

18 August 2008

Georgia: At least 80,000 people displaced by renewed conflict

Hundreds of people have been killed and at least 80,000 ethnic Georgians and Ossetians have fled their homes in South Ossetia and Georgia, due to military offensives by Georgia and the Russian Federation over the last few days. This number adds to some 220,000 to 240,000 IDPs previously displaced in the early 1990s from Georgia's secessionist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who still live in precarious situations throughout the country. Humanitarian agencies and international donors have mobilised quickly to respond to the needs of the newly displaced, and are airlifting supplies into the area. Major constraints to the relief efforts include the lack of access to affected populations, in particular in South Ossetia, and the lack of precise information on the IDPs' location and needs.

The following update only focuses on people displaced over the last few days. For information on longer term IDPs in Georgia and for more background on the conflict in South Ossetia, please see www.internal-displacement.org/countries/georgia.

Map of Georgia



Source: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

Latest political developments

On 8 August, Russia responded militarily to a Georgian offensive aimed at ending secessionist South Ossetia's 16-year-old de facto independence (CSM, 12 August 2008). Georgia's parliament declared a "state of war" with Russia the following day. Meanwhile, Russia maintained that it was conducting a peacekeeping operation. On 13 August, the Russian and the Georgian governments signed a provisional ceasefire mediated by France, but the same day Russia and Georgia traded accusations of ceasefire violations. On 16 August, the parties signed a revised version of the ceasefire agreement, but Russian troops remained in several areas of Georgia (Reuters, 17 August 2007). The Georgian government reported that 175 people on the Georgian side had been killed (UNCT, 13 August 2008), while the Russian Ambassador to Georgia said that at least 2,000 civilians had died in South Ossetia as a result of fighting between Russian and Georgian forces, but these numbers could not be verified (Reuters, 9 August 2008).

The current crisis between Russia and Georgia comes after several years of deterioration of relations between the countries. While until now Russia has officially recognised the territorial integrity of Georgia, it has placed an import embargo on Georgian wine, water, and agricultural products, and closed all communication lines between the two countries in 2006, after Georgia arrested four army Russian officers based in Tbilisi on the charge of espionage. Georgia has repeatedly accused Russia of violating its airspace. Tensions between both countries escalated further in 2007 and 2008, particularly after Georgia set up a

pro-Tbilisi administration in Abkhazia's Kodori gorge – a small mountain territory in the only part of that region not controlled by the de-facto breakaway authorities.

IDP estimates

There are no confirmed estimates of people internally displaced by the recent fighting. IDPs include both ethnic Ossetians who found refuge in other parts of South Ossetia and ethnic Georgians who found refuge in other parts of Georgia, in particular the capital Tbilisi. According to UN agencies in Georgia, as well as Russian and Georgian authorities, there are some 80,000 IDPs in Georgia, including 16,000 who fled the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali and other villages, and stayed within South Ossetia; an estimated 1,500 from Upper Kodori, the Georgian controlled part of Abkhazia and 40,000 from Gori (NRC, 13 August 2008). According to Georgian government sources, 88,254 IDPs had been registered by 17 August, including over 81,000 in Tbilisi. Nearly 40 per cent of the displaced are estimated to be children under 16 years, some of whom have been separated from their families (UNICEF, 15 August 2008). In addition, according to Russian estimates, up to 30,000 South Ossetians found refuge across the border in North Ossetia in the Russian Federation (UNCT, 13 August 2008).

Humanitarian situation

The main town of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, was devastated during an attack by Georgia. Ethnic Ossetians fled when Georgian military personnel entered the town. Meanwhile, ethnic Georgians fled surrounding villages, which were looted

and set on fire by Ossetian militias (HRW, 13 August 2008).

The town of Gori, close to South Ossetia and 70 kilometres from Tbilisi, was mostly abandoned following attacks by Russia, and many shops have been destroyed and looted (UNCT, 13 August 2008). Some 6,000 people displaced by fighting in the 1990s and registered as IDPs also fled (UNCT, 10 August 2008). According to Human Rights Watch (HRW), forces on both sides in the conflict between appear to have killed and injured civilians through indiscriminate attacks on Gori and Tskhinvali (HRW, 14 August 2008).

Some 1,500 ethnic Georgians also fled bombings from the Upper Kodori Valley, an area of Abkhazia controlled by Georgia. They found refuge in the town of Kutaisi, Georgia, with the assistance of the UN and of the Georgian government (UNCT, 13 August 2008).

Most of the displaced are estimated to be staying with relatives and friends, or to be living in unofficial shelters, which makes it very difficult to estimate their number and locations or to know how long displacement is likely to last. According to UN assessments, there are 48 newly-registered centres for IDPs in Tbilisi and nearby areas, including 600 people in a tent camp close to the airport of Tbilisi, and the number is expected to grow as the influx of people continues (UNICEF, 13 August 2008). Thousands of others remain unregistered and are reported to lack access to shelter or food (WVI, 13 August 2008).

The large-scale destruction of the South Ossetian capital and of other towns and

villages in Georgia means that as people try to return home, they will need support to rebuild their house, schools, bridges, to restore water supply, and to ensure mine clearances (CARE, 14 August 2008).

