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## UN General Assembly Recognizes Ethnic Cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia, Calls for Swift Return of IDPs

### President Saakashvili Hails “Historic” Resolution, Reiterates Peace Proposals

In a landmark resolution, the United Nations General Assembly on Thursday, May 15, recognized the “arbitrary forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of persons from Abkhazia,” calling for their prompt return and underscoring the importance of preserving the property rights of these refugees and IDPs. The General Assembly directed UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to report back next autumn on progress in implementing the resolution.

During the General Assembly debate, Georgia’s UN Ambassador Irakli Alasania stressed that unification had become the guiding principle of the Georgian Government—“a house divided against itself could not stand,” he said. Two months ago, the Government of Georgia presented a sweeping new peace plan to the residents of Abkhazia. “By challenging the status quo,” Alasania added, “Georgia is striving to create new ways to bring about a lasting resolution to the conflict.”

President Saakashvili, speaking yesterday on Georgia’s Black Sea coast, hailed the resolution as “historic” for its recognition of the Russian-abetted ethnic cleansing in the 1990s that drove over 400,000 ethnic Georgians, Estonians, Greeks, Jews and others from their homes. He also emphasized that the General Assembly is now on record as advocating the right of these refugees “to return to their homes and receive back their property.”

At the same time, Saakashvili used the occasion to urge the Abkhaz to consider his government’s peace proposals. Earlier this week, high-level Government officials held their first direct talks since last October with separatist rebels. At the meeting, Alasania, formerly Georgia’s chief negotiator, presented the peace plan to the separatist rebels in Sukhumi. The plan offers the Abkhaz unprecedented autonomy; constitutional protections; high-level political offices in the central government including the post of vice-premier; a free economic zone; and international guarantees.

Indeed, the Government is multiplying peace moves. Journalists and UNOMIG have confirmed that, contrary to Russian assertions, there are no Georgian army troops in the Kodori gorge. Reintegration Minister Timur Yakobishvili was in Moscow on May 16-17 to try to win the Russian government over to a President Saakashvili’s new peace initiatives. Georgia recognizes that, despite its history of belligerence against the country, Russia could play a significant role in finding a just and peaceful solution to the separatist conflicts.

Mr Alasania, speaking after the General Assembly vote, noted that the resolution marks a breakthrough in how the international community perceives the conflict in Abkhazia.

“The term ‘ethnic cleansing’ has reappeared again,” he said. “Russia has been trying to bury this term for the past 10 years.” Equally important, Mr Alasania stressed, was that the resolution not only recognizes the right of IDPs and refugees to return, but also highlights their property rights. Finally, he emphasized that the plight of those forcefully driven from the region will now remain on the UN agenda, since the UN Secretary General will report to the next General Assembly on what is being done in regard to the return of IDPs.

Passage of the resolution could help shift the dynamics on the ground. Russia, under the guise of a UN-endorsed peacekeeping mission, has been illegally building up troops and weapons in Abkhazia in recent weeks. The Government of Georgia is seeking to replace Russian peacekeepers with an international force, arguing that the Russian troops are not neutral in the conflict. The recognition of the ethnic cleansing that took place in Abkhazia could help generate international support for a change in the peacekeeping format and for the broad autonomy-driven peace plan proposed by the Government.

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1. **United Nations General Assembly:**  
<http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/ga10708.doc.htm>