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Georgia: New IDP strategy awaits implementation

Tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) from Georgia's secessionist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been waiting more than a decade for a solution to their displacement following conflicts which broke out in the early 1990s. The majority of the 220,000 to 247,000 IDPs have found refuge in the region bordering Abkhazia and in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Many of them still live in precarious conditions in former hotels and public buildings, and depend on meagre state benefits. During the past few years, some 45,000 people have returned to the Gali district in eastern Abkhazia, only to find poor conditions and economic prospects.

In order to improve their situation, the Georgian government developed in early 2007 a national strategy on IDPs, drawn up with the support of the international community and civil society organisations. The strategy aims to serve as a foundation for the government's action plan, which is expected to be implemented with support from the UN and other international partners. As of October 2007, implementation of the strategy had not started.

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IDPs in Georgia

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Background and causes of displacement

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union and its declaration of independence in 1991, Georgia had to confront two regions within its own borders which were demanding independence: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The fighting that followed killed about 10,000 people and caused the displacement of some 300,000 people (UNDP, 2004). The conflicts also resulted in the Georgian government's loss of control over both regions, which now largely owe their de facto autonomy to Russian backing.

Close to 95 per cent of the IDPs originated from Abkhazia (CHR, 25 January 2001), where virtually the entire ethnic Georgian population fled, primarily to the region on the Georgian side of the internal border with Abkhazia, and to the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. At the same time, many ethnic Abkhaz were displaced within Abkhazia. Ethnic Georgians and Abkhaz also found refuge in Russia. Both groups generally describe what happened to them as "ethnic cleansing" (Dale, 1997; IFRC, 30 November 2000).

The conflict in South Ossetia caused the displacement of 60,000 people, mainly ethnic Ossetians from both the break-away territory and other parts of Georgia; the vast majority of them found refuge in North Ossetia, Russia. About 10,000 ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia were also displaced within Georgia (CHR, 22 March 2006).

In 2004 and 2005, the Georgian Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA), with the support of UNHCR and the Swiss government, identified and reg-

istered 221,597 IDPs currently living in territories under Georgian control (CHR, 22 March 2006). However, this figure has not been endorsed by the Georgian government, who used the estimate of 247,000 in 2007 (GoG, 2 February 2007). The MRA has also started to register as IDPs some of the hundreds of Georgian citizens deported from Russia, as it views many of them as originating from Abkhazia and South Ossetia (UNCT in Georgia, November 2006). Approximately 70 per cent of Georgia's IDPs live in urban areas, primarily Zugdidi in western Georgia, but also Tbilisi and Kutaisi (World Bank, May 2005).

Peace remains elusive

In order to prevent the resumption of violence, the international community sent peacekeepers to South Ossetia and to Abkhazia in 1992 and 1994 respectively. In South Ossetia, a Joint Control Commission representing Georgia, Russia, North Ossetia and South Ossetia, as well as Joint Peacekeeping Forces representing Georgia, Russia and North Ossetia, are mandated to prevent the resumption and escalation of the conflict. The UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) performs a similar function in Abkhazia. Its contingent is entirely made up of Russians, as peacekeeping has been mandated to the Commonwealth of Independent States. Georgia has long criticised the presence of Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in July 2006, the Georgian parliament passed a resolution requesting the government to expedite the withdrawal of both Russian peacekeeping contingents.

South Ossetia

Following the election of President Mikhail Sakaashvili in January 2004, the government intensified efforts to bring South Ossetia back under its control. Tensions rose and clashes caused the temporary displacement of several thousand people in July and August 2004. Since local elections were held at the end of 2006, there have been two competing authorities in South Ossetia, one seeking closer relations with Russia and the other, backed by the Tbilisi government, aiming for autonomy within Georgia.

Abkhazia

The UN has led the international community's efforts for a peaceful settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Abkhazia declared independence in 1994, but it has never been recognised by a single country, though Russia maintains a border crossing and has re-opened a railway link to the city of Sukhumi. The return of refugees and IDPs, predominantly to the Gali district of eastern Abkhazia, has been a central issue in peace negotiations (CHR, 22 March 2006). The Georgian government has offered Abkhazia considerable autonomy within Georgia, but several attempts to solve the conflict have failed. According to some analysts, one of the problems is that the term "autonomy" has been devalued by the experience of the autonomous republics of the Soviet Union, which actually had very little autonomy. Observers also point out the inconsistency with which the Georgian government pursues its policies, on one hand stressing peaceful resolution, and on the other hand building up its military presence in and around the conflict zones (RFE/RL, 14 August 2007). Meanwhile, the de facto president

of Abkhazia has emphasised the importance of relations with Russia rather than with Georgia, while 90 per cent of Abkhazia's population hold Russian passports, the currency is the Russian rouble and many retired people receive Russian pensions.

