



Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia

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Executive Summary

The Georgian government officially approved its new strategy for the occupied territories in January. The document does not deal with security issues or the question of status of the two breakaway regions, focusing instead on engaging the residents of these regions in various social and economic projects implemented by the government.

The 9th round of conflict settlement talks between Georgia, Russia and the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatist governments took place in Geneva in late January though the parties were unable to reach an agreement on security measures. Meanwhile, the question of a possible dialogue between the Russian government and the Georgian opposition caused a rift between different opposition groups.

The Georgian press devoted considerable attention to the events unfolding in the separatist-controlled Akhgori District in January, including the introduction of new rules for the individuals entering the district. A CIPDD local monitor noted that Georgia's national TV stations often cover the situation in the district in an overly dramatic manner and broadcast exaggerated reports about the tension there.

Residents of the IDP settlements of Shida Kartli staged several protests in January after they had electricity and/or gas supply suspended because of their failure to pay the bills. The problem appears to have arisen from a misunderstanding over the government's commitment to cover the utility payments of IDPs.

The CIPDD regional monitors continued to highlight the economic problems of the war-affected villages of Shida Kartli, including inaccessibility of land due to security problems, poor condition of roads and lack of transport and shortage of irrigation water.

The relative improvement of security situation in Shida Kartli that was noted in the previous report appears to have persisted in January. The fact that there have been no major hostage-taking incidents since November is a welcome development. At the same time, isolated cases of shooting have sustained a sense of insecurity among the residents of some Georgian villages adjacent to the administrative border.

The lack of information about various types of government aid remains a problem and continues to fuel general discontent in Shida Kartli, particularly among the residents of IDP settlements. It seems that some of the protest rallies staged by IDPs in January could have been avoided through a timely dissemination of the relevant information by the authorities.

Monitoring Risk Factors/Indicators

Political Indicators

General Political Developments

The Georgian government officially approved its new strategy for occupied territories on 27 January. The strategy is focused on engaging the people living on occupied territories through their involvement in various projects implemented in other parts of the country. The government is planning to present the strategy to major international organizations and to adopt a detailed implementation plan by June. The strategy implies promotion of economic ties through restoration of the infrastructure linking the breakaway regions with the rest of Georgia. The government intends to offer healthcare and education opportunities to the people living in the two separatist provinces. Minister of State for Reintegration Temur Iakobashvili told *24 Saati* that the strategy does not deal with security matters and the question of status of the breakaway regions since these must be resolved through negotiations between Georgia and the “occupying side”. The newspaper also carried comments by political analyst Andro Barnovi, who described the strategy as a “realistic” document.¹

Georgian-Russian Relations

The ongoing discussion about a possible dialogue with Russia was a subject of disagreement between different opposition groups in January. Following former Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli’s trip to Moscow in December, the leaders of the parties allied with Noghaideli’s Movement for Fair Georgia made statements supporting his efforts. Conservative Party leading member Kakha Kukava said that Georgia’s national interests “cannot be advanced” through the policies implemented by the current government, while People’s Party leader Koba Davitashvili suggested that compromises could be made in terms of Georgia’s accession to NATO as part of normalization of Georgia’s relations with Russia. Meanwhile, Salome Zourabichvili, former minister of foreign affairs and currently the leader of the opposition Georgia’s Way movement, questioned Noghaideli’s mandate for holding talks in Moscow and said that negotiations with Russia must only start after a new government comes to power in Georgia.²

Rezonansi reported on 22 January that the Russian government was setting up restricted access zones along the border with Georgia and deploying the Federal Security Service units and Cossack forces there. The report cited Georgian Interior Ministry Analytical Department Chief Shota Utiashvili, who said that the Zemo Larsi border crossing between the two countries was set to open on 1 March unless the Russian side changed its mind.³

Conflict Settlement Talks

The 9th round of the conflict settlement talks on Abkhazia and South Ossetia took place in Geneva in late January. The *24 Saati* daily reported before the talks that Russia continued to insist on immediate signing

¹ “Dividing Lines and State Strategy”, Dato Gamisonia, *24 Saati*, 28 January 2010.

² “Question of Dialogue with Russia Causing Rift in Opposition”, Giorgi Putkaradze, *Rezonansi*, 27 January 2010.

