

The Army and Society in Georgia

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EASTERN DIRECTION TROOPS ARE TO DEFEND KAKHETI FROM NEW "LEKIANOBA"

By Irakli Aladashvili

General Toradze, a veteran of the 1992-93 war in Abkhazia and former commander of the 11th MRB of the MoD, was appointed commander of the Internal Troops in 1994. An year later, in November 1995, Shota Kviriaia, the interior minister at the time, fired Toradze and his deputy Colonel Akia Barbakadze. The following three years and six months General Toradze was unemployed until appointed the EDT commander by David Tevzadze (by the way, during the war in Abkhazia Tevzadze served under Toradze).

Almost one year has passed since the MoD set up several direction troops - Western, Kodori and Eastern. The MoD began to create the staff of the latter in the last place, in February 1999, and the process is still under way. David Tevzadze, the defence minister, appointed General Ghia Toradze commander of the Eastern Direction Troops (EDT).

Unfortunately, the government has not paid much attention to the eastern direction so far. As tensions persist in western Georgia (Samegrelo and Abkhazia) Tbilisi directed most of its armed forces to western regions so that eastern Georgia appeared to some extent unprotected. However, eastern Georgia may face a certain threat already in several months, after snow melts away in the Caucasian mountains opening highland cross-routes between Georgia and Chechnya. Just Chechnya may pose a danger of new "lekianoba" (a medieval term that originates from the name of one of the Caucasian highland tribes, the Leki, and refers to the intrusion of the Caucasian highlanders into Georgia for kidnapping) - eastern Georgia used to suffer from it for centuries.

Official Grozny and the Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov fail to control the situation in Chechnya. Almost all the Chechen military leaders - Shamil Basayev, Salman Raduyev and others - do not obey the president any longer. Kidnapping of people for ransom has become the main source of income for them and their men. Therefore, during the last year - after the war in Chechnya ended - the Chechens kidnapped a lot of people in the Krasnodar and Stavropol provinces and North Ossetian autonomous republics of Russia, and conveyed them to Chechnya.

Blocked in the north, the west and the east by Moscow, Chechnya has in fact the only way-out - to the south or through eastern Georgia. To date, at least seven Georgian citizens have been kidnapped and conveyed to Chechnya. The question is whether the Georgian government is able to adequately respond to the operations of small but well armed and, more importantly, combat experienced groups of kidnappers. Unfortunately, the answer to this question is negative at present. A more or less strong paratroop battalion of the MoD was deployed in Telavi (the Kakheti region) till the end of 1998. But due to the last year's October 19 mutiny in western Georgia, after the leader of the rebelled servicemen Akaki Eliava fled to forests and threatened to attack the Poti sea port, the frightened authorities promptly re-deployed this unit to Poti. More exactly the battalion now defends the Supsa oil terminal. Last year the government also re-deployed a battalion of the Internal Troops from Telavi to Tbilisi. Only one MRB of the MoD remains in the Kakheti region (in Gombori) at present but it is the so-called "cadre" one (consists of only officers plus some sentry and support detachments) and its combat efficiency falls far short of satisfactory. The Georgian Frontier Troops have several check-points at the Georgian-Chechen border but their number is not enough to control all the highland cross-routes and check possible penetrations from the north.

Under such negative circumstances, the MoD has resolved to create an eastern direction staff in Telavi. However, there are actually no troops at present capable of fulfilling the staff's orders efficiently and in time. Meanwhile, the current economic situation of the Georgian railroad and automobile transport departments makes it almost impossible to rapidly deploy troops from one region of the country to another. Considering how many difficulties the MoD encountered when transporting heavy armaments of the Koda-based 11th MRB (nearby Tbilisi) by railroad to western Georgia last October (to put down the October 19 mutiny), one can easily understand that it will be extremely hard to check possible penetration of Chechen gunmen into Georgia.

On February 24 the MoD launched a staff exercise in Telavi - the first exercise to be held in eastern Georgia. This may be regarded as a sort of "presentation" of the newly created Eastern Direction Troops. Interestingly, during the exercise commanders of various military units (deployed throughout Georgia) were given an opportunity to fly on a helicopter and observe dozens of mountainous cross-routes from Chechnya to Georgia.

It must be mentioned that in 1995, during the war in Chechnya, a structure similar to the EDT was established in eastern Georgia. Vardiko Nadibaidze, then defence minister, ordered to set up a temporary operational staff in Telavi under General Guram Nikolaishvili, deputy defence minister at the time. The latter was empowered to command joint forces of the MoD, the Internal Troops and the Frontier Troops that were additionally re-deployed to Kakheti from other regions. The main mission of the staff was to check Chechen units which were expected to penetrate into Georgia if the Russian army entrapped them in mountains. After the Chechen war ended, this staff was dissolved.

