

# **LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR PEACE PROJECT (DO NO HARM)**

---

## **Case Study**

### **International Assistance to Civilians: The Abkhaz-Georgian Civil War.**

**Kenny Gluck**

**March 1995**



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

**These documents do not represent a final product of the project.** While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

# **International Assistance to Civilians: The Abkhaz-Georgian Civil War.**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Following the Abkhaz-Georgian civil war in 1992-1993 a host of humanitarian organizations began operations to support the IDP population in the area and help rebuild the war-torn areas of the country. The post-war situation in Abkhazia and western Georgia, where the IDPs were concentrated, presented daunting challenges for peace-building activities. The war and its ensuing forced expulsions had left the different ethnic groups on opposite sides of the front line with few possibilities for interaction or collaboration. Donors had limited interest in conflict resolution and steered aid away from the conflict area.

Although no explicit peace-building activities were initiated by humanitarian organizations in the conflict area, all of their work inevitably was intertwined with the conflict and its attached ethnic hostilities. The various humanitarian organizations interacted with the conflict in different ways depending on their mission in the country, their goals and the personal attitudes of their staff towards conflict.

## **II. THE CONTEXT**

Georgians greeted independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 with an optimism unmatched among the former republics of the Soviet Union. Located on the Black Sea coastline, between Russia and Turkey, the warm climate and easygoing life style there earned Georgia the nickname the "Italy of the East" during Soviet times. Most Georgians expected an economic and cultural renaissance to follow freedom from Moscow. In an April 1991 referendum, over 95% of Georgians supported independence from the Soviet Union. Other than the brief and turbulent independence of 1918-1921, the vote took Georgia outside of Moscow's control for the first time in almost 200 years.

Instead of economic and cultural revival, however, independence unleashed a cycle of violence and chaos in Georgia. In its first three years of independence three civil wars erupted in the country, pitting Georgians against the country's ethnic minorities and Georgian sub-ethnic groups against each other.

## **UNEASY BIRTH OF DEMOCRACY**

In the forefront of the independence movement was Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a former dissident who gained control of the Georgian parliament in 1990. With strident nationalist and anti-Communist rhetoric, Gamsakhurdia was elected Georgia's first independent president in May 1991 with 87% of the popular vote.

Gamsakhurdia's overwhelming electoral success, however, soon faded as Georgia's economic situation worsened and ethnic and regional tensions rose. By the fall of 1991 the Georgian capital of Tbilisi was convulsed with street demonstrations denouncing Gamsakhurdia's autocratic style. Only 8 months after his landslide election, Gamsakhurdia became the first post-Soviet leader to be overthrown as three weeks of street fighting left much of the once beautiful city center in ruins. Two months after the overthrow, the victorious military leaders invited Eduard Shevardnadze, the

former Soviet foreign minister under Gorbachev, to return to Georgia to head the new government.

The fighting revealed deep fissures within the Georgian people. Although most Georgians share a common language and culture they have rarely in history been unified in a single state. Only incorporation into the Russian empire finally united the east and west of the country, which for centuries had been split into rival kingdoms. “A secular national awareness” in Georgia emerged only in Soviet times and divisions in dialect and culture remain strong.<sup>1</sup>

Even after his overthrow, the west of the republic, populated by Mingrel and Svan Georgians, remained loyal to Gamsakhurdia, himself a Mingrel Georgian. Both of these groups consider themselves Georgians, although they maintain their own dialects and traditions separating them from east Georgian (Kartlians and Kakhetians). The bulk of the Mingrel population refused to recognize the new government and began armed resistance against it. Pro-Shevardnadze groups launched a campaign of terror there in 1992 and 1993 in an attempt to crush the resistance. The fighting continued in spurts until October 1993 and was characterized by extensive looting and harassment of the local population. In some cities in Samagrello, such as Senaki, almost a quarter of the houses were destroyed in the shelling and retributions that followed the fighting.

