

**FOREIGN PRESS CENTER BRIEFING WITH DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
FOR EUROPEAN AND EURASIAN AFFAIRS MATTHEW BRYZA**

**TOPIC: SITUATION IN GEORGIA AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CAUCUSES**

**THE WASHINGTON FOREIGN PRESS CENTER, WASHINGTON, D.C.**

**TUESDAY, AUGUST 19, 2008, 2:00 P.M. EDT**

**MODERATOR:** Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming on 24 hours notice to the Washington Foreign Press Center. We're very pleased today to have Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matt Bryza, who has recently returned from Tbilisi, to talk about the situation in Georgia and the wider implications for the Caucasus.

I'm going to say one thing: We're going to – this will be 30 minutes, and I will cut off it there. When we have questions and answers, please remember three things: Wait for the microphone, tell us your name, tell us your media affiliation. If you keep your question short, we'll have more questions. Thanks.

**MR. BRYZA:** And thank you all for coming. I want to start by giving you the latest information that we have from the ground in Georgia. I just checked to find out whether or not the withdrawals have begun. And we know we have no evidence yet that the Russian withdrawals have begun from Georgia, and that's despite President Medvedev's commitment that his government would begin a withdrawal as of yesterday. So the situation remains quite serious on the ground.

Something the Secretary has stressed is that Russian forces moved very quickly into Georgia, and they should be able to move equally quickly out of Georgia. This issue is, by the way, not simply political. It's not just geopolitical. It is deeply human and humanitarian. While I was in Tbilisi, I received numerous, dozens of reports from distraught people. Whether they were Georgian Government officials or human rights advocates and international journalists didn't matter. I received reports from everyone, but reports of serious human rights violations, including killing, rape, destruction of property, homes. And it seemed, too, that this was being conducted by irregular forces.

I'd just like to underscore that as peacekeepers, or as human beings, the Russian military is responsible – members of the Russian military are responsible for making sure that the territory that they now occupy is free from these ravages against local population. And at the same time, the Government of Russia and the Russian military is responsible for making sure that humanitarian organizations can get access to South Ossetia to assess the damage and to do everything possible to prevent any such human rights violations, and to get in the assistance, the humanitarian assistance that is so important to avert a humanitarian crisis, and then begin to get life back to normal.

Now, we understand from the United Nations there are already over 100,000 internally displaced persons in Georgia. We need to get the international human rights organizations in to South Ossetia to be able to assess what's happening.

On the diplomatic front, as I said, we've already -- I've already made the point that it's crucial that Russia lives up to President Medvedev's commitment to withdraw from Georgia, according to the ceasefire agreement that French President Sarkozy, together with OSCE and Chairman-in-Office Finnish Foreign Minister Stubb negotiated -- calls for the Russian troops that came in after August 6<sup>th</sup> -- that came into Georgia, to leave Georgia. So again, they came in quickly. They need to leave just as quickly.

Today, there was also a very strong statement issued by the North Atlantic Council of NATO. As you know, Secretary Rice participated in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council Foreign Ministers. It's a significant statement in that it underscores, again, number one, the importance of Russia leaving immediately, honoring the ceasefire agreement. It underscores the strong unity of the Euro-Atlantic family in articulating these demands.

It also talks about the formation of a new NATO-Georgia Commission that would be analogous to the existing NATO-Ukraine and NATO-Russia Commissions, and which will then be a major step forward, number one, in underscoring the Euro-Atlantic community's support for Georgia and its membership in NATO as Georgia fulfills membership criteria, and, number two, it simply demonstrates the unity of our entire alliance in defense of this democracy that is Georgia's.

Secretary Rice has spoken very clearly, as has President Bush, about the unacceptability of trying to oust a democratically elected government, which we have seen has been, in some cases, the stated objective by the Russian Government of its offensive or invasion of Georgia. We simply, in this day and age, as Secretary Rice said, as President Bush said last week, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cannot allow that sort of behavior.

