a post-war one," said South Ossetian spokeswoman Irina Gagloyeva. "Taking advantage of this lull, we are reburying those killed in the Georgian aggression.

"Many were buried in a hurry just where they were killed - in orchards and kitchen yards. Yesterday, we recovered 18 decomposing bodies from under the rubble in Tskhinvali. Today we found another four."

Moscow announced an emergency aid package for South Ossetia, with Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin pledging 10 billion roubles (\$414 million) to rebuild the shattered region.

GEORGIA TO LOSE REBEL REGIONS?

Analysts said Georgia's failed attempt to seize South Ossetia by force last week made it much less likely that the breakaway territory, along with a second rebel region, Abkhazia, would return to Tbilisi's control in the future.

The EU-brokered peace plan would provide the basis for a U.N. Security Council resolution to settle the conflict.

But analysts said Georgia may yet have to make painful concessions, having been routed on the battlefield and forced to concede precious ground in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The current version of the peace plan mentions respect for Georgia's "sovereignty and independence" but had no reference to "territorial integrity" -- possibly allowing for discussion about the future status of the separatist territories.

Abkhazia said its forces had pushed out Georgian troops and captured the disputed upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge on the region's boundary.

That was a major blow to Tbilisi, since the gorge was the only significant portion of Abkhaz territory under its control.

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are populated by ethnically distinct groups with their own languages.

Additional reporting by Sue Fleming in Washington, Paul Taylor in Brussels, Dmitry Solovyov in Vladikavkaz, James Kilner in Tbilisi, and Oleg Shchedrov in Moscow; Writing by Michael Stott