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14 Deaths Is Only Fact In Georgia Border Clash

By Paul Rimple

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Twenty armed militants from the North Caucasus supposedly wandered into Georgia from Dagestan on Aug. 28, and the next day three Georgian servicemen and 11 of the militants were killed. That's about all we're likely to ever know.

Five residents of the border village of Lapankuri were taken hostage, the Interior Ministry said, although Georgia's Rustavi 2 TV reported that there had been three groups of hostages. The official version is that "several" Georgian border police who were looking for the five were captured by bearded militants and then traded themselves for the hostages. They, in turn, were traded for police officers, according to some accounts.

Disparate messages like this only breed conjecture in a country of skeptics who prefer to believe in the most outlandish conspiracies than in the most logical explanations. Of course, people have reason to mistrust the authorities, who have a history of staging poorly executed provocations. With parliamentary elections a month away, some people are saying

the ruling party planned the story to prove how effectively it can respond to hostile threats.

The Interior Ministry said the militants were all Russian citizens, some from North Ossetia. President Mikheil Saakashvili speculated that the infiltration was a test to check Georgia's combat readiness. But who needs to test Georgia's "readiness?" In 2008, Russia conquered Georgia in just a few days.

The "operation" drew the ire of the Caucasus Emirate, a militant group that aims to unite the North Caucasus into a single Islamic state. These are the same people the Federal Security Service tried to link to Georgia back in May. An Islamic insurgent's website claimed the fighters as members but denied that they took hostages.

"You will acquire another enemy who will exact a ruthless revenge," wrote one virtual mujahedeen.

However, news of the event subsequently disappeared from the website.

Why would some people with guns come to Georgia, take hostages and make no demands? Has the violent unrest that has been stewing in Dagestan simply spilled over into Georgia? Or is it a Russian plot to destabilize Georgia?

What this is, in fact, is just another abstruse confrontation in Georgia, where, in light of the facts, we have fictitious renderings by everybody with a problem in the region. All we really know is that 14 men are dead — and that nobody benefits from that.

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