



November 7, 2008

## Georgia Claims on Russia War Called Into Question

By [C. J. CHIVERS](#) and ELLEN BARRY

TBILISI, [Georgia](#) — Newly available accounts by independent military observers of the beginning of the war between Georgia and [Russia](#) this summer call into question the longstanding Georgian assertion that it was acting defensively against separatist and Russian aggression.

Instead, the accounts suggest that Georgia's inexperienced military attacked the isolated separatist capital of Tskhinvali on Aug. 7 with indiscriminate artillery and rocket fire, exposing civilians, Russian peacekeepers and unarmed monitors to harm.

The accounts are neither fully conclusive nor broad enough to settle the many lingering disputes over blame in a war that hardened relations between the Kremlin and the West. But they raise questions about the accuracy and honesty of Georgia's insistence that its shelling of Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, was a precise operation. Georgia has variously defended the shelling as necessary to stop heavy Ossetian shelling of Georgian villages, bring order to the region or counter a Russian invasion.

President [Mikheil Saakashvili](#) of Georgia has characterized the attack as a precise and defensive act. But according to observations of the monitors, documented Aug. 7 and Aug. 8, Georgian artillery rounds and rockets were falling throughout the city at intervals of 15 to 20 seconds between explosions, and within the first hour of the bombardment at least 48 rounds landed in a civilian area. The monitors have also said they were unable to verify that ethnic Georgian villages were under heavy bombardment that evening, calling to question one of Mr. Saakashvili's main justifications for the attack.

Senior Georgian officials contest these accounts, and have urged Western governments to discount them. "That information, I don't know what it is and how it is confirmed," said Giga Bokeria, Georgia's deputy foreign minister. "There is such an amount of evidence of continuous attacks on Georgian-controlled villages and so much evidence of Russian military buildup, it doesn't change in any case the general picture of events."

He added: "Who was counting those explosions? It sounds a bit peculiar."

The Kremlin has embraced the monitors' observations, which, according to a written statement from Grigory Karasin, Russia's deputy foreign minister, reflect "the actual course of events prior to Georgia's aggression." He added that the accounts "refute" allegations by Tbilisi of bombardments that he called mythical.

The monitors were members of an international team working under the mandate of the [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe](#), or O.S.C.E. A multilateral organization with 56 member states, the

group has monitored the conflict since a previous cease-fire agreement in the 1990s.

The observations by the monitors, including a Finnish major, a Belarussian airborne captain and a Polish civilian, have been the subject of two confidential briefings to diplomats in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, one in August and the other in October. Summaries were shared with The New York Times by people in attendance at both.

Details were then confirmed by three Western diplomats and a Russian, and were not disputed by the O.S.C.E.'s mission in Tbilisi, which was provided with a written summary of the observations.

Mr. Saakashvili, who has compared Russia's incursion into Georgia to the Nazi annexations in Europe in 1938 and the Soviet suppression of Prague in 1968, faces domestic unease with his leadership and skepticism about his judgment from Western governments.

The brief war was a disaster for Georgia. The attack backfired. Georgia's army was humiliated as Russian forces overwhelmed its brigades, seized and looted their bases, captured their equipment and roamed the country's roads at will. Villages that Georgia vowed to save were ransacked and cleared of their populations by irregular Ossetian, Chechen and Cossack forces, and several were burned to the ground.

#### Massing of Weapons

According to the monitors, an O.S.C.E. patrol at 3 p.m. on Aug. 7 saw large numbers of Georgian artillery and grad rocket launchers massing on roads north of Gori, just south of the enclave.

At 6:10 p.m., the monitors were told by Russian peacekeepers of suspected Georgian artillery fire on Khetagurovo, an Ossetian village; this report was not independently confirmed, and Georgia declared a unilateral cease-fire shortly thereafter, about 7 p.m.

During a news broadcast that began at 11 p.m., Georgia announced that Georgian villages were being shelled, and declared an operation "to restore constitutional order" in South Ossetia. The bombardment of Tskhinvali started soon after the broadcast.

According to the monitors, however, no shelling of Georgian villages could be heard in the hours before the Georgian bombardment. At least two of the four villages that Georgia has since said were under fire were near the observers' office in Tskhinvali, and the monitors there likely would have heard artillery fire nearby.

Moreover, the observers made a record of the rounds exploding after Georgia's bombardment began at 11:35 p.m. At 11:45 p.m., rounds were exploding at intervals of 15 to 20 seconds between impacts, they noted.

At 12:15 a.m. on Aug. 8, Gen. Maj. Marat M. Kulakhmetov, commander of Russian peacekeepers in the enclave, reported to the monitors that his unit had casualties, indicating that Russian soldiers had come under fire.

By 12:35 a.m. the observers had recorded at least 100 heavy rounds exploding across Tskhinvali, including 48 close to the observers' office, which is in a civilian area and was damaged.

Col. Gen. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, a spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry, said that by morning on Aug.

8 two Russian soldiers had been killed and five wounded. Two senior Western military officers stationed in Georgia, speaking on condition of anonymity because they work with Georgia's military, said that whatever Russia's behavior in or intentions for the enclave, once Georgia's artillery or rockets struck Russian positions, conflict with Russia was all but inevitable. This clear risk, they said, made Georgia's attack dangerous and unwise.

Senior Georgia officials, a group with scant military experience and personal loyalties to Mr. Saakashvili, have said that much of the damage to Tskhinvali was caused in combat between its soldiers and separatists, or by Russian airstrikes and bombardments in its counterattack the next day. As for its broader shelling of the city, Georgia has told Western diplomats that Ossetians hid weapons in civilian buildings, making them legitimate targets.

