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COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION KEY DOCUMENTS

GEORGIA

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COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION SERVICE

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1. Preface

- i This Country of Origin (COI) Key Documents has been produced by Research Development and Statistics (RDS), Home Office, for use by officials involved in the asylum/human rights determination process. It provides general background information about the issues most commonly raised in asylum/human rights claims made in the United Kingdom. The COI Key Documents include information available up to 13 November 2006.
- ii The COI Key Documents is an indexed list of key reports, papers and articles produced by a wide range of recognised external information sources. It does not contain any Home Office opinion or policy.
- iii For Home Office users, the COI Key Documents provide direct electronic access to each source referred to in the document, via a link on the source numbers in the index and list of sources. For the benefit of external users, the relevant web link has also been included, together with the date that the link was accessed.
- iv As noted above, the documents identified concentrate mainly on human rights issues. By way of introduction, brief background information on Georgia is also provided. Please note, this background material is not intended to provide a summary of the material contained in the key documents listed.
- v This COI Key Documents and the documents listed are publicly disclosable.
- vi Any comments regarding this COI Key Documents or suggestions for additional documents are very welcome and should be submitted to the Home Office as below.

Country of Origin Information Service

Home Office
Apollo House
36 Wellesley Road
Croydon CR9 3RR
United Kingdom

Email: cois@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Website: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html

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It is not the function of the Advisory Panel to endorse any Home Office material or procedures. In the course of its work, the Advisory Panel directly reviews the content of selected Home Office COI documents, but neither the

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2. Background information on Georgia

Full Country Name: Georgia

Area: Total area 69,700 sq km

Population: 4.4 million

Capital City: Tbilisi (population 1.5 million)

People: 71% Georgian (including subgroups of Svanetians, Mingrelians, Ajars), 7.7% Armenian, 6.5% Russian, 6% Azeri, 3% Ossete, 1.8% Abkhaz

Languages: Georgian 71% (official), Russian 9%, Armenian 7%, Azeri 6%, other 7% (note: Abkhaz (official in Abkhazia)) The Georgian group of languages is unique and does not belong to any of the major language families.

Religion(s): Georgian Orthodox 65%, Muslim 11%, Russian Orthodox 10%, Armenian Apostolic 8%, unknown 6%

Currency: Lari

Major Political Parties: National Movement, Burjanadze-Democrats United Democrats, New Rights, Labor.

Government: Republic

Head of State: President Mikhail Saakashvili

Prime Minister/Premier: Zurab Noghaideli

Foreign Minister: Gela Bezhuashvili

Membership of International Groupings/Organisations: BSEC, CCC, CoE, CE (guest), CIS, EAPC, EBRD, ECE, FAO, IAEA, IBRD, ICAO, IDA, IFAD, IFC, IFRCs, ILO, IMF, IMO, Inmarsat, Interpol, IOC, IOM (observer), ISO (correspondent), ITU, OPCW, OSCE, PFP, UN, UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNIDO, UPU, WHO, WIPO, WMO, WTOO, WTrO (applicant). (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

