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Georgia's Pankisi Gorge: Russian Concerns and U.S. Interests

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Summary

Georgia has faced difficulty in asserting control over its Pankisi Gorge area bordering Russia's breakaway Chechnya region. During 2002, Russia increasingly threatened to intervene in the Gorge, claiming that Chechen rebels and international terrorists based there were making forays into Russia. U.S. interest in the Gorge was spurred by evidence that terrorists there might have been linked to Al Qaeda, and the United States provided training and equipment to help Georgia reassert control over the area. This report may be updated. Related products include CRS Issue Brief IB95024, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia*; and CRS Report 97-727, *Georgia [Republic]: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests*.

Background

In late 1999, soon after sending troops into Chechnya, President Putin made the first of repeated demands that Georgia permit Russian troops to pursue rebels escaping into Georgia, and that it cooperate in joint policing of its border and the elimination or extradition of rebels. Frustrated by continued separatist fighting in its Chechnya region, Russia in 2002 stepped up these demands, arguing that Georgia's Pankisi Gorge area near Chechnya's border provided a major sanctuary and source of support for the rebels.



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (09/02 M.Chin)

As fighting in Chechnya intensified in late 1999, up to 6,000 Chechens fled south of the Russian-Georgian border about 25 miles into Georgia's eleven-mile long Pankisi Gorge area. Many of these refugees had kinship and other ties to the Gorge's population of 7,500 mainly ethnic Chechens, termed Kists, who had long resided in the area. The Georgian government helped the fleeing Chechens to settle in the Gorge. It tended to tolerate the presence of former Chechen rebel fighters in the Gorge as long as they remained inactive and lived there in peace. Some in Georgia also may have considered

support for the refugees as leverage for reducing Russia's support of separatism in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. In any event, the Georgian government had little control over the poverty-stricken Gorge.

U.S. interest in the presence of international terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge was spurred when, reportedly during the 9/11 attacks, a phone call was made from a bin Laden operative in Afghanistan to Georgia announcing the success of the first phase of attacks. President Bush in late February 2002 explained the decision to launch the GTEP by emphasizing that there were some Al Qaeda in the Gorge. The State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism for 2001* stated that Georgia "contended with international mujahidin using Georgia as a conduit for financial and logistic support for the mujahidin and Chechen fighters."¹

Recent Developments

Georgia-Russia tensions escalated in July 2002 after sixty Chechen guerrillas attacked Russian forces just north of the Georgian border. In the face of the heightened tensions and pressure from Russia, Georgia announced in mid-August 2002 that police and security forces soon would be deployed to the Gorge and that military exercises would commence near the Gorge. The deployments began on August 25, with the setting up of checkpoints sealing off the Gorge, some guarded by tanks and armored vehicles. Russian and Georgian officials reported that many or most Chechen rebels and terrorists left the Gorge either after the announcement of the GTEP or just after the announcement of Georgia's deployments, with some moving across the border into Chechnya and others scattering along Georgia's borders with other areas of Russia. According to some reports, U.S. military planners and FBI, CIA, and DEA personnel advised or participated in the operation. Putin sent a letter to Shevardnadze on September 4, 2002, demanding that Georgian authorities "neutralize" terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge rather than simply let them leave the area. The State Department condemned Russian airstrikes into Georgia's Pankisi Gorge area bordering Russia's Chechnya region and stressed that Russia should cooperate with Georgia's efforts to combat the terrorists.

Putin increasingly attempted to frame the issue of Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge as part of the U.N.-backed effort, led by the United States, against international terrorism, maintaining that Russia had the right to counter-attack or pre-empt terrorists in states harboring them. On September 11, 2002, Putin asserted that while Russia had eliminated Al Qaeda and other international terrorists within Chechnya, they continued to threaten Russia and the world from neighboring Georgia. He called on his defense, border, and security agencies to prepare plans for an incursion. Georgian-Russian tensions seemed to reach new heights the next day, when Putin addressed letters to President Bush and other U.N. Security Council (UNSC) and OSCE members condemning Georgia's police action in the Pankisi Gorge as duplicitous, in part because Georgian leaders were "conniving" with the terrorists. He warned that Russia might exercise its right to self-defense under the U.N. Charter or the UNSC's anti-terrorism resolution 1373 "to counter the terrorist menace." The United States responded swiftly,

¹ The White House. Remarks By the President to the Travel Pool, Feb. 27, 2002; see also statement by Charge d'affaires Philip Remler, *AP*, Feb. 11, 2002. The alleged National Security Agency phone intercept was reported on *CBS Evening News*, Sept. 4, 2002.

expressing “unequivocal opposition” to unilateral military action by Russia inside Georgia, and offered its “good offices” to mediate the Russian-Georgian dispute.

