

# **Russian Invasion of Georgia**

## **The Facts on Ethnic Cleansing of Georgians during the Russian invasion and occupation**

**8 October, 2008**

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**Since the start of Russia's invasion and occupation of Georgia, the international community has confirmed ethnic cleansing of Georgians in the villages of Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, of the Gori and Kareli Districts, as well as in Kodori Gorge, Upper Abkhazia.**

As of 8 October, the Civil Registry Agency of the Ministry of Justice of Georgia has registered 131,169 internally displaced persons forced to leave their homes by Russian attacks and bombings, which were followed by widespread looting, deliberate destruction of civilian property, harassment of civilian ethnic Georgian populations in South Ossetia, in adjacent regions, and in Upper Abkhazia<sup>1</sup>. The UNHCR has estimated number of IDPs 192 000, including 35 000 in North Ossetia.<sup>2</sup>

Before August 2008, the central government of Georgia controlled 21 Georgian villages in the "South Ossetia" conflict zone. All ethnic Georgian residents of these villages left the conflict zone. The Civil Registry Agency registered 18,806 IDPs from Tighva (Prone Valley), Kurta (Didi Liakhvi Valley) and Eredvi (Patara Liakhvi) municipalities as of 8 October 2008.

There were an estimated 1,900 inhabitants in Azhara municipality (Upper Abkhazia) as of 1 January 2008, according to the Department of Statistics. The Civil Registry Agency had registered 1,218 IDPs from this municipality as of 8 October 2008.

The policy of ethnic cleansing orchestrated by the Russian military, acting in concert with separatist militias, now threatens tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians in villages near the districts of Gori and Akhalkgori. These villages are currently under Russian occupation.

Such policies, combined with the August 26 recognition of the separatist regimes by the Russian Federation, now make it impossible for ethnic Georgians to exercise their right to return to their homes.

### **Ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia**

The Russian troops and separatist illegal armed formations deliberately targeted the civilian population of Georgian villages in the Didi Liakhvi Valley, the Patara Liakhvi valley and the Prone Valley:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/08/13/georgi19607.htm>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "UNHCR chief visits South Ossetia", 22 August 2008, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/NEWS/48aef0dc4.html>.

- Human Rights Watch, journalists, and eyewitnesses report mass destruction of Georgian villages in the region nearby areas. The policy of destroying and looting civilian property has transformed formerly ethnic Georgian areas into ghost towns.<sup>3</sup> Satellite images provided by UNOSAT clearly demonstrate the damage inflicted upon several Georgian villages around the city of Tskhinvali.<sup>4</sup>
- The execution of ethnic Georgian men and women has been reported by international organizations, international media, as well as eyewitnesses, including ones recently rescued from the notorious hostage camp in Tskhinvali.
- Number of cases of rape also have been reported (one female victim, a 22-year-old ethnic Georgian, testified of being raped by four militaries while being held in the Tskhinvali hostage camp);
- Elderly villagers who were physically unable to flee the ethnic cleansing have been captured in large numbers and held as hostages (later handed over in exchange for prisoners of war).
- Houses owned by ethnic Georgians have been looted and burnt down, following a policy of ethnic cleansing of Georgians that has been “proudly” acknowledged by the separatist leader Eduard Kokoity; he declared that the goal of the ethnic cleansing is to purge Georgian enclaves in the region so as not to allow ethnic Georgians to return to their homes.<sup>5</sup> As Human Rights Watch observed, deliberate attempts by the Russian government to exaggerate the number of people killed in the conflict also provoked revenge attacks on Georgian villagers.<sup>6</sup> Characteristically, the chairman of the separatist parliament Gassiev declared: “Georgians will no more return here—we burned all their houses in the enclaves.”

### **Ethnic cleansing of Georgians outside of the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia**

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After Russian troops and separatist illegal formations destroyed Georgian villages within the conflict zone, expelling and killing ethnic Georgians, they extended these brutal activities to nearby Georgian villages in the Gori and Kareli districts; these areas, which were away of the conflict zone, have now been deemed by Russia as being in a so-called “security/buffer zone.”