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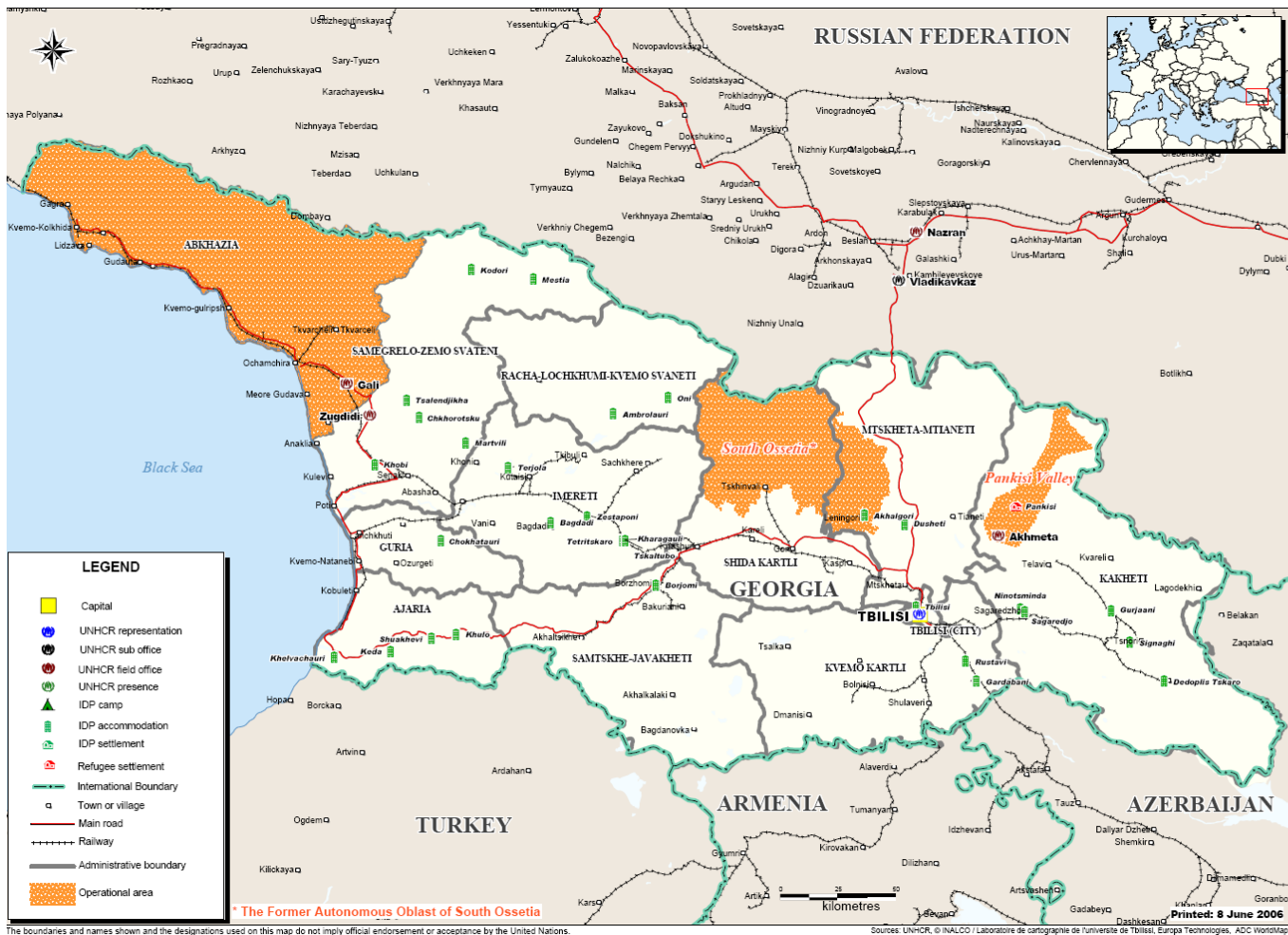
GEOGRAPHY

Georgia is situated in south-western Asia, bordering the Black Sea, between Turkey and Russia. It covers a total area of 69,700 sq km, which is all land. Georgia borders Armenia (164 km), Azerbaijan (322 km), Russia (723 km) and Turkey (252 km). Georgia is largely mountainous with the Great Caucasus Mountains in the north and the Lesser Caucasus Mountains in the south. (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

MAPS



Map of Georgia, United Nations, August 2004 [19]



Administrative Map of Georgia, UNHCR, June 2006 [6c]

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ECONOMY

GDP: US \$4.0 billion

GDP per head: \$930 (calculated)

Annual Growth: 8.6%

Inflation: 4.8%

Major Industries: Steel, aircraft, machine tools, electronic locomotives, trucks, tractors, textiles, shoes, chemicals, wood products, wine and financial services.

Major trading partners: Russia, UK, Turkey, other EU countries, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Armenia. (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

Currency: lari (Europa World Online, 6 November 2006) [1]

Exchange rate: US\$1.74 and UK £3.30 (Universal Currency Converter, 31 October 2006) [15]

“Georgia was hit badly by the Russian financial crisis of August 1998 and it took the country a long time to start recovering. The recovery has largely been export led, although the start of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline construction in 2003 is responsible for considerable increase in GDP compared to previous years.

Neighbouring Turkey and Russia are the main export markets, followed by former Soviet State of Turkmenistan. Agriculture is the largest sector of economy, accounting for 21% of total GDP, although several other industries have high growth rate, including construction (33%), financial services (20%), communication (19%), hotels & restaurants (17%) etc.” (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

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RECENT HISTORY

“From the 18th century to the present day, Georgia has from time to time turned to Russia for protection and help: Russia's response over the years has varied according to her interests. Towards the end of the Soviet period, the strong Georgian sense of national identity became translated into a desire for political independence, especially after Soviet military intervention in April 1989.

