

# 8 Displacement in the former Soviet region

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 unleashed massive population movements in the countries that subsequently formed the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Inter-ethnic disputes and unresolved conflicts came to the surface and were played out with devastating consequences.

The erection of new national boundaries left millions of Russians and others outside their ‘homelands’. Many of these people sought to repatriate, and complex questions of citizenship arose. Some of the peoples who had been deported in the 1940s were finally able to return to their original homelands, and new influxes of refugees and asylum seekers arrived from further afield. It has been estimated that during the decade up to nine million people were on the move, largely as a result of the political upheavals, making this the largest movement of people in the region since 1945.<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of the decade, hundreds of thousands of people were uprooted by inter-ethnic and separatist conflict in the South Caucasus. This included the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the conflicts in the Georgian autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, civil war in Tajikistan caused hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes. The North Caucasus also became the scene of large-scale forced displacement. In 1992, tens of thousands of Ingush were expelled from North Ossetia to neighbouring Ingushetia. Subsequently, there was large-scale displacement in and around Chechnya, first in 1994–95 and then again from September 1999. In addition, throughout the decade, large numbers of people, in particular ethnic Russians outside the Russian Federation, found themselves ‘aliens’ in various parts of the former Soviet Union and left those areas for places where they felt that they were safer or had better prospects.

Complex interconnections between forced displacement and mass migration became increasingly evident. To clarify these issues, a major international conference was convened in 1996 by UNHCR, in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). These organizations worked closely with the governments of CIS countries to identify displacement problems needing to be resolved, to establish common terminology, and to develop a common strategy. In addition to widely used terms such as ‘refugees’ and ‘internally displaced persons’, new categories were developed to describe the different movements of people specific to the region. These included ‘formerly deported peoples’, ‘repatriants’, and ‘involuntarily relocating persons’.

UNHCR faced many challenges in setting up programmes in the region, particularly in the territory of the Russian Federation—a permanent member of the UN Security Council. It was a highly politicized environment, not least because the Soviet

Union had been largely hostile towards UNHCR. This chapter describes the processes through which UNHCR came to establish a presence in the region, and how it developed a comprehensive approach, including capacity-building activities designed to help prevent further forced displacement.

## The Soviet legacy

In the early 1920s, the Soviet Union became the successor to the ethnically heterogeneous empire of the tsars. It was the massive outflow of refugees from the former Russian Empire which, in 1921, led the League of Nations to appoint Fridtjof Nansen as its High Commissioner to deal with this huge displacement problem. Missions such as those undertaken by Nansen's representatives in 1923 to assess the conditions of returnees in southern Russia were not to be repeated in this region until the final days of the Soviet Union's existence.

The Soviet Union sought to forge individuals, peoples and society in accordance with its all-embracing communist ideology. The transfer and mixing of peoples—whether voluntary or involuntary—became a standard means to a utopian end. Tens of millions were uprooted. This was compounded by the massive displacements caused by the Second World War. Stalin's forced transfers of entire nations in the 1930s and 1940s provided classic examples of 'ethnic cleansing' long before the term was coined.<sup>2</sup> The stimulation of population movements in the name of political and economic goals continued under his successors.

When in the second half of the 1980s political controls gradually began to be relaxed, the ethnic and nationalist tensions and aspirations that had been suppressed and largely concealed in the Soviet Union were released. The political unravelling of the Soviet system was therefore accompanied by 'ethnic unmixing' and the assertion of claims to sovereignty in disputed territories.<sup>3</sup>

One of the first indications of Moscow's declining control was the beginning, in early 1988, of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. This was over the contested territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, situated in Azerbaijan but with an Armenian majority seeking unification with Armenia. The flight of Armenians from Azerbaijan, and vice versa, produced the first waves of *bezhtensi* (the Russian catch-all term for both refugees and internally displaced) used by the Soviet media and the public.<sup>4</sup> In June 1989, there was another explosion of inter-ethnic violence in the Uzbekistani section of Central Asia's main fault line, the Fergana Valley, when the local population drove out tens of thousands of Meskhetians. These so-called 'immigrants' had been deported en masse during the Stalin era from southern Georgia and forced to settle in Central Asia.<sup>5</sup>

Such dramatic examples of inter-ethnic clashes and ethnic expulsions fuelled fears, both within and outside the Soviet Union, that its dissolution would unleash greater violence and bloodshed and generate mass flows of refugees, internally displaced people and migrants. Certainly, the results of the last Soviet census

## Soviet mass deportations of the 1940s

Figure 8.1

Poles/Jews (1940–41)	380,000
Volga Germans (Sept. 1941)	366,000
Chechens (Feb. 1944)	362,000
Meskhethians (Nov. 1944)	200,000
Crimean Tatars (May 1944)	183,000
Koreans (1937)	172,000
Ingush (Feb. 1944)	134,000
Kalmyks (Dec. 1943)	92,000
Karachai (Nov. 1943)	68,000
Poles (1936)	60,000
Finns (St Petersburg region, 1942)	45,000
Balkars (April 1944)	37,000
Moldovans (1949)	36,000
Black Sea Greeks (1949)	36,000
Other Soviet Germans (1941–52)	843,000
Other Crimean groups (1944)	45,000
Other Black Sea groups (1949)	22,000
Other N. Caucasus groups (1943–44)	8,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,089,000</b>

Source: UNHCR (Public Information Section), *Commonwealth of Independent States conference on refugees and migrants*, 30–31 May 1996.

Note: All statistics on the original deportations, with the exception of the Meskhethians, are provided by A. Blum of the Institut National d'Etudes Démographiques in Paris. Historical details were supplied by Blum or taken from *Les peuples déportés d'Union Soviétique* by J.-J. Marie. Population transfers (amounting to several million people) linked to collectivization and the Gulag labour camps rather than the 'special settlers regime', are not included. Further large-scale deportations took place from the Baltic states, Moldova and the Ukraine from 1944 until 1953.

conducted in 1989 seemed to underscore this potential. They indicated how large a number of people risked being viewed as aliens, if independent states were to emerge. Depending on what definition of a homeland was used, between 54 million and 65 million people (roughly a fifth of the Soviet population of 285 million) lived outside their national-administrative units. Of these, some 25.3 million were Russians who, as the predominant nation accounting for around half the total Soviet population, had been accustomed to feeling at home anywhere in the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

### Establishing a UNHCR presence in the region

At the beginning of the 1990s, the continuing economic decline and resurgence of nationalism in the Soviet Union raised widespread fears that a 'tidal wave' of

Soviet migrants could move westward. In Western Europe the asylum system was already under pressure. In Central Europe, which itself had only recently emerged from the Soviet sphere of influence, an asylum regime had barely begun to be established. UNHCR, which was gradually establishing a presence there, saw a clear need to bolster fledgling refugee protection mechanisms and thereby to strengthen the expanding European edifice as a whole.

For many years the Soviet Union had viewed UNHCR with suspicion, regarding the organization as an instrument of the Cold War. However, in the second half of the 1980s, after the new Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev inaugurated his policies of *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost* (openness), the Soviet attitude towards the organization began to change. Faced with such challenges as resolving the conflicts in Cambodia and Afghanistan, both of which entailed the return of large numbers of refugees, the Soviet leadership increasingly recognized the usefulness of cooperation with UNHCR.

It was not only foreign policy exigencies that prompted the Soviet Union to develop cooperation with UNHCR. New domestic problems connected with internal forced displacement were also a determining factor. After decades of pervasive regimentation at home and tight controls over external contacts, the Soviet Union was not in a position to deal with either the large-scale displacement generated by ethnic conflicts on its territory or the appearance of increasing numbers of foreign asylum seekers in the capital, Moscow.

