

Air Force Deploys S-300 Missiles in Abkhazia

August 11, 2010



Medvedev and Bagapsh visiting Russia's base in Abkhazia on Sunday. **Dmitry Astakhov**

Air Force commander Alexander Zelin said Wednesday that S-300 air defense missile systems have been deployed in Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia region to protect the separatist authorities there, sending a defiant signal to Tbilisi and the West two years after a war with Georgia.

General Zelin also said that air defenses of other types had been deployed in Georgia's other rebel region, South Ossetia. "The task of these air defenses is not only to cover the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also to avert violations of their state borders in the air and destroy any vehicle illegally penetrating their air space, whatever the goal of its mission," Zelin said.

Georgia reacted promptly, accusing Moscow of "strengthening its image and role as an occupying country." "It shows ... not only that Russia does not intend to withdraw its troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but that it is actually strengthening its military control over these territories," said Eka Tkeshelashvili, head of Georgia's National Security Council.

The S-300 is a mobile, long-range air defense system that can detect, track and destroy ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and aircraft. The United States and Israel have repeatedly voiced concern over possible deliveries of S-300s to Iran.

In August 2008, Russia crushed a Georgian assault on South Ossetia that came after days of clashes between Georgian and rebel forces.

Since then, Russia has recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent. President Dmitry Medvedev visited a Russian base in Abkhazia with Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagapsh last weekend.

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