“In November 1990, the radical nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected Chairman of the Georgian parliament following the landslide election victory of his Round Table/Free Georgia coalition. In March 1991 Georgians voted overwhelmingly (89.3%) for independence and the parliament unanimously adopted a declaration restoring Georgian independence as it existed in 1918. Gamsakhurdia (deceased in 1994) was subsequently elected President with 86.5% of the vote. However, he was deposed in 1992 and Eduard Shevardnadze, the former head of the Georgian Communist Party (1972-85) and ex-Soviet Foreign Minister (1985-89), was invited to head a new State Council.

“Shevardnadze pressed ahead with parliamentary elections in October 1992. International observers confirmed that the elections were free and fair. In November 1992 the new Georgian Parliament elected Shevardnadze as Head of State. Parliamentary and Presidential elections took place on 5 November 1995. Shevardnadze gained 73% of the vote and his party, the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG) won a majority in the Parliament. Shevardnadze was inaugurated as President under the new constitution in November 1995.

“Following President Shevardnadze's resignation in November 2003, a snap Presidential election was held on 4 January 2004. Mikhail Saakashvili was inaugurated as Georgia's third President since modern independence on 25 January 2004 after securing a landslide majority. The elections were widely seen as free and fair.

“Political violence blighted Georgia's early years after independence, with murders of both opposition figures and former President Shevardnadze's aides. Shevardnadze survived assassination attempts in August 1995 and February 1998. However, in recent years Georgia has experienced a relative stabilisation of the political situation and the restoration of law and order. The new Government of President Saakashvili has said it is committed to a restoration of law and order and respect for human rights.” (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

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RECENT EVENTS AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

“Parliamentary elections took place in November 2003. The electoral process was widely seen as flawed and was severely criticised by international organisations such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE

Observer Mission, led by British MP, Bruce George, was highly critical of the electoral process and the flawed results declared by the Georgian authorities. Mass, but peaceful street demonstrations resulted in the resignation of then President Shevardnadze on 23 November 2003. The Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze was appointed Acting President until Presidential elections were held on 4 January 2004. Mikheil Saakashvili, a 36 year old US-educated lawyer, leader of the National Movement and the main figure behind November's demonstrations, was elected by a landslide victory. The new President has said his priorities will be to fight the corruption which has dogged all aspects of society since independence and improving the economy so that salaries and pensions may be paid.

"Fresh Parliamentary elections were held on 28 March [2004]. President Saakashvili's party and coalition partners won again, giving him and his party a strong mandate to bring about reform. The OSCE said, 'The Georgian authorities have seized the opportunity, since the 4 January presidential election, to further bring Georgia's election process in closer alignment with European standards for democratic elections, including OSCE commitments and Council of Europe standards. However, in the wake of the events of November 2003, the political life of Georgia, as reflected in the election process, is not yet fully normalised.'

"Following Saakashvili's election as President of Georgia in January [2004], tensions between the semi-autonomous region of Ajara and its autocratic leader Abashidze grew. Massive electoral fraud and Abashidze's unwillingness to accept Saakashvili over Ajara set the scene for a confrontation that resulted in Abashidze stepping down on 5 May [2004]. Georgia's Parliament introduced a new Ajaran Constitution and fresh Ajaran legislative elections were held on 20 June [2004]. Ajara's elections were won by a local offshoot of President Saakashvili's National Movement party." (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

"Municipal elections took place in Georgia on 5 October 2006. On 6 October 2006 the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) reported that the elections "...were conducted with general respect for fundamental freedoms, however, the blurred distinction between the authorities and the governing party reinforced the advantage of the incumbents." [32a] "The Saakashvili-led ruling party United National Movement won a convincing victory in the poll, securing 66.5 per cent of the vote, with the opposition bloc of Republicans and Conservatives notching up just 12 per cent." (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 12 October 2006) [33]

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ABKHAZIA

"Political and inter-ethnic conflicts have been a feature of Georgia's political life since modern independence in 1991. The separatist regimes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue to provide the most serious challenges to Georgia's hopes for political and economic stability. In 1989, when the last Soviet census was held, the then Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, situated on the Black Sea coast, had a population of 537,000. As a result of enforced 19th century migration and 20th century Georgian colonisation, the Abkhaz - a people ethnically distinct from the Georgians - had become a minority in their own republic (44% Georgians, 18% Abkhazians, 16% Russians).

