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Russian Troop Exodus Stalls

Soldiers Build Posts, Trenches, Camps

By Mike Eckel The Associated Press

SACHKHERE, Georgia — Russian forces dug trenches and built sentry posts deep inside Georgia on Wednesday, showing few signs that they would pull back later this week as promised.

Georgian soldiers suggested the Russians were trying to provoke them and justify a resumption of the conflict, which over five days pounded the infrastructure of the small former Soviet republic and the morale of its troops.

In the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, President Mikhail Saakashvili said Russia was thinning out its presence in some of the towns it occupies but was seizing other strategic spots.

“What we’re seeing now is a clear regrouping and also, again, some kind of deception campaign, saying, ‘Look, we’re moving out,’” Saakashvili said.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has pledged that his forces would retreat by Friday to South Ossetia, the breakaway Georgian province at the heart of the war, and a surrounding security cordon.

But there have been few signs of movement other than the departure of a small contingent of Russian soldiers from Gori, a strategic city in central Georgia.

On Wednesday, much of Georgia remained tense as Russian troops built a guard post out of timber on a hill outside Igoeti, about 30 miles from Tbilisi, and a large Russian convoy rolled near the western city of Senaki.

Russian soldiers also set up what appeared to be semipermanent camps in at least three places in western Georgia near the Black Sea port of Poti, with dozens of men digging in near armored personnel carriers and trucks.

Warfare in a nation straining to escape Russian influence has sent tensions between Moscow and the West to some of the highest levels since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

South Ossetia is recognized internationally as part of Georgia, but Russia says the province’s future is up to provincial leaders — who almost certainly will make more declarations of independence from Georgia.

In a sign Russia plans to solidify control of South Ossetia, Col. Gen. Anatoly Nogovitsyn said Russia would build 18 checkpoints in the security cordon around the province, with 270 soldiers manning front-line posts.

The Parliament of another pro-Russia separatist region, Abkhazia, called on Russia on Wednesday to recognize its independence. Fighting flared in both regions for five days before Georgia and Russia agreed to a cease-fire.

Western leaders have stressed that Georgia must retain its current borders.

“South Ossetia and Abkhazia are part of Georgia,” President Bush declared Wednesday in Florida.



SAAKASHVILI: Accuses Russia of “deception campaign”



BELA SZANDELSZKY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Russian soldiers dig trenches and what appear to be semipermanent camps at a new position deep in Georgian territory near the Black Sea port of Poti on Wednesday.