



Report on Situation in Shida Kartli, Georgia

October 2009

Compiled on the basis of reports by six local correspondents and the coverage of the events in Shida Kartli by Georgian newspapers

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Monitoring Risk Factors/Indicators

Political Indicators

Detainment of Georgian civilians

The reporting period was marked by incidents in which residents of the Georgian-controlled villages adjacent to South Ossetia were detained by Russian or Ossetian forces.

The 24 Saati daily newspaper reported on 27 October that 16 residents of the Georgian-controlled village of Gremiskhevi (bordering Akhagori District) were detained by Russian servicemen while collecting firewood in the local forest and taken to Akhagori. Merab Chigoyev, the separatist president's representative for resolution of post-conflict issues, said that the Georgians had been arrested for illegal entry into South Ossetia though Aleksandre Maisuradze, chief of Georgia's Mtskheta-Mtianeti regional police department, told the newspaper that the Russians had actually moved some 200 meters into the Georgian-controlled territory.¹

On 28 October, 24 Saati quoted the head of Akhagori's separatist administration, who said that the detainees were being kept in proper conditions. Shota Utiashvili, head of the Georgian Interior Ministry Analytical Department reiterated Tbilisi's assertion the Russians had detained the civilians on the territory of Dusheti District. The newspaper also quoted an EUMM statement that emphasized that the incident was a sign of a wider problem that affected the residents of the border zone.²

The newspaper further reported on 30 October than another five Georgians (resident of Kareli District) were detained by Russian troops on 28 October but were released the following day. The newspaper noted, however, that the 16 Georgians detained earlier remained in custody in Akhagori. The EUMM called for their release and urged the Georgian police and the Russian troops to collaborate more

¹ "Georgian Citizens Abducted by Russian Invaders", Khatuna Jangirashvili, 24 Saati, 27 October 2009.

² "Abducted 16 Georgians Remain in Captivity", Natia Mskhiladze, 24 Saati, 28 October 2009.

closely in order to prevent such incidents in the future. Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Andrey Nesterenko was quoted as saying that the 16 detainees had attempted to illegally collect timber in South Ossetia.³

Situation in Akhalgori

The Rezonansi daily newspaper reported on 19 October that the separatist authorities are planning to close the road to Akhalgori in November. The newspaper said that, according to locals, the separatist authorities could do this in order to be able to determine the actual number of people permanently residing in Akhalgori (as opposed to those who just go there to receive salaries). Locals believe that Ossetians are not interested in the permanent isolation of Akhalgori from Georgian-controlled territories. Local residents were also quoted as saying that the separatist authorities suspended the salaries of school directors in Akhalgori because part of the equipment supplied from Tskhinvali was missing.⁴

According to a correspondent, Georgia's central TV stations frequently provide inaccurate information about the situation in Akhalgori and usually air comments by people who left the district 10-15 years ago. The correspondent cited the TV reports that suggested that teaching in Georgian had been banned in Akhalgori as an example of how the actual state of affairs is being distorted, noting that nothing of this sort had happened in the town and the school programmes had remained unchanged after the war. The correspondent suggested that Georgian TV stations should try to provide an unbiased coverage of the situation in Akhalgori since fabricated reports have a negative impact on the lives of the Georgians living there.

The correspondent also highlighted the security measures implemented at the Georgian police checkpoint set up on the road to Akhalgori. According to the correspondent, along with the ordinary police officers, there are representatives of the crime police, the Constitutional Security Department and the special force deployed at the checkpoint. They are conducting a thorough examination of the

³ "Monitoring Mission Categorically Demands Release of Georgian Citizens", Tamar Ivanidze, 24 Saati, 30 October 2009.

⁴ "Residents of Akhalgori Hope That, if Ossetians Are Actually Planning To Close the Road, They Will Change Their Mind", Mari Otashvili, Rezonansi, 19 October 2009.

individuals travelling to/from Akhagori and the people who are not registered as residents of Akhagori are not allowed to enter the district. The correspondent emphasized that Georgian police does not let the locals bring any products of Russian origin to the Georgian-controlled territory or to take large quantities of food and construction materials to Akhagori.

Security situation in Georgian-controlled villages adjacent to South Ossetia

Correspondents have noted a general sense of insecurity in the villages located near South Ossetia.