³ “Closed Border Zones and Armed Cossack Groups” Salome Gogokhia, *Rezonansi*, 22 January 2010.

of a nonaggression treaty between Georgia and the two breakaway regions. Report cited political analyst Archil Gegeshidze, who suggested that such an agreement with the separatist governments would be meaningless since it was Russia that posed a threat to Georgia.⁴ The newspaper also said that the Georgian delegation was planning to raise the question of replacing the Russian border troops stationed in the breakaway regions with an international police force at the talks. Political analyst Kakha Gogolashvili told the paper that, while the Russian and the separatist delegations were certain to reject the proposal, the initiative was still useful as it would show the international community a lack of constructiveness on the part of the Russians and the separatists.⁵

After the talks, *24 Saati* reported that the meeting had turned out to be “quite difficult and emotional”, noting that the parties had failed to sign a document on security measures. The report quoted Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria as saying that the Russian and the separatist delegations had made sure the meeting would end without any result. Bokeria further accused Russia of adopting an “inflexible” stance and resorting to “cheap propaganda”.⁶

Security Situation and Border Issues

As was the case in December, no major incidents were recorded in the areas adjacent to the administrative border in January. The only relatively high-profile incident took place on 4 January when Gennadiy Filiyev was arrested by the Georgian police. According to the Georgian authorities, Filiyev was a member of a South Ossetian armed group and carried an assault rifle and hand grenades when the police detained him in the village of Nikozi. The separatist government, however, condemned the arrest and claimed that Filiyev had been abducted by the Georgian special services from a Tskhinvali suburb.⁷

Despite relative calm, the CIPDD regional monitors continued to report about isolated cases of shooting and a general sense of insecurity in some of the Georgian villages adjacent to South Ossetia. According to a CIPDD monitor, the residents of the village of Zemo Nikozi were frightened by the sound of gunshots coming from the separatist-controlled territory in January, particularly during the New Year and Christmas holidays. A CIPDD monitor who visited the village of Kvemo Khviti in January reported that the residents of the village were disturbed by frequent gunshots coming from the nearby separatist-controlled areas. There had been instances of the locals being abducted and beaten by the separatists before being released.

According to a CIPDD monitor, the residents of the village of Karaleti have been worried by the rumors that the government is planning to build a military base in the area and the population may have to move elsewhere.

Georgian newspapers paid considerable attention to the events unfolding in Akhagori District in January. Paata Zakareishvili, member of Georgia’s opposition Republican Party, was interviewed by the *Rezonansi* daily on 12 January about the situation in Akhagori. Zakareishvili said that Russia has a “strategic interest” in the district due to its close proximity to the Georgian capital and is therefore investing heavily

⁴ “Nonaggression Treaty Must Be Signed by Russia and Georgia”, Mari Akhsiashvili, *24 Saati*, 26 January 2010.

⁵ “Georgia To Demand Replacement of Russian Troops”, *24 Saati*, 28 January 2010.

⁶ “Reality as Seen from Tbilisi”, *24 Saati*, 29 January 2010.

⁷ “Georgian Law Enforcers Have Detained Ossetian Resident”, Civil Georgia, 5 January 2010, <http://civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=22197&search=გოგოლაშვილი> (accessed on 8 February 2010).

in the construction of military infrastructure there.⁸ *Rezonansi* further reported on 28 January that the Russian military were planning to build an airfield in the village of Ikoti in Akhagori District. The report noted that the construction posed a major threat to a number of historical monuments, including a nearby convent. The newspaper said that the construction had been put on halt though it was not clear whether this had been done because of weather conditions or the discontent the plan had caused among the local population.⁹

Separatist President Eduard Kokoyty reportedly visited Akhagori with a number of Russian officials on 18 January in order to inspect the spending of funds allocated for the construction of a road linking the district with Tskhinvali. According to *Rezonansi*, Kokoyty was angered by the alleged embezzlement of the funds and decided to “establish personal control” over the implementation of the project.¹⁰

Human Rights

On 11 January, the Georgian Foreign Affairs Ministry commented on the media reports about the separatist leadership’s alleged intention to introduce additional requirements for individuals entering Akhagori with Georgian IDs. Deputy Foreign Minister Nino Kalandadze said that the decision did not produce any new threats and was unlikely to add to the existing tension though she did urge the international community to condemn it. Kalandadze also said that the South Ossetian side was trying to stall the conflict settlement talks.¹¹ A Georgian newspaper later reported that the separatist authorities were planning to introduce new rules as of 20 January, whereby all Georgian citizens entering Akhagori District would have to present verified Russian translation of their Georgian IDs along with the original document. According to the new rules, the border would only be open from 6 AM to 8 PM.