The way forward, of course, is for Russia to live up to the ceasefire commitment and to begin to turn international public opinion both in the immediate region and, more broadly, in our broader community back in a positive direction. Our goal is not to isolate Russia. Our goal is not to inflict punishment for the sake of punishment on Russia. This Administration has a strong record of trying to build a partnership with Russia.

We embraced Russia's own self-stated goals of becoming a member of international institutions that we think of as comprising the community of free nations. And we would still like to see Russia to be able to move in that direction, but right now, its actions are working in the opposite direction. So standing together with our friends and colleagues in the Euro-Atlantic family and the international community and, first and foremost, with the people of Georgia who have elected their own government democratically, we call on Russia to again, implement the ceasefire, pull its troops out of Georgia, all of them that came in after August 6<sup>th</sup>, and make sure this humanitarian crisis is averted, and immediately take steps to stop the humanitarian and human rights violations that we're receiving credible reports on.

Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** All right. Again, remember, wait for the microphone, your name, your affiliation.

Andrei.

**QUESTION:** Andrei Sitov from Tass from Russia, thank you. Thanks for coming, by the way. In shorthand, three quick things: Why did you not warn the Russians when the Germans – when the Georgians started moving first? We all read in *The Washington Post* that you knew about it. And the questions from President Medvedev – you remember the questions.

**MR. BRYZA:** No, which ones? There are a few of them.

**QUESTION:** The –

**MR. BRYZA:** There are a few of them.

**QUESTION:** No, no. The – he said there are three basic things: who attacked whom first, did you want the Abkhazians and the – the Abkhazians and the Ossetians to cease to exist as nations, and who is to pay for the mess? Thank you.

**MR. BRYZA:** Well, first of all, the accounts you read of my own discussions with Georgian officials were in the framework of Russia already attacking Georgia. And in fact, reports that the Roki Tunnel had already been breached by Russian forces and Russian forces were moving toward not only Tskinali, but also Korta. So I was told that the Georgians were lifting the ceasefire in the context of a Russian attack having already begun. So there is no logic to informing the Russians that the ceasefire is lifted if, in fact, an attack is underway.

Number two, who shot whom first; I don't know if we'll ever really know the answer to that question. It's not relevant, of course, because subsequently, Russia has moved well beyond South Ossetia. Even if its stated objectives were the real objectives, it used strategic bombers to target civilian and other populations. It has blocked, if not blockaded, the Port of Poti. It has destroyed the east-west rail connection near Tbilisi, not in South Ossetia. It has participated in an attack in Abkhazia that completely undermines the spirit in the letter and everything we've ever done in the UN Friends Group with respect to Abkhazia. Abkhazia has nothing to do with South Ossetia at all. It has sunk and scuttled Georgian coastguard ships out in the Black Sea.

So whoever shot whom first is now no longer the issue at all. It's that Russia has escalated so dramatically and brutally and in a way that has brought the opprobrium of the international community against it.

But since you asked the question, let's probe a little bit further. The provocations had been going on for a long time. A lot of us have talked in previous weeks and months about what was happening in Abkhazia, where there were serious provocations from the Russian side, beginning on April 16<sup>th</sup> when the Russian Government – when the Kremlin issued new instructions for the Russian Government to strengthen its official relations with the separatist regions in Georgia.

That's in sharp violation of numerous Security Council resolutions, as you know, which means international law that underscore Georgia's territorial integrity.

Many other things happened thereafter. There was the shoot down of a Russian unmanned aerial vehicle, the imposition of – or reintroduction of paratroopers with artillery into Abkhazia, as well as railroad troops who, now we see, although claiming – although the claim was the railroad troops in Abkhazia were there for humanitarian purposes. Actually, the – that railroad was used to conduct – to help conduct a military operation in Abkhazia.

