

As part of the Borders hotspots series, Defence Viewpoints had been monitoring the growing tension between Russia and Georgia over the South Ossetia region and has been spurred into writing due to the action today from Russia.

Russian tanks have entered the capital of Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia, says Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili. Georgia has been fighting separatists with ties to Russia in order to regain control of the province, which has been effectively independent since the 1990s.

Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, said "ethnic cleansing" had been reported in villages in South Ossetia amid a Georgian offensive to retake the breakaway region.

Mr Lavrov called on the West to reach "the right conclusions" over the conflict, saying the Georgian offensive had been made possible by Western military aid to Tbilisi.

"Now we see Georgia has found a use for these weapons and for the special forces that were trained with the help of international instructors," he said. "I think our European and American colleagues ... should understand what is happening. And I hope very much that they will reach the right conclusions."

In reply, Georgia is reported to have said any involvement of Russian forces in the conflict will result in a state of war. Georgia's president said 150 Russian tanks and other vehicles had entered South Ossetia.

He told CNN: "Russia is fighting a war with us in our own territory."

Mr Saakashvili, who has called on reservists to sign up for duty, said: "This is a clear intrusion on another country's territory. We have Russian tanks on our territory, jets on our territory in broad daylight," Reuters new agency quoted him as saying. He also said Georgian forces had shot down two Russian jets on Georgian territory, although Russia denied any of its fighters had entered its neighbour's airspace.

The Russian military reported that ten Russians were killed and 30 injured during Georgian shelling of their barracks, but Georgian officials denied firing on Russian peacekeepers in the area during their offensive in South Ossetia. Georgian troops had earlier launched an attack to regain control of breakaway South Ossetia, where officials said at least 15 people were killed and an unspecified number of people wounded.

Russia's Defence Ministry pledged to protect Russian citizens in the region. Most of the region's residents have Russian passports. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev later chaired a session of his security council in the Kremlin, vowing that Moscow will protect Russian citizens.



"In accordance with the constitution and the federal law, I, as president of Russia, am obliged to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are located," Mr Medvedev said in televised remarks. "We won't allow the death of our compatriots to go unpunished."

Russia's Defence Ministry denounced the Georgian attack as a "dirty adventure."

"Blood shed in South Ossetia will weigh on their conscience," the ministry said in a statement posted on its official website. "We will protect our peacekeepers and Russian citizens," it said without elaboration.

**SOUTH OSSETIA TIMELINE** (for more on Georgia visit [www.ukdf.org.uk](http://www.ukdf.org.uk))

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2006 S Ossetians vote for independence in unofficial referendum

April 2008 Russia steps up ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia

July 2008 Russia admits flying jets over S Ossetia; Russia and Georgia accuse each other of military build-up

7 August 2008 After escalating Georgian-Ossetian clashes, sides agree to ceasefire

8 August 2008 Heavy fighting erupts overnight, Georgian forces close on Tskhinvali

12 August 2008 We do not set ourselves the task of providing a running commentary on operations - other media can provide eye-witness testimony that we cannot.

However, today it has been reported that Russia has ceased military operations in Georgia, according to the Kremlin. President Dmitry Medvedev gave the order to end the campaign after 'restoring security for Russian citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia.' Mr Medvedev told his defence minister and chief of staff that 'the goal had been attained.' The statement comes after five days of conflict in the region.

After this statement, tens of thousands of Georgians gathered in Tbilisi's main square to hear President Mikhail Saakashvili speak. At least 150,000 protesters cheered President Mikheil Saakashvili outside Georgia's parliament on Tuesday, backing him in Georgia's confrontation with Russia over the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

The president told the crowd that Russia was continuing its "ruthless, heartless destruction" of Georgian citizens - although the Kremlin denied his claims. In addition, Georgia said that Russian jets were bombing villages outside South Ossetia in Georgia proper.

"Despite the Russian president's claims earlier this morning that military operations against Georgia have been suspended, at this moment, Russian fighter jets are bombarding two Georgian villages outside South Ossetia," the Georgian government said in a statement.

Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, has stated that Georgia must sign a legally binding document on the non-use of force. And Mr Medvedev warned that Russia would not allow any further Georgian military activity in South Ossetia, saying: "Should centres of resistance or



other aggressive attempts arise, you must take the decision to destroy them."

Some 100,000 people are estimated to have been displaced by the conflict.