A Russian delegation led by the Russian interior minister Sergey Stepashin and including heads of militia departments of the Stavropol and Krasnodar provinces, and North Caucasian autonomies visited Georgia on March 17. Among the members of the delegation there was also the commander of the Russian internal troops General Pavel Maslov. In other words, the delegation was made up of the heads of those governmental agencies that are in charge of patrolling the administrative borders of Chechnya. Stepashin held closed-door talks with the Georgian leadership. According to some sources, the two countries' interior ministers discussed, among other things, measures aimed to block Chechnya's southern borders. In this issue Russia and Georgia seem to have a common interest.

General Toradze has began to form the EDT from the scratch. Time will show whether he succeeds in achieving this goal with rather poor financing.

THE 1999 DEFENCE BUDGET AND ARMY BUILDING PROBLEMS OF GEORGIA

By Teimuraz Chachanidze

MoD

The efficiency of Georgia's defence largely depends on the amount of finances allocated by the state budget. For some last years there has been a trend towards reduction of defence spending. This was mainly caused by difficulties of transition to a market-led economy.

In 1997 Georgia spent 78.6 mln GEL (or about \$63 mln by the exchange rate at the time) on defence. The 1998 defence budget totalled 74 mln GEL or about \$55 mln. This money was allocated to the MoD troops - 28,000 servicemen. Due to a budget crisis that burst out at the end of the last year defence spending was curtailed by 9% or by 7 mln GEL. As to the rest of the money - 67 mln GEL - the finance ministry still owes the MoD 10 mln GEL (about \$4.5 mln) or 14.9% of the 1998 defence budget. This debt affected a lot of aspects of the army building: military pensions have not been paid for six months, while salaries for three months; servicemen did not get sufficient amount of foods and uniforms; many tasks of combat training were not completed. Actually, in 1998 defence spending amounted to 57 mln GEL or about \$42 mln.

In 1999 problems seem likely to be even harder. The draft state budget allocates 55 mln GEL (about \$24 mln) to defence or by 12 mln GEL less than in the previous year. Today the army totals 27,000 servicemen and civilian personnel. During parliamentary debates some articles of the draft were revised. Particularly, spending on the purchase of medicines was reduced from 700,000 GEL (about \$318,000) to 300,000 GEL (about \$136,000) but, on the other hand, money for foods was increased to 17,329,000.00 GEL (about \$7.8 mln). Finance on research (300,000.00 GEL) was completely re-allocated to the expenditure on the PfP program that reached 800,000.00 GEL (about \$363,400).

Recent devaluation of the national currency Lari has inflated prices for foods, clothes, fuel and other basic products essential to normal functioning of the army. When the country with the defence budget of \$46.5 mln fails to maintain 28,000 servicemen, it is doubtful whether \$24 mln will be enough for the 27,000-men army.

IMPROPER PLANNING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The weakness of the Georgian economy, large-scale tax evasion and other problems seriously impede collection of state revenues. As a result, the state budget cannot allocate enough finances to the country's defence. Due to insufficient financing Georgia falls into the category of economically weak and poor countries. In 1998 the defence budget and defence capabilities of Georgia were similar to those of Albania or Honduras, while the 1999 proposed defence spending places Georgia along with such African countries as Togo or Sierra-Leone. Under the circumstances, the current defence planning must be changed. The following examples are suffice to illustrate that it uses deficient and out-of-date methods.

According to the "Military Newspaper" (published by the MoD), 4,582 reserve officers graduated military departments of the Georgian high schools in 1998. At the same time, 79 cadets graduated the Joint Military Academy of Georgia and more 227 of them studied in Russian military colleges and academies. Their number increased by 150-200 servicemen in September. Georgian military personnel are trained in Ukraine, Turkey, Greece, Germany, Great Britain, USA and some other countries. The number of officers have obviously grown excessive. In two or three years the problem will become extremely urgent. In some time to come, there will be a lot of pilots, tank crews and naval officers but there will be no aircraft, tanks and warships for them.

Against such a background, the defence spending is gradually decreasing and in all likelihood this tendency will persist. These and other problems put in the agenda the necessity to adopt 3- or 5-year planning. The parliament and the MoD should define an optimum size, structure and armaments of the armed forces, stages and financing of the army-building in accordance with the military doctrine, national security and military strategies, national security concept and other military-political documents (which either do not exist or are outdated).

