



# **COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN**

## **OVERVIEW**

**Country: Georgia**

**Planning Year: 2006**

## **2006 COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN FOR GEORGIA**

### **OVERVIEW**

#### **1. Protection and socio-economic operational environment**

UNHCR works in all areas of Georgia, including the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as the Pankisi Valley. While Georgia was once one of the wealthiest republics of the former Soviet Union, the country has undergone serious political and socio-economic changes since it achieved its independence in 1991. Civil conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia resulted in severe destruction of the country's infrastructure and the displacement of close to 260,000 people. This has created a tremendous burden on the national economy and society in general. Georgia has not yet been able to achieve substantial progress on negotiating a peaceful settlement vis-à-vis Abkhazia and South Ossetia and determining their political status within the country. As a result, IDPs continue to live in extremely difficult conditions and returnees find themselves in a political vacuum where the Georgian government is unable to meet their protection and assistance needs.

Before September 2004, over 260,000 IDPs were registered with the Ministry for Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia. Following 2004 annual IDP registration, as well as the verification of IDP registration conducted by the Georgian government with UNHCR's support, the internally displaced population in Georgia numbered at 214,018 as at 30 June 2005. Nearly half of the IDP population lives in collective centres, often in sub-standard conditions. Others stay with extended families or in private accommodation. While some have been successful in starting small businesses, accessing higher education, and gaining other meaningful employment, many IDPs exist on the margins of economic and associational life. They are subject to parallel services from the State confirming their isolation, and unable to return to their place of origin. A UNHCR-funded survey in 2002 showed that over 44% of IDPs in Tbilisi were unemployed. In an IFRC survey published in 2000, the unemployment rate of IDPs in collective centres was estimated at three times higher than that of the rest of the population, with only one in seven persons having access to land in comparison to more than 60% of the local population.

UNHCR is formally part of both peace processes in relations to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. UNHCR is a signatory of the 1994 Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return between Abkhaz and Georgian sides, the Russian Federation and UNHCR, and also has observer status in the OSCE-led mechanism of the Joint Control Commission (JCC) for South Ossetia. Within these frameworks UNHCR meets regularly with the working groups related to the return of refugees and IDPs to both breakaway territories.

Despite the reduction in its assistance to IDPs in recent years due to budgetary constraints, owing to its long presence and activities, UNHCR enjoys the trust of all parties and people it serves. It is seen as an important actor on issues related to IDPs, refugees and return, and there are high expectations for UNHCR to be more actively engaged in protection and assistance activities regardless of the lack of progress in the peace process. UNHCR recognizes that while efforts continue to find a political solution, people's humanitarian needs should not be ignored.

## *Abkhazia*

There has been little progress made in reaching a comprehensive settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia. The new *de facto* President, Sergei Bagapsh, has reconfirmed that Abkhazia would settle for nothing less than full independence. The UN-led peace process is continuing however, and the Security Council has repeatedly urged parties to show progress in the priority areas of economic cooperation, return of refugees and IDPs, and political and security matters, as three key areas for ultimately reaching a political settlement of the conflict.

In the last fifteen years the GDP in Abkhazia has fallen by 80-90%; unemployment is around 95%; and per capita incomes have decreased by 90%. While there is no shortage of food in Abkhazia, vulnerable groups lack the means with which to purchase it. Families in Abkhazia, particularly in the area of return, produce a range of crops including maize, hazelnuts, and mandarins, which are then sold in Georgia proper or Russia. Many IDPs in western Georgia commute across the Inguri river (the main dividing line between Georgia and Abkhaz controlled territories) to plant and harvest their crops during the season. Taxes are collected by Abkhaz authorities on agricultural products being transported across the Inguri river. Families in the area of return also maintain kitchen gardens, growing fruit and vegetables and keeping some livestock.

## *South Ossetia*

The political and socio-economic situation in South Ossetia is difficult and complex. The region is currently governed by *de facto* Osset authorities based in Tskhinvali who have neither the physical infrastructure nor the resources to meet the needs of the war-affected population or returnees. Furthermore, the number of returns to South Ossetia has been quite small. The reasons for this are complex – the main factor being the dire state of the economy, leading many refugees to decide to remain in North Ossetia, the Russian Federation. Overall, the military and security situation remains tense, particularly in the conflict zone, thereby constraining efforts in terms of return. The operational environment in South Ossetia has been marked by an increase in restriction of movement due to strict security measures and a fluid and daily changing environment. Furthermore, potential IDP returnees have requested UNHCR to suspend its assistance activities in certain areas of South Ossetia until the situation improves.

## *Pankisi Valley*

While UNHCR originally began working in Georgia to offer assistance and protection to IDPs, in 1999 an influx of Chechen refugees into the Pankisi Valley resulted in UNHCR expanding its activities. In the last few years, the security situation inside the Pankisi Valley has challenged both UNHCR and the refugees themselves. There was significant global pressure placed on Georgia to improve overall law and order in the valley and clean it up of criminal and combatant elements operating therein. A number of steps and actions taken by the Government have helped in improving the situation.