Rezonansi reported in mid-January that 11 Georgians were allegedly being held in the Tskhinvali prison. The report noted that, according to some sources, Georgian Army officer Zviad Kobaladze was among those prisoners. Kobaladze’s uncle told *Rezonansi* that the serviceman had been tortured and sentenced to 20 years in prison by the separatist authorities. The newspaper cited Interior Ministry Analytical Department Chief Shota Utiashvili, who said that there were no soldiers among the Georgians held in Tskhinvali. Utiashvili also commented on the allegations that the Georgian law enforcers were holding Ossetian hostages, emphasizing that all South Ossetian residents held in Georgian prisons had been arrested for specific crimes, including murder and terrorism.¹²

According to a report published in *Rezonansi* on 22 January, separatist government representative Boris Chochiyev criticized the International Committee of the Red Cross for its refusal to aid the Tskhinvali authorities in organizing a trip to Tbilisi for the families of the South Ossetians who went missing after the August 2008 war. Chochiyev was quoted suggesting that the ICRC had made the decision due to the Georgian government’s objection to such a visit. The report also cited an ICRC representative, who said that the organization was in the process of setting up a new mechanism for dealing with the question of

⁸ “Time Will Come When There Will Be More Russians Than Georgians in Akhagori”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 12 January 2010.

⁹ “Russians Building Military Airfield Near Convent”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 28 January 2010.

¹⁰ “Kokoyty and Russian Officials Have Visited Akhagori”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 20 January 2010.

¹¹ “Ossetian Side’s Accusations Are Groundless”, Interpressnews, *24 Saati*, 12 January 2010.

¹² “There are 11 Georgians in Tskhinvali Prison, Including One Military Officer”, Tamta Karchava, *Rezonansi*, 15 January 2010.

missing persons and did not deem it right to participate in any “parallel initiatives”.¹³ The newspaper further reported on 29 January that the ICRC continued to work towards the creation of a mechanism on missing persons. The paper cited ICRC representative Maia Kardava, who said that both sides had agreed “in principle” to assist the ICRC in organizing “humanitarian visits” to Tbilisi and Tskhinvali by the families of the missing individuals.¹⁴

On 26 January, *Rezonansi* carried a story about the plans of the families of the missing Ossetians to visit Tbilisi. The newspaper cited Paata Zakareishvili, member of Georgia’s opposition Republican Party, who said that a tentative agreement about the trip was reached when he travelled to Tskhinvali in December in order to negotiate the release of the Georgian teenagers who were held by the separatist authorities at the time. The report noted that the opposition Movement for Fair Georgia (led by former Prime Minister Zurab Noghaidei) had submitted requests for information about 35 missing individuals to various government bodies but was yet to receive a reply. The report highlighted the case of five young Ossetians who, according to their families, were held by the Georgian police.¹⁵

¹³ “Red Cross Is Setting Up New Mechanism for Finding Missing Persons”, Tiko Osmanova, *Rezonansi*, 22 January 2010.

¹⁴ “Families of Missing Persons Are Entitled To Know What Happened to Them”, Tiko Osmanova, *Rezonansi*, 29 January 2010.

¹⁵ “Parents of Missing Ossetians To Come to Tbilisi”, Mari Otashvili, *Rezonansi*, 26 January 2010.

Economic Indicators

Economic Problems of IDPs

IDPs living in Shida Kartli staged several protest rallies in January.

The *Rezonansi* daily reported on 27 January that the former residents of Akhagori who were yet to receive government payouts for their lost homes were planning to organize a “large-scale protest” outside the presidential palace in Tbilisi. The report noted that some 120 people gathered outside the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation on 26 January and the protesters later moved to the parliament building. *Rezonansi* was told by a ministry representative that the distribution of payouts had been delayed because of inaccuracies in the list of individuals entitled to receive the compensation. The report cited opposition Conservative Party member Bidzina Gujabidze, who accused the government of adopting a “cynical and immoral attitude” towards IDPs.¹⁶ According to a CIPDD regional monitor, employees of the regional security services were present at the site of the protest, while one of the participants of the rally received a threatening phone call from a local official. The monitor confirmed that the original list of the people who were to receive the compensation was likely to have been inflated.

Utility payment arrears were a major issue in a number of IDP settlements in January. According to a CIPDD regional monitor, the residents of the Karaleti IDP settlement had electricity and gas supply suspended in mid-January following their failure to pay the bills. The IDPs apparently suffered from a lack of information and thought that the authorities had undertaken to cover their utility payments during the first 18 months of their stay in the settlement. The IDPs protested against the suspension and blocked the nearby highway but were dispersed by the police. A representative of the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation told the CIPDD monitor that the government pays for the utilities up to a certain threshold and the IDPs have to make all payments above that amount.

Similar events took place in the Khurvaleti settlement where the IDP families that exceeded the electricity payment limit established by the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation had power supply suspended on 6 January and staged a protest on the main highway the next day. According to a CIPDD monitor, Energo Pro (a privately-owned Czech company that operates power distribution networks in most of Georgia’s provinces) later issued a statement, saying that all residents of different IDP settlements that failed to pay their bills would have the supply suspended.

