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Russia Stages a Substantial Withdrawal

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Georgian, Foreign Officials Dispute Assertion of Compliance With Cease-Fire

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GORI, Georgia, Aug. 22 -- [Russia](#) pulled troops and armored vehicles out of vast swaths of seized territory and ended its 10-day occupation of this Georgian city Friday, but Georgian and foreign officials disputed Russia's claim that it had complied with the terms of a recent cease-fire agreement.

Columns of Russian trucks, tanks and artillery pieces rumbled north throughout the day toward the breakaway territories whose disputed status sparked the current crisis. Just before leaving Gori at 8 p.m., Russian forces detonated giant explosions on various Georgian armories and military installations that spewed flames and black smoke into the sky.

The Russian withdrawal was a major step toward ending the slow-burning conflict that ignited into full-scale war Aug. 7 when the Georgian army invaded South Ossetia. Russian forces responded swiftly and sharply, seizing as much as a third of Georgian land.

But the Russian retreat now underway leaves many contentious issues unresolved, including the future deployment of thousands of Russian soldiers and South Ossetian militiamen aligned with them who remain in undisputed Georgian territory. Whether the disputed territories -- South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the [Black Sea](#) coast -- will remain part of Georgia, seek independence or be annexed by Russia is also unclear.

"I think what happened today is encouraging but unacceptable until the last Russian soldier leaves my country," [Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili](#) said in a telephone interview late Friday. "What they are still doing, making explosions, camping by the road, digging positions, does not look to me like cease-fire. It looks like warfare."

Officials in the United States, which along with several European countries has pressured Russia to leave Georgia, agreed. "We are not seeing that they are in compliance right now," [White House](#) spokesman [Gordon Johndroe](#) said at a briefing in Crawford, Tex., where [President Bush](#) is spending time at his ranch. "They have not completely withdrawn from areas considered undisputed territories, and they need to do it."

Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov told reporters Friday night in the southern Russian city of Sochi that the Russian withdrawal had been completed "without incident and according to schedule."

Under the terms of the cease-fire brokered by French President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) more than a week ago, Russian forces were supposed to return immediately to the pre-conflict boundaries, though Russia says the accord also allows its forces to monitor the conflict zone.

Georgian officials see little distinction between Russian peacekeepers and Russian soldiers.

In the western part of Georgia, Russian soldiers continued to man checkpoints near the port in the city of Poti and remained on a military base at Senaki, about 30 miles south of the border with the disputed territory of Abkhazia, Georgian officials said.

In the east, Russian forces abandoned posts on the key trade corridor linking the capital, Tbilisi, with central Georgia but retreated only to the village of Karaleta, two miles north of Gori -- the largest city held during the occupation. From there, they continued to man checkpoints and field camps along the main highway running north toward South Ossetia.

Russia says such checkpoints will eventually be manned by Russian peacekeepers, distinguishable from regular soldiers by their blue armbands bearing the letters "MC," the Russian initials for peacekeeping forces. But the uniforms worn by newly arrived Russian troops Friday evening bore no such insignia. The troops quickly settled into makeshift, roadside camps behind five-foot berms and concertina wire.

"We'll get the patches tomorrow," one soldier said, smiling as he responded to a reporter's question.

Dozens of Georgian police officers crammed into white-and-blue pickup trucks rushing into Gori at dusk, establishing checkpoints at the main entry points to the city and waving triumphantly as they toured the streets.

"Check all the cars coming in or out, but if you notice any Russian military vehicles leaving, just let them pass," David Rabusadze, head of the regional police force, told his charges as they took their positions in the road.

But in the town of Akhagori, far from the combat zone and only a 45-minute drive northwest from Tbilisi, the Russian soldiers who departed after manning a checkpoint for the past week were quickly replaced by South Ossetian militiamen, who roamed the streets in armored vehicles bearing the South Ossetian flag. Georgian officials and civilians have accused the militias of killings during the Russian occupation.

"My men are gone, and Akhagori is now in the hands of Ossetian rebels," a Russian colonel, who declined to give his name, said as he left the city in a green jeep.

Nine militiamen, wearing pieces of military uniforms and carrying Kalashnikov rifles, stood sentry on the main road into town. Asked how long they would stay, one man, who identified himself only as the checkpoint commander, said: "This is our land; we'll stay as long as we want. Basically, it is ours from now on."

He added, "We have not mistreated a single Georgian in town, and we will not," as a man standing beside him sheathed and unsheathed a six-inch knife.

Inside the ethnically mixed Georgian and Ossetian town, dozens of militiamen milled about the main square, centered on a statue of Saint George. The fighters said they considered Akhagori the border of their rightful territory and would not go farther.

"There will not be a minute of peace as long as they stay here," said Gia Shermadini, a Georgian resident of a neighboring village. "We will devour each other."

Hours later, in Gori, Russian soldiers had all but vanished. Residents gathered in the streets and debated what would come next.

"Thank God they are leaving, but now it is time for the Georgian government to bring something to the people, not war," said Sophia Davitashvili, 56.

"Georgia was only defending its rightful territory from Russian aggression," replied a neighbor, Khatuna Khvedelidze, 43.

Moments before departing, Russian Gen. Vyacheslav Borisov, who on Friday was replaced as the top commander in the region, chatted with priests outside St. Mary's, the largest Orthodox church in the

city.

"In my mind, I am already gone to Tskhinvali," he said, referring to the South Ossetian capital, which bore the brunt of the initial Georgian assault. "I am the last one left here. Just checking on things."

From a tattered, white plastic shopping bag, he presented a gift to the high priest: a blue and white striped Russian paratrooper undershirt. Then he was on his way.

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