A MODERN ARMY CANNOT BE BUILT WITHOUT FUNDAMENTAL REFORMS

The limited financing requires to reduce the size of the army but simultaneously improve its efficiency. In their reports foreign experts who deal with the problems of army building in Georgia - a British General Sr. Gary Johnson, a German General Henning von Ondarze and an American expert David A. Ochmanek - emphasise that Georgia cannot, need not and must not have a large, heavily armed and expensive army which will greatly strain the country's meagre resources and, therefore, will hardly gain the society's support. The foreign experts recommend that active forces be manned mainly with contract and professional personnel. They will be armed and trained as mobile light infantry. Their possible participation in future international peacekeeping operations must be also taken into account. Special training centres should be created for reservists. Georgian experts, too, work on reforms in the army. Some interesting ideas have been proposed by Colonel Soso Barnabishvili.

One principle underlies all these considerations: armed forces should be reduced to a level that will satisfy minimal defence requirements within guaranteed state financing.

The military reform should address the aspects listed below.

1. The MoD and General Staff

There must be a civilian defence minister who will be responsible for the state policy in the armed forces. General Staff must be under a military chief responsible for combat efficiency of the army, operational tasks and all the other activities necessary to maintain adequate potential of the armed forces. Such a management model is widely applied by western countries and well suits the Georgian policy. Consequently, there will be a need to perfect the structure and management bodies, and staff them by military and civilian personnel with western mentality.

2. Conscription

The current conscription system is outdated and does not match modern requirements. Georgia has a huge resource of conscripts but only one out of every ten conscripts is drafted into the army. Corruption-ridden commissariats - drafting offices - call up mainly men from poor families. This leads to antagonism between servicemen. Such kind of recruits are distinguished by low physical and intellectual abilities. They are little interested in the military service. There is a need for a new type of conscription. Physical and psychological conditions of conscripts should be tested by a qualified commission. On the basis the commission's resolution, conscripts will be called up for the military or non-military alternative services.

3. Military Units Manned with Professionals

At the first stage a special commission must test servicemen and select them from each other according to their capabilities and sense of commitment. Afterwards, selected servicemen will pass highly qualified training in a special training centre. After training, they will serve in a new kind of military units. Being manned with well trained and committed servicemen, these units may serve as the basis for a professional army in the future. Having completed the general military service, these servicemen will have an opportunity to continue

their service under contract to the army. These units will be deployed along the whole length of the country's border and in strategically important regions. Professionalism will substantially increase the weight of the military in the society. The youth will grow interested in a military career and the military service will become prestigious.

4. Alternative Service

The law on non-military alternative service was adopted as early as in 1997 but due to various problems it has not come into force yet. Introduction of alternative service in the armed forces indicates establishment of democracy. Conscientious objectors may be employed at unpopular civil works; they may also serve as unarmed attendant personnel of the armed forces.

5. Training of Reservists

Reserve is a main component determining the efficiency of the military mechanism and defence capabilities of a small country. One of the main directions of the military reform should be creation of a complete mobilisation system which may allow to promptly mobilise enough reservists.

Reform is a painful process which requires to dismiss a lot of officers who have served for quite a long time, gained combat experience and were awarded state orders and medals. To make the process "smooth", the government should develop a special state program in order to adapt retired military personnel to the civil life and give them employment. In the summer 1998 the Georgian parliament passed a law on the status of military personnel. One of its articles reads as follows - "A military serviceman/servicewoman shall defend state sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, maintain the country's internal and external security, display great valour when resisting armed assaults and aggression...". For its part, the state accepts certain responsibilities such as respect for military personnel's dignity and honour. One wonders whether the current situation allows to do this at present.

Military Chronicle

Georgian press reports

Conflict zones

Zurab Samushia, the commander of the Georgian guerrilla unit White Legion, has refuted reports of some Russian and Abkhaz mass media about Georgian guerrillas' attempted attack on the Russian military base in Gudauta (Abkhazia) not long ago (one Russian serviceman was reportedly wounded). Such information, he said, aimed to discredit the Legion which, in his words, has the only mission - to defend civilian population of Abkhazia from criminal gangs.

