

## Moscow denies South Ossetia joining Russia

Russia Thursday denied reports that the break-away Georgian province of South Ossetia was considering joining the Russian federation.

Clarifying Moscow's view on the new controversy over the future status of South Ossetia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the tiny Caucasus territory had no intention of joining his country, news agencies reported.

Lavrov was addressing a press conference in Poland, where he was discussing US missile defence plans.

'South Ossetia does not want to join up with anyone,' Lavrov was quoted by Interfax as saying. 'They have understood that without independence, they can't assure their security.'

Russia's foreign minister issued the comments following a confusing flip-flop by South Ossetia's leader Edouard Kokoity.

Kokoity's statements to journalists earlier during a round table with western experts in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi had been seen as a reaffirmation of the region's longstanding goal to unite with Russia's ethnically-linked republic of North Ossetia.

'Yes, without doubt, we will become part of Russia,' Kokoity was quoted by news agencies as saying in discussions. 'We have no plans to form any kind of independent Ossetia.'

But, less than an hour later, Kokoity again said, 'Obviously, I was misunderstood.'

'We are not going to refuse the independence which has come to us through enormous sacrifice, and South Ossetia is not going to become part of Russia,' the South Ossetian leader was then quoted as saying.

Moscow recognised as independent South Ossetia and Georgia's other rebel region of Abkhazia last month, infuriating its former Soviet neighbour and Tbilisi's Western allies.

The foreign ministers of both regions flew to Moscow Tuesday to formalise military and diplomatic cooperation with Russia, which announced this week it intends to base nearly 8,000 troops indefinitely in the provinces.

Most citizens of both states have been issued Russian passports since winning a war of succession from Tbilisi after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

But Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh insisted on Abkhazia's independence at the discussion group Thursday, news agency Itar-tass reported.

Abkhazia's future as an independent state located on the Black Sea is seen as more viable than that of South Ossetia, a tiny landlocked agricultural region with a population of roughly 70,000.

Nicaragua is the only state to have followed Russia's lead in recognising the two Georgian

territories.

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