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Georgia's new leaders to appeal for urgent international aid

Story from AFP / Christian Lowe and Nikolai Topuria

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Tuesday, 25-Nov-2003 2:10AM PST

TBILISI, Nov 25 (AFP) - Georgia's new leaders said they would appeal for urgent international financial assistance Tuesday as the outgoing parliament prepared to set a date for presidential elections after the ousting of president Eduard Shevardnadze.

Former parliament speaker Nino Burjanadze, to whom Shevardnadze handed over power at the weekend after weeks of opposition protests, warned that "Georgia is on the verge of economic collapse."

"We intend to ask for the help of the international community," Burjanadze said during a televised meeting at the presidency.

Georgia, still struggling after the collapse of the Soviet Union over a decade ago, has a foreign debt of 1.8 billion dollars (1.5 billion euros) and is on the verge of defaulting on its debts, mainly towards Turkey and Russia, because of chronically low tax collection.

The International Monetary Fund broke off lending to the crisis-ridden Caucasus state after parliament failed in August to approve belt-tightening measures.

On two previous occasions Georgia successfully applied to the Paris Club of state creditors to have debt repayments rescheduled. But under Paris Club rules, only debtor countries with active IMF programmes can seek debt rescheduling.

The parliament elected in 1999 was to convene Tuesday to set a date for presidential elections which the constitution says must be held within 45 days of Shevardnadze's resignation on Sunday.

"I think it necessary to hold an election as quickly as possible," said Burjanadze Monday.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court annulled the disputed November 2 legislative elections on grounds of fraud. It was not clear when a date would be set for a

new poll.

The opposition had charged that the parliamentary elections which returned Shevardnadze's government to power were rigged and demanded his resignation.

Burjanadze's plea for financial help came after the United States, a key ally of Georgia, said it was prepared to help ease the political transition in the former Soviet republic, leaving the door open to financial assistance.

"We stand ready to help the Georgian people as they prepare for new presidential elections," White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan told reporters.

"We're supportive of what the Georgian opposition party did to restore the integrity of Georgian democracy, in terms of using peaceful demonstrations to overturn a fraudulent parliamentary election," she said.

But Russia took a sour note, President Vladimir Putin saying it was "concerned" that "the change of power in Georgia happened against the background of a heavy pressure."

Moscow hoped the "future lawfully elected Georgian leadership will do everything to restore the centuries-old ties between our countries," he said.

Russia, which has army bases in Georgia, has kept a watchful eye on developments in Tbilisi, concerned that the United States may be seeking to bolster its influence in the country, which lies on a transit route for oil from the new fields of the Caspian Sea to the West.

Burjanadze met Monday with Georgia's top security officials and reappointed the head of the national security council whom Shevardnadze had fired the previous day.

The meeting followed one in the hours following Shevardnadze's resignation, during which Burjanadze thanked the nation's security chiefs for not getting involved in the political turmoil.

However, Interior Minister Koba Narchemashvili announced his resignation Monday, as he reasserted his support for Shevardnadze.

The country's new leaders also faced the rising threat of separatist forces as the head of the Georgian autonomous region of Adjara on the Black Sea coast, who sided with Shevardnadze in the conflict, closed the border with the rest of Georgia.

Aslan Abashidze on Monday decreed a month's closure of road, air and rail links after announcing a state of emergency late Sunday.

Georgia has already suffered the secession of two pro-Moscow separatist regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are outside Tbilisi's control.

As the new leadership set a course for elections, a spokesman for Mikhail Saakashvili, who led the protest movement, said the US-educated 35-year-old lawyer was planning to throw his hat in the ring.

"Saakashvili will be a candidate in the election," Visarion Djugveli told AFP.

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