"Svobodnaya Gruzia" No. 26, February 10, p. 1

According to Abkhaz authorities, there are about 120 thousand landmines across Abkhazia. The British NGO "Halo Trust" claims this number to be about 150 thousand. Minefields are mainly located in the Ochamchira, Sukhumi and Gali districts, and some areas of the Kodori Gorge. Rains and floods often expose mines and wash them to the Black Sea: in 1998 some 20 landmines were revealed at the Black Sea coast. The Halo Trust plans to complete mine clearing operations in Abkhazia in 5-7 years. It started its activities in Abkhazia two years ago and has spent \$1.5 mln since then. Each mine cleaner gets \$100 for every revealed mine. However, according to some sources (first of all Georgian guerrillas), the British organisation often employs local civilians as mine cleaners and allegedly pays them only \$30 per each revealed mine, while the rest \$70 remain in its possession.

"Droni" No. 14, February 11-13, p. 7

According to Nodar Natadze, the leader of the United Republican Party, Russia is deploying additional troops at its military bases in Abkhazia which are enough to conquer, "if there are appropriate grounds to do so", the Caucasus in 3-5 hours. Particularly, in Natadze's words, 3,000 servicemen and 28 aircraft, including Su-25 fighters and Su-27 bombers, have been recently delivered to the Bombora airfield near Gudauta (Abkhazia). Tamaz Nadareishvili, the chairman of the Tbilisi-based Supreme Council of Abkhazia, also claims that the Russian military forces in Abkhazia have been substantially enlarged, violating armament quotas of the CFE (Conventional Forces in Europe) agreement.

"Droni" No. 15, February 13-16, p. 2

"Resonance" No. 39, February 13, p. 2

Army building

Colonel Koba Kobaladze, 29, has been appointed commander of the MoD Western Direction troops (his predecessor, General Zaur Uchadze was dismissed last year in connection with the October 19 mutiny in western Georgia). Kobaladze has graduated the Riyazan military college of airborne troops and Frunze military academy (both in Russia).

"7 Dge" No. 15, February 8-9, p. 2

Colonel Soso Barnabishvili has proposed a new scheme of reforms in the army. In his opinion, the MoD should create elite forces. To this end, Barnabishvili plans to select the most trained and intelligent servicemen - "We will sort out the men from the boys" - and converge them on a special training centre for further three-month intense training course. According to the plan, privates will be paid about 30 GEL per month (currently they get 3 GEL), while officers' salary will double. After the training, the servicemen will serve in special elite units and wear distinct uniforms. The whole process must be completed in nine months. According to Barnabishvili, 600-900 perfectly trained servicemen will graduate the centre by that time.

"Alia" No. 20, February 6-7, p. 4

Reportedly, the law on alternative non-military conscription may be put in force by the end of 1999. Male able-bodied citizens of conscription age - conscientious objectors - are liable to non-military conscription. They will have to serve for three years in emergency/rescue services, fire brigades, hospitals, public utilities, building offices, etc. According to the law, conscientious objectors must formally appeal to respective district drafting offices within 10 days after they received call-up papers and explain on what grounds they object to the military service. The office has to examine and submit their documents to the state commission for alternative non-military conscription (it must be mentioned that the commission has yet to be created) within 20 days after it got a conscientious objectors' application. The commission has to make a decision (reject or approve) in one week. After demobilisation, citizens will be registered in a non-military reserve and may be mobilised in case of emergency (natural disasters, ecological catastrophes, etc.).

"Meridiani 44" No. 15, February 8-10, p. 6

David Tevzadze, the defence minister, has ordered to abolish the Central Military Commissariat of Georgia and assign its functions to a newly created mobilisation department of the MoD. A part of the 300 personnel of the Commissariat (mostly civilians) was dismissed, while the others offered jobs in the MoD. According to General Tengiz Razmadze, the head of the department, the MoD is now examining two possibilities: first, district commissariats - drafting offices - remain and only the Central Commissariat is abolished; second, district drafting offices, too, are dissolved and their functions will be fulfilled by civil district administrations.

"Svobodnaya Gruzia" No. 26, February 10, p. 3

"Resonance" No. 39, February 13, p. 2

According to official statistics, in 1998 the army got only 55% of the required number (specified by the 1998 defence budget) of meat, 53% of fish, 36.6% of butter and slightly more than 50% of cabbage. As to uniforms, the logistical services got only 72% of the budgetary finance. As a result, servicemen were provided with only 74% of field uniforms, 38% of winter jackets, 9.6% of warm winter underwear, 52% of bed clothes and 45% of boots. Medical services of the army got only 18.5% of the required 1.5 mln GEL.

"Meridiani 44" No. 19, February 17-19, p. 6

Seven privates of the Koda-based 11th MRB of the MoD were conveyed to the Tbilisi garrison guardhouse on February 16 for having left the military site without leave of absence. However, the garrison duty officer turned them away since all were lousy. In addition, one of them appeared to be a Russian citizen and, therefore, had no right to serve in the Georgian army. His case will be investigated.

