

South Ossetia under Georgian attack

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Georgia has declared a war on its breakaway region of South Ossetia. Georgian forces are attacking the South Ossetian capital city of Tskhinvali. The attack was launched late on Thursday, at 11:45 p.m. Moscow time. "There is massive artillery shelling from Grad rocket systems, guns and large-calibre mortars from Georgian-controlled territory," South Ossetia's information and press committee reported.

Dozens of civilians are reported to have been killed in the firing, and the number of wounded is being verified. The toll is set to rise as the attacks continue. An air strike was launched on the city in the early hours today. Tskhinvali's population is estimated at about 30,000 people, of whom 90 percent are Russians. Many buildings have been destroyed, dozens of buildings are on fire. The local hospital also came under attack. The medical personnel have been led to an underground shelter, but it is impossible to carry the wounded there due to heavy fire.

Ossetian troops are putting up strong resistance on the approaches to the city. According to Russian peacekeepers, Georgia is bringing armored equipment, artillery, tanks and personnel close to Tskhinvali and nearby villages. Georgian aircraft are bombing South Ossetian villages. Five Su-25 fighters have attacked the village of Tkverneti.

The positions of Russian peacekeepers came under attack, too, as well as a humanitarian aid convoy led by South Ossetian President Teimuraz Mamsurov.

Officially, Georgia calls it "an operation to bring constitutional order to the Tskhinvali region," Mamuka Kurashvili, the commander of Georgian peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia, told Rustavi 2 channel. He said he had warned Russian peacekeepers not to meddle.

Teimuraz Yakobashvili, Georgia's State Minister for Reintegration, told Rustavi 2 that Georgian forces had occupied five South Ossetian villages as a result of the overnight operation. South Ossetian officials denied the report.

Georgia assesses the operation as "freeing the villages from South Ossetian bandit gangs." "Our goal is to cease fire and riots of bandit gangs and prevent Georgia from becoming a depot for arms and drugs," Yakobashvili stressed.

Russia strongly denounced Georgia's attack of South Ossetia and initiated an extraordinary meeting of the UN Security Council. However, the organization failed to agree on a Russian-

drafted statement calling on both sides to stop violence. It urged Georgian neighbors to refrain from provocations and respect an Olympic truce.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Georgia's aggression would provoke a response from Russia. "Tbilisi is taking very aggressive actions against South Ossetia. Russia demands retaliation," he said.

Georgia's attack came hours after President Mikhail Saakashvili declared a ceasefire, saying that Tbilisi would seek a diplomatic solution to the escalating conflict, which he blamed on the breakaway republic.

Georgia's air forces have Mi-24 and Iroquois helicopters and SU-25T, SU-25 Scorpion, MiG-21, L-159 ALCA, An-2 and other aircraft. Its air defense troops are equipped with Strela-10 missile systems, ZSU-23-4 Shilka mobile gun systems, and S-125 (Neva) anti-aircraft short-range systems. The republic's navy forces have high-speed patrol boats, major landing ships, missile ships and gun ships. Ground forces are equipped with the tanks T-55, T-54 and T-72, as well as infantry combat vehicles, combat reconnaissance patrol vehicles, armored personnel carriers; Grad rocket systems, guns and mortars, mostly of Czech origin.

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