Seeking to further address Russian concerns, President Shevardnadze on September 16 ordered stepped up efforts in the Gorge to “capture terrorists, arrest criminals, and free hostages.” On September 25, 2002, a group of several dozen Chechen rebels that allegedly infiltrated from Georgia clashed with Russian forces. Ominously, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov asserted that this new attack might well finally tip Russia’s hand toward a military incursion into “lawless” Georgia. Moving to quell such threats, Georgia inaugurated air patrols of the border area on September 27. While Russian forces were clashing with these rebels, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE, to which Russia and Georgia belong) strongly denounced Russia’s threats to intervene and formed a fact-finding mission to visit the Gorge.²

Marking an significant easing of tensions between Russia and Georgia, the two presidents met in Moldova on October 6, 2002, and agreed on border cooperation, including the designation of their security ministers as border emissaries and the establishment of an early-warning joint communication system. In follow-up meetings in mid-October and mid-November, border officials of the two states signed accords reportedly setting up parallel border checkpoints and providing for some reconnaissance and patrolling cooperation. Georgian officials in late October reported that their forces had apprehended over a dozen foreign terrorists linked to Al Qaeda and had handed them over to the United States, though U.S. sources would not verify such reports. Allegedly, one prisoner was Saif al Islam el Masry, an Al Qaeda officer involved in several terrorist attacks on U.S. personnel and facilities.

New Revelations. A major shift in Georgia’s view of Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge occurred in early December 2002 when an armed group from Russia crossed into Georgia to commit crimes. Reportedly, the group had earlier left the Pankisi Gorge following Georgia’s crackdown. Shevardnadze asserted that the group constituted the spearhead of terrorists “planning to carry out wide-ranging terrorist acts in Tbilisi,” and announced a nation-wide anti-crime operation, stating that “I made a big mistake when I failed to pay attention to the terrorist threat.” He also alluded to Georgian press reports that prominent Chechen rebel leaders had threatened the Georgian government. He stated that the anti-crime operation would not be aimed against peaceful Chechens residing in Georgia. Responding to Shevardnadze’s announcement, Putin commended Shevardnadze “for decisive action in the struggle against terrorism.”³

International observers appeared in recent weeks to be also re-assessing the threat posed by international terrorism in the Pankisi Gorge as more potent than previously supposed, seemingly lending greater support to some of Russia’s arguments. At variance with some earlier reports that Al Qaeda members had mainly appeared in Georgia after 9/11 (having fled from U.S.-led fighting in Afghanistan), this new information suggested

² The mission reported in Nov. 2002 that it appeared that Georgia had achieved “great success” in asserting control over the Pankisi Gorge. The Georgian and Russian delegates to PACE in Jan. 2003 agreed to set up a joint working group to deal with disputes over Pankisi Gorge and other issues.

³ *FBIS*, Dec. 7, 2002, Doc. No. 20; Dec. 9, 2002, Doc. No. 152.

that Chechen rebels, assisted by 80-100 Al Qaeda and other international terrorists, had established at least two training camps in the Pankisi Gorge in late 1999. By 2002, they controlled the Gorge. The camps contained sophisticated communications equipment and supplies. Training included hostage-taking, shooting down airplanes, and use of chemical weapons and explosives. Although the international terrorists focused on funneling money and fighters into Chechnya to fuel the Chechen rebel fighting, they were also a node of support for worldwide terrorism.⁴ Such support may have included the development of toxins and bombs for use against U.S. and other targets in the Middle East, Western Europe, and Russia.⁵

