

# Russian troops in Georgia put on high alert, troops ordered to shoot

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TBILISI, Georgia: The commander of Russian military forces in Georgia said Sunday that his troops had been put on high alert and ordered to shoot to kill to defend their bases, as the two ex-Soviet nations faced their worst bilateral crisis in years over the arrest of Russian officers on spying charges.

Gen. Andrei Popov said the Russian law authorizes the military to use force to defend their bases abroad from aggression. "We are ready to thwart any possible attempts to penetrate our facilities using all means, including shoot to kill," he told reporters.

Moscow, infuriated by Wednesday's arrest of four Russian officers, recalled its ambassador, evacuated its citizens and denounced Georgia as a "bandit" state.

Ties between Tbilisi and Moscow had already been strained over Georgia's bid to join NATO, and allegations that Russia was backing two Georgian separatist provinces.

Moscow denies that claim.

Along with some 2,500 peacekeepers in breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has between 3,000 and 4,000 troops at two military bases in Georgia that it pledged to withdraw by the end of 2008 under a deal signed last year.

Russian Gen. Alexander Baranov, the commander of the North Caucasus military district, said Saturday that Moscow was suspending planning for further withdrawals because of the officers' arrests.

Popov reaffirmed Sunday that scheduled troop withdrawal from the two Russian military bases left in Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union could be affected by the spy scandal.

"If the situation continues to worsen, we would be physically unable to fulfill the task to withdraw weapons and equipment," he said.

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