

Forced Migration: Repatriation in Georgia, Open Society Foundation, NY, June 1995

PART TWO

Views of the UNHCR Repatriation Plan

The Abkhaz Position

From the outset, the Abkhaz government has officially supported the UNHCR-supervised repatriation plan as defined in the Quadripartite Agreement on the Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons signed in Moscow on April 4, 1994, by Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia and the UNHCR.

At the time the plan was introduced, there were several compelling reasons for Abkhaz authorities to support the plan for the swift repatriation of IDPs back to Gali. Under the agreement, the return of IDPs was a prerequisite to the next stage in Abkhaz normalization—a referendum on the status of the breakaway region. This, the Abkhaz hoped, would open the way for international recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state. Another reason for supporting rapid repatriation was to bring the IDPs back to their homes in the Gali region, where they had traditionally furnished the labor force for the republic's lucrative tea plantations and other agricultural enterprises. Were the IDPs not to return in time for last year's growing season—and they did not—vital cash crops would be forfeited, and the fields would fall to greater neglect.

In practice, however, official support for the repatriation plan was consistently contradicted by the statements and actions of Abkhaz representatives both in Sukhumi and the Gali region. International NGOs report that in preliminary meetings in Sukhumi in May 1994, Abkhaz officials, notably Deputy Prime Minister Enver Kanba, expressed open hostility toward ethnic Georgians. Officials in the Gali region did the same. While fighting continued around Gali, there were almost daily reports of violent attacks on ethnic Georgians who had tried to return from Gali to check on their homes and gardens. The Abkhaz authorities attributed these deaths to landmines and bandits, taking no responsibility for the ethnic targeting that was in fact taking place.

Abkhazia's continuing resistance to repatriation was summarized in March 1995 by a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) delegation in Tbilisi: "[The Abkhaz] are using obstructionist tactics. They say they do not want to rejoin Georgia. They can accept any other option, other than becoming part of Georgia again." The delegate believed that a key factor underlying Abkhazia's resistance to repatriation was the critical "demographic issue." Prior to the war, ethnic Abkhaz constituted only 18 percent of the overall population, and were thus a minority in their own republic. If Abkhazia were to rejoin Georgia, ethnic Georgians would flood back into the Black Sea region, and once again dominate the political scene by virtue of their superior numbers.

In March 1995, President Vladislav Ardzinba confirmed the same stand he had held during an interview on the eve of the war in 1992. Ardzinba was still firm about the goal of Abkhazian independence and maintenance of the present borders of the republic. He firmly denied reports that he had recently offered to cede to Georgia a small strip of land in the traditionally Mengrelian region of Gali as far as Gali Canal. This area, just north of the Inguri river, has been the scene of the many of the gravest human rights abuses by Abkhaz bands. The Sukhumi government has admitted it has difficulty controlling the area.

Ardzinba's position was echoed by several other officials in Sukhumi, including the deputy foreign minister, the speaker and deputy speaker of the Parliament, and the head of the Abkhazian human rights commission. In general, officials blamed the violence in Gali on Georgian infiltrators from Zugdidi, and added that because of the continuing threat of invasion from Georgia, Abkhazia was unable to disarm its own young men. Abkhaz officials rejected the use of the term ethnic cleansing to describe the beatings and murders of Georgians to discourage them from returning. The human rights commissioner complained that the OSCE had never sent a mission to Abkhazia to investigate such allegations, and that the UN had sent a mission only once.

A key theme raised by Abkhaz leaders (as well as by PKF members interviewed), was that a political settlement on Abkhazia was needed before or concurrent with any repatriation effort. Without official status, Abkhaz leaders argued, returnees would not know whether they were going back to an independent state with a seat in the UN or simply to a region of Georgia. Abkhaz leaders prefer the status of an independent state, of course, because if Abkhazia were to remain part of Georgia, the returnees would be inclined to obey the laws issued by Tbilisi and the Abkhaz would be back where they started from. The intransigence of Abkhaz leaders is buttressed by the anger of

ordinary people. Many support the idea of repatriation in principle, but the scars of the initial assault, the death and displacement that afflicted nearly every family, and the vast destruction still surrounding them are all daily reminders of their rage.

While rarely opposed to the return of women and children, many people raise concern that the women and children probably supported their male relatives as they took up arms against their Abkhaz neighbors. Most Abkhaz may appear uncomfortable admitting it, but say it will take a long time—ranging from five years to a generation—for their wounds to heal sufficiently to live side-by-side with the Georgians.

The Georgian Position

The presence of as many as 280,000 IDPs from its secessionist regions is an increasing source of political and economic tension in Georgia. The shabby hotels of Tbilisi are bursting with IDPs from Sukhumi, compounding the existing burden from thousands of ethnic Georgians displaced by the fighting in 1991 and 1992 during South Ossetia's bid for independence. Few of them have found work in the morass of Georgia's economic collapse. Most of them have sold whatever possessions they escaped with in order to buy a few basic goods.

The Georgian government and international organizations have provided IDPs with basics, including a much coveted supply of electricity and heat. This has stirred resentment among Tbilisi's permanent residents, who spent much of last winter bundled up in dark apartments without heat, hot water, or cooking gas. Those who could installed small wood-burning stoves in their homes, but the majority subsisted on whatever cold food they could afford.