Let's shift to South Ossetia. There was a dreadful tit-for-tat exchange going on, using grenades and artillery between South Ossetian and Georgian forces. South Ossetia's government and its security structures are run by Russian officials. The Secretary of the National Security Council, the so-called Minister of Defense, Minister of Internal Affairs, head of the border guards, their deputies, many of them are actually Russian officials sent from Russia. And so they were the people commanding the South Ossetian forces that were shooting at the Georgians, so Russian command over South Ossetian forces, shooting at Georgian peacekeepers or troops and villages.

So the conflict involved Russia early, all the way in the very beginning. Plus, we know that those South Ossetian peacekeepers were firing from behind Russian peacekeeping units. So the Russian forces had interspersed themselves as a shield between the Georgians and the South Ossetians. So Russia was involved in this from the very outset, I mean, in the beginning of August.

The claims of genocide or of ending the South Ossetian people or Abkhaz people, they're – well, they're downright false, as – and ridiculous. In the case of Abkhazia, it was the Abkhaz who attacked the Georgians. It wasn't the Georgians who attacked the Abkhaz this last week.

In South Ossetia, it's just not factual that the South Ossetian population was limited. There – there were claims by Moscow of 2,000 deaths, as we know, in Tskhinvali. And Human Rights Watch has gone in, looked around, and said, well, they identified – I think they said around 44 dead. Of course, that doesn't mean they found everybody. But Human Rights Watch did estimate that -- or did assess that the claims of 2,000 dead were exaggerated and suspicious, given that those claims were articulated just at the moment that some senior officials in Russia were claiming Georgia has committed genocide and that there needed to be a human rights tribunal set up.

Now, finally, who pays for the mess? Good question. Good question.

We know that Russia used – leveled Tskhinvali after the initial Georgian attack with airpower. Well, I'm not here to say who will pay, but damage was inflicted from both sides on Tskhinvali and severely. Russian forces have now, as I said, destroyed the rail line, at least part of it. They have sunk Georgian ships, they've damaged the Port of Poti, damaged a highway, destroyed a lot of property. I don't know who will pay these costs. At some point, we'll – I guess we'll get to that reckoning. But what we need to do now is make sure that forces withdraw – of Russia – and that we take care of the human rights problems and humanitarian situations.

Sorry that was a long response, but there were several questions in there. Sorry.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. Ahu Ozyurt from Turkish daily newspaper Milliyet. Matt, have you asked Turkey to allow U.S. hospital ships to pass through the Turkish Straits to Georgia? And are you satisfied with Turkish cooperation on humanitarian efforts?

**MR. BRYZA:** Well, we have not made a formal request. We've had consultations in full respect for the Montreux Convention. We, of course, have no choice but to honor the Montreux Convention. We try to do so in every aspect of our foreign policy that involves maritime affairs, whether it's commercial shipping, NATO maritime operations or, in this case, humanitarian shipments aboard U.S. military ships. So anything we would do involving the movement of any U.S. vessels through the Turkish Straits has to be in accord with the Montreux Convention.

We understand the Montreux convention is one of the core elements of the legal infrastructure of the Turkish Republic. And the Turkish Republic is one of the miraculous outcomes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of a secular democracy that is a very positive – the brightest shining light, perhaps, in that part – in that part of Europe, Southeastern Europe.

Are we satisfied? Well, I mean, we're working on making sure the humanitarian deliveries can keep moving through Turkish waters and into Georgia; yeah, so far, so good. I have to say I was surprised by this announcement of a Caucasus Stability Pact by the Turkish Government. I hadn't been briefed that that was going to happen. We have a partnership with Turkey on the Caucasus, and I presume that we'll be able to work together very closely now with our allies in Turkey, since we do have clearly shared interests, not to mention values, throughout the Caucasus with our Turkish ally.

Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Yes, right there.

**MR. BRYZA:** Sir?

**QUESTION:** Yeah, Mr. Bryza, Aram Vanetsyan, Armenia news service, Voice of America. Do you think Kosovo's independence could be a precedent for all this turmoil? Also, what do you think? Can Armenia neighboring countries play any positive role in easing the situation? Thanks.

