

Russian Invasion of Georgia

A creeping case of ethnic cleansing:

The situation in the Gali district of Abkhazia

10 November 2008

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Executive Summary

Prior to 1992, the Georgian region of Abkhazia was one of the most multi-ethnic and multi-cultural regions of the Caucasus. The first war (1992-1993) resulted in the displacement of almost 80% of the region's population, including almost all of the population of the Gali district (roughly 79 000 people, mostly ethnic Georgians). The sporadic return of these refugees to the district only started in 1999. Since then, about 45 000 people have returned.

Situation before the war

Between the first conflict and the Russian invasion this August, the population of Gali had a difficult life, characterized by ill-treatment and terrible living conditions. Issues they had to face included:

- Extremely high crime rates. Separatist authorities tacitly supported organized crime to intimidate the population. Georgian inhabitants were also reported to have been the victims of arbitrary imprisonments, with the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) reporting cases of forced labor.
- No or limited legal access to Georgian-language education. Schools and teachers were either prohibited from teaching in Georgian or this opportunity was strictly limited; those who transgressed these instructions were victims of harassment and prosecution. In 1995, a new curriculum reinforced the teaching of Russian at school.
- Pressure to abandon Georgian citizenship. The population was subjected to strong pressure to abandon their Georgian citizenship in favor of an "Abkhaz" one.
- No freedom of speech. No independent, Georgian-language media were tolerated. Consequently, the district's population had very little access to comprehensive and accurate information.

- No freedom of religion. Georgian Orthodox Churches have been refused the right to operate in the region. Georgian priests refusing to preach in Russian have been ousted.

Situation since the Russian invasion

Russian troops are reported to have taken position and opened several new checkpoints in the Gali district. Freedom of movement has been severely curtailed: On 8 October, the separatists imposed a system of “passes”, priced at such a high level (5,000 Russian Rubles, or about 140 €, for a 3-month pass) that “legal” travel to neighboring Zugdidi district has become unaffordable for the vast majority of the districts’ residents. On 9 October, all roads connecting Abkhazia to the rest of Georgia were closed.

Russian troops started mining the administrative boarder between Zugdidi and Gali districts and exploded all bridges, but the central one across the river Enguri , effectively isolating Gali district from the rest of the country.

International concern

On 15 October, the International Court of Justice in The Hague found that the ethnically Georgian population of the district (as well as in the rest of Abkhazia, in the region of South Ossetia, and in adjacent areas) was at risk of “irreparable harm” and imposed provisional measures to safeguard their rights.

Background

On 14 August, 1992 war broke out between the government of Georgia and Moscow backed separatists. The war was marked by high levels of violence and the mass abuse of human rights.

The military confrontation ended in 1993, when separatists supported by Russian regular army units, and mercenaries from the Russian North Caucasus gained control over almost the whole territory of the region, and expelled most of the pre-war population, including almost all ethnic Georgians. In practice, close to 80% of the region’s pre-war population was forced to flee.

The pattern of the abuses committed by the Russian-backed separatist forces during the conflict suggests that they were neither casual nor sporadic, but constituted instead a carefully planned programme of ethnic cleansing, designed to change the ethnic composition of the region by force.¹

¹ United States of America, State Department country report 2007

Abkhazians constituted 17,8% and Georgians 46% of the pre-war population of 535 000. Roughly 400 000 residents, including the vast majority of the 270 000 ethnic Georgians, were forced to leave their homes, mostly in a mass exodus at the end of 1993.² Most of them still live outside of the region, both in Georgia, or abroad, prevented from returning home.

Almost the entire population of the Gali district, totaling some 79 000 mostly ethnic Georgians, was displaced during the war. Since 1999, an estimated 45 000 persons have returned to the district, living in harsh conditions and subjected to arbitrary separatist rules that strongly discriminate against them on the sole basis of ethnicity.