Tensions in this area have been largely superseded by the conflict between Georgians and Abkhaz, as the former enemies became uneasy allies in the fight to preserve Georgian control over the neighboring autonomous region of Abkhazia. (see below)

## SOUTH OSSETIA

The conflict in Western Georgia erupted against the background of another more violent conflict. Gamsakhurdia’s reign was marked by rising tensions between ethnic Georgians and Georgia’s many ethnic minorities, particularly in South Ossetia, an autonomous region located in northern Georgian along the Russian border. (See Appendix - The Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy)

With the backing of conservatives in Moscow, autonomous regions throughout the former Soviet Union sought to heighten local autonomy as central control from Moscow waned. South Ossetia took this path in 1989, declaring itself an autonomous republic, spurred by a rise in nationalist sentiments in Georgia proper. The Georgians responded to the Ossetian move by revoking any trace of Ossetian autonomy. Gamsakhurdia proclaimed that Ossetians, like other ethnic minorities in Georgia, should be considered as “guests” on Georgian land without any particular rights. The constitutional maneuvering was framed by a constant stream of historical histrionics from both sides trying to prove who came first to the foothills on the southern slopes of the Caucasus mountains.

The conflict turned violent in January 1991 when the Georgian militia entered the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, and began what was later described as a anti-Ossetian pogrom. The fighting marked the beginning of 18 months of open warfare between Ossetian and Georgian forces fighting for control of the territory. Ethnic Georgians, who prior to the war comprised almost a third of the population were brutally expelled from Ossetian held territory. In a similar fashion, Ossetians were driven from Georgian held areas. Attacks on Ossetians living in Georgia proper gradually forced them to flee to the embattled Tskhinvali or across the border into Russia.

At the height of the war, South Ossetia declared independence, a status which they continued to hold on to in 1995 in spite of the lack of any international recognition. At several points during the conflict, South Ossetia has appealed for Russia to annex the territory joining them with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic within Russia. The fighting continued sporadically until July 1992, when a Russia imposed cease-fire, policed by a joint mission of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian soldiers. The cease-fire has held for more than three years with only occasional violations although it has not been accompanied by progress towards a political solution to the conflict.

## ABKHAZIA

Georgia's third and bloodiest civil war involved the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia which runs along the Black Sea coast in the north-west corner of the republic. The area was marked by ethnic tensions and competition even before the downfall of the Soviet Union and Soviet nationalities policies have greatly aggravated the nature of the conflict.

Prior to the war ethnic Abkhaz comprised only 18% of the population in the regions while Georgians represent 46% of the area's population. The rest of the region is populated principally by Armenians (15%) and Russians (14%). These demographic realities made democratization and the breakup of the Soviet Union particularly terrifying for the Abkhaz leadership and population. Abkhaz leaders had always seen Moscow as their protection against Georgian cultural and political domination. (See Appendix - The Legacy of Soviet Nationalities Policy)

This window of calm began to disintegrate shortly after Gamsakhurdia's overthrow in January 1992. The new rulers in Tbilisi were eager to prove their nationalist credentials, particularly in light of Shevardnadze's pro-Moscow reputation. The State Council, which ruled the country after the coup, began chipping away at Abkhaz autonomy. The Council reinstated the pre-Soviet Georgian constitution of 1918, which held no provisions for Abkhaz autonomy. The Abkhaz responded by reinstating the Abkhaz constitution of 1925 in which Abkhazia was independent from Georgia.

The war of words and dusty constitutions finally gave way to the rumble of tanks in August 1992, when Georgian troops, under the pretext of fighting pro-Gamsakhurdia rebels, crossed the border into Abkhazia. Meeting resistance from Abkhaz militias, the troops changed their destination and proceeded to seize Sukhumi, the Abkhaz capital. Tengiz Kitovani, the Georgian Minister of Defense who led the operation, raised the Georgian flag over the Abkhaz parliament building and declared Abkhaz autonomy finished.

The better equipped and more numerous Georgian forces were able to seize most of Abkhaz territory early in the war, driving the Abkhaz forces into a pair of isolated pockets in the early months of the war. Later in the war, taking advantage of infighting on the Georgia side and receiving active support from the Russian army and from related ethnic groups in the Northern Caucasus (principally Circassians, Kabardins, Alegei and Chechens), the Abkhaz forces were able to recapture the entire territory of the republic.