On 16 August, Russian army detachments entered Akhmagori district, which has never been under separatist control and where Georgian and Ossetians were living in peace. Russian occupying forces threatened local population of expulsion if they did not accept Russian citizenship and reject their Georgian citizenship. As a result, 3,597 ethnic Georgians have fled Akhmagori district as of 7 October, out of a total population of 7 894 (of this number, about 7,194 are ethnic Georgians and 700 are ethnic Ossetians). These IDPs are now mostly in Gori IDP camps.

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<sup>3</sup> Photos from Human Rights Watch. [http://www.hrw.org/photos/2008/georgia\\_galleries/](http://www.hrw.org/photos/2008/georgia_galleries/)

<sup>4</sup> <http://unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/>

<sup>5</sup> Interview of Eduard Kokoity with Russian newspaper “Kommersant” from 15.08.08; No144, and Interview with the speaker of separatist parliament Znaur Gasiev with newspaper “Komsomolskaia Pravda” from 22.08.08.

<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?fromsearch=ef093ba1-b275-41da-8576-5d73596075da&docid=1011783> and <http://kp.ru/daily/24150/366813/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/14/georgia.russia1>

## **Ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Kodori Gorge/Upper Abkhazia**

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Approximately 42,000 ethnic Georgians in the Gali district of Abkhazia region are under the threat of expulsion. Reports received from residents of Gali—which is now isolated from the rest of Georgia due to the closure of the administrative border at the Enguri Bridge—suggest that they are being harassed, attacked, and threatened of expulsion if they do not accept Russian passports.

There were an estimated 1 900 inhabitants in Azhara municipality (Upper Abkhazia) as of 1 January 2008, according to Department of Statistics. The Civil Registry Agency had registered 1,218 IDPs from this municipality as of 26 September 2008.

## **Russian attacks on civilian populations & use of cluster bombs**

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**ATTACKS ON CIVILIAN POPULATIONS:** On 8-11 August, Russian military aircrafts bombed residential areas in Gori, killing 45 civilians and injuring many more. As a result of these bombings, eight apartment buildings were destroyed in Gori, leaving about 500 families homeless. The subsequent blockade of the city of Gori by the Russian troops prevented Georgian doctors from assisting wounded soldiers and civilians in the war zone, causing prolonged suffering and death among civilians.

Up to date 220 civilian deaths have been reported by Georgia's healthcare system; however, it is impossible to estimate casualties in numerous villages, so the total number of casualties remains unknown. More than 60 civilians have been reported dead in the villages of the Gori and Kareli districts following the Russian occupation of this area. At present, Russian occupation forces prevent local administration from entering those villages in the so-called "security/buffer zone," so they are unable to identify the corpses. The situation is worse in the formerly ethnic Georgian villages within actual conflict zone. Many corpses have been secretly buried by locals inside houses (usually in basements and yards), as there have been cases of killings by Russian-allied militias during outdoor burials.

**CLUSTER BOMBS:** Human Rights Watch researchers documented the use of cluster munitions by Russia in the civilian populated areas, refuting Russia's earlier denials that it had used such weapons. Human Rights Watch photographed unexploded sub-munitions from cluster munitions in and around the villages of Shindisi and Pkhvenisi, in the Gori district. There are still hundreds of unexploded sub-munitions in the area.<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch confirmed that on 12 August, Russian aircraft dropped RBK-250 cluster bombs, each containing 30 PTAB 2.5M sub-munitions, on the village of Ruisi in the Kareli district. Three civilians were killed and five wounded in the attack. On the same day, a cluster strike in Gori city center killed at least eight civilians and injured fifteen. A Dutch journalist, Stan Storimans was among the dead and an Israeli journalist Zadok Yehezkeli was among the injured.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2008/08/20/georgi19660.htm>