"Alia" No. 27, February 18-19, p. 10

According to the draft 1999 state budget of Georgia, this year's defence expenditures are estimated at 56.6 mln GEL (about \$25.7 mln) or 18 mln GEL (about \$8,2 mln) less than last year. This money is enough to provide sufficient foods and ammunition to only 15-16,000 servicemen, though the size of the armed forces currently totals 27,000. With such a budget, experts say, procurement will be actually impossible this year. The draft rather disappointed the MoD. Let alone huge arrears of salary, according to the draft, its personnel will no longer enjoy free-of-charge yearly passes for the Tbilisi Underground. The last year's passes have already expired. The Underground administration agreed to prolong their term but only till February 25. The military are also dissatisfied with the fact that the money for foods remain unchanged - 59 GEL (about \$26.8) per month for each servicemen (officers get this money as a surplus to their salary), though the Lari has devalued 70-80% in recent times.

"Resonance" No. 53, February 27, p. 2

"Droni" No. 19, February 25-27, March 9-11; pp. 2, 7, 10

In accordance with the recent parliamentary resolution, the Georgian military forces (the MoD, the Internal Troops, the SDFD and the SSS) total 45,072 servicemen this year or 1,271 less than in 1998.

"Resonance" No. 53, February 27, p. 2

On February 28 Eduard Shevardnadze signed a decree on the 1999 activities in the field of human rights, anti-corruption policy, maintaining rule of law and legal reforms. According to the document, the MoD and Military Procurator's Office have to analyse reasons of desertion in the army and come up with respective recommendations in three months. It remains unclear, however, why the reasons of desertion should be analysed only by the MoD, though the problem equally affects the Internal Troops and the SDFD units as well.

"7 Dge" No. 30, March 15-16, pp. 1, 2

Nowadays, there are 16 high schools with military departments in Georgia - some 4,500 reserve officers graduate them every year. On the whole, the current number of Georgian reserve officers totals about 80 thousand. However, their professional level falls far short of satisfactory as the quality of military education in the high schools is too low. In fact, Georgia has inherited the old Soviet education system for reserve officers which remains unchanged for years. More than 500 lecturers teach at the military departments of high schools at present. Being employees of the Ministry of Education and officers of the MoD simultaneously, they get two salaries. The MoD now plans to re-organise this system. But it will hardly succeed unless conceptual issues are settled first: the government must define what an army the country needs in peace and in war, and what officer specialities are required first of all; the parliament should adopt a mobilisation law, etc. Currently the military departments teach only 33 military professions. Dimitri Lezhava, the head of the MoD Staff Department, claims that a modern army needs much more professions. He has proposed a plan of reforms in the system. In his opinion, teachers of the military departments must be dismissed from the MoD and remain only employees of the Ministry of

Education. Besides, all the 350 Georgian high schools must get equal rights to establish military departments - at present only 16 of them have such a right according to the president's respective decree. In Lezhava's opinion, not all of them are capable of creating military departments but those that are will start to rival. As a result, he argues, an elementary market principle will be put into force - the best wins. Every high school should teach such military disciplines that correspond with its main educational courses, while the educational programs must be approved by the MoD. Afterwards, the MoD will examine all the graduates: the best of them will be awarded officer ranks and enlisted in the army reserve. All the others will have to pass one-year general military service as sergeants.

"Droni" No. 15, February 13-16, p. 5

General Vano Gurgenidze, the head of the MoD armaments department, has been removed from office in connection with last year's imports of out-of-order Czech-made machine guns. Military Procurator's Office abstains from commenting on the case.

"Droni" No. 14, February 11-13, p. 2

Frontier defence

The SDFD Board discussed problems of personnel training at its sitting on February 6. According to Gela Khutsishvili, deputy chairman of the SDFD, a lot of the Georgian frontier officers are willing to study in Russian and Ukrainian military colleges but only a couple of them will have such an opportunity this year due to the lack of finance. In some time to come, in his words, the SDFD will establish, with the help of the MoD, an academy of frontier troops in Georgia.