"The Georgians have been quite clear that they were shelling targets — the mayor's office, police headquarters — that had been used for military purposes," said Matthew J. Bryza, a deputy assistant secretary of state and one of Mr. Saakashvili's vocal supporters in Washington.

Those claims have not been independently verified, and Georgia's account was disputed by Ryan Grist, a former British Army captain who was the senior O.S.C.E. representative in Georgia when the war broke out. Mr. Grist said that he was in constant contact that night with all sides, with the office in Tskhinvali and with Wing Commander Stephen Young, the retired British military officer who leads the monitoring team.

"It was clear to me that the attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation," Mr. Grist said. "The attack was clearly, in my mind, an indiscriminate attack on the town, as a town."

Mr. Grist has served as a military officer or diplomat in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Kosovo and Yugoslavia. In August, after the Georgian foreign minister, Eka Tkeshelashvili, who has no military experience, assured diplomats in Tbilisi that the attack was measured and discriminate, Mr. Grist gave a briefing to diplomats from the [European Union](#) that drew from the monitors' observations and included his assessments. He then soon resigned under unclear circumstances.

A second briefing was led by Commander Young in October for military attachés visiting Georgia. At the meeting, according to a person in attendance, Commander Young stood by the monitors' assessment that Georgian villages had not been extensively shelled on the evening or night of Aug. 7. "If there had been heavy shelling in areas that Georgia claimed were shelled, then our people would have heard it, and they didn't," Commander Young said, according to the person who attended. "They heard only occasional small-arms fire."

The O.S.C.E turned down a request by The Times to interview Commander Young and the monitors, saying they worked in sensitive jobs and would not be publicly engaged in this disagreement.

### Grievances and Exaggeration

Disentangling the Russian and Georgian accounts has been complicated. The violence along the enclave's boundaries that had occurred in recent summers was more widespread this year, and in the days before

Aug. 7 there had been shelling of Georgian villages. Tensions had been soaring.

Each side has fresh lists of grievances about the other, which they insist are decisive. But both sides also have a record of misstatement and exaggeration, which includes circulating casualty estimates that have not withstood independent examination. With the international standing of both Russia and Georgia damaged, the public relations battle has been intensive.

Russian military units have been implicated in destruction of civilian property and accused by Georgia of participating with Ossetian militias in a campaign of ethnic cleansing. Russia and South Ossetia have accused Georgia of attacking Ossetian civilians.

But a critical and as yet unanswered question has been what changed for Georgia between 7 p.m. on Aug 7, when Mr. Saakashvili declared a cease-fire, and 11:30 p.m., when he says he ordered the attack. The Russian and Ossetian governments have said the cease-fire was a ruse used to position rockets and artillery for the assault.

That view is widely held by Ossetians. Civilians repeatedly reported resting at home after the cease-fire broadcast by Mr. Saakashvili. Emeliya B. Dzhoyeva, 68, was home with her husband, Felix, 70, when the bombardment began. He lost his left arm below the elbow and suffered burns to his right arm and torso. "Saakashvili told us that nothing would happen," she said. "So we all just went to bed."

Neither Georgia nor its Western allies have as yet provided conclusive evidence that Russia was invading the country or that the situation for Georgians in the Ossetian zone was so dire that a large-scale military attack was necessary, as Mr. Saakashvili insists.

Georgia has released telephone intercepts indicating that a Russian armored column apparently entered the enclave from Russia early on the Aug. 7, which would be a violation of the peacekeeping rules. Georgia said the column marked the beginning of an invasion. But the intercepts did not show the column's size, composition or mission, and there has not been evidence that it was engaged with Georgian forces until many hours after the Georgian bombardment; Russia insists it was simply a routine logistics train or troop rotation.

#### Unclear Accounts of Shelling

Interviews by The Times have found a mixed picture on the question of whether Georgian villages were shelled after Mr. Saakashvili declared the cease-fire. Residents of the village of Zemo Nigozi, one of the villages that Georgia has said was under heavy fire, said they were shelled from 6 p.m. on, supporting Georgian statements.

In two other villages, interviews did not support Georgian claims. In Avnevi, several residents said the shelling stopped before the cease-fire and did not resume until roughly the same time as the Georgian bombardment. In Tamarasheni, some residents said they were lightly shelled on the evening of Aug. 7, but felt safe enough not to retreat to their basements. Others said they were not shelled until Aug 9.

With a paucity of reliable and unbiased information available, the O.S.C.E. observations put the United States in a potentially difficult position. The United States, Mr. Saakashvili's principal source of

international support, has for years accepted the organization's conclusions and praised its professionalism. Mr. Bryza refrained from passing judgment on the conflicting accounts.

"I wasn't there," he said, referring to the battle. "We didn't have people there. But the O.S.C.E. really has been our benchmark on many things over the years."

The O.S.C.E. itself, while refusing to discuss its internal findings, stood by the accuracy of its work but urged caution in interpreting it too broadly. "We are confident that all O.S.C.E. observations are expert, accurate and unbiased," Martha Freeman, a spokeswoman, said in an e-mail message. "However, monitoring activities in certain areas at certain times cannot be taken in isolation to provide a comprehensive account."

*C.J. Chivers reported from Tbilisi, Georgia, and Ellen Barry from Moscow. Olesya Vartanyan contributed reporting from Tbilisi, and Matt Siegel from Tskhinvali, Georgia.*

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---