As they began to address these problems at the practical level, the Soviet authorities recognized the need to integrate the country into the international refugee protection system and began to look to UNHCR for assistance and guidance. In September 1990, the Soviet Union sent an observer delegation to UNHCR's annual Executive Committee meeting in Geneva. This delegation informed the High Commissioner, Thorvald Stoltenberg, that the Soviet government intended to accede to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and that new legislation was being prepared on managing migration and dealing with 'an estimated 600,000 internally displaced'.<sup>7</sup>

UNHCR was initially reluctant to become involved in the Soviet Union. The scale and complexity of the displacement problems were daunting and those who had been uprooted were internally displaced people who did not necessarily appear to fall within the organization's mandate. In addition, UNHCR faced funding constraints. The rapid pace of change in the Soviet Union, however, led UNHCR to review its approach. During 1991, burgeoning bilateral contacts resulted in the first UNHCR missions to the Soviet Union, as a result of which an informal understanding on the desirability of establishing a continuing presence was reached. An internal UNHCR strategy paper on 'the disintegrating USSR', prepared in September 1991, advised that, 'given the uniquely historical dimension of the change, this office should be pragmatic rather than formalistic and—in its field—be pro-active rather than reactive'.<sup>8</sup>

## Box 8.1

## Statelessness and disputed citizenship

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and the break-up of Yugoslavia, millions of people needed to confirm a new citizenship status. Was a former Czechoslovak citizen now Czech or Slovak? Was someone born in Belgrade, raised in Sarajevo, now married to someone from Zagreb and living in Ljubljana, a Yugoslav, Bosnian, Croat or Slovene citizen? New states emerging from these dissolutions established their own criteria for citizenship. In some cases, people who did not meet those criteria became 'stateless'; in other cases they failed to acquire citizenship where they lived.

These questions are by no means confined to Europe, nor does statelessness result only from the dissolution of states. Sometimes it can result from flaws in legislation and procedures governing marriage and the registration of births. In other cases, discriminatory policies targeted at minorities or other groups or individuals lead to statelessness. In some instances, governments have passed citizenship laws which have had the effect of marginalizing whole sections of society. Individuals affected by problems of statelessness or unclear citizenship often lack a clear legal status and therefore have difficulties contracting marriages, sending children to school, working, travelling or owning property. The result is that statelessness is often a cause of population displacement.

It is not possible to provide a list of the world's stateless people because unclear citizenship or nationality is more often than not disputed. Every country is affected to some degree because all countries have laws to determine who is a citizen and who is not, and approaches are not always harmonized between states.

The political changes in Europe during the 1990s illustrated the problems which can arise when conflicts on nationality status occur. When the Baltic states regained independence, their nationality laws excluded hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians who had lived there for decades. When many Crimean Tatars returned to

Ukraine, their families having been deported from there by Stalin in the 1940s, some arrived after the termination date for automatic access to Ukrainian citizenship, creating difficulties in finding jobs and housing. Yugoslavia's violent break-up displaced over four million people, and many records needed to trace citizenship were destroyed, creating numerous problems. When Czechoslovakia broke into two republics, many living on the Czech side were attributed Slovak citizenship, making them foreigners in their place of habitual residence.

In Asia, the Biharis (non-Bengali Muslims who moved from India to what was East Pakistan in the late 1940s) considered themselves to be Pakistani nationals and refused to take Bangladeshi nationality when Bangladesh gained independence in 1971. The government of Pakistan has since been reluctant to 'repatriate' them, and over 200,000 are still in camps in Bangladesh. In Myanmar, restrictive nationality laws continue to prevent many residents, such as the Rohingyas, from being considered as nationals. In Bhutan, citizenship laws adopted in the 1980s effectively excluded many ethnic Nepalis from Bhutanese nationality. Some 100,000 ethnic Nepalis from Bhutan are still living in camps in Nepal.

In Africa, some 75,000 people were expelled from Mauritania as a result of inter-ethnic clashes in 1989–90. Although most have since returned, around 30,000 remain in Senegal, their claims to citizenship challenged by the Mauritanian authorities. In Zaire, following legislation passed in 1981, thousands of Banyarwanda people *de jure* lost their citizenship. In Ethiopia, as a result of the war with Eritrea which started in 1998, the authorities expelled 68,000 people to Eritrea for being nationals of an enemy state. Although both countries issued papers to these people, as of December 1999 neither was willing to accept full responsibility for them as citizens.

In the Middle East, more than 120,000 Kurds who have lived in northeastern Syria all their lives have not been able to acquire citizenship.

In Kuwait, up to 250,000 Bidoons have long lived as a minority without an effective nationality. Many were forced out of Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf crisis and now live in Iraq and other Gulf countries. Finally, although Palestinians may not be considered as stateless since a Palestinian state has technically existed since the approval of UN General Assembly Resolution 181 (1947), some three million have been unable to return to their homes and their legal status has constantly been disputed by the Israeli government.

A link exists between statelessness and potential refugee flows, though clearly not every stateless person is a refugee. UNHCR promotes accession to and implementation of the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. These instruments provide a legal framework for avoiding and reducing cases of statelessness and resolving conflicts between states.

In 1995, UNHCR's Executive Committee and, subsequently, the UN General Assembly requested that UNHCR apply its expertise to the problem of statelessness. Since then, the organization has become increasingly involved in promoting the prevention and reduction of statelessness by disseminating information, training government officials, and encouraging cooperation amongst other organizations working on related issues. UNHCR has encouraged states to set up national structures so that stateless people can seek representation and has, where appropriate, worked with states to establish procedures to allow stateless people to acquire citizenship. Some states have made significant progress in recent years in addressing problems arising from statelessness and disputed citizenship. Thus far, however, problems have been tackled on a case-by-case basis. Instances of inadvertent loss of nationality, as well as those of discrimination leading to loss of nationality and expulsion, continue and are often a root cause of refugee flows. The challenge is to establish a harmonized international framework for acknowledging and responding systematically to statelessness problems.

## The Commonwealth of Independent States and neighbouring countries, 1999

Map 8.1



### The concept of preventive protection

In September 1991, the new High Commissioner, Sadako Ogata, approved in principle the opening of a regional office in Moscow. The following month, UNHCR organized its first training activity in Moscow on emergency preparedness. Building on experience gained in Central Europe, UNHCR sought to pursue a policy which would strengthen its operational capacity and enable it to play a preventive and early warning role.<sup>9</sup>

In early December, UNHCR sent a mission to the region to 'determine . . . [its] ongoing presence in the USSR'. These officials ended up witnessing the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the birth of the CIS on 8 December 1991. The conclusions of this landmark mission helped shape UNHCR's approach to the post-Soviet region. They emphasized that 'the classic approach of reacting to events *ex post facto* and with traditional mandate measures exclusively within the country of asylum is likely to prove inadequate'. Drawing on lessons 'from current UNHCR experience in ethnic conflict situations such as Sri Lanka and Yugoslavia', the mission recommended 'a primarily protection/preventive role, with the accent on early warning and pragmatic measures to reduce pressures on affected populations to move out'. It also recommended the establishment of an 'ongoing

presence' in the Transcaucasus (hereafter referred to as the South Caucasus) and Central Asia.<sup>10</sup>

During the first months of 1992, UNHCR sent fact-finding missions to most of the newly independent states that had emerged in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, thereby establishing direct ties with the new governments. In March, the High Commissioner convened a meeting to develop a UNHCR strategy for the post-Soviet region. It agreed on the need for more systematic measures to provide legal advice and support to strengthen the capacities of governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to deal with issues related to forced displacement. It also endorsed the overall concept of 'preventive protection'. In the context of the CIS, this was to involve establishing a presence, monitoring and early warning, setting the tone of international humanitarian standards, training initiatives, and public information efforts to promote human rights with special regard to minorities and displaced persons.<sup>11</sup>

### **Building new partnerships**

The emerging strategy recognized what had been apparent from the very outset of UNHCR's involvement in this region, namely the need for close cooperation with other relevant agencies and organizations of the UN system, as well as with the IOM.<sup>12</sup> During this initial period, UNHCR worked with the Russian Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières in providing assistance to asylum seekers in Moscow. It fielded joint fact-finding missions with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), and disseminated human rights documentation from stocks of the UN Centre for Human Rights.