A CIPDD regional monitor visited the Tsmindatsqali settlement near Gori where some 480 cottages were built for IDPs after the war. According to the monitor, the IDPs have complained about the poor quality of the cottages and the humidity inside them in particular. The IDPs staged a protest and blocked the main highway on 12 January after learning that the authorities were not planning to cover their utility payments. The monitor emphasized that, while these events were covered extensively by local newspapers, neither the local nor the national TV stations paid any attention to them.

Economic Situation in Villages Affected by War

The CIPDD regional monitors continued to highlight the economic problems of the war-affected villages in their monthly reports. The monitors visited a number of villages in Gori District in January.

A CIPDD monitor travelled to the village of Karbi located near separatist-controlled territory. According to the monitor, the residents of the village were able to retain most of their agricultural land after the 2008 war but they lost most of the last year’s harvest due to the poor quality of the pesticides they had received

¹⁶ “People from Akhagori Staging Protests and Demanding Compensation”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 27 January 2010.

as part of the aid. The road linking the village with the main highway is in an extremely poor condition and the locals are also facing a shortage of firewood. The houses damaged during the war were subsequently repaired by the authorities but the residents are dissatisfied with the quality of the work and claim that their homes are unfit for living.

The residents of the village of Kvemo Khviti currently have to rent land in other Georgian-controlled villages because the security situation makes it impossible for them to use their own land for agricultural activities. Also, removal of unexploded ordnance was not carried out on their land because of its close proximity to the separatist-controlled areas. The crops have been affected by the poor quality of the pesticides received as part of the aid. The water supply facilities are located on the separatist-controlled territory and the supply is suspended frequently. Drinking water is also a problem, the roads are in poor condition and the movement of transport has been affected by the security situation. Because of the loss of livelihood and reduced income, the locals can no longer make payments for the bank loans that they got before the war.

A CIPDD local monitor reported that the village of Mejriskhevi has been without water supply for three months now. The water supply facility is damaged but the repair teams cannot access it as it is located on separatist-controlled territory. The local authorities installed a new water supply system in Mejriskhevi after the 2008 war but it is presently out of operation as the village has had electricity supply suspended because of arrears.

Societal Indicators

Media

On 11 January, *Rezonansi* published an account of a trip by one of its reporters to the separatist-controlled Akhagori District. The reporter, who has a grandmother living in Akhagori, received security assurances from the separatist administration chief before travelling to the district. Upon her arrival in the town, she was taken to the separatist police headquarters and interrogated about the objectives of the trip. The journalist noted that she was subjected to “minor intimidation”. The South Ossetian police confiscated her cell phone and ID but returned them the next day. During the visit, the reporter was also interrogated by the local prosecutor’s office. According to the journalist, a local prosecutor told her that members of the Akhagori administration and law enforcement bodies read *Rezonansi* regularly.¹⁷

The residents of the villages adjacent to South Ossetia told a CIPDD monitor in January that South Ossetian TV programmes have lately become critical of the Russian media because of their allegedly negative coverage of the separatist government’s performance.

A CIPDD local monitor noted that Georgia’s national TV stations continue to cover the situation in Akhagori in an overly dramatic manner and air exaggerated reports about the alleged tension in the district.

Education

Rezonansi reported on 21 January that, following the Georgian Education and Science Ministry’s decision to introduce ten graduation exams in high schools, a number of former residents of Akhagori currently residing in the Tserovani IDP settlement decided to transfer their children back to Akhagori schools, so that they would be able to take advantage of the simpler graduation procedure there. According to the newspaper, the parents of the students of Akhagori schools protested against the possible arrival of the children from Tserovani. The report cited the head of the separatist administration of the district, who said that he had personally prohibited such transfers.¹⁸

¹⁷ “Neither Akhagori nor Leningori but Something Else”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 11 January 2010.

¹⁸ “Displaced 11th-graders Want To Move From Tserovani to Akhagori Schools”, Mari Otarashvili, *Rezonansi*, 21 January 2010.

Institutional Indicators

Activities of NGOs and International Organizations

According to a CIPDD regional monitor, as part of a campaign organized by the Coalition for IDP Rights NGO, local and refugee children sent messages of peace attached to balloons in the direction of Tskhinvali from the Georgian-controlled village of Ergenti on 16 January.

Activities of Central and Local authorities

A CIPDD regional monitor noted in her monthly report that the residents of Shida Kartli find it extremely hard to obtain public information from the regional authorities and to access administrative buildings in Gori. This is especially true for the journalists who have previously published critical articles about the local authorities. Journalist Saba Tsitsikashvili was trying to obtain public information from the city authorities was beaten by the guards of the administration building on 22 January.