“The latest phase in the long-standing tension between Abkhazia and Georgia began in July 1992 when the Abkhaz parliament, with a built-in Abkhaz majority, reinstated the Abkhaz constitution of 1925 which gave Abkhazia equal status with Georgia. Georgian troops invaded. Volunteers, particularly from the (Russian) North Caucasus, arrived to help the Abkhaz. After prolonged fighting, the Georgian government lost control of the entire territory of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia in September 1993, and a de facto 'border' between Georgia and Abkhazia was established along the Inguri River. The region was plunged into chaos with more than 200,000 refugees.

“Discussions between the Abkhaz and Georgians started under UN auspices on 30 November 1993. These discussions continued to take place and registered some progress with finalisation of an agreement on the return of refugees in April 1994. However the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate until the parties agreed to a cease-fire in May 1994. A separation of forces agreement was brokered by the Russian Federation and the CIS were called upon to send peacekeeping forces to the area.

“The Russian Federation began deploying troops in a security zone along the Inguri River in June 1994 and the peace-keeping operation officially began on 26 June 1994. A UN Security Council Resolution was passed in July 1994 which agreed to expand the numbers of UN observers (UNOMIG) to a ceiling of 136 (7 are British) with a mandate to monitor and verify the cease-fire agreement. Incidents of mine laying since the beginning of 1996, in which a UN Military Observer was killed and another injured, have led the UN to introduce mine-protected vehicles and to look into the possibility of obtaining advanced mine-clearing equipment.

“The problem of adequate security for the UNOMIG was highlighted on 19 February 1998 when four UN observers were taken hostage in Western Georgia, with the kidnappers demanding the release of those detained as suspects after the attempted assassination of President Shevardnadze. After negotiations, the UN observers were all released unharmed, but the UN cut back drastically on its operations. There have been two further kidnappings of UN staff, one incident in October 1999 and the other in June 2000. In both cases all hostages were released unharmed within a few days of being taken.

“Security in Abkhazia again deteriorated in the autumn of 2001 when Chechen and Georgian rebel armed groups entered the region from eastern Georgia. Fighting broke out and a UNOMIG helicopter was shot down, with the loss of 13 lives. No party has claimed responsibility and the UN is investigating. The rebel groups made their way to the Kodori valley in Abkhazia, where they subject to aerial bombing by unidentified aircraft, which the Georgian government claimed to be from the Russian military.

“The UN peace process is supported by the Friends of the Secretary-General (FOSG), and consists of Russia, US, UK, France, and Germany. There has been little progress on agreeing the outlines of a comprehensive political settlement based on a possible division of constitutional competences between Georgia and Abkhazia. Progress on the return of refugees and improving the security environment has also been slow.” (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

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SOUTH OSSETIA

“In 1989 South Ossetia had a population of 100,000 (66% Ossetians, 29% Georgians - capital Tskhinvali). The South Ossetian Autonomous Region was set up within Georgia in April 1922. The Ossetians are an Iranian people, quite distinct from the Georgians. They practise both Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity (but without great zeal). In September 1990 the South Ossetians proclaimed their independence from Georgia in response to moves being made by Georgian nationalists to loosen Moscow's control. They declared the formation of the autonomous Soviet Democratic Republic of South Ossetia and sought to unite with the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia (in Russia), an old aspiration. The declaration and the previous autonomous status were immediately annulled by the Georgian parliament. In late November 1990 tension between Georgians and South Ossetians led to clashes and intervention by Soviet Interior troops. In December 1991 the South Ossetian parliament declared independence and appealed to former republics of the USSR for support and recognition.

“At a meeting in Dagomys on 24 June 1992, Yeltsin signed an outline agreement with Shevardnadze on settling the conflict. The agreement included a cease-fire, the withdrawal of armed formations, a demilitarised zone, military observers, Joint Peacekeeping Forces, and a quadripartite Joint Control Commission, conditions for the return of refugees, and the resumption of gas supplies to Georgia.