However, it became clear that in addressing the refugee and broader forced migration challenges in the CIS and Central Europe, UNHCR would also need to establish partnerships with other important international actors which had an interest in these issues. These included in particular the Council of Europe and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)—predecessor to the OSCE.

On the occasion of a CSCE 'human dimensions conference' held in Moscow in September 1991, the High Commissioner pointed out the complementarity of UNHCR and CSCE concerns. She suggested the question of dislocated populations be placed on the CSCE agenda and called for more direct dialogue between CSCE member states and UNHCR.<sup>13</sup> This and subsequent initiatives proved effective and helped focus attention on refugee and migration issues. Indeed, at a further CSCE meeting in Helsinki in June 1992, 10 states, including the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan from the CIS, submitted a draft resolution expressing concern at 'the aggravation of the problem of refugees and displaced persons'. In it they declared that 'displacement is often a result of violations of the existing commitments under the CSCE human dimension . . . and is thus of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and does not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned'.<sup>14</sup>

UNHCR came to be seen as having an important role within, or alongside, the CSCE process. UNHCR's participation in a CSCE-led mission to Nagorno-Karabakh in

March 1992 was the first practical experience of interaction between the United Nations and the CSCE generally, and between UNHCR and CSCE in particular.<sup>15</sup>

When, later on, UNHCR began operating in the South Caucasus, it was to become increasingly involved in broader peacemaking efforts led by the United Nations or the OSCE. Among these were the OSCE 'Minsk Group' consultations on Nagorno-Karabakh, the UN-sponsored negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia, and the OSCE-led reconciliation process for Georgia and South Ossetia. In Tajikistan, UNHCR also cooperated closely with OSCE in organizing the repatriation programme.

## Conflicts in the South Caucasus and Tajikistan

The struggle between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which had intensified at the end of the 1980s, was only one of several conflicts that escalated into war soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991. In Georgia, the armed confrontation which had begun in 1989 with the South Ossetians, who were demanding independence, worsened until an uneasy ceasefire was arranged in May 1992. Within weeks of this, a new conflict broke out in Georgia, this time in the autonomous territory of Abkhazia. In Moldova, a brief but fierce bout of fighting broke out in early 1992 between Moldovan forces and those of the self-proclaimed 'Transdnester Republic'. In Central Asia, a bloody civil war began in Tajikistan in May 1992.

During the second half of 1992, the number of people displaced by these conflicts rose dramatically. By this time, the need for emergency humanitarian assistance was widely acknowledged and UNHCR put aside many of its early reservations about becoming involved on the ground. The difficulty now, as UNHCR's representative in the region put it, was 'to get around donor compassion fatigue'. In August he argued in a policy paper that 'even if it may be currently obsessed with Yugoslavia, the international community cannot, on reflection, further ignore the situation in the Transcaucasus'.<sup>16</sup> UNHCR subsequently played a key role, together with the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (which later became the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), in initiating a programme of international humanitarian relief.

### The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh

Even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh had uprooted some 300,000 Armenians and 350,000 Azerbaijanis. Armenia's declaration of independence in October 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union less than two months later both led to an escalation in the fighting and to further displacement. By August 1993, Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian forces controlled some 20 per cent of Azerbaijan territory and had established two 'corridors' linking the enclave with Armenia.





*This ethnic Azerbaijani widow, displaced as a result of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, has been living in a disused gas container for more than 10 years. (UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/1999)*

In the context of this continuing violence, UNHCR was reluctant to initiate a large-scale humanitarian operation on its own. Instead, UNHCR decided to deploy and test its newly created emergency response capacity. On 3 December 1992, UNHCR emergency teams arrived in the Armenian and Azerbaijani capitals, Yerevan and Baku.

By the time a ceasefire was eventually arranged in May 1994, more than half a million Azerbaijanis had been forcibly displaced from large areas of Azerbaijan by Karabakh Armenian forces. While the ceasefire has held, a political settlement has remained elusive and most of those who were uprooted have remained hostages of a frozen conflict. Despite the political deadlock, UNHCR has worked in close partnership with the World Bank, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and NGOs in assisting the Azerbaijani government in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of areas to which uprooted populations have been able to return in safety.

### **Conflicts in the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

In Georgia, the populations of the autonomous territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia both began to press for secession as early as 1989. The original inhabitants of Ossetia, the northern part of which now lies in the Russian Federation, accounted for two-thirds of the region's population in 1979. South Ossetians favoured greater autonomy and unification with North Ossetia and were disliked by Georgians for

## Box 8.2

## Non-governmental organizations

The term 'non-governmental organization' (NGO) applies to a wide range of bodies which are non-commercial in nature. It includes, in particular, humanitarian organizations and human rights monitoring and advocacy organizations. Since its inception, UNHCR has worked with a large number of NGOs. They include inter-national NGOs, which operate in many different countries, national NGOs, which operate only in their own country, and some large, decen-tralized NGO 'families', such as CARE International, World Vision Inter-national, Oxfam, and the Save the Children Alliance.

These organizations engage in a broad spectrum of activities, including emergency relief work, long-term development, and human rights monitoring and advocacy. High Commissioner Sadako Ogata has described NGOs as 'an important democratizing factor in the United Nations international spectrum'.<sup>1</sup> The growing international recognition of their important contributions is also illustrated by the fact that the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize went to Médecins Sans Frontières.

Accurate global statistics on the number of NGOs and resources channelled through them are hard to obtain. Some obser-vers estimate the total funding channelled through NGOs worldwide to be in excess of US\$8.5 billion a year.<sup>11</sup> In emergencies in particular, the proportion of overseas development assistance being channelled through NGOs has increased dramatically in the past 15 years.

UNHCR has worked closely with NGOs since its inception. Indeed, the organization's Statute expressly provides that UNHCR should administer assistance to refugees through private as well as public agencies. During its early years, partly because of the limited funds at its own disposal, UNHCR functioned primarily as a coordinating and supervisory body. During this period, NGOs became important partners for UNHCR. At the time of the large-scale refugee influxes in Africa in the 1960s, UNHCR and NGOs developed a new, more dynamic working relationship, operating in particular through the International Council of

Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), an NGO umbrella organization founded in 1962, which continues to play an important role.

In the 1970s, the number of NGOs began to grow and they became UNHCR's main implementing partners in all aspects of the organization's work. By the end of the 1970s, for example, 37 different NGOs were working in Khao I Dang, a Cambodian refugee camp in Thailand. Throughout the 1980s, NGOs continued to proliferate during the major refugee emergencies in the Horn of Africa, Asia and Central America. By the late 1980s, over 100 international NGOs were working in the Afghan refugee camps and settlements in Pakistan.

The 1990s saw the biggest increase in the number of NGOs, their size, operational capabilities and resources. In 1994, there were estimated to be over 100 NGOs operating in the Rwandan camps in what was then Zaire, 150 in Mozambique, 170 in Rwanda, and some 250 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Kosovo crisis in 1999 again confirmed the number and diversity NGOs able to access public and private sources.

It is governments, rather than individual donors, that are most responsible for the recent increase in NGO funding. In 1970, public-sector funding accounted for a mere 1.5 per cent of NGO budgets. By the mid-1990s, it had risen to 40 per cent and was still increasing.<sup>111</sup> This increase in funding from governments and UN sources has led some observers to question whether a number of these organizations should indeed still be called non-governmental organizations. In many of their projects, NGOs essentially act as subcontractors for governments or the United Nations. Conversely, however, in many cases NGOs act as outspoken critics of both governments and UN organizations.

