

# Heavy gunfire breaks out along border between Georgia, Abkhazia

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Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's ruling party is being challenged in Wednesday's election by opposition forces embittered by a violent crackdown on protesters last year and a presidential ballot earlier this year they claim was fraudulent.

TBILISI, Georgia – Heavy gunfire broke out Wednesday along the administrative border separating Georgia and its breakaway region of Abkhazia, wounding several people who were trying to vote in parliamentary elections, Georgian officials said.

Georgian Interior Ministry official Shota Utiashvili said that Abkhazian forces fired on two buses carrying Georgian residents from Abkhazia's Gali district across the border to a village in Georgia's Zugdidi district.

The group was planning to cast ballots in Georgia's parliamentary election, he said, but gave no other details.

Ruslan Kishmariya, a representative of Abkhazia's unrecognized government, said that Abkhazian border guards reported the shooting not far from the Inguri river, which runs along much of the administrative border, but he did not give details of what happened.

Georgia's Rustavi-2 showed footage of a burned-out bus and another with blown-out windows, along with several people it said had gunshot or shrapnel wounds.

Tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia — which broke away from Georgian government control in the 1990s — have escalated in recent weeks amid mutual accusations that each side is preparing military action. Russia, which has long supported Abkhazia, has bolstered peacekeeping forces in the region and also accused Georgia of preparing for war.

In Moscow, Col. Igor Konashenkov, a spokesman for some of the Russian infantry forces serving as peacekeepers, said automatic weapons fire and grenade explosions had been reported at the site of the violence.

Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's ruling party is being challenged in Wednesday's election by opposition forces embittered by a violent crackdown on protesters last year and a presidential ballot earlier this year they claim was fraudulent.

The United States and the European Union are watching the election closely because of Georgia's frayed ties with Moscow and because of its location on an export route for Caspian

Sea oil and gas.

Saakashvili is a staunch U.S. ally who has angered Russia by his drive to gain NATO membership for Georgia. \_\_\_\_

*Associated Press Writer Ruslan Khashig contributed to the report from Sukhumi, Georgia.*

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