

Presentation of the Minister of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia, HE Ms. Tamar Martiashvili

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a big honour for me to have an opportunity to participate in the celebration of the 10th Anniversary of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and present on behalf of the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation the vision of what role these Principles played in overcoming the displacement crisis in Georgia.

The Guiding Principles are considered to be an “important international framework for the protection of internally displaced persons.”¹ Even without being a binding document, they present the whole range of minimal international standards that allow us to protect those who were displaced. The “Law about Internally Displaced Persons – Persecuted” of Georgia, endorsed in 1996, later included many provisions from the Guiding Principles, related with additional measures for the protection of displaced people.

Responsibility for assisting and protecting internally displaced persons (IDPs) lies first and foremost with the national authorities. These responsibilities are reaffirmed in the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which both the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the Inter-Agency Internal Displacement Division (IDD) have identified as fundamental to comprehensive response in all phases of displacement and as the overall framework for their response.

During the last 15 years the Government of Georgia has mainly dealt with the caseload of protracted displacement after armed conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with some 222 thousand IDPs; the scarp financial allowance was provided on a monthly basis, not giving IDPs the chance to really integrate, and increasing their dependence on assistance.

In 2006, the decision was made to change the state approach to IDPs; the process of development of the IDP State Strategy was announced, and in early 2007 the Strategy was approved. Two main goals stated in the Strategy reflected the inherent right of IDPs to return to their native lands or habitual residences, and to improve significantly their living conditions before such return becomes possible. Unfortunately, due to different reasons, the adoption of the Action Plan for the IDP State Strategy was delayed, and the Action Plan was approved only in late July 2008, and already in the beginning of August Georgia faced a new challenge: the revival of conflict in South Ossetia, followed by the invasion of Russian military troops on the territory of Georgia proper that caused new displacement and new victims among the civilian population.

From the first day of the crisis the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation took the responsibility for accommodating and answering the basic needs of the displaced. As all buildings appropriate for living in were already occupied by IDPs from the previous conflict (Tbilisi alone hosted more than 100,000 IDPs, mainly from Abkhazia), people were temporary placed in schools, kindergartens and abandoned public buildings (mainly in Tbilisi), often without very basic facilities such as water taps and toilets. The total number of

¹ (UN General Assembly GA Resolution A/60/L.1 para. 132)

displaced persons registered in August 2008, at the peak of displacement, by the Civil Registry Agency was 131,000 (and these were only those who applied for registration). In total, 10% of the population of Georgia became displaced. The main priority in the beginning of the emergency was urgently to save their lives, as they had absolutely nothing; and the supply of beds, food and potable water, adequate shelter and housing, as envisaged in Principle 18, became a really political task.

After the 6-point agreement was concluded with the facilitation of President Sarkozy and the EU, the Russian troops in September left Gori and some other places alongside the main road, making possible the return of the urban population to these places. This decreased the burden on Tbilisi, but soon these IDPs were substituted by a new wave of displaced persons from Akhagori. The further steps in implementation of this agreement, particularly monitoring by EU monitors and the withdrawal of Russian military troops from the villages in so-called "buffer zones" allowed us to plan further actions. From the 10th of October the Government of Georgia started the organized process of return of displaced persons to the villages to the north of Gori. This is an ongoing process, people are returning in their villages where the assessment teams assist them to evaluate damage of their houses. Those IDPs whose houses were burnt or destroyed will receive temporary shelters in prepared shelters that will be winterized with assistance from international and local organizations.

IDPs from regions where return is not envisaged in visible period of time (these regions now include the villages of the Tskhinvali region, Kodori Valley in Western Georgia and Akhagori District) will receive new houses. In this case, the Government used the lessons learnt from the previous caseload and decided to provide people with durable solutions; in particular, new houses are built in the regions of Shida Kartli and Mtskheta-Mtianeti, and authorities are purchasing existing empty houses in the neighbouring region.

It is necessary to conduct a consultative process with the displaced that have already started to receive assistance from civil society. It is important to understand what are the expectations of the displaced and how it would be possible to accommodate them within currently existing opportunities.

To ensure that the actions of the Government are in compliance with the requirements of the Guiding Principles, the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation conducts regular consultations with international organizations and with high level representatives of the UN and the EU. During the last two months Georgia was visited by the High Commissioner on Refugees, the High Commissioner on Human Rights of Council of Europe, the UN Secretary General's Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, delegations of the OSCE, PACE, and Governments of donor countries. This allows us to participate in advocacy efforts conducted by the high level representatives, check the priorities and directions chosen by the Government of Georgia and compare them with existing mechanisms for the protection of human rights, particularly the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. These consultations were especially important in view of the fact that IDPs from the previous caseload should also receive durable solutions and the possibility for dignified integration that means that their housing problems should be solved in parallel with a general improvement of social and economic conditions. The equal approach, non-discrimination of any group of IDPs is one of the cornerstones of the Guiding Principles; it is fixed in the IDP State Strategy; and the Government of Georgia and particularly the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation will do its best that the updated Action Plan will equally

cover IDPs from “new” and “old” waves and will find support and understanding in the coming donor conference on October 22nd .

Allow me once again to thank cordially the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway and all organizers of this important event, and express hope that our efforts will be supported by you in the future on the same scale, and that Georgian IDPs will receive a full opportunity to benefit from international attention and assistance.