

Abkhazia: Where did all the Peacekeepers Go?

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During May 20-26, the 1,500 strong CIS Peacekeeping Force (CISPKF) in Georgia's Gali district stood by while intense fighting raged between Abkhaz Interior troops and ethnic Georgian groups such as the White Legion and the Forest Brothers. The CISPKF clearly ignored their mandate and failed to follow orders issued by Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev to intervene.

Many analysts trace this fighting, the latest and most intense to occur since the end of the war in 1993, to the CIS resolution "On Additional Measures to Resolve the Conflict in Abkhazia" adopted at the CIS Summit in late April. The intent of this document was to better reflect the security concerns of displaced Georgians trying to return to the Gali district. To this end, it called for the CISPKF to expand its security zone to Gali and condemned the slow pace at which the Abkhazians are repatriating the internally displaced Georgians who had fled the 1993 fighting. It also linked the lifting of economic sanctions imposed on the Abkhazians to this further repatriation of ethnic Georgians and spoke of a joint Georgian/ Abkhazian body to administer Gali.

The Abkhazians rejected this CIS resolution, claiming that they were not consulted about the final document and pointing out that it was not unanimously approved by the CIS heads of state. Some analysts feel that the Russians may have presented the document knowing that it would upset the Abkhazians and create the potential for a new and larger conflict in Gali. This would create the perception of instability in Georgia at a time when critical decisions are being made about competing oil pipeline routes, one running north through Russia and the other west to Georgia's Black Sea coast. Obviously, warfare in Georgia would hurt that Republic's chances for capturing this lucrative trade - and could also explain why the CISPKF (i.e., Russian forces) did not prevent or intervene to quell the current hostilities.

As early as May 6, the Abkhaz had reported to the CISPKF that several hundred members of the White Legion had entered Gali and that tensions in the security zone could escalate. Some analysts believe that the CISPKF simply is incapable of deterring conflicts. In light of the 57 peacekeepers who have been killed over the past four years and countless others wounded, it is little wonder that the young, poorly trained Russian conscripts seem more concerned with their own well-being than maintaining an already tenuous peace.

Attempting to hide the dubious effectiveness of the peacekeepers, the Russian Defense Ministry released a statement asserting that the CISPKF acted within its mandate, showing courage and endurance in the face of hostilities. Lev Mironov, head of the Russian Ministry's task force for settling conflict in Georgia, said, "The conflict died down like a fire without firewood." He added that Russian forces helped diffuse the situation by preventing Abkhazian and Georgian armored vehicles from entering the zone of conflict.

All this contradicts several reports by both Georgians and Abkhazians that the CIS took no preventive action either before or during the hostilities. Referring to the White Legion and Forest Brother's entry into Gali, the Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba accused the CISPKF of violating the clause in its mandate regarding joint work with Abkhaz police to stop penetrations of saboteur and terrorist groups.

Georgian Foreign Minister Iraki Menagharishvili echoed the Abkhaz viewpoint, declaring that the CISPKF acted "completely irresponsibly and took no measures to stop the violence." Georgia has accused the CISPKF of failing to halt Abkhaz armored vehicles and heavy weaponry from deploying within the security zone as the Russian Defense Ministry had boasted.

Today, over 30,000 internally displaced Georgians face an uncertain future. Unable to return home, they are refugees again. Many of the Gali villages were burned to the ground by withdrawing Abkhaz forces. Furthermore, the Abkhaz have declared a state of emergency in Gali and surrounding areas, allowing only the very young and old to return. Clearly, this time the Abkhaz will severely restrict the ethnic Georgians permitted to reenter the Gali area, fearing continued raids by the White Legion and the Forest Brothers.

More importantly, it appears that both the Abkhaz and the Georgians have lost confidence in the CISPKF to maintain peace. Both sides believe the CISPKF aided the other and therefore compromised itself as a neutral intermediary.

Over the past four years, as up to 50,000 displaced Georgians returned to the region, it looked as if Georgia would regain its previous position in Gali in spite of terrorist attacks on the CISPKF and small skirmishes between the ethnic Georgians and Abkhazians. Now the balance has swung back to the 1993s. The Abkhaz are firmly in control and over 150,000 Georgians are waiting to go home again.