“The Joint Control Commission (JCC) - made up of representatives from Russia, Georgia, North and South Ossetia, works to facilitate negotiations on a settlement to the conflict. A meeting of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) was held in Tskhinvali on 15 April 2004. Another JCC was held in Moscow on 14–15 July 2004 following an upsurge in tensions and fighting. Despite numerous agreements on the demilitarisation of the zone of conflict, tensions remain high. A Georgian request to the OSCE to expand its activities in South Ossetia on 29 July is still under consideration.” (Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 25 October 2005) [4a]

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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

“Increasing US economic and political influence in the country is being watched closely by the Kremlin, as are Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the EU. Tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi are never far from the surface and have flared sporadically since Mikhail Saakashvili became Georgian president.” (BBC News Country Profile) [7a]

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Reports published in 2006 by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office and the US State Department indicated that the government's record on human rights was uneven, with improvements in some areas but serious problems remaining.

The Human Rights Watch 2006 report on Georgia stated that:

"Since the Rose Revolution at the end of 2003, the government has had an uneven record on human rights. In 2005, it continued to prioritize its campaign against corruption and for territorial integrity. Its ambitious reform agenda is supported by the international community. However, at times it carries out reforms hastily, without broad and open consultation and without the thoroughness or detail necessary to eradicate entrenched human rights problems. As a result, human rights abuses continue unchecked in many spheres, following patterns established under former governments.

"On a range of issues, including religious and political freedom and independence of the judiciary, government reforms are producing mixed results. Although the media is now relatively free, it has become less critical and there are signs of increasing government influence on media content. The government has taken some positive steps to prevent torture but torture and due process violations continue to be reported. Refugees remain vulnerable to abuse." [5a]

The 2006 Amnesty International report on Georgia recorded that:

"Reports of torture and ill-treatment by law enforcement officers continued, despite efforts by the authorities to address the issue. Some perpetrators of attacks on religious minorities were imprisoned but hundreds of others remained unpunished. Chechens sought by the Russian Federation on terrorism charges and a Kurd wanted by Turkey were at risk of expulsion or extradition. The judiciary appeared to be unduly influenced by the government. There were allegations of government interference with freedom of the media in particular in relation to television. The internationally unrecognized breakaway areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia retained the death penalty." [11a]

The Foreign & Commonwealth Office Human Rights Annual Report 2006 stated that:

"President Saakashvili has set an ambitious reform programme aimed at promoting and establishing democracy, good governance and the rule of law in line with Georgia's NATO and EU accession aspirations. Despite considerable progress in some areas, though, Georgia's human rights record remains uneven...There have been allegations that, through indirect control, government influence has led certain sections of the media to become less critical. Media outlets that have spoken out against the actions of the government claim to have been subjected to political pressure. Despite this, the right to demonstrate still exists and has been frequently exercised in 2006. Civil society has become more outspoken, and extra-parliamentary opposition activities have increased. While 2005 saw a decrease in the number of reported attacks on non-orthodox religious groups, the legal framework to clarify the situation of nonorthodox religious groups in Georgia is not yet in place.

“Although the government has taken several important steps to prevent torture and mistreatment by the police and other security agencies, incidences of torture continue to be reported and remain a serious concern. The lack of professionalism and independence of the judiciary makes prosecution difficult, as does the apparent culture of impunity among the security services. Police officials routinely use firearms against suspects with the explicit support of both President Saakashvili and the Ministry of the Interior. Several suspects have died in the course of violent arrests.

“As a result of the police’s zero tolerance approach, pre-trial detention facilities and prisons are increasingly overcrowded. The prison population has almost doubled since 2004, a fact the government views as a positive achievement. Sanitary and health conditions do not meet international standards. Several deaths in custody have been reported. Most detainees’ cases have reportedly been investigated, but follow-up has been hindered by a lack of judiciary staff. In recent months there have been several clashes between detainees and authorities. On 27 March 2006, at least seven prison inmates were killed in circumstances which remain unclear. There is a growing belief among human rights activists that the government needs to end the apparent culture of impunity that exists within the security agencies. The judiciary is also under pressure from the government. In the drive to tackle corruption and establish a new and independent judiciary, judges have been pressured to resign and/or dismissed in arbitrary procedures directly influenced by the executive branch.” [4b]

The US State Department Report 2005 (USSD 2005), published on 8 March 2006, also recorded that the government's human rights record had improved in some areas during the year, “... although serious problems remained. The following human rights problems were reported:

- law enforcement officers tortured, beat, and otherwise abused detainees
- inhumane and life-threatening prison conditions
- corruption and impunity in law enforcement
- arbitrary arrest and detention
- lack of judicial independence
- interference with citizens' right to privacy
- government pressure on the media
- discrimination and harassment against some religious minorities
- violence and discrimination against women
- trafficking in persons” [4b]

