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United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Address by Prime Minister of Georgia, H.E. Zurab Noghaideli

As prepared for delivery Political Counselor, Samuel Laeuchli
at the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 30, 2007

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you, Mr. Minister, for your comprehensive review of Georgian affairs. The United States remains a strong supporter of Georgia and its efforts in the areas of democratic, economic and social reform. We support its aspirations toward greater engagement with NATO, and appreciate the contributions it has made to Coalition efforts in Iraq as well as the International Security Force in Afghanistan.

We all recognize the challenge of finding peaceful resolutions to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Any solution must respect Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within internationally recognized boundaries, and also guarantee broad autonomy for those regions.

We continue to believe that confidence-building measures such as demilitarization and economic rehabilitation can help lay the groundwork for a viable political settlement.

We remain optimistic about the potential for peace and stability in the Caucasus. The United States is one of many OSCE States working to promote reconciliation and cooperation between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Ossetians living in and around the conflict zone.

In our view, the Economic Rehabilitation Projects led by the OSCE are the best illustration of our joint efforts. In fact, the OSCE has used these projects as an example to parties in other OSCE conflict zones to show it is possible to improve the lives of men, women and children even while political issues remain unresolved.

We have stressed repeatedly that improved security is a prerequisite for such projects to succeed. In that regard, there is a pressing need to increase the number of OSCE military observers. In the past few months, almost every OSCE participating State has agreed that more monitors are needed. We should now turn this agreement into action through a non-restrictive Permanent Council decision that allows the new head of Mission, Ambassador Hakala, to determine where to deploy the observers.

Moreover, we emphasize the need for a checkpoint for joint monitoring at the village of Didi Gupta, and again call for international monitoring of the Roki tunnel. We again urge the Russian Federation to lift all restrictions on transport, travel, and commerce that have impaired its relations with Georgia. These are necessary measures to promote transparency in the region and build confidence and trust between the sides.

We were pleased that the JCC was finally able to meet October 23-24 for the first time this year, and that the meeting took place in Tbilisi, consistent with the principle of rotating the site.

We regret that the sides did not achieve greater progress at this meeting, and hope that the parties will refrain from unreasonable pre-conditions and will find mechanisms to allow all the major political actors in South Ossetia to participate in the process of conflict resolution and economic rehabilitation.

Over the past months, several incidents have raised concerns about instability in the region. The fighting near the cease-fire line in Abkhazia has raised tensions. The missile incident near South Ossetia, which we recently discussed in the FSC, made it abundantly clear that Georgian airspace remains extremely vulnerable to incursions from outside the country's territory.

There have also been several recent, tragic incidents involving landmines. We call upon all parties to avoid using these weapons, and to facilitate their removal from the conflict regions.

As important as the unresolved conflicts are, they are not the only issue facing Georgia. For that reason, we commend the Government for its ongoing efforts to promote democratic reform and respect for human rights. In our opinion, Georgia has taken important steps to promote the independence, effectiveness and fairness of the judicial system and has made strides in combating trafficking in persons. We support President Saakashvili's initiative to lower the threshold for entering parliament from seven to five percent, a step which should make that body more representative.

As you yourself can attest, there are other serious areas that need to be addressed, such as improving conditions in pre-trial detention facilities and in prisons, strengthening the independence of the judiciary, and passing and implementing continued reforms to the electoral code with an eye to next year's elections.

In this regard, we urge dialogue between the Georgian Government and opposition, and continue efforts to encourage the development of civil society.

Thank you for your presentation here today. We wish you success as you face the challenges ahead.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.