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United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Situation in South Ossetia

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 2, 2006

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

The Ljubljana Ministerial and its Statement on Georgia left us all optimistic about a new momentum toward resolving the conflict in South Ossetia. Since then, however, a chill has settled on the process.

According to the regular, reliable, and professional reports from the OSCE Mission in Georgia, there has been a series of incidents in South Ossetia, some serious, any one of which could have erupted in bloody hostilities. Fortunately, the situation has now become calmer; however, we remain concerned at the potential for small incidents to escalate into serious ones. Therefore, we call on both sides to exercise restraint and take care to avoid any further incidents.

We note reporting from the OSCE of recent difficulties the OSCE has faced in coordinating with the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF), and we call on the JPKF and its Commander to improve cooperation with the OSCE Mission to allow both organizations to carry out their agreed and mandated functions.

Mr. Chairman, we recall the statement of our Ministers of Foreign Affairs made in Ljubljana, in which we jointly reaffirmed our support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. In this regard, we are deeply concerned by renewed statements by the Russian Federation that it will protect the interests of its citizens in South Ossetia. The United States believes that the extension of Russian citizenship to the vast majority of residents of South Ossetia -- coupled with such statements -- calls into question the Russian Federation's stated support for Georgia's territorial integrity and commitment to support a peaceful resolution of the South Ossetia conflict based on that principle.

Finally, we were dismayed at the Russian Federation's withdrawal from an agreed meeting of the Joint Control Commission scheduled in Vienna last week. We and many other delegations were deeply disappointed that, owing to this perplexing decision by the Russian Federation, this meeting did not take place. The cancellation of the Vienna JCC was a significant setback to our mutual efforts to assist the sides in developing an agreed program of work for confidence building and economic cooperation, leading to the future resolution, through peaceful negotiations, of South Ossetia's status within Georgia.

It is clear that the current situation calls for confidence-building steps by all parties. For this reason, the United States welcomes the unilateral steps recently announced by the Government of Georgia to begin demilitarization and improve security in South Ossetia.

These measures encompass several important steps, including the filling in of trenches, bringing the Georgian battalion of the Joint Peacekeeping Force closer to authorized strength, and ordering all Georgian military elements not to enter the conflict zone without the permission from the Georgian Ministry of Defense and the agreement of the chief of the Georgian Peacekeeping Battalion. Georgia has also committed to take steps to ensure the unhindered movement of legal cargos coming from the North.

As a related matter, a draft law on restitution is pending before the Parliament of Georgia. We urge the South Ossetians to accept Georgia's repeated invitation for consultations on this draft. It is important that all the stakeholders have a chance to consult before the Parliament enacts the law. Unfortunately, the South Ossetians have, up to now, not responded positively to Georgia's offers to meet. It will not be credible later on for the South Ossetian side to criticize the proposed law if they have rejected offers to sit down with the Government to discuss and comment on it before adoption.

We commend Georgia for its continuing efforts to make the difficult decisions needed to secure a lasting peace. We call on the Russian and South Ossetian sides to reciprocate with confidence building measures of their own. These should include allowing international observers to monitor the Roki Tunnel and withdrawing Russian personnel and equipment that do not belong in the zone of conflict.

We call on all sides to agree now to a meeting of the JCC as soon as practical and in a mutually agreeable location. There is much work to do, including reconciling the relatively few differences remaining between the peace plan proposed by Georgia, which the OSCE Ministerial recognized as a basis for peaceful settlement of the conflict, and the plan proposed a few days later by the South Ossetians. We would welcome a direct meeting of the South Ossetian and Georgian sides to develop a shared vision of a peace plan.

Echoing the February 21 statement of the EU Presidency on behalf of the European Union, we also continue to believe that the broader participation by OSCE members will facilitate the negotiating process, lead to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and promote economic development that benefits all citizens of Georgia, including those living in South Ossetia.

Thank you.