

Annex E.4.11

Public



Georgian Villages in South Ossetia Burnt, Looted ^[1]

August 12, 2008

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(Java, August 13, 2008) – Human Rights Watch researchers in South Ossetia on August 12, 2008, saw ethnic Georgian villages still burning from fires set by South Ossetian militias, witnessed looting by the militias, and learned firsthand of the plight of ethnic Ossetian villagers who had fled Georgian soldiers during the Georgian-Russian conflict over the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

In South Ossetia, Human Rights Watch researchers traveling on the evening of August 12 on the road from the town of Java to Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, witnessed terrifying scenes of destruction in four villages that used to be populated exclusively by ethnic Georgians. According to the few remaining local residents, South Ossetian militias that were moving along the road looted the Georgian villages and set them on fire. Human Rights Watch saw numerous vehicles carrying South Ossetian militia members, as well as Russian military transports moving in the direction of Tskhinvali.

Numerous houses in the villages of Kekhvi, Kvemo Achabeti (Nizhnie Achaveti in Russian), Zemo Achabeti (Verkhnie Achaveti in Russian), and Tamarshehi had been burnt down over the last day – Human Rights Watch researchers saw the smoldering remnants of the houses and household items. The villages were virtually deserted, with the exception of a few elderly and incapacitated people who stayed behind either because they were unable to flee or because they were trying to save their belongings and cattle.

“The remaining residents of these destroyed ethnic Georgian villages are facing desperate conditions, with no means of survival, no help, no protection, and nowhere to go,” said Tanya Lokshina at Human Rights Watch.

In the village of Kvemo Achabeti, Human Rights Watch researchers spoke to an elderly man who was desperately trying to rescue his smoldering house using two half-empty buckets of dirty water brought from a spring. He told Human Rights Watch that the vast majority of the residents, including his family, fled the village when active fighting between Georgian forces and South Ossetian militias broke out on August 8, but he decided to stay to look after the cattle. He said members of the South Ossetian militia came to his house on August 11, and tried to take away some household items. When he protested, they set the house on fire and left. The man said he had no food or drinking water, his hands were burned and hair was singed – apparently as he was unsuccessfully trying to extinguish the fire – and he appeared to be in a state of shock. He said that there were about five to ten elderly and sick people left in the village, all in a similar desperate condition, and many of the houses were burned.

In the village of Kekhvi, many houses were set on fire between 6:30 pm and 7:30 pm on August 12 – they were ablaze as Human Rights Watch researchers moved along the road. Two elderly women from Kekhvi were weeping as they told Human Rights Watch about what happened in the village. One of them explained that the members of South Ossetian militias passed by the village and stopped at her house and “threw something” that set it on fire. She did not manage to rescue anything from the house and at the time of the interview could not even enter the house as it was still burning. She had no money on her and did not know if she could survive in this situation.

Human Rights Watch researchers also saw armed Ossetian militia members in camouflage fatigues taking household items – furniture, television sets, heaters, suitcases, carpets, and blankets – out of houses in the village of Kvemo Achabeti, and loading them into their trucks. Explaining the looters’ actions, an Ossetian man told Human Rights Watch, “Of course, they are entitled to take things from Georgians now – because they lost their own property in Tskhinvali and other places.”

A representative of the local administration in the town of Java told Human Rights Watch that the authorities had arrested two men who were looting the ethnic Georgian villages, but was adamant that they were not members of the South Ossetian militias. His colleague, however, said, “Isn’t that what they [Georgians] have been doing to us? These old people shouldn’t be complaining – they should be happy they weren’t killed.”

International humanitarian law applicable to the fighting between South Ossetian militias and Georgian forces prohibits attacks on civilian property, as well as looting or pillaging. Individuals, including commanders, participating in the deliberate or reckless destruction or looting of civilian property are responsible for war crimes. International humanitarian law also prohibits “acts or threats of violence the primary purpose of which is to spread terror among the civilian population.”

Russian Minister of Internal Affairs Rashid Nurgaliev said there would be “decisive and tough” measures taken against looters.

“The Russian government should be held to this promise to punish looters but much more needs to be done to ensure that all sides protect civilians,” said Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Human Rights Watch researchers also interviewed South Ossetian women displaced from the Leningeri district of South Ossetia. The women, from the mountain villages of Tsinachari, Monasteri, Zakori, Tsubeni and Tsair, told Human Rights Watch that they had fled with children and elderly people when Georgian military personnel entered their villages on the night of August 7/8.

The displaced persons spent several days in the woods with brief respites in neighboring villages before being picked up by South Ossetian militia and transported to the town of Java. This group of approximately 100 people was accommodated in the Java school building for the night and was due to be moved by buses to North Ossetia in Russia on August 13.

A woman from Tsinachari told Human Rights Watch,

The Georgians came to the village at around two o’clock in the morning. They told us not to be afraid and said that if our men wouldn’t shoot, they wouldn’t shoot either. They shot in the air –

probably trying to frighten us. They entered the houses, checked identification documents, even took away the passports from some of our neighbors. They also looked for young guys and for the men. Though all our males were already gone by then – they joined the militia and hid themselves in the woods. The Georgians were also looking for firearms but our men had taken their weapons with them, so there was nothing much to find. We were very scared and could not stay in the village while the Georgians were there, so we also fled into the woods. For the first night, we just walked non-stop.

A woman from Tsair, who fled with her two small children, said that her husband and brother were both in the militia, and told Human Rights Watch that the Georgian soldiers stole whatever money she kept at the house. They also took away the rifle that the men in the family had left behind as well as the passports of the residents, all of whom have citizenship in the Russian Federation.

Another woman from Tsinachari told Human Rights Watch that on August 8, a group she was with was stopped in the woods by the Georgian military. According to the woman, the soldiers said, "Tell your men not to open fire. If they don't shoot we aren't going to shoot either."

During the time they spent in the woods the fleeing civilians were provided with food and assistance by the members of South Ossetian militia, mostly their own relatives. When the militia finally drove them to Java, the women said a wounded man was transported along with them. He was a member of the South Ossetia militia who they were told had been seized by Georgian soldiers in the mountains, beaten up and released. He suffered several broken ribs from the beating.

Source URL: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2008/08/12/georgian-villages-south-ossetia-burnt-looted>

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