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1 October 2008

The human cost of war in Georgia

Large-scale destruction of property, unexploded ordnance and ongoing security concerns have stopped tens of thousands of people from returning to their homes after the Georgia-Russia conflict of 7-13 August.

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Those remaining residents in South Ossetia and the adjacent, Russian-controlled "buffer zone" face shootings, looting and ethnically motivated attacks. These abuses are also stopping the return of those ethnic Georgians who fled their homes.

"The Russian and Georgian authorities, as well as the de facto South Ossetian administration must make every effort to guarantee security and provide assistance to all people without discrimination," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International. "Those forced to flee their homes must be allowed to return safely and those unable or unwilling to do so, must be resettled."

More than 160,000 people were forced from their homes during the five-day war and its aftermath between Georgia and the Russian Federation. Hundreds of civilians were killed and many more were injured during the conflict. Homes have been destroyed and lie in rubble.

Georgian forces shelled Tskhinvali, the capital of the breakaway region of South Ossetia, and surrounding villages on 7 August. Aerial attacks by Russian forces between 8 and 12 August bombed ethnic Georgian majority villages in South Ossetia, the town of Gori and surrounding areas in Georgia proper.

Amnesty International representatives collected eye-witness accounts from survivors of the hostilities and took photographs of the war's aftermath. Kazbek Djiloev gave this account of how he experienced the attack on his house in a residential area in the south of the town of Tskhinvali on the night of 7 August:

"We were listening to Saakashvili [Georgia's President] who was saying that he agrees on any negotiations. We felt comfortable. I was drinking tea and suddenly I heard gunfire followed by tanks, artillery, etc. we all went downstairs. Two hours later I heard explosions, the house shook, the roof exploded and these GRAD missiles fell on our house.

"The sofa and other stuff caught fire. We heard an airplane and it aimed at us and started firing at us with a machine gun. My brother and I hid downstairs again. After a while another GRAD fell and half of the house was destroyed. I was in shock.

"The Georgians claim that they fired at positions of Russian soldiers. This is a lie. There was no soldier here. They were firing at peaceful citizens. There was nothing military here. I was here with my brother and mother … Now I don't have a house. The weather is nice and I can sleep in the garden but don't know what to do when the rain comes. Nobody is helping me. I'll never be able to restore the house because I don't have the money."
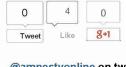
Despite the denial of the Russian authorities that they did not use cluster bombs, there is photographic and expert evidence of their use by the Russian army. Bejam Basilidze described what he witnessed in the village of Khverno Kviti on 8 August:

"It was evening. Suddenly I heard a terrible sound. I saw an explosion in the air, then bombs were falling like hailstones each covering an area of three or four metres. Everything exploded, the ground, the roofs of the houses. Seven people were wounded and cows too. There weren't any Georgian troops in the area – they had already left for Gori in the afternoon."

Amnesty International has documented the extensive looting and arson of Georgian-majority villages on territory within South Ossetia, but under Georgian administrative control prior to the conflict, and on territory outside of South Ossetia within the "security zones" established by Russian forces. South Ossetian forces, paramilitary groups and privately armed individuals, some of whom are alleged to have come from the Russian Federation, engaged in these attacks in areas which were under effective Russian control.

Nina, a woman from Kurta village in South Ossetia, told Amnesty International:

"Men in military uniform were going through the gardens. They were Russian-speaking, but not Russian. I took them to be Ossetians, Chechens, some Asians, maybe Uzbeks and Cossacks. They were all wearing the same military uniform and they were armed with Kalashnikovs. They burnt about 15 houses in Kurta and took the livestock away on trucks. As we were leaving Kurta we saw two neighbours being abducted. They were pushed into a car boot by the marauders.

"We left Kurta on 13 August by foot. We went to Eredvi via Kheiti. In Eredvi, we saw dead bodies. A man, woman and two children. We continued walking and reached the village of Ditsi [outside of South Ossetia]. I saw no dead bodies in Ditsi and some of the houses were burnt down, but not all of them. We passed Ditsi and reached Trdznisi. There we also saw many burnt houses and property thrown around in the streets. We stayed the night there and moved on to Tqviavi. We saw many more dead bodies there, under cars and vans. All the dead bodies were civilians, I didn't see any dead Georgian soldiers."

According to UNHCR, an estimated 163,000 people were forced to flee their homes, including 127,000 displaced in Georgia proper and another 36,000 to the Russian Federation.

Some have already returned to their homes, but tens of thousands are unable to do this, either because their homes were destroyed, or because it is not safe for them to return.

The people in South Ossetia and Georgia have suffered numerous violations as a result of the conflict. They continue to be in need of humanitarian aid and protection of their human rights. Amnesty International calls on all parties to the conflict to ensure that all those displaced by the hostilities are guaranteed a safe and durable return to their places of residence.

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