"Meridiani 44" No. 15, February 8-10, p. 2

The Georgian Frontier Troops have completely took over the Akhaltsikhe frontier base which earlier belonged to the Russian frontier guards. The ceding ceremony took place on February 14. Russia started withdrawing its frontier troops from this sector - the longest one at the Georgian-Turkish border (170 km and 15 check-points) - last December. A part of the Russian frontier guards has left for Russia, the others were re-deployed to Armenia and Batumi (Adjara). Their ammunition and equipment was divided equally between the two countries. As a result, the Georgian frontier guards received, among other things, about 50 military vehicles. According to Colonel Grigol Lazishvili, the commander of the Akhaltsikhe group of the Georgian frontier troops, barracks and other buildings of the base need repairing. Besides, due to insufficient financing, the Georgian frontier troops cannot use the base designed for 2,000 servicemen to the full.

"Akhali Taoba" No. 40, February 12, p. 5

"Resonance" No. 41, February 15, pp. 1, 2

A new complex of the Frontier Troops was inaugurated in Poti on February 24-28. The complex includes barracks, depots, a garage, an officer mess and some other buildings. The project was financed by the USA. Besides, the Georgian Coast Guard has received one more American gift - a PFC "Sea Ark". So the Guard has already two such craft at present.

"Dilis Gazeti" No. 35, February 19, p. 5

Visits, negotiations, co-operation

The Georgian president has declared that Georgia may withdraw from the CIS collective security agreement unless it is "adapted" to the current realities, i.e. helps solve the problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He added later that the final decision on the issue would be made after his consultations with Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan, expected after the Georgian president's visit to Japan in March. Earlier, Mr. Karimov had declared that Uzbekistan would not prolong its participation in the agreement which expires this April.

"Droni" No. 13, February 9-11, p. 3
"Resonance" No. 57, March 3, pp. 1, 2

At his February 4 press-conference Valeri Chkheidze, the SDFD chairman, claimed the last year's Russian-Georgian agreement on complete withdrawal of the Russian frontier troops from Georgia (the process must be completed this July-August) to be the main achievement of the SDFD in 1998. Although the frontier defence budget has reduced from 13 mln GEL (about \$9.3 mln by then exchange rate) in 1998 to 11 mln GEL (about \$5 mln) in 1999, the SDFD plans to further develop the Coast Guard and create its own air force. Besides, the Georgian frontier guards are going to participate in the coming multi-national PfP exercise "Sea Breeze 99". Commenting on the results of his January visit to Belgium and Austria, Mr. Chkheidze emphasised that while in Vienna he discussed prospects of the Georgian-Austrian co-operation in the field of mountainous frontier operations. Austria, in his words, has the best alpine frontier instructors in the world who may organise proper training of Georgian frontier guards.

"Akhali Taoba" No. 33, February 5, p. 7

Two Georgian officers took part in the February 6-20 PfP training on chemical, biological and nuclear weapons in Turkey. All the expenses of their participation were covered by Ankara.

"Dilis Gazeti" No. 24, February 6, p. 2

David Tevzadze met some foreign military attaches on February 9 to discuss the current situation in the Georgian army and prospects of the military reform in Georgia. The attaches promised to assist the Georgian army-building.

"Sakartvelos Respublika" No. 36, February 10, p. 1

The Russian military launched artillery fire tests at the Gonio firing ground near Batumi (Adjara) at the end of January. Reportedly, the gunfire with the use of howitzers lasted more than an hour and scared the Batumi-dwellers stiff. Grigol Katamadze, deputy defence minister, said the MoD had protested to the Russian military attache as the exercise was not co-ordinated with the Georgian authorities. In his words, the Russian command had warned only about a staff training which was supposed to begin on February 1 without use of heavy armaments. On the other hand, Niaz Zosidze of the press centre of the Supreme Council of Adjara, denied this information. The Russian military, in his words, did not use heavy armaments in Gonio and there was no panic in Batumi. Such exercises, in his words, are regularly held in Gonio and the population has got used to them.

"Akhali Taoba" No. 25, 31; January 28, February 3; pp. 2, 5

"7 Dge" No. 11, 12, 13; January 29-31, February 1-2; February 3-4; pp. 1, 2

"Kviris Palitra" No. 6, February 8-14, p. 9

A Russian military delegation led by General Mikhailov, deputy defence minister, and a group of Russian MPs were going to visit Adjara on February 3, allegedly to attend the Russian military exercise in Gonio (near Batumi). While Mr. Mikhailov had co-ordinated his visit with the Georgian MoD, the Russian MPs failed to notice the Georgian authorities in advance. As a result, Tbilisi protested and their visit was cancelled. As to Mikhailov, according to official information, his visit was postponed due to health problems.

