

Georgia orders general mobilization, fighting with South Ossetia rages

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili called for a general military mobilization Friday as fighting raged in Georgia's separatist region of South Ossetia.

'Hundreds of thousands of Georgians should stand together to save Georgia,' Saakashvili said in a televised national address.

Saakashvili said the Georgian side now controlled a 'large part of South Ossetia,' and fighting was ongoing in the rebel regions' capital Tskhinvali.

'Tskhinvali is now liberated and fighting is ongoing now in the Tskhinvali's center,' he added.

At least 15 people, primarily civilians, were killed in heavy shelling and airstrikes of the capital Tskhinvali, news agency Interfax cited South Ossetian officials as saying.

Both sides deployed fighter jets to carry out bombings on one another as the fighting escalated Friday.

South Ossetia side for the first time attacked with two Sukhoi SU-25 fighter jets to bomb Georgian positions, and a short time later, Georgia sent five of the same jet.

Television footage showed heavy rocket bombardments and houses burning in the small mountain region in the South Caucasus.

Saakashvili accused Russia of carrying out the air strikes and of arming separatist troops on Friday.

'Immediately stop bombardment of the Georgian towns,' Saakashvili said referring to Russia. 'Georgia was not an initiator of this confrontation and Georgia will not give up its territories ... We have already mobilized tens of thousands of reserve troops.'

South Ossetia appealed to its ally Russia for protection on Friday.

Russian Premier Vladimir Putin, in Beijing for the Olympic Games, condemned 'aggressive actions' by Georgian troops and said that Russia would be compelled to retaliate.

Putin said he held talks with Chinese leaders and US President George W. Bush, who is a close ally of the pro-Western Saakashvili.

The Kremlin said President Dimitry Medvedev was consulting with aides about Moscow's planned response that remained within Russia's UN mandated peacekeeping role in the region.

'The president is constantly receiving full information from the scene of military actions in South Ossetia,' the statement said.

Most residents in South Ossetia and Georgia's other breakaway region have been issued Russian passports. Over 2,500 Russian peacekeeping troops have been patrolling the two breakaway provinces since a UN ceasefire agreement ended a bloody civil war in 1994.

Long-simmering tensions in the regions turned violent with a buildup of conflicts between Tbilisi and Moscow.

Russia, seeing a threat in Georgia's US-backed bid to join NATO in April, has stepped up ties with the rebel governments in recent years and flown fighter jets over Georgian territory.

Tbilisi has condemned such actions as an attempt to annex part of its territory.

At an emergency session of the United Nations late Thursday, Russia failed to push through an agreement for an immediate halt to fighting from both sides.

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