Increasingly, governments are funding national NGOs, undercutting the traditional intermediary role of international NGOs. Many of these national NGOs are small. Some are community-based organizations with only a few staff and operating only in one small town or village. There has been a pro-

liferation of such NGOs. For example, by 1999 there were over 200 different national NGOs working in Afghanistan alone.

UNHCR has established increasingly close working partnerships with national NGOs. During the Bosnian crisis, more than 90 per cent of UNHCR's humanitarian assistance was distributed by local organizations like Merhamet, CARITAS and local Red Cross branches. By 1999, 395 national NGOs were working in partnership with UNHCR—three times the number five years earlier. In 1999, these national NGOs implemented nearly 20 per cent of UNHCR's projects. They play an important role in the creation of local civil society and invariably remain long after international humanitarian organizations have left.

Since 1994, UNHCR-NGO cooperation and consultation has expanded through what is known as the Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process. UNHCR and NGOs hold regular meetings in most countries where they operate. These help build partnership structures and allow NGOs to participate in UNHCR's own policy development and planning. The PARinAC process has proved particularly useful in sudden, large-scale refugee emergencies.

The importance of NGOs to UNHCR is illustrated by the fact that in 1999, UNHCR channelled US\$295 million through 544 NGO implemen-ting partners. Some 50 per cent of all UNHCR programmes are now implemented by international NGOs, 34 of these NGOs receiving more than US\$2 million each in 1999.

The Humanitarian Charter and the Minimum Standards in Disaster Response, known as the Sphere Project, aims to increase the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, and to make humanitarian agencies more accountable. Launched in 1997, this principled and practical framework for humanitarian action is the result of the combined efforts of over 200 organizations, including NGOs, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, academic institutions, the United Nations (including UNHCR), and government agencies.

their traditionally pro-Russian stance. The Abkhazians, a largely Muslim people, had enjoyed virtual sovereignty within Georgia in the 1920s. Under Stalin, however, Georgians were settled in the area and, by 1989, Abkhazians comprised only 18 per cent of the population, while Georgians accounted for nearly half.

Fighting in South Ossetia broke out in 1989 between Ossetians and local Georgians. Despite the presence of Soviet and then Georgian troops, a successful ceasefire agreement was not reached until May 1992. By this time, some 50,000 Ossetians had fled across the border to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation, while an estimated 23,000 Georgians had been chased out of South Ossetia into Georgia proper.

Just as one conflict ended in Georgia, another started. Fighting broke out in Abkhazia in mid-1992 when the republic declared its independence, and 2,000 Georgian troops were sent in to restore order. Over the next year-and-a-half, this conflict resulted in the displacement and expulsion of an estimated 250,000 Georgians from Abkhazia.

In July 1993, a ceasefire was agreed, and the following month the UN Security Council decided to establish a small UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). This was the United Nations' first such mission in the former Soviet Union. At first, the ceasefire faltered, but by December UN-sponsored talks resulted in a memorandum of understanding between the two sides and the inclusion of peacekeeping personnel in UNOMIG. As the situation began to stabilize, UNHCR, which had opened an office in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, in June 1993, became actively involved with the Georgian and Abkhaz sides and the Russian Federation in negotiating a quadripartite agreement on the voluntary return of refugees and displaced people. An agreement was eventually signed in Moscow in April 1994, providing for a 2,500-strong CIS peacekeeping force comprising mainly Russian troops, and giving UNHCR the task of overseeing the return process.

Though not without its flaws, the quadripartite agreement appeared to represent a bold but credible attempt to reverse what had amounted to the expulsion of an entire population on ethnic grounds. However, the implementation of the agreement was subsequently obstructed by the insistence of the Abkhaz side that the issue of Abkhazia's political status be settled in advance of repatriation. UNHCR was thus compelled to suspend its return programme.

Despite the continuation of UN-sponsored proximity talks and other negotiations, the overall situation remained volatile. Tens of thousands of displaced Georgians returned spontaneously to the Gali district, which lies closest to Georgia proper, despite the threat of land mines and other dangers. The lack of security guarantees in an area which was not under government control made UNHCR reluctant to promote or facilitate voluntary repatriation to Abkhazia. Instead, it negotiated with both the Abkhaz and Georgian sides in an effort to reach the returnees in the Gali zone, as well as victims of conflict in other parts of Abkhazia, mainly in the regional capital, Sukhumi. UNHCR subsequently provided those who had spontaneously returned to Gali with building materials, seeds and diesel fuel to assist reconstruction, while similar assistance was provided in other parts of Abkhazia.

In May 1998, fighting between Georgian partisans and Abkhaz militia flared up again in the Gali district, marking a major setback for local and international peace-making efforts. As a result, some 40,000 of the original 50,000 returnees were again displaced, and many of the houses and schools rehabilitated by UNHCR were looted and burned down.

Efforts to achieve a peaceful resolution of the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia were more fruitful. The political impasse which had prevailed since May 1992 was broken in February 1997 at a meeting in Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia. A joint control commission, operating under the aegis of the OSCE, adopted three decisions, including one on the voluntary repatriation of refugees and displaced people. UNHCR established a presence in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia, and set up a modest assistance programme there, primarily providing construction materials to returnees whose homes had been destroyed or damaged during the conflict. This cooperation between UNHCR and OSCE in assisting with the resolution of the Georgian–Ossetian conflict was extended in 1998 to include the Council of Europe in a joint effort to strengthen the Georgian government's capacity to establish a judicial and legal process to facilitate the return of property to victims of the conflict.

### **Civil war in Tajikistan**

Civil war broke out in Tajikistan in May 1992, less than six months after the break-up of the Soviet Union. The conflict revolved around political, ethnic or clan, and, to a lesser extent, ideological issues. The Uzbek, Khojandi and Kulyabi groups, which had traditionally wielded political and economic power during the Soviet era, were challenged by marginalized groups from other regions (Garm and the Pamiris) with an anti-communist, pro-Islamic and nationalist agenda. Russian troops, which had remained in the country following the break-up of the Soviet Union, assisted the government in bringing the fighting under control and in preventing rebel forces from entering the country through its southern border. Within months, the fighting had caused some 600,000 people to flee their homes. Of these, around 60,000 Tajiks fled south to Afghanistan, while many other ethnic Russians, Uzbeks and Tajiks fled to other parts of the CIS and beyond.

While an integrated UN approach to the conflict in Tajikistan was being worked out, UNHCR provided emergency assistance to Tajik refugees in northern Afghanistan. Then, in January 1993, a UNHCR team arrived in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe. In the same month, a small UN Mission of Observers to Tajikistan (UNMOT), established by the UN Security Council, was deployed. Over the next few months, UNHCR staff found themselves operating in an extremely volatile environment. During this time, they conducted difficult, though ultimately successful, negotiations with the warlords responsible for the expulsions to win the confidence of all parties and create the necessary conditions for the return of the refugees and displaced people.



*Former refugee children who have returned to Khatlon Province, Tajikistan, attend classes outdoors because their school was destroyed during the war. (UNHCR/A. HOLLMANN/1995)*

The civil war effectively ended in early 1993, although some insurgency activity continued to destabilize the country after that. From April 1993, UNHCR, working together with other UN agencies and NGOs and with the support of the government of Tajikistan, helped to organize the repatriation of refugees and the return of those who had been internally displaced. To achieve this, UNHCR established an extensive field presence to monitor returns and provide protection. UNHCR, together with its partners, provided the returnees with assistance in reconstructing their destroyed homes and vital infrastructure.