A report published in October 2006 by the International Federation for Human Rights expressed deep concern about the persistence of many serious human rights violations in Georgia:

“Since the coming into power of Mr. Mikhaïl Saakaschvili at the favor of the so-called ‘roses’ revolution’, local and international organisations observe regular deterioration of fundamental freedoms. The violations of rights and freedoms are encouraged by a very personalised and authoritarian sense of power from the President. The first consequences of it are the excessive use of violence et [sic] and the impunity by law-enforcement bodies, repression and harassment against journalists, human right defenders, etc... This also contributed to conflictual situations at both internal (minorities and separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and external (recent break of diplomatic relations with Russia) levels.

“This new escalation of internal and external tension can provoke a serious deterioration of the situation of civilian population of Georgia and lies within the on-going agravation [sic] of a general human rights situation.” [34a]

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3. Index to key source documents

(KB users – Click source number to access document directly)

<p>KEY FACTS AND GEOGRAPHY</p>	<p>[1] Europa World Online, Location, Climate, Language, Religion, Flag, Capital, Country Statistics, accessed on 2 November 2006 http://www.europaworld.com/pub/</p> <p>[2a] United States Department of State (USSD), Report on Human Rights Practices 2005: Georgia, 8 March 2006 http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61649.htm</p> <p>[2c] United States Department of State (USSD), Background Note: Georgia, last updated September 2005 http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5253.htm</p> <p>[4a] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Country Profile: Georgia, last updated on 25 October 2005 http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KCountryProfile&aid=1019233890630</p> <p>[7a] British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Country Profile: Georgia, last updated on 13 November 2006 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1102477.stm</p> <p>[10a] Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), The World Fact book: Georgia, last updated on 17 October 2006 https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/gg.html</p> <p>[14] Library of Congress – Federal Research Division: Country Studies: Georgia, March 1994 http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/getoc.html</p> <p>[17a] United Nations Common Country Assessment 2004: Georgia http://www.undg.org/documents/5468-Georgia_CCA.pdf</p> <p>[31] World Bank, Georgia Country Brief 2006 http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/GEORGIAEXTN/0,,menuPK:301755~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:301746,00.html</p>
<p>MAPS</p>	<p>[6c] UNHCR Administrative Map of Georgia, June 2006 http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/3f3276474.pdf</p> <p>[19] United Nations Cartographic Section, Map of Georgia, August 2004 http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/profile/georgia.pdf</p>
<p>HISTORY</p>	<p>[1] Europa World Online, Recent History, accessed on 6 November 2006</p>

HISTORY CONT'D	<p>http://www.europaworld.com/pub/</p> <p>[2a] United States Department of State (USSD), Report on Human Rights Practices 2005: Georgia, 8 March 2006 http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61649.htm</p> <p>[2c] United States Department of State (USSD), Background Note: Georgia, last updated September 2005 http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5253.htm</p> <p>[4a] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Country Profile: Georgia, last updated on 25 October 2005 http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/ServletFront?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029394365&a=KCountryProfile&aid=1019233890630</p> <p>[7a] British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Country Profile: Georgia, last updated on 13 November 2006 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1102477.stm</p> <p>[7b] British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Timeline: Georgia, last updated on 18 October 2006 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1102575.stm</p> <p>[26a] Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2006: Georgia, September 2006 http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2006&country=6967</p>
POLITICS AND RECENT EVENTS	<p>[1] Europa World Online, Government and Politics, accessed on 3 November 2006 http://www.europaworld.com/pub/</p> <p>[2a] United States Department of State (USSD), Report on Human Rights Practices 2005: Georgia, 8 March 2006 http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61649.htm</p> <p>[2c] United States Department of State (USSD), Background Note: Georgia, last updated September 2005 http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5253.htm</p> <p>[4a] Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), Country Profile: Georgia, last updated on 25 October 2005</p> <p>[5a] Human Rights Watch (HRW), World report 2006: Georgia January 2006 http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/01/18/georgi12229.htm</p> <p>[7a] British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Country Profile: Georgia, last updated on 13 November 2006 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1102477.stm</p> <p>[7b] British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Timeline: Georgia (last updated on 18 October 2006) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/country_profiles/1102575.stm</p>

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