"7 Dge" No. 13; February 3-4; pp. 1, 2

"Akhali Taoba" No. 31, February 3, p. 5

"Alia" No. 19, February 4-5, p. 2

A Russian military delegation led by Nikolay Mikhailov, deputy defence minister of Russia, visited Tbilisi on February 10 for talks with David Tevzadze. The parties failed to reach any agreement. "We have reached complete mutual understanding but the problems remain unsolved", Mikhailov said. Tbilisi keeps demanding to fulfil the January 1998 Russian-Georgian agreement according to which Russia shall cede to the Georgian army about 40 former Soviet military objects. Besides, the Georgian government insists that the Russian military are paid salary in the Georgian national currency Lari. A large amount of Russian Roubles currently paid to Russian servicemen negatively affects the exchange

rate of Lari, while in the Akhalkalaki district (one of the largest Russian bases is stationed there) the Rouble dominates the currency circulation. For its part, Russia requires customs exemptions on imports of goods for the Russian troops in Georgia and permission to repair military vehicles and equipment in Russia. Tbilisi claims that under pretext of repairs Russia has illegally taken out of Georgia a lot of its armaments, though they must have been divided between the two countries as stipulated in the agreement. At a briefing after the talks, Mikhailov said 10-, 15-, or 20-year stay of Russian military bases in Georgia matched interests of both countries. In his opinion, the Gudauta-stationed Russian military base (345th Airborne Regiment) must be considered "peacekeeping" and, therefore, its deployment in Abkhazia is justifiable. Mikhailov also visited Batumi and Gudauta to inspect Russian bases there.

"Resonance" No. 37, February 11, p. 2
"Zakavkazskie Voennye Vedomosti" No. 16, February 13, p. 1

A one-hour closed-door meeting between David Tevzadze and Eduard Shevardnadze took place on February 11. There was no official information about the theme of the talks. According to some informal sources, they were focused on the results of the February 10 Tevzadze-Mikhailov negotiations.

"Dilis Gazeti" No. 29, February 12, p. 2

General Alexey Maltsev, deputy chief of the CIS military co-operation staff, visited Tbilisi on February 19 for talks with Irakli Menagharishvili, the foreign minister, David Tevzadze, the defence minister, and Revaz Adamia, the chairman of the parliamentary defence and security committee. The talks were focused on the prospects of the settlement in Abkhazia and a new peacekeeping mandate (the old one expired about six months ago). He also visited Abkhazia to learn the situation there.

"Svobodnaya Gruzia" No. 32, February 18, p. 3

According to the MoD press centre, General Johnny Pirtskhalaishvili, the chief of the General Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces, has submitted a proposal to George Marshall Centre. He offers to hold a regional conference on joint exercises and regionalisation of the PfP program in Georgia.

"Meridiani 44" 20, February 19-22, p. 2

Grigol Katamadze, deputy defence minister, visited Bulgaria on February 24-March 1 for talks with the Bulgarian military leadership. Prospects of the two countries' military co-operation in the fields of personnel training and joint exercise in the framework of the PfP program were on the table.

"Dilis Gazeti" No. 42, February 27, p. 2

Prospects of Georgia's accession to the international ban on landmines were discussed at the February 8 talks between Eduard Shevardnadze and Jodie Williams, a co-ordinator of the international anti-landmines campaign. According to the president, Georgia is ready to join the ban but the issue, in his opinion, requires more careful attitude. He emphasised that landmines are still widely used in Abkhazia and Tbilisi cannot control the situation there. In Shevardnadze's opinion, mine clearing in Georgia must be implemented through a large-scale international program. For his part, David Tevzadze strongly objected to the prohibition of landmines. He emphasised that no neighbouring country has joined the ban so far.

"Svobodnaya Gruzia" No. 25, February 9, p. 1
"7 Dge" No. 16, February 10-11, p. 1

The 12th Russian military base (Adjara) carried out a military exercise at the Gonio firing ground near Batumi on February 4-5 with participation of several T-72 tanks, BMP-1, 122mm howitzers D-30 and self-propelled anti-aircraft artillery systems 3CU-23-4. A group of Georgian generals led by David Tevzadze and Johnny Pirtskhalaishvili attended the exercise as guests.

"Alia" No. 19, February 4-5, p. 2
"Kviris Palitra" No. 6, February 8-14, p. 9

Eduard Shevardnadze decreed to create an ad hoc commission for the problems of the Russian-Georgian military co-operation on February 28. The commission is chaired by Irakli Menagharishvili and David Tevzadze, the foreign and defence ministers respectively.