By mid-1995, the majority of the internally displaced as well as some 40,000 refugees had returned and nearly 19,000 shelters had been rebuilt. UNHCR handed over its monitoring activities to the OSCE. Then, in June 1997, a new UN-sponsored peace agreement signed in Moscow resulted in further repatriation. Over the following two years, another 17,000 Tajiks returned, while UNHCR also implemented income-generation, crop and education programmes to facilitate the reintegration of the returnees in the south of the country. Since then, Tajikistan has succumbed to more bouts of fighting, which have resulted in further internal displacement. Although the opposition has been brought into the government, the political situation remains tense.

## New challenges in CIS countries

In the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly established states grappled with the need to establish appropriate legal and administrative procedures to cope with complex refugee and migration-related issues. Between 1992 and 1993, most of the CIS countries either introduced temporary refugee legislation or adopted refugee laws. In February 1993, the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan became the first of the CIS countries to accede to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, to be followed by Armenia and Tajikistan by the end of the year.

Increasingly, however, it became clear that the CIS states were preoccupied primarily with their own displaced populations and were reluctant to assume responsibilities for dealing with classic refugee issues. UNHCR faced considerable difficulties in promoting the internationally accepted idea of asylum, including the introduction of fair and reliable status determination procedures and the acceptance of a uniform definition of a refugee.

In 1991–92, UNHCR and its NGO partners were faced with the dilemma of how to respond to the needs of asylum seekers stranded in Moscow airport and of some 10,000 non-CIS asylum seekers. The latter were mostly Afghans, Somalis, Iraqis and Ethiopians, and were mostly in the Russian capital. UNHCR's representative in Moscow reported in January 1993 that 'refugees/asylum seekers are not welcome; as far as Russia is concerned they are in transit and assisting them here would create a pull factor'.<sup>17</sup> He added that Russia did not even have the financial means to look after its own displaced, the 1992 budget of the Federal Migration Service being US\$3 million for one million displaced people. Other CIS countries faced similar problems. UNHCR therefore began providing assistance to the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers, surveyed the needs of stranded Afghans in Russia, and launched public awareness activities.

A further complication was the confusion in terminology and concepts in some of the CIS countries. In particular, Russia and some other countries introduced the term 'forced migrant' into their legislation to describe Russians and russophones who were repatriating from former Soviet republics that had now become independent countries. This legislation obfuscated the internationally recognized refugee definition and reinforced the distinction between refugees from within the CIS and those from outside the CIS. It often resulted in discrimination against the latter.<sup>18</sup>

### Russian 'forced migrants' and other population movements

For Russia, the key migration management issue was thus the mass inflow of Russians and russophones. Many of these people felt stranded and discriminated against in the new states. This was particularly the case in Central Asia and the Baltic states. The whole question became highly politicized. The issue of millions of

repatriants weighed on national pride, while the protection of the rights of Russians in the ‘near abroad’ featured prominently in Russia’s foreign policy.

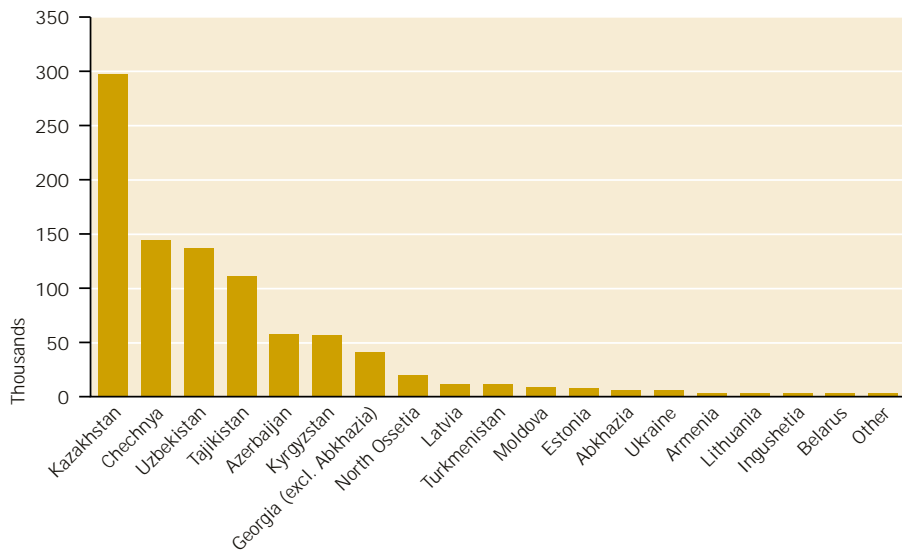
A ‘repatriation’ movement from the Central Asian republics had actually been under way during the last decade of Soviet rule, but now the volume and political visibility of these flows suddenly increased. Between 1992 and 1996, approximately three million people migrated to Russia, although barely a million of them were registered with the authorities. This was the largest single population movement within the CIS region in the post-Soviet period.

Russia labelled those Russian citizens or would-be citizens who were arriving from the former Soviet republics ‘forced migrants’. Other CIS countries countered that this definition was politically judgemental. They maintained that what was happening was a form of post-imperial relocation which did not affect only Russians. Rather, they argued that many of those on the move were returning to their ancestral homeland on a voluntary basis for cultural, social or economic motives. To add to the confusion, the term ‘forced migrant’, was also applied to those who were internally displaced.

There were other large-scale displacement and migration problems facing the CIS states. These included the movement of people such as the Crimean Tatars, who had been deported in the 1940s and until the collapse of the Soviet Union had been prevented from returning to their homeland. There were flows of ethnic repatriates to

**'Forced migrants' registered in the Russian Federation by previous place of residence, 1993-98\* (Total = 978,000)**

**Figure 8.2**



\*The total number of registered and unregistered ‘forced migrants’ who arrived in the Russian Federation during the 1990s is estimated to be over three million.

Source: Russian Federal Migration Service.

their titular states, such as ethnic Kazaks returning to Kazakhstan from Mongolia, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. There was also resettlement induced by environmental disaster and, increasingly, a westward flow of illegal migrants using the CIS countries as a transit corridor to Western Europe. In addition, within the CIS, millions of people sought work in other states. This labour migration, especially from countries affected by war, was generally of an unregulated nature.

To tackle these issues, the CIS states worked together, both on a bilateral and sub-regional basis, and within the CIS framework. As early as October 1992, 10 CIS states signed an agreement concerning formerly deported peoples in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.<sup>19</sup> A year later, nine CIS countries also signed an agreement on assistance to refugees and forced migrants. This agreement gave definitions of a 'refugee' and 'forced migrant' that were wider than the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and included those who had fled from conflict. It considered a refugee to be someone who was not a national of the country of asylum, whereas a 'forced migrant' was.<sup>20</sup>

These and similar CIS agreements from this period appeared to represent sound initiatives, but in practice they remained only on paper. This was not only because of lack of funding but also, more importantly, because of enduring tensions within the CIS between states such as Russia, which favoured greater integration, and states such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Georgia, which opposed the CIS's transformation into a supra-state structure. Increasingly, therefore, the need was recognized for some form of neutral framework within which displacement and migration problems could be addressed by CIS countries.

### The CIS conference

In a move to draw international attention to the problem of 'forced migrants', the Russian authorities turned to the UN General Assembly. In December 1993, the General Assembly approved a resolution, sponsored by the Russian Federation, to hold a UN conference on 'the problems of refugees, returnees, displaced persons and migrants'.<sup>21</sup> Two months later, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev officially requested the High Commissioner to convene a conference.<sup>22</sup>

UNHCR initially responded cautiously, being well aware of the politically sensitive nature of the proposal and the financial and operational implications. Increasingly, however, it also recognized the limitations of a piecemeal approach to the problems of this vast region, and that an effective and relevant framework for action could not, in this non-traditional environment, be based solely on an asylum-centred strategy. UNHCR decided to dovetail CIS initiatives with its own evolving strategic thinking and promote the idea of a comprehensive multilateral approach to the region's problems. In this, the organization drew on its experience gained in the CIREFCA process in Central America more than a decade earlier.

