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Russians on Dual Track

Some tanks leave, but fortifications, trenches are built in key areas

By Bela Szandelzsky The Associated Press

POTI, Georgia — Russian forces dug trenches and built fortifications in key areas of Georgia on Thursday, but also rolled columns of tanks north toward home, picking and choosing how they would comply with the terms of a peace accord.

A top Russian general said it could be more than 10 days before the bulk of the troops return to Russia.

Although Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had promised his forces would pull back as far as separatist South Ossetia and a surrounding zone by today, Russian troops appeared to be in no hurry — even settling down in strategic spots. This raised concerns about whether Moscow was aiming for a lengthy occupation of its smaller, pro-Western neighbor.

A European Union-brokered cease-fire requires both Russian and Georgian forces to move back to positions held before fighting broke out Aug. 7 in South Ossetia, which has close ties to Russia. The Russians are allowed to remain in zones around Georgia's borders with South Ossetia and another separatist region, Abkhazia.

The war in Georgia, a small country straining to escape Moscow's influence, has sent tensions between the Kremlin and the West to the highest levels since the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union.

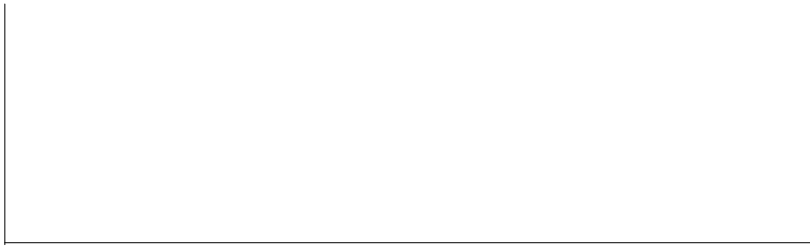
NATO, Russia's Cold War foe, said it had received a note from Moscow announcing Russia is halting military cooperation with the trans-Atlantic alliance.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and her Polish counterpart signed a deal to build an American missile defense base in Poland after a top Russian general warned last week that Poland was risking an attack, possibly a nuclear one, by developing the base.

Russian forces took up positions Thursday at the entrance to Georgia's main Black Sea port city of Poti, excavating trenches, setting up mortars and blocking a key bridge with armored personnel carriers and trucks. Another group of APCs and trucks was positioned in a wooded area nearby.

But top officials in Moscow insisted troops were moving out in accordance with the EU accord.





BELA SZANDELZSKY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS Georgians demonstrate against the presence of Russian troops in the Black Sea port city of Poti, Georgia, on Thursday. Russian forces excavated trenches and set up mortars facing the city despite Russia's promise to pull back troops from Georgia.