"Resonance" No. 67, March 13, pp. 1, 2

State security

On February 17 the parliament approved a bill on intelligence in the first reading. According to the document, three agencies form the intelligence system of the country and are responsible for intelligence activities in Georgia: State Intelligence Department, and intelligence departments of the MoD and SDFD.

"Dilis Gazeti" No. 34, February 18, p. 4

Miscellany

A fire burst out in the HQ of the MoD Western Direction Troops in Kutaisi on February 4. The building was completely burnt down, no casualties were reported. Fire brigades put out the fire in three hours. Investigation of the incident is under way.

"Meridiani 44" No. 14, February 5-8, p. 3

Kakha Butskhrikidze, a 19-year-old soldier, was deadly wounded, while on duty, by unidentified criminals in the Koda-based 11th MRB of the MoD on February 5. He died in hospital several hours later. Military Procurator's Office is investigating the incident. The investigation has led to a confrontation between the Office and the brigade command. The latter claims that the soldier was fired at from outside the unit, while the Office refers to post-mortem that showed that the soldier was shot from a close distance. Investigators point to the fact the Office was informed about the incident not by the brigade command but by the administration of the hospital where the soldier died. For his part, Andro Kalatozishvili, the commander of the brigade, explains that according to the military regulations, he has to report all incidents only to a duty officer of the MoD who must inform the Office afterwards. The Office is also dissatisfied that the brigade command launched its own investigation before the Office investigators arrived on the spot. This allegedly resulted in the loss of some evidences. In Kalatozishvili's words, the brigade has its own lawyers who have a right to carry out investigation on their own in accordance with the military regulations. Unfortunately, they are experts on desertion and lack professionalism in criminal cases, he says. He also claims that six soldiers of the brigade were summoned to the Office to testify in connection with the incident and beaten by investigators. The information was confirmed by Nodar Epremidze, the chairman of the Society for Soldiers' Rights. The Office, however, denied this accusation.

"Alia" No. 20, 26; February 6-7, 16-17; p. 10

According to the MoD press centre, David Tevzadze has been hospitalised for several days to undergo a regular prophylactic medical examination.

"Resonance" No. 32, February 6, p. 2

On January 27 the Georgian police arrested a servicemen of the Russian troops in Georgia for attempted rape. Some time later he was passed to Russian law enforcement authorities. Although, according to the current legislation, criminals must be prosecuted in the country they have committed a crime in, Georgian authorities neither investigate crimes committed by Russian servicemen in Georgia nor even keep a record of them.

"Droni" No. 14, February 11-13, p. 2

ABBREVIATIONS:

EDT - Eastern Direction Troops (MoD)
MoD - Ministry of Defence
PfP - Partnership for Peace program
SID - State Intelligence Department
CIS - Commonwealth of Independent States
MIA - Ministry of Internal Affairs
MRB - motor rifle brigade
MSS - Ministry of State Security
NSC - National Security Council
RPF - Russian Peacekeeping Force
SDFD - State Department of Frontier Defence
SSS - State Safeguard Service

Press Digest

Russian deputy defence minister Nikolay Mikhailov's statement (made while on his February visit to Georgia) claiming the Gudauta base (the 345th Airborne Regiment) to be a "peacekeeping" one is rather meaningful, the Dilis Gazeti (31) remarks. It suggests that there are only three Russian military bases in Georgia: in Vaziani, Batumi and Akhalkalaki. But strategically, in the newspaper's opinion, just the Gudauta base (Abkhazia) is the most powerful and important of all. It protects one of the largest Russian air force bases in the Caucasus - the Bombora military airfield (near Gudauta). However, it seems that the Russian military have their own logic reflecting Russia's imperial policy when they claim a base with modern aircraft and armaments to be a peacekeeping one, the newspaper argues. The 345th Regiment (just its servicemen participated in the brutal crackdown on peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi on April 9, 1989) used to stay in Giyandja (Azerbaijan) and was re-deployed to Gudauta in 1992, as soon as the war in Abkhazia began. It actively backed Abkhaz forces against Georgian governmental troops. After the war ended, Moscow insisted that its servicemen were included in the Russian Peacekeeping Force in Abkhazia. Obviously, in the newspaper's opinion, the Kremlin did so intentionally - in case Tbilisi demanded to withdraw the Russian military bases from Georgia. As long as the Gudauta base is a peacekeeping one, it can be pulled out only together with the whole Peacekeeping Force. The Georgian leadership will hardly press for the withdrawal of peacekeepers as neither Tbilisi nor Sukhumi are interested in a new war which may well burst out as soon as the Russian peacekeepers leave, the Dilis Gazeti concludes.