During discussions held in Moscow in May 1994, the Russian Federation agreed to the broad approach proposed by UNHCR. Other CIS countries and affected states and organizations were then invited to participate. UNHCR, IOM and the OSCE, represented by its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR),



agreed to organize this ambitious multilateral endeavour jointly. In December 1994, a new General Assembly resolution reinforced support for the initiative.<sup>23</sup>

The intense preparatory work lasted almost two years and consolidated agreement to address current and potential displacement problems within an international forum for cooperation and dialogue. Through a series of sub-regional meetings, the CIS states were encouraged to identify the problems and needs in their countries more clearly. A first meeting of experts in May 1995 agreed to recognize a broad range of displaced populations as relevant to the conference.<sup>24</sup>

The CIS conference was finally convened in Geneva on 30–31 May 1996. The full name was ‘Regional Conference to Address the Problems of Refugees, Displaced Persons, Other Forms of Involuntary Displacement and Returnees in the Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Relevant Neighbouring States’. In searching for a strategy to address humanitarian problems and to bolster regional stability, the conference had an underlying political dimension which integrated displacement and migration issues with security concerns. It therefore represented the nearest the international community got to addressing directly, albeit under a humanitarian aegis, some of the most acute problems resulting from the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Participants reviewed the population movements taking place in the region and went on to establish clearer definitions of the different categories of people involved. These included refugees, internally displaced persons, repatriants and formerly deported peoples, as well as ecological, labour and transit migrants. Instead of the term ‘forced migrant’, the neutral term ‘involuntarily relocating persons’ was devised.<sup>25</sup> Clarifying these definitional issues represented both the starting point and the key achievement of the conference. Identifying the type of movement involved helped depoliticize the issues. The conference adopted a Programme of Action which, on the basis of agreed principles, set out a comprehensive and integrated strategy to address migration and displacement issues. In doing so, it sought to prevent the emergence of situations which would create further involuntary displacement.<sup>26</sup>

### **Follow-up to the CIS conference**

The CIS conference process helped bring the countries concerned into the mainstream of international norms and practices relating to refugees and displaced populations, and to focus the attention of donors on the region. Its Programme of Action subsequently provided the impetus for the adoption of new legislation in practically all fields, including human rights and refugee law.

The conference helped UNHCR refine and energize its activities in the region by allowing it to extend its activities to a broader range of displaced populations. UNHCR has since opened offices in all CIS countries. It has also worked closely with governments to develop and implement asylum and citizenship legislation which conforms to international standards. In Central Asia, UNHCR helped establish the Bishkek Migration Management Centre to provide training, research and inter-

regional dialogue on refugee and migration issues in the area. More generally, it has provided training programmes not only on refugee law issues, but also on issues concerning human rights, humanitarian affairs, migration and aliens law, and emergency preparedness.

Together with its partners, UNHCR actively promoted the recognition of the role of NGOs in civil society and the establishment of a legal framework defining their status. The Council of Europe gradually assumed the lead role in the process of providing a normative framework on NGO legislation. Through an NGO fund established in 1997, UNHCR provided small grants to local NGOs to strengthen their capacity to address migration and refugee issues.

In the context of the follow-up process, UNHCR and its partners, particularly the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Council of Europe, sought to address the crucial but politically sensitive issues of statelessness [see box 8.1] and that of the Soviet institution of residence permits (*propiska*), which restricted freedom of movement and choice of residence. Although some of the CIS countries formally abolished the *propiska* system, in practice it has more often than not been perpetuated tacitly or under another name.

### Formerly deported peoples

Among the peoples deported by Stalin in the 1940s, the Crimean Tatars, the Meskhetians and the Volga Germans were not allowed to return in substantial numbers until the late 1980s, when controls within the Soviet Union began to loosen. Volga Germans were allowed to emigrate to the Federal Republic of Germany under the provisions of the German constitution. Some 850,000 went to Germany between 1992 and 1999, while only a few thousand returned to the Volga region during this period.

In the case of the Crimean Tatars, some 250,000 returned to the Crimea in Ukraine between 1988 and 1999. A similar number are estimated to remain outside the Crimea, mainly in Uzbekistan. The Crimean Tatars' return has caused tensions with residents of the peninsula which have been exacerbated by economic difficulties affecting the whole population. Returning Tatars also had problems acquiring Ukrainian citizenship and in finding housing, which led them to set up squatter settlements.

In 1997, the Ukrainian government asked for international assistance in reintegrating the Tatars. At the same time, mediation by UNHCR and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities enabled the Ukrainian and Uzbekistan governments to conclude an accord facilitating returning Tatars' acquisition of Ukrainian citizenship. UNHCR also carried out a public awareness campaign in Ukraine on the issue of the Tatars. By the end of 1999, the problem of statelessness among formerly deported people in Crimea was largely resolved.

The question of the Meskhetians was more complex. This disparate Turkic group from southwestern Georgia did not acquire a clear national identity until after their deportation in the 1940s. Unlike the other groups, they were never accused of collaboration with the invading Nazi forces. However, the strategic importance of the area

near the Turkish border from which they were deported led the Soviet authorities to prevent their return. In the late 1980s, communal violence in the area where they had settled (the Fergana Valley between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan) forced around 90,000 of them to flee. More than half of them went to Azerbaijan. Since then, Meskhetians have continued to encounter problems of status, citizenship and integration in several CIS countries.

In September 1998, all of the parties involved were brought together for informal consultations for the first time. The meeting in The Hague was organized by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in cooperation with UNHCR and the Open Society Institute's forced migration projects.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, other actors including the Council of Europe have also become involved. The Council of Europe included the gradual repatriation of those Meskhetians who wanted to go to Georgia as one of the conditions for the latter's accession to the organization in April 1999.

## Conflict in the North Caucasus

The first inter-ethnic fighting on the territory of the Russian Federation took place in the North Caucasus in October and November 1992, within a year of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Longstanding tensions between the Ingush, a formerly deported people, and the North Ossetians, flared into violence, forcing between 40,000 and 50,000 Ingush to flee the disputed Prigorodny District of North Ossetia for the neighbouring autonomous republic of Ingushetia. In October 1994, the Russian authorities invited UNHCR to investigate the situation in the area. However, shortly after the fact-finding mission left, a full-scale military conflict erupted in neighbouring Chechnya.