At the same time, reported security-related operations have resulted in increased anxiety among the refugee population regarding their future. The closure of the OSCE border monitoring mission further complicates matters. Finally, it should be acknowledged that after six years of displacement the refugees are increasingly tired of their living conditions.

Not surprisingly, BO Tbilisi has also witnessed rising tensions between the local population and the refugee community. Possibilities for self-reliance are fairly limited, thereby increasing concern regarding prospects for the future. Efforts are thus needed to integrate refugees into the overall developmental plan of the country, so that longer term solutions can be realised.

## **2. Operational goals and potential for durable solutions**

### *Refugees and Asylum Seekers*

UNHCR Georgia in 2006 will place emphasis on meeting the protection and assistance needs of refugees in Georgia with an enhanced focus on seeking and implementing durable solutions. The core issue for this caseload is to ensure that the principle of *non-refoulement* is respected. In seeking durable solutions for the Chechen refugees in Georgia and to prevent further displacement or conflict due to the sensitivity of the caseload, UNHCR will work in partnership with the Government of Georgia, diplomatic missions and international organisations advocating to ensure refugees' continued right to protection in Georgia.

The current population of Chechen refugees from the Russian Federation is comprised of 80 % women and children. Expediting the further implementation of durable solutions (in particular, resettlement and local integration) is therefore of paramount importance. UNHCR will continue to support the Government of Georgia in upholding the 1951 Convention to prevent the *refoulement* of refugees, especially given the pressure on the Georgian authorities to expedite the voluntary return of refugees to Chechnya. In May 2005, around 20 refugees voluntarily repatriated to Chechnya with the assistance of the Russian Federation. In view of present conditions in the country of origin, UNHCR has not promoted the return of refugees to Chechnya in the Russian Federation.

The role of all stakeholders in 2006 will be crucial in order for UNHCR to operate in the best interest of refugees. When necessary, UNHCR will advocate on behalf of selected individual cases with resettlement countries. In 2006, UNHCR may also advocate with donors for bi-lateral assistance, particularly in the context of diminishing funding available to UNHCR, to jointly meet the needs of the refugee caseload. It may become particularly relevant for the purposes of the successful local integration of those refugees qualifying for citizenship in Georgia. For those refugees who may integrate in Pankisi Valley with the local Georgian "Kist" population, UNHCR will advocate for other organizations/agencies in Georgia to consider this caseload in their regular poverty alleviation and self-reliance programmes.

The operational goals for strengthening the asylum system in 2006 will include: the regularisation of refugee status in the legal system of Georgia; the building of the national capacity on referral and reception of asylum seekers; and refugee status determination procedures. The activities will focus on changes of the legal acts and practices affecting individual and *prima facie* refugees. In addition to enhancing the efficaciousness of the agencies dealing with refugees, UNHCR will continue its cooperation in the field of refugee protection with the Parliament, Ombudsman's Office, courts, mass media and civil society.

### *Internally Displaced Persons*

In terms of the IDP caseload, in 2006 UNHCR has set as its operational goals: increased engagement in Abkhazia; increased and more flexible assistance programme in South Ossetia to assist returnee families in their reintegration; and continued support to protection and self-reliance activities for IDPs in Georgia proper. These objectives are a direct continuation of BO Tbilisi's growing activities in 2005 that were proposed following the High Commissioner's visit to Georgia.

#### Abkhazia

UNHCR remains committed to its engagement in Abkhazia and the return process. By contributing to the peace process, UNHCR aims to pave the way for returns. To achieve this, UNHCR will undertake activities to alleviate the suffering of the affected population and to build confidence and trust between communities (i.e. community development projects, small scale assistance). UNHCR has also identified the need to develop and strengthen protection activities with a focus on capacity building which would help to contribute towards their protection. As security remains a key concern particularly in the Gali District, UNHCR will expand its protection activities for the estimated number of 45,000 persons currently living in Gali district. This number needs to be verified, however. To this end, UNHCR plans to carry out an exercise to ascertain the number and concerns of those refugees and IDPs currently living in their homes in the Gali District on a permanent or seasonal basis.

In order to raise their awareness about international standards, UNHCR will conduct training on basic human rights for the local law enforcement agencies in the Gali District, as well as for journalists in Sukhumi. To strengthen protection monitoring in the Gali District, UNHCR will equip, support and work closely with a local NGO, which will regularly report to UNHCR. Training will also be provided to other NGOs working in the area.

#### South Ossetia

UNHCR will continue to advocate for the right of return to original places of residence through the OSCE-led mechanism of the Joint Control Commission (JCC). Economic regeneration of the region and property restitution are of key importance in this regard.

UNHCR's current assistance programme for South Ossetia only focuses on returns. In 2006, UNHCR will simultaneously include the provision of shelter assistance to IDPs who are unwilling or unable to return to their places of former residence in South Ossetia and Georgia proper. Shelter assistance in this case would focus on durable solutions by moving people out of temporary accommodation where they have been residing for more than ten years and resettling them in newly constructed blockhouses on land provided by the local authorities. UNHCR will also conduct small scale IDP collective centre rehabilitation activities in Tshkinvali. UNHCR will also expand its winterization assistance programme to assist the most vulnerable IDPs who reside in collective centres.