While Russia officially recognises the territorial integrity of Georgia, relations between both countries have deteriorated sharply over the past year, causing peace negotiations to come to a standstill. In 2006, Russia placed an import embargo on Georgian wine, water, and agricultural products, and closed all communication lines between the two countries, after Georgia arrested four army Russian officers based in Tbilisi on the charge of espionage. Georgia has repeatedly accused Russia of violating its airspace. Tensions between both countries escalated further in 2007, when Georgia set up a pro-Tbilisi administration in the Kodori gorge – a small mountain territory in the only part of Abkhazia not controlled by the de facto breakaway authorities – after Georgian troops had forced Abkhaz militia groups from the area (UNSC, 18 July 2007).

Continuing humanitarian needs of long-term IDPs

During a visit to Georgia in December 2005, the UN Secretary-General's Representative on the Human Rights of IDPs, Walter Kälin, said he was "shocked by the misery" in which some of the 240,000 IDPs were still living (Brookings, 3 May 2006). Humanitarian agencies estimate that close to half of the displaced population live in collective centres, located in former hotels, schools, kindergartens,

factories and hospitals. Of a total of 1,683 collective centres throughout the country, 70 per cent do not meet basic living standards, with inadequate access to clean water, unsafe electrical systems and inadequate insulation (Zoidze & Djibuti, 2004). In addition, it is believed that an increasing number of IDPs previously living in private accommodation have moved to collective centres as local families have become more unwilling to host them given their inability to pay rent (Dershem/Gurgenidze/ Holtzman, November 2002). Little information is available on the living conditions of IDPs accommodated with host families.

In general, IDPs, and particularly those living in collective centres, have limited access to land and employment, and are therefore more vulnerable to poverty than the rest of the population (Zoidze & Djibuti, 2004; World Bank, May 2005). According to the UN, IDPs and other vulnerable people still have significant humanitarian needs (UNCT in Georgia, November 2006). One of the most serious causes of IDP vulnerability is related to their emotional conditions, as the conflict and their difficult situation after the conflict have created feelings of dependency, passivity and depression that have hindered their social integration and recovery of economic self-reliance (Sumbadze & Tarkhan-Mouravi, July 2003).

According to a study commissioned by UNDP in 2004, the overall health status of IDPs, particularly those living in collective centres, is worse than that of the rest of the population (Zoidze & Djibuti, 2004). Local observers also point out that due to corruption and lack of information, IDPs in rural areas have very limited – if any – access to the free health ser-

vices for IDPs. The Abkhaz Ministry of Health in Exile reported that the prevalence of the most frequent diseases among IDPs was more than twice that among the general population.

Of particular concern are vulnerable groups among the displaced, such as elderly, traumatised and disabled people, and female-headed households (CHR, 22 March 2006). Many of the over 100,000 displaced children have specific needs as well. Collective centres where many grow up offer crowded living space, extremely poor sanitary conditions, and inadequate access to health services. As IDPs, they often face social stigma and resulting psychological problems. They also feel isolated, as many attend specialised schools for displaced children, which are generally in very poor condition due to lack of funds (UNICEF/NRC, October 2006; NRC, July 2007).

Return to Abkhazia and South Ossetia

In 2007, the Georgian government and the international community have continued to emphasise the right of return of Georgian IDPs. The Georgian government urged the resumption of work by the Commission for the Return of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees, which was established under the 1994 Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons (UNSC, 18 July 2007). Following Abkhazian local and parliamentary elections in early 2007, the European Union stated that elections in this region of Georgia could only be valid after all refugees and IDPs were given the right to a safe, secure and dignified return to their

homes (EU, 5 March 2007). In April 2007, UNSC Resolution 1752 stressed “the urgent need to alleviate the plight of refugees and IDPs and the need for a perspective of life in security and dignity in particular for a new generation growing up outside Abkhazia, Georgia”, and recalled “the right of return for all IDPs to Abkhazia, Georgia” (UNSC, 13 April 2007). Meanwhile, Abkhazian authorities have maintained that the return of IDPs to Abkhazia – other than to Gali – is impossible (Civil Georgia, 17 February 2007).

In practice, Georgian IDPs have continued steadily to return to the Gali district of Abkhazia over the past few years, though no ethnic Georgians have been able to return to the rest of Abkhazia. The living conditions of the 45,000 returnees remain extremely poor, with deficient housing, limited economic opportunities and a general lack of public services (CHR, 22 March 2006; DRC, February 2006). Many have to rely on relatives in western Georgia to survive, or they continue to work part of the year outside Abkhazia to support themselves. Returning children have to attend school in Russian (NRC, July 2007). Georgian state television reported that some Georgian returnees in Gali were forced by the Abkhazian authorities to hand over part of their hazelnut crops to provide money for the breakaway Abkhazian army (IBC, 20 August 2007). It is not clear to what extent this is a problem, as it depends on the village returnees live in and their relationship with the local Abkhazian police forces. Ethnic Georgian youths from Gali are also reportedly being forcibly recruited into the Abkhazian army (US DOS, 6 March 2007; UNICEF/NRC, October 2006).

According to the UN, some 6,000 refugees and IDPs have returned to South Ossetia since 1997 (UNCT, November 2006). In South Ossetia, returns that did occur after 2002 tended to strengthen the dominance of local majority populations rather than promote multi-ethnic coexistence, as few members of minorities recovered their pre-war properties (OCHA, 15 January 2004). Since summer 2004, very few people have returned home due to the volatile security situation and persisting poor economic conditions.