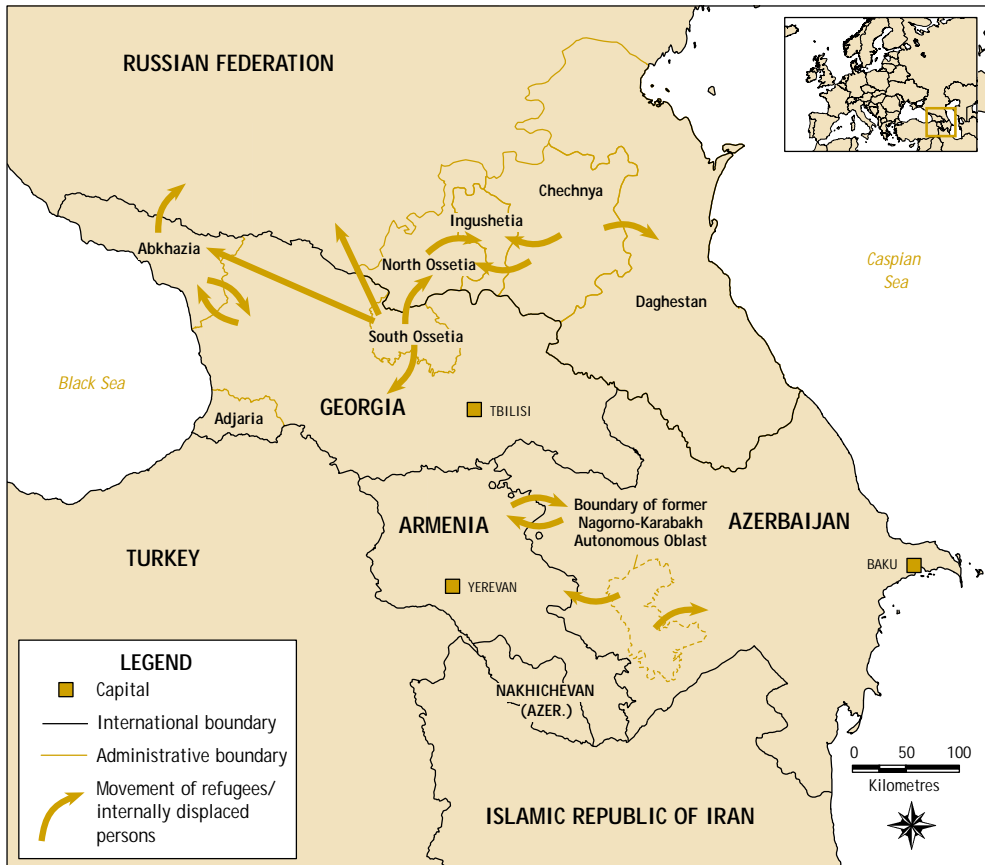
### War in Chechnya

Chechnya declared its independence in November 1991, after which some 150,000 non-Chechens left, largely to other parts of the Russian Federation. Fighting erupted in late 1993, when opponents of the rebel Chechen government launched the first of a series of unsuccessful offensives. In December 1994, Russian forces intervened directly against the breakaway republic, dramatically altering the political and security situation in the area. Bombing and artillery attacks destroyed large parts of the capital, Grozny, and surrounding villages, forcing over 250,000 people out of a total Chechen population of 700,000 to flee their homes. These people fled into Ingushetia, Daghestan and North Ossetia, as well as to other parts of Chechnya.

The Russian government invited UNHCR to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced at the end of December 1994, not long after the entry of the Russian troops. With the agreement of the UN Secretary-General that it work with this huge new caseload of internally displaced people, UNHCR launched its first emergency humanitarian assistance operation in the Russian Federation. This assistance in the

## Main population displacements in the Caucasus region during the 1990s

Map 8.2



North Caucasus was provided in cooperation with the Russian Ministry of Emergencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), other UN agencies and NGOs. Largely as a result of this operation, social and ethnic tensions resulting from the mass influx were contained, preventing destabilization in Ingushetia and Daghestan and the spread of the military conflict from Chechnya.

A ceasefire was eventually secured in August 1996. This provided for the withdrawal of Russian troops but did not resolve the question of Chechnya's status. Over the next year, many of the displaced returned to their homes in Chechnya, allowing the UN inter-agency emergency operation in the region to be phased down. Attention reverted once again to the issue of the repatriation of internally displaced Ingush people to the Prigorodny District.<sup>28</sup>

The situation in Chechnya remained volatile, however. Kidnappings and killings were widespread. In December 1996, six ICRC staff members were brutally assassinated as they slept in the hospital where they worked. In North Ossetia, Vincent

Cochetel, head of UNHCR's Field Office in Vladikavkaz, was kidnapped in January 1998, taken to Chechnya and not freed there until 11 months later. The security risks to humanitarian workers prompted UNHCR to redeploy its staff from Vladikavkaz to Stavropol, 300 km to the northwest, in early 1999.

Continuing tensions in the region obliged UNHCR to abandon plans to promote return. In 1997, UNHCR provided assistance to over 90,000 internally displaced people from Chechnya who were living in neighbouring Russian republics and in Georgia. Cross-border assistance was also provided to displaced people in Chechnya itself. In addition, over 35,000 people uprooted from the Prigorodny District of North Ossetia, who were still living in Ingushetia, were assisted. In North Ossetia, UNHCR began organizing the repatriation of 29,000 registered refugees to South Ossetia and Georgia proper.

Armed hostilities broke out again in Chechnya in the second half of 1999. At first, fighting in neighbouring Daghestan between Chechen armed groups and Russian forces obliged about 30,000 people to flee. Then, in October, a new war between Russian forces and forces of the secessionist republic broke out. Once again over 200,000 people fled into neighbouring republics, particularly Ingushetia, and several thousand escaped across the international border into Georgia. UNHCR and other humanitarian organiza-

*Families in Chechnya mourn their dead after their houses were destroyed by aerial bombardment.*  
(UNHCR/L. VAN DER STOCK/1995)



## Box 8.3

## Armed attacks on humanitarian personnel

The dangers faced by humanitarian personnel are not new. In July 1964, François Preziosi, a UNHCR official working in the Rwandan refugee camps in what was then the Republic of the Congo, described some of these dangers in one of his field reports: 'If I seem to take some risks by going frequently to the front lines, it is not out of pure curiosity, but to be able, when the time is ripe, to intervene and try to prevent any inconsiderate action against the refugees both in the field and in the resettlement centers. To be able to do this I have to become a familiar sight among the officers and soldiers and therefore to visit them frequently.'<sup>iv</sup> Six weeks later, on 18 August 1964, Preziosi and an official working for the International Labour Organization were murdered at the Mwamba refugee camp, in the Kivu area of eastern Congo, while trying to protect Rwandan refugees.

Humanitarian personnel have regularly found themselves working in life-threatening situations all over the world. Until the end of the Cold War, however, UNHCR and most other humanitarian organizations largely avoided operating inside active war zones. Only the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Médecins Sans Frontières, routinely operated in the midst of conflict.

### Increased dangers

Throughout the 1990s, humanitarian organizations—including UNHCR—have become increasingly active in situations of ongoing armed conflict, and the number of humanitarian

personnel injured or killed in the line of duty has grown accordingly. In many cases, humanitarian personnel are victims of landmines or are threatened by indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, over 40 humanitarian workers from different organizations were killed and many others were injured by shelling or sniper attacks, particularly in Sarajevo, where in early 1994 the city was the target of 1,200 shells every day.<sup>v</sup> At that time, and for the first time in its history, UNHCR routinely used armoured vehicles and staff were provided with bullet-proof vests.

Humanitarian organizations operating in conflict situations have attempted to distinguish themselves by using white vehicles, clearly marked with flags and logos, to avoid being attacked. But in many cases this has not provided sufficient protection. In places of random violence, where criminality is rife, where warlords and local commanders are accountable to no one but themselves, where checkpoints are manned by drunken soldiers or by child soldiers who carry guns bigger than themselves, no one is safe. On the contrary, aid organizations, with shiny white four-wheel drive vehicles, bristling with radio antennae and other sophisticated and expensive equipment, are often prime targets.<sup>vi</sup>

But humanitarian personnel are not only exposed to criminality and random violence. The presence of humanitarian organizations is often resented by one or more of the warring parties, and this resentment can develop into a particular kind of threat. Relief operations in

situations of on-going armed conflict are often perceived by warring parties as posing obstacles to their military, political or strategic goals. Humanitarian personnel may be suspected of passing on secret or sensitive information, or they may become unwanted witnesses to crimes that the warring parties would like to conceal. Combatants sometimes try to remove or deter actual or potential witnesses to human rights abuses and other violations of international law by creating an environment in which it is unsafe for humanitarian staff to operate. Organizations that operate on both sides of a front-line may also be resented for providing assistance to the 'enemy'. In many situations, locally recruited humanitarian personnel find themselves at even greater risk than international staff largely because of their local, religious or ethnic ties.