## ETHNIC RELATIONS AND WAR

Abkhaz-Georgian tensions have existed for decades both at political and personal levels. In a

unusual challenge to the Soviet taboos on the mention of ethnic tensions, Abkhaz groups petitioned Moscow to allow the Autonomous Republic to secede from Georgia and join the Russia Federation in 1979. Moscow officials denied the request and the crisis was eventually defused with the help of concessions from the Georgian government, then as now headed by former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze.

Relations at the grassroots level varied from city to city within Abkhazia. In some areas ethnic Abkhaz vigorously defended what they saw as the encroachment of the Georgian language. “God forbid if anyone heard you speaking Georgian in Gudauta,” according to one Georgian resident of the area, which was one of the few overwhelmingly Abkhaz parts of the region. While in the capital of Sukhumi there was a high degree of social and residential integration between the various ethnic groups, in other cities, such as the Gagra, people lived in ethnically defined neighborhoods. In mixed Georgian and Abkhaz villages in central Abkhazia, residents recalled an functional, albeit tense, relationship between the groups. “We lived side by side with the Abkhaz,” recalled a Georgian woman who fled the region during the war, “we went to their weddings, they came to ours. We hated each other a little, of course, but everything was normal.”

The ethnic passions in the early stages of the war were limited. The Georgian population of Abkhazia is predominantly Mingrel and was vehemently opposed to the Shevardnadze government. Most local Georgians did not support the actions taken by the Georgian army which was guided from Tbilisi. But the brutal methods used by both sides, however, quickly lent the conflict a deeply ethnic foundation. According to the Human Rights Watch report on the conflict, “both sides of the conflict showed reckless disregard for the protection of the civilian population ... Troops on the ground terrorized the local population through house to house searches, and engaged in widespread looting and pillage, stripping civilians of property and food. We have received countless reports on both sides ... that combatants raped and otherwise used sexual terror as an instrument of warfare.”<sup>2</sup>

The widespread abuses and terror were consciously targeted against members of the “enemy” ethnic groups setting off a cycle of retribution and vengeance. “The combination of indiscriminate attacks and targeted terrorizing of the civilian population was a feature of both sides’ deliberate efforts to force the population of the other party’s ethnic group out of areas of strategic importance. The practice was adopted first by the Georgian side, in the second half of 1992, and later, more effectively by the Abkhaz side. The parties terrorized and forced the enemy ethnic population to flee ... and in some cases entire villages were held hostage on the basis of ethnicity.”<sup>3</sup>

The scale of barbarity was captured in a televised statement by Gia Karkarashvili, the Georgian commander in Abkhazia and later Minister of Defense. Karkarashvili implied that Georgia would not hesitate to lose 100,000 in order to kill 93,000 Abkhaz, referring to the entire Abkhaz population. Many Abkhaz interpreted the statement as a threat to exterminate the Abkhaz nation.

Military activities have been only sporadic since the Abkhaz forces overwhelmed the Georgians and regained control of all of Abkhazia, driving approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgian residents of the area across the Inguri River into Georgia proper. A cease-fire, policed by 1,600 Russian soldiers and 140 UN military observers, has been in effect since December 1993. Following their military victory, the Abkhaz government declared independence from Georgia and are seeking recognition as an independent state. As yet, no governments have provided such recognition.

## THE OFFICIAL PEACE PROCESS AND REPATRIATION

Peace talks sponsored by the UN began before the fighting subsided in October 1993. The sides agreed to a cease-fire and the deployment in the area of UN military observers and Russian peacekeeping forces. The major achievement of the peace process was the Quadripartite Agreement (QPA) which was signed by representatives of Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia and UNHCR in April. In addition to the cessation of military activities, the sides agreed to begin negotiations on a political settlement to the conflict and allow repatriation of all IDPs. The QPA established the Quadripartite Commission (QPC), chaired by UNHCR, to arrange the repatriation of Georgian IDPs.<sup>4</sup>

The repatriation process immediately became the focus of extreme controversy both for the participants in the conflict and for the international organizations working in the area. Of the 80,000 IDPs who were originally scheduled for repatriation in the first six months of the program, only 311 were eventually resettled, principally due to Abkhaz refusal to cooperate. (see The Debate over Repatriation Below)

Georgia is threatening to expel the Russian peace-keepers when their mandate ends in late 1995. This move would likely lead to a resumption of military activities in the area.

