

Medvedev to Sign Extended Lease on Base in Armenia

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YEREVAN, Armenia — Armenia's Foreign Ministry said Wednesday that the country had agreed to extend a lease on a Russian military base until 2044, strengthening Moscow's military presence in the strategic region.

The deal will be signed during a visit to Yerevan by President Dmitry Medvedev on Thursday and Friday.

Russia and Armenia signed a deal in 1995 allowing the Russian base in the town of Gyumri on Armenia's closed western border with Turkey to operate for 25 years. Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian said Wednesday that the changes would extend that deal to 49 years from 1995.

Nalbandian said the deal would spell out that the Russian base would help secure the landlocked country of 3.2 million people, where the specter of renewed conflict with Azerbaijan over its breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh is never far away.

"And in realizing those goals, the Russian side will assist in providing Armenia with weapons and modern military equipment," Nalbandian said in an interview with Rossia-24 television.

Some in the Armenian opposition have complained that the deal undermines the country's independence.

Russia has several thousand soldiers in Gyumri who help patrol Armenia's western border with Turkey. Ankara closed the frontier in 1993 in solidarity with Azerbaijan during the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The mountain region threw off Azeri rule in the early 1990s with Armenian backing. A cease-fire was agreed upon in 1994, but a peace deal has never been concluded, and Azerbaijan frequently threatens to take the territory back by force.

Russia is part of a mediating group, which includes France and the United States, that has been trying for the past 15 years, without success, to forge a peace deal.

Although it has traditionally enjoyed close relations with Armenia, Russia has sought in recent years to develop ties with Azerbaijan as it vies with the West for access to energy reserves in the Caspian Sea.

The Russian military also has troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two breakaway regions of neighboring Georgia where it is building up bases after a five-day war over South Ossetia in 2008.

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