**MR. BRYZA:** Certainly, we know that there are those in the Russian Government who had wanted this – Kosovo to be a precedent for what just happened in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia. Legally, there's no foundation for that at all.

In international law, the principle of territorial integrity – and I say this to an Armenian friend carefully – the principle of territorial integrity occupies the highest priority when we begin the process of conflict resolution – separatist conflict resolution. It simply is a fact of international law. It is – territorial integrity is an international legal principle. In other conflicts, we say if the two sides decide that they can reach a compromise that incorporates other elements of

international diplomatic practice or international law like self-determination of peoples, terrific. That's what we want to do in the case of Karabakh, have a negotiated political compromise that takes into account both of these principles.

In the case of Kosovo, there's another principle of international law or international legal practice that came into play, which is that if there is a severe humanitarian crisis, then this supremacy of territorial integrity is suspended, and the international community has the right to come up with or search for mechanisms to resolve that conflict, again, in the name of a humanitarian venture. That is what happened in Kosovo and that is what led us to the Security Council resolutions 1244 that allowed for the international community to work together with former President Ahtisaari on his plan. So these are fundamentally different situations based on international legal practice, and I – we don't believe there is any precedential nature of Kosovo for anything else. It's unique.

**MODERATOR:** Yes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, Vladimir Kara-Murza, RTVi television. The question is not on – so much on the conflict as on Georgia internally itself. You and other officials in the U.S. Government keep referring to Georgia as a democracy, democracy, democracy. Of course, last November, after the dispersal of the opposition demonstration in Tbilisi, the closure of Imedi television, there were other statements coming from the U.S. State Department and – respect with U.S. NGOs and from (inaudible). Why is it suddenly forgotten?

And more specific, if I could ask your comment on a more particular issue, several days ago, the Georgian authorities terminated the broadcast of our own channel on the Georgian territory, RTVi, which is the only Russian language news channel not controlled by the Russian Government. It provided objective coverage, both sides, but apparently, even that wasn't good enough.

How, in your view, is this conforming to the principles of freedom of speech and democracy that many U.S. officials claim the Georgian state is about? Thank you.

**MR. BRYZA:** Thank you, excellent questions. Georgia is a democracy. It remains one. It was one last November. And it is not – it has not even come close to finishing its democratic evolution. It still has a long way to go on many fronts, including the issue you just raised. I'm happy to say I've been working with our Embassy yesterday and today on the very case of your station.

And you raise a compelling point: It is the one Russian language TV station that is freely operating. Even if it weren't, that's irrelevant. There needs to be – there must be freedom of the media in any democracy for a country to be a democracy. So of course, we call on the Georgian Government to restore those broadcasts, absolutely, as I personally did in the case of Imedi TV back in November. What we did in that instance was develop a mechanism that addressed legitimate concerns on not only the part of the Georgian Government, but some of the investors in Imedi, that the editorial line had diverted a bit from the normal professional and ethical standards of journalism. That was fixed. That was resolved.

In this case, there have been no such accusations about your station. It simply needs to be put back on television. So the underlying point is that Georgia is clearly a democracy, but it's not a perfect democracy. It's got a long way to go. And we are committed to helping Georgia move even deeper on its democratic – in its democratic evolution. That said, no matter how flawed Georgian democracy is, it is the Georgian people who elected their leadership. And that – that set of preferences must be respected by the international community.

That's what made us so upset about this operation into Georgia and some of the statements coming from senior Russian officials that the goal – or simply, that Saakashvili must go. We need to respect the will of the Georgian people. My last point is it's about the Georgian people and the democratic process. It's not about any individual person. I'm often asked about, well, gee, is – are you too closely tied to one leader, President Saakashvili, or somebody else. I was asked the same question about Eduard Shevardnadze before the Rose Revolution.

We care about the leaders that are elected by the Georgian people because it's the process of democracy that matters to us.