Situation before the Russian invasion

Those Georgians who managed to trickle back home in the district are being deprived of fundamental rights, including: basic security, the right to study in their mother tongue, or even the right to speak Georgian in public places.³

Security situation

Crime rates were extremely high. Separatist authorities were unable - and often, unwilling - to fight against it. Crimes often had an ethnic component, with criminals preying on ethnic Georgian inhabitants. Kidnappings for ransom became widespread. Local separatist agencies did little to prevent criminal activity. On the contrary, their agents often were involved in criminal acts themselves. A popular extortion racket consisted of picking up Georgian residents, locking them up in Gali "police station" without charging them, and forcing their families to pay ransoms to secure their release. Some of these detainees were subjected to brutal treatments amounting to torture. Victims of the practice sometimes included children. Some victims who attempted to resist their kidnappers or robbers were murdered. These phenomena were documented by international agencies – see for example the UN Secretary General's report of April 2007⁴.

Deprivation of liberty, prisons

Georgian residents of the Gali district often became the victim of detentions, being locked up in jail without charge for unlimited periods. Some of the victims were transported to Sokhumi, the regional capital, and kept in harsh conditions and deprived of the right to a fair trial.

² Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia, and the Russian Shadow by S. A. Chervonnaia and Svetlana Mikhailovna Chervonnaia.

³ United States of America, State Department Country Report 2007

⁴ Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia. 3 April 2007

Courts of the proxy regime in the district reportedly did not make efforts to establish facts or administer justice. Criminals of all stripes paid bribes to local separatist officials to avoid prosecution.⁵

Education

As pointed in the report of the Parliamentary Assembly on Refugees and displaced persons in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia,⁶ education continued to pose a problem in the district, where teaching must take place in Russian.

Ethnic Georgians living in the Gali district had no or limited legal access to education in their own language. As a practical matter, however, teachers who did not speak Abkhaz instructed their students in Georgian. Those who did so were often subject to harassment and prosecution by separatist regime.⁷

The separatists forcibly introduced new curricula and textbooks designed to change the identity of Georgian pupils and students. This phenomenon was particularly notable in history and geography, whose textbooks were rewritten from an extremist perspective and forcibly introduced in September 2007. Teachers and parents protested, and the UN Secretary General expressed his concern about this issue in his report to the Security Council on 18 July 2007.

The most serious issue was language. The 1995 Abkhaz curriculum mandated teaching in Russian and aimed to eliminate Georgian as a language of instruction. Georgian language teaching materials and, in some places, Georgian-speaking teachers were withdrawn. The consequent disruption of teaching protocols and the forcible introduction of Russian-language materials adversely affected the quality of education, convinced some Gali internally displaced persons not to return home, and incited others to move elsewhere in Georgia to ensure their children could be educated in Georgian. The remaining population resisted as it could: just before the Russian invasion, 16 of the 30 schools in the district still taught mainly in Georgian.

Citizenship

The Constitution of Georgia considers all residents of Abkhazia to be its equal citizens, irrespective of ethnicity. The separatists consider all residents of the region to be "Abkhaz citizens". The population of the Gali district was put under constant pressure to take up an "Abkhaz citizenship" and to abandon their Georgian one. Separatist legislation creates

⁵ United States of America, State Department Country Report 2007

⁶ Doc. 10835, 6 February 2006, Refugees and displaced persons in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

⁷ United States of America, State Department Country Report 2007 and 2007 report of the Ombudsman of Georgia

great difficulties and serious administrative hurdles for residents who do not want to accept “Abkhaz citizenship”. UNOMIG expressed its concerns against such practice.⁸

Freedom of speech and association

Access to information is severely limited in the region. The most important media for the great majority of the population are Russian television and regional separatist run TV. Georgian channels can only be received clearly in eastern districts of the region. No Georgian-language newspapers have ever received permission to publish in the district.

Unlike Russian and Abkhazian language printed media (where some competition and limited media freedom exists), regional broadcasters are run under by the proxy authorities.