### Direct attacks

Attacks on humanitarian personnel have become disturbingly commonplace. In February 1993, Reinout Wanrooy, a UNHCR staff member working in Afghanistan, was travelling on the road from Peshawar to Jalalabad with two UN colleagues and two Afghan drivers. As they neared Jalalabad, three unidentified gunmen in a pick-up truck overtook them and started shooting at the two clearly marked UN vehicles. After forcing the UN cars to a halt, the gunmen jumped out and opened fire on their victims at point-blank range. Three men died instantly and one of the Afghan drivers was fatally wounded and died later in hospital. Wanrooy managed to escape by jumping from the car

and running as fast as he could, dodging a hail of gunfire.

Numerous other aid workers, from different organizations, have lost their lives in similar situations. At least 23 people working for the Red Cross movement have been killed since 1996 in the Great Lakes region of Africa alone. The brutal assassination of six ICRC staff members in Chechnya in December 1996 was particularly alarming. Mostly doctors and nurses, they were all shot as they lay in their beds in the hospital where they worked. In Burundi in the same year, three ICRC workers were assassinated in another chilling, premeditated attack. Dozens of other aid workers have lost their lives in direct attacks, caught in cross-fire from small arms or indiscriminate shelling, in planes that were shot down, or because of landmines. Many more have been injured or have suffered, and continue to suffer, the effects of trauma.

Aid workers have also increasingly been taken hostage. One such victim was Vincent Cochetel, head of UNHCR's office in Vladikavkaz, in the Russian Federation, who was overseeing a programme to help tens of thousands of people displaced by the conflicts in Chechnya, Ossetia and Ingushetia. In January 1998, as he unlocked the door to his seventh floor apartment, three masked gunmen forced him to kneel on the floor and a gun was jammed into his neck. For the next 317 days he was held prisoner in Chechnya in appalling conditions. He was stuffed into the boot of a car for three days, regularly beaten,

manacled in cellars and subjected to mock executions, before his eventual release there.

Between 1 January 1992 and 31 December 1999, 184 UN international and local staff members lost their lives in the line of duty. Most were engaged in humanitarian operations. During the same period, there were over 60 incidents of taking UN staff hostage, more than half of these involving humanitarian personnel. Since the beginning of the 1990s, 15 UNHCR staff members have been killed in deliberate, premeditated armed attacks; some were shot in the head at close range. If the death and injury of NGO staff are also taken into account, these grim statistics are significantly higher.

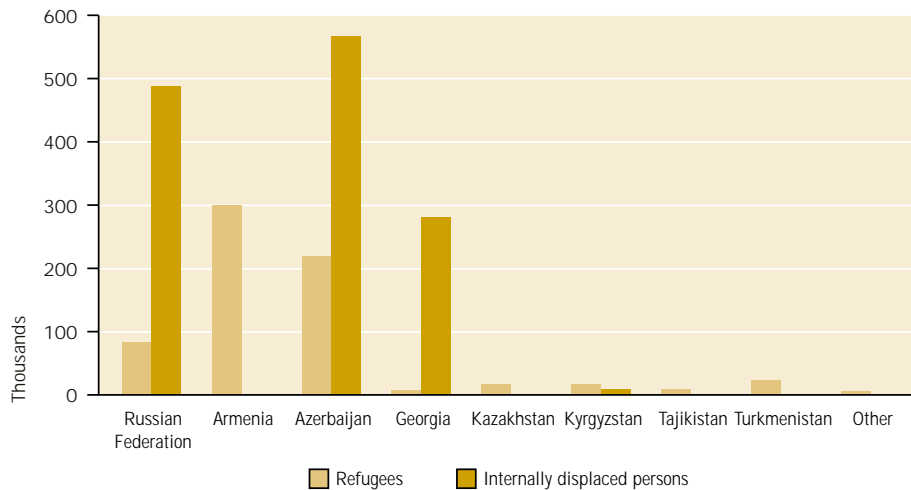
### Safety measures

Before the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, UNHCR employed only one person, on a part-time basis, to advise on issues related to staff security. In 1992, UNHCR initiated an entirely new security system, involving the employment of specialist advisors on security, a training programme for staff members and improved coordination both within the United Nations and with NGOs. By the end of the decade, UNHCR was employing 21 field safety advisors in 15 countries in Africa, Asia and Europe. These security officers provide support and advice to UNHCR staff on security issues, monitor the local security situation, liaise with relevant local authorities, other UN agencies, NGOs and embassies, and provide on-the-spot training on how to minimize risks and respond to threats and attacks.

In places such as northern Iraq, Somalia, the Balkans, East Timor and Liberia, UN peacekeeping forces or other international or regional security forces have been deployed to enhance security for humanitarian personnel and to improve access to vulnerable populations. They escort relief convoys, clear land mines, rehabilitate roads and bridges, and manage airports. In many other places, however, governments have been less willing to commit troops or other resources to improve security for humanitarian personnel. In some of the most dangerous places in the world, far from the spotlight of the international media, many unarmed humanitarian workers continue to work on their own, risking their lives in an attempt to protect and assist others.

## Refugees and IDPs in the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1999

Figure 8.3



tions provided food and emergency supplies to these people, many of whom were sheltered in camps, and sought to ensure protection of their basic human rights.

The second Chechen crisis became highly politicized internationally. No Western country disputed the right of the Russian Federation to carry out what the government maintained was an anti-terrorist campaign on its own territory. Many countries, however, criticized the means used and the disproportionate force unleashed against the civilian population by the Russian military.

## The challenges ahead

The dissolution of the Soviet Union unleashed a host of latent inter-ethnic antagonisms and nationalist and secessionist aspirations in the region. Many of the conflicts that broke out in the late 1980s and early 1990s remain unresolved, leaving thousands of people still internally displaced. Most of these people have been unable either to return to their homes in safety or integrate satisfactorily in the places to which they fled. Some borders are still disputed, complicating the state-building process. The dead-locked peace processes in the South Caucasus and the continuing situations of neither war nor peace have created additional anguish and uncertainty for those concerned. Although a settlement was reached in Tajikistan, peace there remains fragile. There are also tensions in other parts of Central Asia. In Chechnya, fighting continues and much of the infrastructure and housing has been destroyed. The capital, Grozny, has become the scene of destruction on a scale not seen in Europe since the Second World War. Thousands remain displaced in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Daghestan, with an uncertain future.



Over the last decade, many CIS countries have made significant progress in developing migration and refugee legislation and most of them have now acceded to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. However, implementation of the principles of refugee protection remain problematic, and the asylum system in the region is still inchoate and fragmented. The widespread use of the 'safe third country' notion and the existence of re-admission agreements without adequate guarantees for the protection of refugees have perpetuated serious gaps in the emerging regional and broader international asylum system.

For many citizens of CIS countries, the concept of providing asylum to refugees from outside the CIS is still a difficult one to digest. In a climate of acute socio-economic stress, xenophobia has flourished rather than been tempered. Among the general public, distrust has also grown between Slavic and Caucasian peoples within the CIS, exacerbated by the Chechen war and perceptions of a terrorist threat. In this respect, NGOs can play a vital role in promoting tolerance rather than xenophobia and in helping to build confidence among communities recovering from conflict. The NGO sector has been boosted greatly by the CIS conference process, but more needs to be done to create an environment in which NGOs can operate effectively.

In addition to the many challenges within the former Soviet region, the European Union's expanding and increasingly restrictive asylum and border-control systems are perceived by CIS countries as assigning them the role of being a barrier for illegal migration to the west. The governments of the CIS countries maintain that western and central European countries should take an integral European view of the problem. They argue that these countries should assist them both in establishing fair and effective asylum systems, and in combating illegal and transit migration, which is also a major concern in the region.

# Endnotes

## Chapter 8

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