Government and international response

The UN Resident Coordinator is leading the current coordination efforts through a Humanitarian Coordination Group, which includes UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs, and so far no Humanitarian Coordinator has been designated. While the cluster approach has not been formally rolled out, humanitarian response is organised by sector, i.e. food (led by WFP), protection (led by UNHCR), water & sanitation (led by UNICEF), shelter & NFIs (led by UNHCR), logistics (led by WFP), and the newly formed health & nutrition group (led by USAID) (UNCT, 10 August 2008).

The Georgian government has appointed the Minister of Health, Labour and Social Affairs as Coordinator for humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 16 August 2008). Representatives of the Georgian Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA), of the Ombudsman's Office and municipalities have also participated in some of the sectoral meetings to coordinate the delivery of assistance (UNCT, 13 August 2008). But according to local observers, IDPs from Gori have complained of the lack of structures to receive them. The MRA has informed UNHCR that it lacked staff capacity to conduct systematic registration of new IDPs, and that it did not have funding to pay the cash assistance to newly IDPs which is required according to Georgian law (UNCT, 10 August 2008).

In order to respond to the many humanitarian needs of IDPs and other vulnerable populations in Georgia, the UN may issue a special flash appeal to donors (UNCT, 13 August 2008). Already, the World Food Programme (WFP) has sent two planes carrying high-energy biscuits for IDPs in Georgia since many of them have no access to cooking facilities. The agency is planning additional humanitarian airlifts to deliver food assistance all over Georgia (WFP, 13 August 2008). The Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sent two planes which provided aid supplies to up to 30,000 people (UNHCR, 12 August 2008). The ICRC and NGOs are also raising additional funds and scaling up their operations to bring food, basic necessities, shelter, and medical assistance to the displaced. International donor governments, in particular EU countries and Norway, mobilised quickly to pledge support to IDPs and other vulnerable populations. Assistance will be channelled through humanitarian agencies present on the ground. Meanwhile the U.S. government sent military planes as well as naval forces to deliver humanitarian supplies to Georgia directly (U.S. government, 13 August 2008).

One of the main constraints to the quick delivery of assistance is the lack of access due to the ongoing conflict. Most of the assistance continues to be focused on Tbilisi and its surroundings, and UN agencies and NGOs have announced that they had no access to South Ossetia. Access to Gori is also very difficult, and on 15 August, two UNHCR vehicles were hijacked at gunpoint on the outskirts of Gori (OCHA, 16 August 2008). The UN Resident Coordinator in Georgia called on all parties to the conflict to “establish

immediately the necessary security and administrative conditions to allow the establishment of a humanitarian corridor, as agreed in the ceasefire plan” (Civil Georgia, 14 August 2008).

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has met several times since the beginning of the crisis, but has not been able to reach an agreement, as the Russian Federation, one of the permanent members of the UNSC which has veto power over any resolution put forth by the Council, is also one of the parties to the conflict. While the French government has drafted a UN Security Council resolution to call for a halt to hostilities, it is not clear when it will be discussed.

Note: This update only focuses on people displaced over the last few days. For information on longer term IDPs in Georgia and for more background on the conflict in South Ossetia, please click [here](#).

Sources:

CARE, 14 August 2008, CARE helps growing number of displaced people in Georgia

Christian Science Monitor (CSM), 12 August 2008, Roots of Georgia-Russia clash run deep

Civil Georgia, 14 August 2008, UN Agencies Call for Humanitarian Corridor

Government of the United States of America, 13 August 2008, Bush outlines humanitarian, diplomatic intervention in Georgia

Human Rights Watch (HRW), 14 August 2008, Russia/Georgia: Investigate civilian deaths

Human Rights Watch (HRW), 13 August 2008, Georgian villages in South Ossetia burnt, looted

Human Rights Watch (HRW), 13 August 2008, Georgia: Safe corridor urgently needed for civilians in Gori district

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 13 August 2008, Georgia Crisis: "The rebuilding starts now"

Reuters, 17 August 2008, Russia, Georgia sign ceasefire but tensions high

Reuters, 9 August 2008, Factbox - Casualty tolls in Caucasus conflict

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 15 August 2008, Georgia: UNICEF immediate needs - Response to the needs of children and women affected by the conflict in and around South Ossetia, Georgia

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 13 August 2008, Concern for displaced people in Russia and Georgia

United Nations Country Team in Georgia, 13 August 2008, Georgia: Situation Report on the Conflict - No. 6, 13 Aug 2008

United Nations Country Team in Georgia, 10 August 2008, Georgia: Situation Report on the Conflict - No. 3, 10 Aug 2008

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 16 August 2008, Situation Report No. 3 on the Situation in Georgia 16 Aug 2008

World Food Programme (WFP), 13 August 2008, WFP reaches thousands in Georgia displaced by conflict

World Vision, 13 August 2008, Georgia: Humanitarian needs still growing

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

Media contact:

Kate Halff

Head of IDMC

Tel.: +41 (0)22 799 07 03

Email: kate.halff@nrc.ch

Greta Zeender

Country Analyst

Tel.: +1 212 316 04 94

Email: greta.zeender@nrc.ch

IDMC

Norwegian Refugee Council

Chemin de Balexert 7-9

1219 Geneva, Switzerland

www.internal-displacement.org

Tel: +41 22 799 0700

Fax: +41 22 799 0701