According to a correspondent, people in the village of Arbo of Gori District are frequently disturbed by the sound of gunshots coming from the Ossetian-controlled territory at night, which has resulted in a high incidence of stress-related diseases.

The situation in the village of Koshka was described as "most difficult" by a correspondent, who noted that the locals live in a state of "permanent terror" as there is shooting almost every day and kidnappings occur too.

The residents of the village of Dvani which is surrounded by Ossetian-controlled territories told a correspondent that there has been no shooting lately though a child was recently injured by unexploded ordnance from the last year's war.

People from a number of different villages have complained about inadequacy of the security measures implemented by the authorities. The residents of the Kveshi village of Gori District told a correspondent that the Georgian police force stationed in the area cannot provide them with sufficient protection as demonstrated by frequent raids by armed Ossetians. A correspondent reported that the residents of the village of Zemo Nikozi feel "unprotected" despite the fact that there are three police posts near the village. A correspondent was told in the village of Ergenti that shooting is frequent and no measures have been taken to provide them with protection. The residents of the village of Tselubani complained about the lack of police patrolling in the area.

General political situation

A correspondent reported that, while several political parties have set up their offices in Gori, only the Republican Party has been relatively active in the area lately. On 29 October, the Fair Elections NGO organized a meeting where the draft constitutional amendments prepared by the special state commission were presented to the citizens.

The residents of the village of Dvani, who are unhappy about the lack of government attention to their problems, staged a protest in October and marched all the way to the main road linking Eastern and Western Georgia. According to a correspondent, some locals (including minibus drivers) were intimidated by the police and warned against participating in the protest.

Economic Indicators

The August 2008 war has had a considerable impact on the economic situation in Shida Kartli. The living conditions in the province have been affected in a number of ways.

In the villages adjacent to South Ossetia, a considerable part of orchards, pastures and other types of agricultural land has fallen into Ossetian- and Russian-controlled areas, depriving the locals of their livelihood. This is the case, for example, in the villages of Koshka, Dvani, Kveshi and Ergneti.

Some of the agricultural land has also become unusable because of unexploded ordnance from the war. The problem was recorded by correspondents in Kvemo Khviti, Zemo Nikozi and Tselubani. The residents of Tselubani also complained that they lost some of their land because of the construction of an IDP settlement and a highway. Locals are often unable to utilize the land they have because of the shortage of the necessary equipment and materials and have complained about the lack of government attention and aid.

Due to the security situation in the villages adjacent to the Ossetian-controlled territory, the movement of transport is limited, which makes it hard for the locals to take their produce to other parts of Georgia for sale. Poor condition of roads in the area makes the situation worse. Correspondents were told about this problem in Koshka, Dvani, Zemo Nikozi, Kveshi, Ergneti and Karaleti.

Poor irrigation is a common issue in nearly all of the monitored villages. Water for irrigation systems is supplied from Ossetian-controlled territory and the supply is extremely unstable, which has a major impact on the local farming. Parts of the irrigation system were also damaged during the war. Irrigation is a major concern in Koshka, Zemo Nikozi, Mejriskhevi, Ergneti, Tselubani and Karaleti.

Unemployment is a common problem in all villages. A number of locals were dismissed from the Army and police after the last year's war. In the village of Koshka, a large majority of residents is unemployed. Most of the few people who have jobs are either employed by the police or participate in clearing mines. A resident of Dvani was reportedly sacked from the police after he was injured on duty. A correspondent was told in the village of Zemo Nikozi that a large majority of

some 60 locals who served in the Army have now been dismissed. The loss of jobs has made it difficult for the locals to repay the bank loans they got earlier.

There is no gas supply network in these villages, so the residents have to use firewood for heating in the winter. Collection of firewood is problematic in many areas since the nearby forests are often controlled by Ossetian and Russian forces. Correspondents reported about this problem from Koshka, Dvani and Kveshi.