Not only are the IDPs a drain on Georgia's strapped economy, but they are a constant reminder of the military defeats in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. More importantly, they are a symbolic warning that the struggle to maintain a unitary state is not over, and that Eduard Shevardnadze may not be winning. Georgian nationalists excoriate Shevardnadze for losing South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and advocate the hard line of never ceding an inch of Georgian territory to the leaders of these two republics.

This uncompromising stand is supported by Georgians far and wide, who invariably argue that the two republics have not been sufficiently grateful for all the language rights and autonomy measures granted them by the Tbilisi government during the Soviet period. Rebutting the Abkhaz argument, Georgians invoke their own historical facts to prove that Georgia's claim to this territory dates to antiquity. Given the intransigence of Georgians over this issue, the only durable solution entertained has been prompt resettlement in Abkhazia.

Local integration, an alternative solution sometimes advocated by UNHCR, has not been discussed seriously, even though the IDPs in western Georgia belong to the same ethnic group (Mingrelian) and get along well with their local hosts. According to NGOs working in the field, after more than two years of displacement, many of these IDPs have achieved some degree of integration by attrition. Openly considering a policy of large-scale local integration would be seen as the abandonment of territory to the Abkhaz, and this is unthinkable for Shevardnadze's political survival.

Meanwhile, pressure has been mounting among the frustrated IDPs, particularly those living in Zugdidi, who can practically see their homes on the other side of the Inguri river. Thousands are believed to have gone back to their homes unofficially, slipping across the Inguri river through the bush or bribing border guards at the official crossing. Many stay for a week at a time to trade or to work in their gardens. Figures on the number of returnees vary; Abkhaz authorities claim that as many as 70,000 have returned.

When UNHCR-sponsored repatriation finally began last year, thousands were eager to return. But reports immediately reached Zugdidi of attacks on returning families, and terrified returnees began to filter back across the river to the IDP centers and local host families. Those who did not try to return to Gali remain tired and exasperated in Zugdidi. Several times over the last year, thousands of IDPs have held angry demonstrations on the bridge which serves as the border crossing into Abkhazia, which is guarded by detachments of Russian PKF and Abkhaz troops.

At the time of this writing, anger among IDPs continues to mount and international officials warn that the stalemate cannot go on forever. There are partisans in western Georgia who are ready to fight again, and several of them have already slipped across the river to participate in hit-and-run operations on the other side.

The Russian Position

Though officially neutral throughout the conflict, Russian political and military leaders reportedly supported the Abkhazians with military matériel and manpower, playing a crucial role in the Abkhaz victory over Georgian forces in September 1993. In the wake of that defeat, the Georgian government was still embroiled in a conflict with supporters of deposed President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Seeing little chance of winning that battle with its exhausted and demoralized troops, Georgia then turned to Russia for military support. In exchange, Shevardnadze was forced to make the politically unpopular concession of joining the Moscow-dominated CIS. Immediately thereafter, Russia installed troops to maintain security along roads and rail lines in western Georgia. By the end of 1993, the civil war had sputtered to an end and Gamsakhurdia had died under mysterious circumstances.

Since then, the Russian Federation has signed the April 1994 Quadripartite Agreement, and has served as facilitator in the ongoing search for a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict. While both groups acknowledge deep dependency on Russia, they both harbor equally deep resentment and distrust of the former imperial power. Georgians condemn Russia for helping the Abkhaz defeat them and for choking the Georgian economy. But the Abkhaz also condemn the Russians for sealing their border with the rest of the "mainland" on the pretext of blocking Abkhaz fighters from rushing to support their Chechen brothers in battle against Moscow. The sealed border has blocked travel from Russia as well, cutting off vital imports of food, medicine and construction material. The Abkhaz bitterly interpret this development as the result of a new alliance between Russia and Georgia aimed at forcing Abkhazia to rejoin Georgia, or face economic strangulation and a new military invasion by Tbilisi. It is imprudent to try to predict Russia's next moves, but Russia's position, with its perpetual shifts and turns, will remain a pivotal factor in reaching or failing to reach a long-term settlement to Abkhazia's conflict with Georgia.

The UN Observer Mission and the CIS Peacekeeping Force

If there is one issue all the participants in the fragile peace settlement in Abkhazia agree upon, it is the need for the Security Council to maintain the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia, which was in fact extended from May 12, 1995, to January 12, 1996 (Resolution 993). In the Gali region, the main duty of the PKF is to prevent arms and armed contingents of both sides from entering a 12-kilometer zone on either side of the Inguri river.

The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia, introduced into Abkhazia in August 1993, provides an international contingent of unarmed professional military officers to monitor the work of the PKF. Headquartered in Sukhumi, with sector headquarters in Zugdidi and Gali, the 136-member force also performs the informal but vital function of patrolling the towns and villages where criminal bands have roamed and, in certain instances, brings abuses to the attention of Russian and Abkhaz officials. Everyone interviewed for this report predicted that without the two uniformed groups, "a bloodbath," "very big violence," or even another full-scale war could occur.

Both the PKF and the UNOMIG officers interviewed in March insisted that if they were to pull out at the end of their latest term in May 1995, their absence would plunge Abkhazia into a spiral of deadly violence. Agreeing with this view, NGO officials and local people would like the UN to toughen its mandate by giving the forces a policing function which could markedly curtail criminal violence. In the absence of any rule of law in Abkhazia, and to a great degree in Georgia as well, the only improvements in security have come through the equally brutal punishment meted out by hardline mayors and police chiefs. Many recommended adding a policing function to the PKF and UNOMIG mandates to achieve the day-to-day stability Abkhazia desperately needs.