It is difficult, and sometimes dangerous, for Georgian journalists to work in the district. For example, on 28 February 2008 r, two Georgian journalists working for Mze TV (Malkhaz Basilaia and David Tsotsoria) were arrested for “illegally crossing the border” and held for 10 days. Foreign journalists, too, are sometimes threatened or worse: on 22 May this year, Marek Chunkevich, a Polish TV journalist, , was badly beaten and robbed by separatist officials.

The right of association is also severely curtailed in the district, a restriction sometimes imposed by force (see for example the cases of Levan Ghachava, Iveri Korshia, and Koba Rigvava, arrested on 1 March this year).

Freedom of religion

A 1995 decree issued by the separatists that banned Jehovah's Witnesses in the region remained in effect but was not enforced, and the group reported no problems.

Baptists, Lutherans, and Catholics also reported that they were allowed to operate in the region, but the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) reported that it was unable to do so.

The GOC Patriarch expressed his concern over Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) support of separatism in the region. He accused the ROC of subsidizing websites that encouraged secessionist sentiments, and complained that the Moscow Theological Seminary was training Abkhaz priests, despite the fact that the ROC recognizes the country's territorial integrity. On 11 March 2008, a Georgian priest was ousted from the region by the separatists for preaching in Georgian ⁹.

⁸ Report of the Secretary General on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia; 2 April,2008

⁹ Report of the Secretary General on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia; 2 April,2008

Forced labor

Georgian residents were obliged to give agricultural products (mainly hazelnuts) in certain amounts to separatist's local officials. They are either not paid or paid very little price for their products.

The proxy law enforcers regularly forced Gali residents to work in the nut plantations owned by representatives of separatist regime. They also regularly target Georgian boys, including underage boys, for forcible conscription into the separatist illegal formations (see various reports by UNICEF, UNOMIG and the US State Department, from 2006 and 2007).

Situation after the Russian Invasion

The situation described above has only worsened following the Russian invasion. Russian-backed separatists substantially increased their pressure on the ethnically Georgian population.

Russian troops that have recently withdrawn from their illegal checkpoints in the Samegrelo region have stationed themselves in villages throughout the Gali district. They have created new checkpoints in the villages of Pichori, Otobaia, Nabakevi, Chuburkhinji, Dikhazurga, Saberio and Mziuri as well as in the town of Gali. In effect, they have taken every crossing point between the Zugdidi and Gali districts under their control.

On 9 October 2008, the administrative border between the Abkhazia and Samegrelo with the exception of three crossing points was closed. A physical border, consisting of fences, concrete barriers, and checkpoints, is being built by the separatists and Russian troops between the Gali district and the rest of the country.

The *Abkhazia Media Center* reported that the separatists had introduced a system of permits to cross the "border". A three month permit would cost 5 000 Russian Rubles (about), a six-month permit 10 000 Russian Rubles, and all "illegal" border-crossers would be punished by high fines and prison terms of up to 6 years. For a resident of Gali, an area devoid of industry with a subsistence economy, 140 € comfortably exceeds a month's income.

The pricing and penalties of the newly introduced permit system are clearly designed to solidify the hold of separatists on the Gali district. Combined with the pressure to accept "Abkhaz citizenship" and the closure of Georgian-language schools, the measures are best understood as a way to ethnically change the composition of the area.

In effect, ethnic Georgians are being given an unpalatable choice: abandon your Georgian roots, or leave the region.

Additionaly to these measures Russian troops started mining the right bank of the river Enguri and exploding bridges previously used by Gali residents to get to the Zugdidi district. On 24 October 2008 Russian troops and illegal formations exploded railway bridge connecting village Tagiloni (Gali district) with village Shamgona (Zugdidi district). This railway bridge was not acting, but was used by local civilians to cross the river and get to the Zugdidi district. On 1 November Russian occupying forces exploded three other bridges near villages Khurcha and Nabakevi. Only remaining cross between Zugdidi and Gali districts is central bridge which was closed on 9 October.

| Explosion of the bridges and mining the right_ bank of the river Enguri effectively isolated Gali district, population of which largely depends on the supplies and trade with the neighboring Zudgidi district.