**MODERATOR:** All the way in the back, and then right here.

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much, Mr. Moderator. My name is Shogo Kawakita with Kyodo News, Japanese newswire service. Sir, you mentioned that U.S. Administration doesn't have any intention to isolate Russia from the international community. But we are also hearing a little bit different voices from the Administration that Russia should pay the price for its action, and some sort of punitive action should be taken to Russia. So what's – what kind of discussion going on at the Administration for Russia's action?

Thank you.

**MR. BRYZA:** Thank you. Yeah, those are not contradictory statements, right? Our goal is not to isolate Russia. Our goal is to help pull Russia back on to a more constructive trajectory. And to do that, our President, our Secretary of State and their colleagues at the highest level have determined that there needs to be – well, there need to be costs, as you yourself just described. I'm not going to speculate on that. I'll let my boss, the Secretary of State, and the President speak for whatever initiatives might be unfolding. But of course, there are deliberations at the very highest level.

But it's not only about imposing costs, of course. And we have to do all we can to save the Georgian democracy, save the democracy in Georgia. That means tackling the humanitarian crisis. It also means making sure the economy restores growth and that the financial system remains stable. So there's a lot we need to do to make sure Georgian democracy stays on track.

Yeah -- did you want to follow up? Yeah, sorry.

**QUESTION:** Thank you, a quick follow-up to that. Do you see any possibilities – so you don't want to go into detail, but --

**MR. BRYZA:** No.

**QUESTION:** -- do you see any possibilities that the Russia could be expelled from the G-8 framework or the U.S. could stop Russia – U.S. could block Russia joining the WTO? Thank you.

**MR. BRYZA:** Thank you. The Secretary has said, the President has said that Russia has had an ambition to join the international organizations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that comprise our community of free nations. It simply, logically, cannot be that Russia moves in that direction but then behaves in a different way. So I'd rather not talk about any specific institutions or organizations, but we're just making a general point.

And we're not trying to issue vague, empty threats or wag our finger; simply stating the fact that this military operation has imposed a serious cost on Russia in terms of its standing in the world. And that's not a good thing. It's not something we relish. It's not something we want to see happen. We spent years, many of us in this Administration, doing all that we could to build up a mutually beneficial relationship between the U.S. and Russia. And as you may recall, at the beginning of this Administration, we talked about a strategic partnership between our two countries. It's – we're a long way from that now.

**MODERATOR:** Right there, in the stripes.

**QUESTION:** Thank you. My name is Nargiz Asadova, Echo, Moscow radio station and (inaudible).

I have two questions. Did the Georgia inform U.S. Ambassador or the U.S. Administration about their decision to start the military operation in South Ossetia? And my second question is, do you think that the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be a part – should participate in the negotiation process about the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Thank you.

**MR. BRYZA:** Thank you, Nargiz. The – we were in very close contact with the Georgian Government throughout these days, early -- August 1<sup>st</sup>, when things started to heat up and then the night of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup>. And our message was consistent to our Georgian colleagues, which was: Avoid a direct military confrontation with Russia at all costs. You cannot prevail; it's simply not possible. Russia is 30 times as big as Georgia. Its military is several times as large. It can almost instantaneously roll tanks in. And then, even if you succeed miraculously in stopping tanks and infantry and mechanize infantry which move very quickly, it's the air power that's finally going to get you, and that is what happened.

So what I was describing a little bit earlier was that we received reports that an attack had begun, that the Georgians had implemented a ceasefire, that the shelling by the South Ossetians behind the Russian peacekeepers continued despite the ceasefire on two particularly sensitive villages of Nevia(ph) and Tamarasheni, and that there was an offensive underway from Russia through the Roki Tunnel toward Tskhinvali and Korta and other Georgian – ethnically Georgian villages.



And at that point, the Georgian leadership told some of us we have no choice but to defend our villages and our people and lift the ceasefire. Our message remained the same: that we understand the predicament you face, but we strongly recommend that you not engage in a direct military conflict with Russia because that is unwinnable. So that did not – that message was consistent. It did not change.