Among the most sensational new evidence was surveillance camera footage allegedly shot in March 2002 of Al Qaeda presence in the Gorge, released by the Georgian Security Ministry in mid-January 2003. The Ministry reported that among the international terrorists on camera was the Jordanian Abu Hafs, better known as Amzhet, who led the 80-100 international mujahidin in the Gorge. Other evidence showed a more potent Chechen rebel presence than previously acknowledged by Georgia, including Ruslan Gelayev, with a band of 200-250 rebels; Doka Umarov (also called Khasanov), with a band of 130-150 rebels; Hussein Esambayev, with a band of 130-140 rebels; and a rebel called Batya, with a band of 100-120 rebels.⁶ Many or most of these rebels and terrorists quietly left the Gorge by mid-2002 and were not apprehended. The Security Ministry reported that its anti-terrorist operation was virtually finished in the Gorge by late 2002. The release of the camera footage and announcement that operations were winding down prompted Russia's presidential spokesman to warn on January 16, 2003, that terrorism may not have been eradicated in the Gorge and that international attention should remain focused on the area. Russian military officials also announced further efforts to fortify the Georgia-Russia border. U.S. Ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow too responded on January 17 that much remained to be done to completely eliminate the threat in the area. Perhaps heeding such warnings, in March 2003 the government reportedly sent extra military and police forces into the Gorge to prevent Chechen rebels from re-entering during the spring thaw. Georgian National Security Council secretary Tedo Japaridze in February 2003 was critical of assertions that many Al Qaeda remained in the Gorge, which he said plays into the hands of those Russians wanting to intervene.

The Georgia Train and Equip Program. The Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) grew out of a request for counter-terrorism aid made by President Shevardnadze during his U.S. meeting with President Bush in October 2001. U.S. officials were receptive to this request in the face of evidence of links between the 9/11 attacks and the Gorge. They stressed that the GTEP complemented other multinational

⁴ According to one report, after U.S.-led forces eliminated Al Qaeda bases in Afghanistan, Al Qaeda operations chief Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, a major planner of the 9/11 attacks, directed that Pankisi become a major center of Al Qaeda operations. *CNN*, Mar. 3, 2003.

⁵ *Time*, Oct. 28, 2002, p. 32; *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 29, 2002. In his address to the U.N. Security Council on Feb. 5, 2003, on the situation in Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that colleagues of Islamic terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who was an "associate" of bin Laden, "have been active in the Pankisi Gorge." Secretary Powell presented a slide depicting Zarqawi's alleged colleague Abu Atiya (Adnan Muhammad Sadik) as active in the Gorge.

⁶ Amzhet controlled the distribution of funds, including some from U.S. sources, to finance the training camps and operations in Chechnya and elsewhere. *Financial Times*, Jan. 17, 2003, p. 7.

counter-terrorism aid to Georgia and similar U.S. efforts in the Philippines and Yemen. They emphasized that the training aimed to help Georgia deny safe haven and transit for Chechen, Arab, Afghani, al-Qaeda, and other terrorists who infiltrated Georgia, and otherwise to help Georgia gain control over its Pankisi Gorge, protect its sovereignty, and enhance regional stability.

The \$64 million, 21-month, “train the trainer” program formally began in May 2002. Up to 150 U.S. Special Operations Forces, Marines, and other Army and Air Force personnel are training up to 2,000 Georgian military, security, and border officers and troops. The first phase, completed in August, acquainted 120 officers with U.S. military doctrine and tactics regarding military staffing, decision-making, budgeting, and civil-military relations. A second phase involves training four battalions and a company in marksmanship, communications, first aid, reconnoitering, human rights, and offensive and defensive operations and mountain and helicopter tactics. The first 558-man battalion to undergo training was envisaged as a commando-type unit composed of contract soldiers. It completed its training in mid-December 2002, and reportedly some troops would be deployed in the Pankisi Gorge.⁷ Marines began training the “Sachkhere” Mountain Rifle Battalion in counter-terrorism operations in January 2003. Equipment provided includes uniforms, fuel, small arms and ammunition, and medical supplies, and some military facilities were extensively refurbished, but U.S. officials stressed that there are no plans to establish a permanent U.S. military presence in Georgia. The U.S. military also reported that \$350,000 was used to provide advanced equipment for a new National Command Center (NCC) at the Georgian Defense Ministry, operational in late July 2002, to coordinate operational intelligence and plan emergency operations.

