

David Tevzadze,
Georgian Minister of Defense
May 07, 2002

Georgian Defense Minister David Tevzadze was in Washington DC May 6-8 to discuss the details of the \$65 million Train and Equip (T&E) program with senior U.S. officials. The T&E program is designed to help Georgia with its counter-terrorism efforts. Minister Tevzadze also spoke at CSIS. Below is a short summary of the discussion.

Minister Tevzadze noted that the T&E program is actually an extension of the bilateral military cooperation that began in 1995. The first result of the cooperation focusing on military reform was the ability of the Georgian military to participate in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo. September 11 changed the scope of this cooperation to include anti-terror cooperation. If the government crisis in October did not take place, the T&E would have started sooner. Georgia sees the T&E as a two-step program towards increased cooperation with the U.S. in the anti-terror activities: the first step is to help Georgia fight terrorism in Georgia, and the second is to have Georgia participate fully in the war on terrorism.

In addition to the training, the program will help the Georgian military with further reforms. The units to be trained by the U.S. military advisors will be comprised of recruits, not conscripts, and their battalions will serve as models for the rest of the military. Planned reforms for the entire military include reducing the overall size of the military and restructuring the military to resemble militaries in Western democratic countries. The most difficult task will be to prepare the defense ministry (MOD) to accept a civilian minister by 2004. With these reforms, the Georgian military will have inter-operability with its Western allies. However, to succeed in these reforms, the MOD needs to have a bigger budget.

Minister Tevzadze ruled out the use of the U.S. trained troops against Abkhazia. He affirmed that no one in the Georgian government has any intention of using force in Abkhazia. In fact, he believed the relations between the Abkhaz and the Georgians were improving.

On relations with Russia, Minister Tevzadze noted that political relations between the two countries are cold, but this should not preclude the normalization of military relations. He believed that while the Russians initially overreacted to T&E, which culminated in the April 12 Kodori events, tensions were beginning to subside.

On relations with other neighbors, in addition to very close relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, he also pointed out that the Georgian Chief of General Staff recently conducted his first official visit to Armenia. While he believed there could be regional cooperation on areas such as natural disasters, a true regional cooperation would only start after the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Finally on Pankisi, Minister Tevzadze mentioned that it is mainly the Ministries of Interior and State Security that are working in the gorge, and they have already made some achievements. The MOD forces that will be trained by the T&E will mainly back up the Georgian governments activities. The announcement of the program has dramatically improved the situation on the ground and even the Chechen refugees welcome the U.S. involvement. There are no Al Qaeda cells on the ground, but there may be members of Al Qaeda that may have traveled from Afghanistan to Georgia. Given it is other ministries that follow possible Al Qaeda penetration into Georgia, Minister Tevzadze stated that while he doubts there are any Al Qaeda in Georgia now, but he could not rule it out.