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Georgians Taken Prisoner

Russia Also Seizes 4 U.S. Humvees

By **Bela Szandelszky** **The Associated Press**

POTI, Georgia — Russian soldiers took about 20 Georgians in military uniform prisoner at a key Black Sea port in western Georgia on Tuesday, blindfolding them and holding them at gunpoint, and commandeered American Humvees awaiting shipment back to the United States.

The move came as a small column of Russian tanks and armored vehicles left the strategic city of Gori in the first sign of a Russian pullback of troops from Georgia after a cease-fire intended to end fighting that reignited Cold War tensions.

The two countries on Tuesday also exchanged prisoners. It was the latest

example of Russia demonstrating its military prowess, leaving Georgians to wonder if Russia planned an extended military occupation or was still inflicting punishment before adhering to a promised troop withdrawal.

At an emergency meeting in Brussels, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her 25 NATO counterparts demanded that Russia immediately withdraw its troops from Georgia, a U.S. ally that wants to join NATO.

“It is time for the Russian president to keep his word to withdraw Russian forces,” Rice told a news conference.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov lashed back, telling a news conference that the alliance was supporting an aggressive Georgia.

NATO “is trying to make a victim of the aggressor, to absolve of guilt a criminal regime, to save a collapsed regime; and is taking a course to rearm the current leaders of Georgia,” Lavrov said.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told French President Nicolas Sarkozy by phone Tuesday that Russian troops will withdraw from most of Georgia by Friday — some to Russia, others to South Ossetia and a surrounding “security zone” set in 1999.

In Poti, Russian forces blocked access to the city’s naval and commercial ports on Tuesday morning and towed the missile boat Dioskuria, out of sight of observers. A loud explosion was heard minutes later. Georgian Interior Ministry spokesman Shote Utiashvili said the Russian military blew up the Dioskuria.

Several hours later, an Associated Press photographer saw Russian trucks and armored personnel carriers leaving the port with about 20 blindfolded and handcuffed men riding on them.

Poti Mayor Vano Taginadze said the Russians seized 22 military and police troops because the Georgians refused to let Russian armored vehicles enter the port. The Georgians were taken to the nearby Senaki military base, now controlled by Russia.

Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said officials were looking into the reported theft of the Humvees.



BELA SZANDELSZKY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Blindfolded Georgians are transported atop a Russian armored personnel carrier while being detained by Russian troops in the Black Sea port city of Poti, western Georgia, on Tuesday. Russian troops also commandeered several U.S. military vehicles awaiting shipment back to the United States.

RUSSIA STILL THREATENS DURING CEASE-FIRE

A small column of Russian tanks and armored vehicles left Gori Tuesday as the first sign of a pullback. In Poti, Russian soldiers seized about 20 Georgian troops at gunpoint.



SOURCE: ESRI

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