Implications for U.S. Interests

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Lynn Pascoe in congressional testimony on September 24, 2002, stressed that “a stable and democratic Georgia will have geostrategic importance for [U.S.] international relations far into the future.” He suggested that Russia’s threats against Georgia reflected its real concerns about the presence of Chechen rebels and terrorists in Georgia, “visceral” dislike by some in Russia to Shevardnadze’s pro-Western stance, and perhaps displeasure that an oil pipeline being built across Georgia will loosen its near-monopoly control over Caspian energy. Those who view the Pankisi Gorge through the lens of Russian politics also have argued that President Putin and the military were attempting to justify the failures of the Russian campaign in Chechnya by attributing them to Georgian officials and international terrorists.

President Putin’s letter of September 11 appeared designed largely to convince the United States to encourage Georgia to be more cooperative in addressing cross-border incursions, according to some observers. However, other commentators and Russian media asserted that the letter represented an attempt to trade Russia’s support of a UNSC resolution on Iraq in exchange for U.S. acquiescence to a Russian incursion. Addressing this assertion, Undersecretary of State John Bolton rejected any U.S. willingness to consider such an “exchange of concessions.” Some observers have raised concerns that as the United States focuses more on a possible conflict with Iraq, Russia might again consider cross-border forays into Georgia in spring 2003, when Chechen rebels may step

⁷ *Washington Times*, Dec. 17, 2002.

up their activities.⁸ The United States in February 2003 designated three Chechen groups as terrorist organizations, a major endorsement of Russia's stance on the groups, but stressed that the designation did not give leave to Russia to violate Georgia's sovereignty.

Reflecting a major concern of many observers, Senator Nighthorse Campbell has warned that a Russian military incursion into Georgia could "complicate" the closer U.S.-Russia ties that emerged post-9/11.⁹ Cooperative policies that might be jeopardized by a cooling of bilateral relations might include Russia's cooperation on global counter-terrorism, nuclear arms reduction, and the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps indicating the primacy of such bilateral interests on both sides, Foreign Minister Ivanov during his September 2002 U.S. visit stressed that ties were "strengthened," and Secretary Powell stated that the United States was "pleased" with the relationship. Perhaps also indicative, Secretary Powell on September 24 stated that the United States "would not lecture to the Russians" on self-defense, but argued that "brief military force" by Russia in the Gorge would not resolve the problem. He also partly blamed Georgia for border violations, stating that "there's an obligation both on the Georgian side as well as on the Russian side" to stop terrorism. At the same time, Administration sources indicated that the United States was willing to step up trilateral talks with Russia and Georgia to help ease their tensions. Senator John McCain, after visiting the Gorge, also endorsed holding trilateral talks.¹⁰

The GTEP assistance was widely viewed by U.S. and Georgian officials as bolstering Georgia's ability to defend itself without outside intervention from Russia. There were major concerns in both the United States and Georgia that a Georgian crackdown on Chechen rebels and terrorists in the Gorge could trigger attacks by these forces on Georgia itself. Russia's escalation of rhetoric during 2002 provided an impetus to the U.S. GTEP effort to put forces in place that could prevent and counter such attacks. Some U.S. officials also pointed to the establishment of the NCC as an effort by the United States to bolster stability in Georgia during its upcoming political succession. Reports that members of Al Qaeda and other terrorists were in Pankisi or elsewhere in Georgia created dilemmas for a U.S. policy that holds governments responsible for terrorists operating on their territories. However, Georgia's attainment of central government control over its territory will likely take some months or years, and cannot extend to breakaway regions such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia that also might contain terrorists. At the same time, Russia, Georgia, and the United States continue to face the larger dilemma of distinguishing Chechen separatists from terrorists, with the United States calling for Georgia to combat the latter and advocating that Russia open peace talks with the former that lead to the settlement of the conflict.

⁸ *Interfax*, Sept. 13, 2002; *Washington Post*, Sept. 14, 2002, p. A14; *Eurasianet*, Sept. 17, 2002.

⁹ U.S. Congress. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *Hearing on the Republic of Georgia: Democracy, Human Rights, and Security*, Sept. 24, 2002.

¹⁰ On U.S.-Russia ties, see CRS Report RL31543, *Russian National Security Policy*. President Bush reportedly sent a letter to Shevardnadze in late Jan. 2003 calling for more U.S.-Georgia-Russia cooperation on regional security problems. *Interfax*, Jan. 22, 2003.