National response to internal displacement

Since 1996, IDPs have been entitled to certain state benefits according to the “Law of Georgia on Internally Displaced Persons” (most recently amended at 9 June 2006). Nevertheless, for many years, the Georgian government’s political pursuit of their return was so absolute that it denied displaced persons the ability to enjoy their full rights as citizens and lead productive lives in the meantime (Deng, 10 June 2003).

Recently, however, the government has taken steps to improve the living conditions of IDPs. In the early 2000s, IDPs gained the right to vote in local and parliamentary elections in their current residence, rather than in their place of origin, to run for election, and to acquire property while keeping their national IDP status (Brookings, 5 November 2004; OCHA, November 2003). In February 2007, the government adopted a national strategy on IDPs (GoE, 2 February 2007). The “State Strategy for Internally Displaced Persons – Persecuted” deals with all aspects of displacement – housing,

employment, social issues (education and health) and legal status. The strategy stresses that integration of IDPs does not hinder their future return to the habitual residence. Thematic working groups involving relevant government agencies, UN agencies, international NGOs and national civil society provided substantial input to draft the strategy. Meanwhile, the ICRC created a database in order to consolidate information on all of Georgia's collective centres for IDPs (ICRC, 2007).

The strategy serves as a foundation for the action plan which the government intends to implement with anticipated support from the UN and other international partners from 2008. However, as of October 2007, the action plan had been developed but not adopted. Also, it remained to be seen what funds would be available to implement the strategy, and which government structure would be spearheading the implementation. The UN Country Team in Georgia identified the need for strong leadership from the MRA and coordination and cooperation with all relevant parties (including government agencies, civil society, the private sector, and international organisations) as priorities for the implementation of the strategy (UNCT in Georgia, November 2006).

IDPs are eligible to receive extremely modest government benefits from two different systems. Based on their displaced status, IDPs get a monthly allowance administered by the MRA and – for those in collective centres – free electricity and water. Otherwise, following a government decree of 28 July 2006 on social assistance to the general population, IDPs can enrol into a programme of

social assistance if they give up their monthly IDP allowances. This programme is managed by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs (NRC, 13 September 2007; NRC, July 2007).

Property issues

Because IDPs do not have property rights to their accommodation in collective centres, or legal rights to compensation, they have to rely on the goodwill of the state for compensation. Many have received compensation but have been unable to buy their own apartment and have ended up living with relatives or have used the compensation to rent an apartment (UNICEF/NRC, October 2006). Over the past few years, the government has accelerated the privatisation of hotels and other public buildings housing IDPs. According to local observers, the most successful cases of privatisation have occurred when IDPs have been able to negotiate rental conditions directly with the new owners, often with NGO or government support. In practice, thousands of IDPs have left or been evicted from their residences, sometimes without compensation. In August 2007, for example, 300 people were evicted, reportedly without any compensation, from a hotel in Kakheti Province in eastern Georgia (Prime-News, 15 August 2007).

In 2006, the MRA launched a programme called “My House”, according to which IDPs can register their land titles of their properties in Abkhazia in a state inventory. The Minister of Refugees and Accommodation called on the leaders of the breakaway region to cooperate in this process, but without success (UN Association of Georgia, 7 March 2006). Similarly, a law on restitution of property to the victims of the South Ossetian conflict

was passed in December 2006, but had not been implemented as of mid-2007 (ICG, 7 June 2007), and the South Ossetian authorities had rejected the law (UN Association of Georgia, 20 April 2006).

International response

In addition to supporting the development of the national strategy on IDPs, humanitarian organisations have responded to the immediate needs of IDPs and returnees. UNHCR is providing basic shelter assistance to returnees in Gali, where a second programme carried out by NRC and the Danish Refugee Council, with the support of the Swiss Development Agency (SDC) is seeking to create opportunities for income generation, community development and education. Other projects supporting IDPs, by both international and national partners, cover education, legal assistance and micro-credit. A few agencies, including ICRC and the UN's World Food Programme, have continued to provide direct food aid to the most vulnerable IDPs, while other humanitarian organisations have increasingly mainstreamed IDPs into programmes benefiting the general population.

Organisations working in Abkhazia often operate under difficult conditions, facing bureaucratic and security obstacles. International NGOs had to register with the de facto authorities in order to be able to work there. In certain parts of Abkhazia, such as Gali, the volatile security environment has been complicating the provision of humanitarian assistance (UNSC, 18 July 2007).

Donors have shown willingness to work with the current government. In order to improve the response to the humanitarian needs of IDPs, the European Union has allocated funding for food security and income-generation projects to displaced and resident communities, as well as for projects improving the shelter conditions for IDPs in collective centres and for returnees to the Gali district (CHR, 22 March 2006). In 2006, international donors pledged \$10 million at a conference hosted by Belgium on economic rehabilitation in the zone of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict (OSCE, 14 June 2006), and the implementation of the programme started in 2007 (ICG, 7 June 2007). Other major donors to programmes benefiting IDPs include SDC and USAID.

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Georgia. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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