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Russia To Begin Withdrawal

Troops May Remain In Separatist Regions

By Christopher Torchia The Associated Press

GORI, Georgia — Russia's president promised to start withdrawing forces from positions in Georgia today, but suggested that they could stay in the breakaway region at the heart of the fighting that has reignited Cold War tensions.

Top American officials said Washington would rethink its relationship with Moscow after its military drive deep into its much smaller neighbor and called for a swift Russian withdrawal.

"I think there needs to be a strong, unified response to Russia to send the message that this kind of behavior, characteristic of the Soviet period, has no place in the 21st century," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Sunday.

But neither Gates nor Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would specify what punitive actions the U.S. or the international community might take.

Bolstered by Western support, Georgia's leader vowed never to abandon its claim to territory now firmly in the hands of Russia and its separatist allies, even though he has few means of asserting control. His pledge, echoed by Western insistence that Georgia must not be broken apart, portends further tension over separatist South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In Gori, a strategic central city in the small former Soviet republic, there were signs of a looser Russian grip — and scenes of desperation as Georgians crowded aid vehicles and grasped for loaves of bread.

Georgia hit the Russiabacked separatist region of South Ossetia with a massive barrage on Aug. 7, and Russian troops rolled in, advancing far into the Caucasus Mountain nation and raising fears of a long-term occupation of a country at the center of a power struggle between a resurgent Russia and the West.

The troops would leave, a Russian lawmaker said, "sooner or later."

"But how much time it will take, it depends, definitely, on how Georgians will continue to behave," said the lawmaker, Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of a Russian parliament foreign affairs committee.

Rice, who is flying to Europe today to talk with NATO allies about what message the West should send to Russia, said Russia can't use "disproportionate force" against its neighbor and still be welcomed into the halls of international institutions.

"It's not going to happen that way," she said. "Russia will pay a price."





SERGEI GRITS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Residents clamor for bread being distributed in Gori, Georgia, on Sunday. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced that Russian troops will begin pulling back from Georgia today.