Social and Cultural Indicators

According to the local correspondent, relations between Georgians and Ossetians living in Akhagori are “friendly” and there is no tension whatsoever. Some of the Ossetians left the town along with Georgians during/after the war and currently live in the Tserovani IDP settlement. The Ossetians who stayed in Akhagori have refused to join the separatist police force stationed there because they knew that their Georgian neighbours were likely to disapprove of such action. Georgians are not suffering oppression or persecution though Ossetians are given preference whenever a job becomes available in the local administration/institutions. Teaching of Ossetian language in schools was made mandatory.

A correspondent described relations between the residents of the Georgian village of Mejriskhevi and neighbouring Ossetian village of Ghromi as “warm”, noting that the residents of the Georgian village prevented Georgian fighters from raiding Ghromi during the 1992 conflict and the Ossetians returned the favour during the last year’s war when they did not let Ossetian militias burn down Mejriskhevi. However, certain distrust has emerged between the two villages since then. According to the correspondent, locals blame the Georgian police force stationed between the two villages for this deterioration of relations. The situation was compounded as a result of the decision by Georgia’s Energo Pro company to suspend the supply of electricity to Ghromi to which the Ossetians responded by cutting off water supply to Mejriskhevi.

A correspondent who visited the village of Tsitelubani which has a mixed Georgian-Ossetian population was told by locals that relations between the two ethnic groups are perfect and there has not been a single instance of conflict.

Relations between the Georgian and the Ossetian residents of the village of Karaleti were described as “exemplary” by a correspondent.

Institutional Indicators

Residents of a number of villages (Arbo, Koshka, Dvani, Zemo Nikozi, Mejvriskhevi, Ergneti, Tsitelubani, and Karaleti) complained to correspondents about the lack of government attention and aid, claiming that they are yet to have their houses repaired and receive compensation for the property lost during the war. They also highlighted the inadequacy of the agricultural aid that they have received from the authorities.

Shortage of textbooks is the main problem for the Georgian schools of Akhalgori. The district's schools currently receive funding both from the Georgian and the separatist authorities though it is not clear whether the Georgian government will continue providing money in 2010. According to the correspondent, the Georgian authorities are trying to persuade the teachers working in Akhalgori to move to the IDP settlement in Tserovani. The correspondent believes that such policy could have negative consequences since more residents of Akhalgori are likely to leave the town if the Georgian schools are closed down.

The residents of the IDP settlement in Akhalsopeli have told a correspondent that the lack of a school and a kindergarten is their main concern at present. They also complained that they no longer get allowances from the government.

A damaged school building is currently being repaired in the village of Dvani. A shortage of textbooks was reported.

A correspondent reported that some of the medical institutions that operated in Akhalgori prior to the war were subsequently relocated to Tserovani along with the majority of professional staff. As a result, the quality of medical services in Akhalgori has deteriorated considerably. Bringing people who require urgent medical care from Akhalgori to Tbilisi is also problematic since the Russian ambulance vehicles available in Akhalgori cannot pass through the Georgian police checkpoint due to the lack of customs clearance.

Karaleti's only hospital was destroyed during the war and is yet to be restored. Correspondents also heard complaints about the lack of medical services from the residents of Dvani and Zemo Nikozi.

Main Findings

The following are the main findings of the reporting period.

The security situation in the Georgian-controlled villages adjacent to South Ossetia remains difficult as demonstrated by the detainment of Georgian civilians by Russian and Ossetian forces. The lack of agreement between the Georgian authorities and the Russian/Ossetian leadership as to the precise location where those detainments were carried out indicates a potentially dangerous lack of communication and understanding between the sides.

There is a general sense of insecurity and lack of protection in many of the zone's Georgian villages. This could present the Georgian authorities with a difficult choice since deployment of additional police units in the area could potentially raise the level of tension or even trigger a conflict.

The economic situation in the region's villages deteriorated considerably as a result of the war. Inaccessibility of agricultural land has deprived many families of their livelihood, poor irrigation renders farming difficult, while the lack of transport has made it hard for the residents of the villages located near South Ossetia to sell their produce.

No indications of tension between different ethnics groups were recorded in the areas with a mixed population during the reporting period. The possible discontent over the suspension of power supply to Ossetian villages and of water supply to Georgian villages is one potential area of concern.

Many of the local residents are dissatisfied with the level of government attention and assistance they receive. Poor condition of schools and low quality of medical services (or a complete lack of such services) is a common problem in many of the villages visited by the correspondents.