

US Military, MPRI Trained Georgian Commandos Before South Ossetia Invasion

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The US military provided combat training to 80 Georgian special forces commandos only months prior to Georgia's army assault in South Ossetia in August.

The revelation, based on recruitment documents and interviews with US military trainers obtained by the Financial Times, could add fuel to accusations by Vladimir Putin, Russian prime minister, last month that the US had "orchestrated" the war in the Georgian enclave.

The training was provided by senior US soldiers and two military contractors. There is no evidence that the contractors or the Pentagon, which hired them, knew that the commandos they were training were likely be used in the assault on South Ossetia.

A US army spokesman said the goal of the programme was to train the commandos for duty in Afghanistan as part of Nato-led International Security Assistance Force. The programme, however, highlights the often unintended consequences of US "train and equip" programmes in foreign countries.

The contractors - MPRI and American Systems, both based in Virginia - recruited a 15-man team of former special forces soldiers to train the Georgians at the Vashlijvari special forces base on the outskirts of Tbilisi, part of a programme run by the US defence department.

MPRI was hired by the Pentagon in 1995 to train the Croatian military prior to their invasion of the ethnically-Serbian Krajina region, which led to the displacement of 200,000 refugees and was one of the worst incidents of ethnic cleansing in the Balkan wars. MPRI denies any wrongdoing.

US training of the Georgian army is a big flashpoint between Washington and Moscow. Mr Putin said on CNN on August 29: "It is not just that the American side could not restrain the Georgian leadership from this criminal act [of intervening in South Ossetia]. The American side in effect armed and trained the Georgian army."

The first phase of the special forces training was held between January and April this year, concentrating on "basic special forces skills" said an American Systems employee interviewed by phone from the US army's Fort Bragg.

The US military official familiar with the programme said the Pentagon hired the military contracting firms to help supplement its own trainers because of a lack of manpower.

The second 70-day phase was set to begin on August 11, a few days after war broke out in South Ossetia. The trainers arrived on August 3, four days before the conflict flared on August 7. "They would have only seen the inside of a hotel room," quipped one former contractor. Neither MPRI nor American Systems would speak at length to the FT about the programme.

American Systems directed questions to the US army's Security Assistance Training Management Organisation (Satmo) at Fort Bragg, part of the US Army's Special Warfare Center School. Satmo sends trainers, mainly special forces but also contractors, to countries such as Yemen, Colombia and the Philippines. Satmo trainers generally work with forces involved in counter-insurgencies, counter-terrorism or civil wars. A Satmo spokesman declined to comment.

One US military official familiar with the programme said it emerged from a Georgian offer to the US in December 2006 to send commandos to Afghanistan to work alongside American special operations forces.

According to this person, the US told Georgia that the offer should be made through Nato, which welcomed the offer but informed Georgia that its forces would need additional training to meet the military alliance's standards.

While the programme is not classified, there is a lack of transparency surrounding it, though US military officials said the lack of publicity was not part of an effort to keep the programme secret. Other US military training programmes in Georgia have their own websites and photo galleries.

A US European Command spokesman confirmed the existence of the programme only after reviewing an e-mail sent by MPRI recruiters that was obtained by the FT. According to the e-mail, which did not mention Nato operations, former US special operations forces would receive \$2,000 (\$1,150, €1,400) a week plus costs as trainers. "We can confirm the programme exists, but due to its nature and training objectives we do not discuss specifics to ensure the integrity of the programme and force protection of the trainers and participants," he said.

James Appathurai, Nato's spokesman in Brussels, said: "Georgia has made an offer to provide forces to Isaf in the last two years. But until now these Georgian forces have not joined the Isaf mission." An official at a senior Nato member state said it was understood that the forces had been trained by the US, but that the forces had not passed a certification process under which all potential members of the Isaf mission are vetted.

Additional reporting James Blitz in London

Conflict in the Caucasus

The conflict between Russia and Georgia began on the night of August 7, when Georgian forces, including commando units, tanks and artillery, assaulted the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali.

Russia says that at least 133 civilians died in the attack, as well as 59 of its own

peacekeepers, according to figures released this week.

In response Russia launched a mass invasion and aerial bombardment of Georgia, in which 215 Georgians have died, including 146 soldiers and 69 civilians.

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