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Russia Showing Few Signs of Sticking to Cease-Fire

Country says it began withdrawing troops, but forces remain

By Mike Eckel The Associated Press

GORI, Georgia — Russia said Monday that it had begun withdrawing from the conflict zone in Georgia, but it held fast to key positions and sent some of its troops in the opposite direction — closer to the Georgian capital.

Russian troops and vehicles roamed freely around the strategically located central city of Gori, and Russian forces appeared to blow up the runway at a military base in the western town of Senaki.

In Washington, senior defense officials cited “troubling” intelligence that Russia had set up short-range ballistic missile launchers in South Ossetia. The SS-21 missiles have a range of 40 to 70 miles, meaning they can reach the capital from practically any part of South Ossetia, which Russian forces now occupy.

There were few signs Russia was following the terms of a cease-fire to end the short war, which has driven tensions between Russia and the West to some of their highest levels since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

In Paris, the French foreign minister said it appeared that “we are witnessing the start” of a Russian withdrawal but warned that France would call an emergency meeting of the European Council to talk about consequences for Russia if that was not the case.

But U.S. military officials said they had seen no significant movement of Russian troops withdrawing from Georgia.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on her way to an emergency meeting of NATO foreign ministers, said Russia was playing a “very dangerous game and perhaps one the Russians want to reconsider.”

She said the United States and its allies would not allow Russia to draw a “new line” through Europe and intimidate former Soviet republics and former satellite states.

The foreign ministers will meet today in Brussels, Belgium, to consider whether to go ahead with activities planned with Russia, from military exercises to diplomatic meetings.

The European Union-brokered peace plan signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili calls for both sides to pull forces back to the positions they held before fighting broke out Aug. 7. Medvedev had told French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Sunday that Russian troops would begin pulling back on Monday but stopped short of promising they would return to Russia.

In Moscow, the deputy chief of the Russian general staff, Col.-Gen. Anatoly Nogovitsyn, told a briefing that “today, according to the peace plan, the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers and reinforcements has begun.”





BELA SZANDELSZKY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Smoke rises above a Georgian air base in Senaki, western Georgia, on Monday after Russian troops, who are in control of the base, apparently set off explosions to destroy a runway.