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The so-called 'security zone' is anything but safe – it is a no-man's land, and people there desperately need protection.

Giorgi Gogia, Human Rights Watch's researcher on Georgia

In Security Vacuum, Frequent Attacks and Pervasive Fear  
September 15, 2008

The European Union observer mission scheduled to move into areas near South Ossetia must be given both a mandate and adequate resources to protect civilians, Human Rights Watch said today. Human Rights Watch researchers in Georgia in recent days have documented numerous attacks by Ossetians against civilians in villages in this area, which is effectively under Russian control.

"The so-called 'security zone' is anything but safe – it is a no-man's land, and people there desperately need protection," said Giorgi Gogia, Human Rights Watch's researcher on Georgia. "Monitoring is welcome, but what is urgently needed is a robust ESDP mission authorized to do policing to protect people from militia and other attacks and allow the displaced to return safely to their homes."

The Russian military has not been allowing Georgian police into many of the villages in Georgia's Gori district, which borders South Ossetia. Nor has the Russian military been policing the villages itself.

Under an agreement reached September 8, 2008, with the Russian and Georgian governments, the EU will send 200 civilian experts and police observers under the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) to Georgia. The observers, who will be unarmed, will have a mandate to monitor but not to protect civilians in the Gori area.

Three weeks after Russian forces withdrew from most parts of Gori district, tens of thousands of Georgians remain displaced, both because security is deteriorating and because many homes have been destroyed by bombing or [deliberately burned](#). The security situation remains particularly unstable in areas close to the administrative border with South Ossetia. Displaced Gori district residents who spoke to Human Rights Watch uniformly said they feel unable to return to their homes to stay because they fear attacks by Ossetian militias and others seeking to exploit the utter lack of law enforcement in the area.

"The EU says return of the displaced is a priority, but it hasn't acknowledged the lawless situation and ongoing human rights abuses," said Gogia. "Many who have fled are afraid to return, and those who do, face a real risk of violence. ESDP missions in other parts of the world have had policing and protection responsibilities, and there is no good reason why they can't have them here."

Human Rights Watch researchers found that most people remaining in the villages of Gori district are elderly men and women who hope to protect their homes and property or who physically cannot leave. Some younger people from these villages venture from displaced person shelters in the town of Gori to their home villages for a few daylight hours. They look after their houses and harvest their crops, then return to the shelters. Villagers spending the night in villages either gather in one place to seek safety in numbers or hide in fields or woods near their homes.

"Their fear of violence isn't abstract," said Gogia. "Attacks on civilians continue, and people have nowhere to turn for protection."

Human Rights Watch documented numerous attacks and threats against civilians by Ossetian militias and armed criminals in the last 10 days. For example, "Dato", a 22-year-old villager from Abanoskoda, in the Kareli district on the administrative border with South Ossetia, described the killing of his 75-year-old grandmother on September 6. He told Human Rights Watch that on September 5 he was in the village to check on her and help with the harvest.

"My father and I were harvesting crops in my grandmother's field," he said. "As I approached the house, two Ossetians in camouflage, armed with machine guns, stopped me and asked me who I was. One of them cocked his gun and demanded that I give him my cell phone, and I did so."

"The next evening, after going into the village, I returned to my grandmother's house and found that my father was being held by four armed men in masks, wearing camouflage uniforms," said "Dato. "They tried to take me and my father away. My grandmother was protesting and pulling on my father to keep him from being taken. One of them grabbed her to pull her away, and we all began to struggle. The assailants shot me twice in the right leg. They shot my father in the back, and he immediately fell down. I don't know how my grandmother was shot, but when I was able to look at her I saw that she was dead."

"Dato" and his father survived. "Dato" remains in the hospital with a knee fracture. His father was treated for a wound

to the abdomen.

On September 6, a 40-year-old man, "Lado," was driving in another Gori district village, Kvemo Artsevi, when he was stopped by two men in black ski masks and camouflage uniforms armed with machine guns and standing near a car along the side of the road. "Lado" told Human Rights Watch: "They spoke to me in broken Georgian with an Ossetian accent. One of them asked for my documents, took them, and then asked me to come with them to verify my identity. The other one started swearing at me. I was scared and so I sped away. They followed me in their car for about 2 kilometers and shot at me. The right rear window of the car was shot out. My wife and I left the village that day. I won't go back until there are police to protect us. Those who are there made us leave."

Human Rights Watch also found new evidence of the torching of homes in South Ossetia. Multiple witnesses who recently fled Disevi, a village on the South Ossetian border, told Human Rights Watch that, as of September 13, the vast majority of houses in the village had been burned. Much of the village had been burned when Ossetian militias entered the village on August 11, but the remaining houses have been steadily targeted in recent days. One witness who arrived in Gori on September 15 stated that she saw 15 or 16 houses being burned by militias in the period between September 12 and September 15. This witness told Human Rights Watch that although she had stayed in her house throughout the conflict and through the looting and burning by Ossetian militias immediately following the active fighting, the recent systematic burning had caused her to give up hope that her home would be spared.

Disevi residents and residents of other villages also described a series of thefts and said they have heard frequent shooting in the past 10 days, they said they believe that the recent attacks and criminal activity have been carried out not only by Ossetian militia members, but also by civilian residents from neighboring villages taking advantage of the security vacuum.

"Over the past weeks the EU has focused on the status of South Ossetia and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia proper," said Gogia. "But it's high time for the EU to pay equal attention to the rights and safety of the people in these areas. Ensuring that the EU's ESDP mission can actually protect civilians and itself in the so-called buffer-zones would be a good start."

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