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(30.11.2005) Recent events in Abkhazia, a separatist region of Georgia, and confrontational statements by Georgian and Abkhaz officials are likely to harm the upcoming round of the UN-mediated Georgian-Abkhaz negotiations in Sukhumi.

On November 27 a remote-controlled mine detonated on the road between two Gali villages, Tagiloni and Chuburkhinji, and severely wounded Givi Tsulaia, the senior Abkhaz customs officer in Gali, and two Abkhaz militiamen accompanying him. The explosion occurred within the safety zone guarded by Russian peacekeeping troops.

"That was the third explosion of a time bomb in Gali," Sergei Shamba, Abkhaz foreign minister, told Resonansi on November 28. He said that the incident was the work of Georgian guerrillas. Today (November 29) 24 Saat reports that Gali residents claim Georgian guerrillas have been activated in Gali, while Resonansi quotes officials from the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz government-in-exile who say that the recent subversive activities in Gali are the work of lone gunmen rather than organized guerrilla groups.

The predominantly ethnic Georgian-populated Gali district has long been attractive for Georgian guerrilla groups because it is only loosely controlled by Abkhaz authorities. Georgian sources said that Tsulaia, who bears the title "Hero of Abkhazia," might have been targeted for revenge. He commanded Abkhaz paramilitary forces and was widely known for his cruelty toward the local Georgians. Additional Abkhaz forces have now blocked Tagiloni and neighboring villages. Abkhaz law-enforcement officials claimed that Georgian guerrillas, who have recently resumed hostilities in Gali (see EDM, November 18), were behind the assault. Anti-Georgian hostility in Gali resumed early this month (EDM, November 8). On November 17, Abkhaz militiamen murdered two ethnic Georgians in Sida village of Gali.

Meanwhile, Georgian officials are vehemently denying any possible links to the guerrillas. "No guerrilla movement is being launched or will ever be launched," said Gia Volski, deputy state minister for conflict resolution. Some Georgian analysts argue that President Mikheil Saakashvili's government would pay a high political price if it reactivates the guerrilla groups, as countermeasures by the Abkhaz are inevitable.

Some Western analysts doubt that Saakashvili and his team would adhere to any peaceful settlement of the Abkhaz conflict. Zeyno Baran, director of international security and energy programs at the Washington-based Nixon Center, complained that some influential people in the Georgian government have made bellicose statements suggesting that Georgia might regain its breakaway regions by military force. A similar concern was expressed by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies in its annual report, The Military Balance, 2005-2006. Tbilisi tries to downplay these concerns, while reminding that Georgia’s tolerance is not infinite.

Giga Bokeria, a Georgian parliamentarian and Saakashvili's close confidant, said that Tbilisi is deliberately alternating between peaceful and military rhetoric. Having reiterated that Tbilisi would "use all possibilities for a political settlement," Bokeria also admitted, "Unfortunately, we have no serious grounds for optimism. We have the right to use force because this is our territory." Bokeria and other officials argue that intensive rearmament of the Georgian army and peace initiatives "do not collide."

Such statements will hardly appease Sukhumi, especially after Tbilisi established a new Georgian military base in the immediate vicinity of Abkhazia. On November 19, Saakashvili personally attended the opening of a new military base in the western Georgian town of Senaki. This military base, equipped in accordance with NATO standards, can accommodate 3,000 servicemen. "Now the Abkhazians must think twice before making any wrong steps," said Givi Targamadze, chairman of the parliamentary committee for defense and security.

The violence in Gali and militant rhetoric have apparently delayed the reopening of railway communication between Abkhazia and the rest of the Georgia. Some politicians and analysts in Tbilisi had considered restoring rail contacts to be a significant step toward rebuilding confidence between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. However, the continuing instability undermines plans to reopen the railway, which had been an important transport artery linking Russia, Georgia, and Armenia before the 1992-1993 armed conflict in Abkhazia. Saakashvili’s government had warned to the idea of extending the existing rail line to the rest of Georgia and Armenia (see EDM, June 17), likely hoping to solve economic and political problems simultaneously. According to some local experts, Georgia loses about $600 million annually when this line is closed.

Some Georgian policymakers and analysts believe that extending railway communication from Abkhazia towards Western Georgia would revitalize the economic cooperation of these regions with Abkhazia and Russia, restore relations, and contribute to confidence-building. However, Georgian advocates of the railway have been quite vague on many questions, especially about the degree of Georgian control over the Abkhaz portion of the railway, including customs points, distribution of revenue, and the crucial issue of repatriation of refugees.

Paata Davitaya, former minister of justice in the Abkhaz government-in-exile, argues that Russia and Armenia will be the biggest winners from a functioning railway. Abkhazia’s self-styled president, Sergei Bagapsh, refused help from Georgian railroad specialists, instead inviting some 600 Russian specialists and their families to Abkhazia. Davitaya and like-minded analysts argue that the full reopening of the railway would only play into the hands of the separatists. "If we are reopening the railway only for Abkhazians according to their terms that would be parricide," he said. The fear that Abkhaz separatists might use the railway to further integrate Abkhazia into Russia is likely to compel Tbilisi to reconsider its initially optimistic attitude towards this venture.

In his address to the Georgian nation on November 20, Saakashvili stated, "The main aim of the Georgian leadership is to regain Abkhazia and the Abkhaz." The separatists dismissed his comments as "revanchist."

(www.iiss.org, Apsnypress, Kviris Palitra, Akhlai Taoba, November 21, Kavkaz Press, November 21, 22; Civil Georgia, November 18-22; Interfax, TV-Rustavi-2; November 27; Resonansi, November 28, 29; 24 Saati, November 29)