



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Special Representative of the EU for South Caucasus Ambassador Semneby

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 12, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and welcome back, Ambassador Semneby. We again wish to express our appreciation for your considerable efforts in this very important region of the world. The U.S. joins the EU in supporting the need for security and stability in the South Caucasus. To that end, we encourage the development of democratic institutions, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and economic growth. We welcome the European Neighborhood Action Plans for all three countries in the region.

Despite some recent successes, much remains to be done, especially within the human dimension. We strongly support the crucial role of the OSCE, and ODIHR and the Special Representative on the Media in particular, in working with the governments of the South Caucasus on democratic reforms. We also support your work, Mr. Ambassador, to encourage greater respect for freedom of expression, media freedom, and freedom of assembly in these countries. We are also grateful for the EU's contributions in helping promote open and secure borders, which are key to a stable, integrated, and economically vibrant OSCE area.

At the same time, we remain concerned that unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus continue to pose serious obstacles to the goals we have mentioned: security, stability, democratic development, and economic growth across the region. The United States supports the territorial integrity of the countries of the South Caucasus and calls on the sides in each instance to negotiate peaceful solutions to those conflicts. The United States stands prepared to help, as always, through our involvement, formally and informally, in the various conflict-resolution mechanisms that have been developed.

In that spirit, we welcomed last week's visit by Ambassador Hakala and members of her team and the briefing they gave to donors on the Economic Rehabilitation Program in South Ossetia. We are encouraged by the steady progress the Program has made in the past two years as schools have been built, irrigation projects completed and small businesses created. More importantly, this kind of economic rehabilitation has promoted reconciliation and cooperation between ethnic Georgians and ethnic Ossetians living in and around the conflict zone. Donors believe more flexibility on the part of the Georgian and South Ossetian sides would greatly benefit the ERP and in particular the people it is designed to serve.

Given the tense situation in South Ossetia, moreover, we believe more can and should be done. We reiterate our call to increase the number of OSCE monitors across South Ossetia, as well as for joint monitoring of the Roki Tunnel and the establishment of a checkpoint at the village of Didi Gupta. These simple measures are designed to alleviate tensions by

increasing transparency with respect to the movement of goods and people through the Roki Tunnel into Georgian territory.

Sadly, while we can see a glimpse of some progress in South Ossetia, we have become increasingly concerned by developments in Abkhazia. At recent sessions of the Permanent Council and the FSC, we have noted UNOMIG's conclusions regarding the downing of Georgia's unmanned aerial vehicle. We have also expressed our deep dismay at Russia's unilateral decision to send railroad construction troops into the region without the consent of the Georgian Government. Such actions only fuel the instability in what is already a volatile area. They are clearly in contravention of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and they call into question Russia's role as a facilitator and peacekeeper. We note Russia's announcement that it will withdraw these forces in the next two months; we call on Russia to withdraw them immediately, along with the assault forces and heavy weapons.

Ambassador Semneby, we look forward to continued close cooperation with the EU as we work together with the countries of the South Caucasus to promote our shared goals for that region's future success.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.