In terms of negotiating the future situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, well, certainly the Abkhaz and South Ossetian representatives need to be part of the process in some way. But all of us, whether it's the United States or Russia or anybody who is a member of the United Nations, has repeatedly made clear that we support Georgia's territorial integrity. That means the Abkhaz and South Ossetians are not on the same legal level as the democratically elected leaders of either Georgia or the elected leader of Russia.

So there needs to be a differentiation made in terms of the way these leaders are treated. But of course, the interests, the desires, the needs of the South Ossetian residents need to be – and of the Abkhaz residents need to come into play somehow in a negotiating framework.

**MODERATOR:** Right here, and then we'll see if we have time for one more.

**QUESTION:** Deniz Arslan, Turkey's Anatolia News Agency. Matt, there are reports saying that Turkey says no to the American naval ships' passage into the Black Sea. If that's the case, what is the problem? And is there a disagreement on the types or tonnage of the ships and do you expect to have an agreement or a consensus in the end?

**MR. BRYZA:** I don't think there is any serious problem whatsoever. We, again, respect the Montreux Convention and the fact that military vessels over, what, 15,000 tons are not allowed to transit the straits. That's the Montreux Convention, and we will abide by it and honor it. So, no, we don't have a problem, but we – you know, we are talking about the various types of ships that could provide humanitarian assistance in Georgia. And so the negotiations are continuing. But I would by no means want to leave you with a false sense that there is a – some sort of difficulty or crisis in U.S.-Turkish relations on this – on this score.

**MODERATOR:** Last one in the back in the blue shirt, please.

**QUESTION:** Yeah, thank you. We all hear different statements from Moscow about who is driving Russian military forces from the Georgian territory. Some statements say that Russian troops are leaving Georgian territory. Some statements say that they will be standing in Georgia as long as it will be needed. So what are the U.S. Administration and your European allies, what are you going to do to – if Moscow, for example, decides to leave its military troops in Georgia for a long time? Thank you.

**MR. BRYZA:** Well, the first step has to be that Russia honors the ceasefire that President Medvedev has signed. And that calls for the withdrawal of all – of all Russian forces that entered after August 6<sup>th</sup>, all of them out of Georgia. That means South Ossetia, Abkhazia, the rest of Georgia. They all must leave. And what would remain then, or what can remain are those peacekeeping forces that were – or so-called peacekeeping forces that were originally there

in – under the previous arrangements. And I say so-called, because we need to see the peace kept in terms of all of these human rights violations we're hearing reports of.

In the long run, the number of – or how long Russian forces would stay under arrangements that have their antecedent in the previous agreements on Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a matter for negotiation. There were structures in place, both in terms of peacekeeping and mediating the conflict for years, right. In the case of Abkhazia, it's a United Nations framework, and the UN friends group, to which I am the U.S. representative, mediated that conflict. And in South Ossetia, the OSCE was involved. And as you know, there was a joint peacekeeping force of 1,500 soldiers that was comprised of 500 each from Ossetian, Russian and Georgian sides.

Those frameworks are in an ambiguous state now. They seem to be no longer, quite frankly. In the case of the UN friends group, well, Russia has become clearly a party to the conflict. It can't be a mediator if it's a party. It attacked Georgia in the upper Kodori Valley; therefore, it is no longer a mediator. South Ossetia, the same; I mean, the whole world has been talking now for almost two weeks about Russian military forces invading Georgia.

So the guideposts we had or the frameworks that previously existed are gone, and so we're going to have to negotiate now how long these residual concentrations of Russian peacekeepers will be able to remain in Georgia. But I can assure you that we will be continuing in the current line that we are of unity with our allies to restore Georgia's territorial integrity, which is a legal obligation of all of us, including Russia. Thank you.

**MODERATOR:** Thank you all for coming.