## THE ECONOMY

The Georgian economy has been devastated by the series of wars and chaos, which has vastly aggravated the economic decline felt throughout the former Soviet republics. By 1994, industrial production fell by 80% from 1989 levels while agricultural production over the same period fell by 60%. Prior to independence 96% of the exports went to other Soviet republics. The overall economic decline in these countries have left Georgia's exporters without a market for their products.

In 1993 Georgia introduced the coupon, a stopgap currency designed overcome shortages of rubles in the country. Without a sound fiscal policies however, the coupon, which was issued at parity with the ruble rapidly became worthless. The minimum monthly wage rose to 1.5 million coupons (US\$1) by the end of 1994, although this represented a fraction of a family's actual food needs.<sup>5</sup>

Shortages of grains and artificially low prices for most staples led to severe food shortages in 1992-1994. Rioting at bread stores became a frequent occurrence as supplies inevitably ran short. The freeing of prices on most goods in 1994 has eliminated the shortages, although this move introduced additional difficulties for many low-income groups. As the security situation has improved in Tbilisi and other Georgian areas far from the conflict zones, economic and commercial activity has rebounded quickly.

The situation in Abkhazia remains far more critical than in Georgia proper. Reversing their previous support for the war, Russia has imposed a stringent economic blockade against Abkhazia since the war's end, in a attempt to make the Abkhaz more flexible in the peace process and with regard to repatriation. As a result, Abkhazia is largely cut off from the outside world, with only

feeble commerce through its underdeveloped and partially destroyed Black Sea ports to count on.

Although there has been no active fighting in the central and northern parts of the regions for over 18 months little of the extensive war damage has been repaired. In rural areas people have resorted to subsistence farming, while in urban areas of the region, many are wholly dependent on humanitarian aid.

## LOCAL ATTITUDES AND LOCAL INITIATIVES

The war has left approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgian IDPs spread throughout towns in western Georgian and in the capital of Tbilisi. Most are living in former schools or barracks waiting to return. They are not expecting to return to a land of peace. Many of the IDPs have little hope that the conflict is behind them.

“We shall never live with the Abkhaz again. If we go back either we will kill them or they will kill us. There is too much blood behind us.” said a Georgian women IDP who for the past 1 1/2 years had lived in a school in western Georgia.

Similar sentiments were heard by Abkhaz residents about the possibility of allowing Georgians to return to their homes in Abkhazia. “I never want to hear Georgian again,” said an Abkhaz women in Sukhumi. “When I hear the language all I see is the killing they did. All I see is the blood.”

The depth of the ethnic hatred and the physical separation of the two sides has prevented any local initiatives aimed at building bridges between the Abkhaz and Georgians. Most Abkhaz NGOs have maintained a militant anti-Georgian militancy which virtually precludes any cooperation with their Georgian counterparts. The Abkhaz Mothers Movement for Peace and Social Justice was one of the organizers of the demonstrations against the return of Georgian IDPs in the spring of 1994.<sup>6</sup>

The chairwomen of the Abkhaz Children’s Fund likewise saw little possibility for reconciliation - even with Georgian women. “The women were more vicious than the men. How can we speak of reconciliation. I’ve spent my life building bridges with other groups, but no more. You can nail me to a cross but I will never again have relations with Georgians.”

Even those women who would have wished to be a voice for reconciliation found no available forum for this and plenty of incentive to keep quiet. “Now is not the time for talking [peace]. Those who talk a lot end up with a gun at their head. Now is the time to keep your mouth shut, look after your grandchildren and wait,” said one International Rescue Committee staffperson.



Abkhaz NGOs have had almost no contact with international NGOs or UN organizations. Tbilisi based Georgian NGOs are, in general, better organized and have had cooperative relations with both UN and international NGOs. Several Georgian women's groups, such as the Women of Georgia for Peace (WGP) and the White Scarf Movement (WSM) have an explicit peace focus and have had collaboration and some funding from United States based peace groups including the National Peace Foundation.

The White Scarf Movement takes its name from a Caucasian tradition/legend of women intervening with symbolic white scarves to stop brother fighting each other. The movement began in Georgia in the midst of the Abkhaz war with the trip of a large group of Georgian women to the front in an attempt to separate the warring parties. The group has an explicitly pro-Georgian focus and was partly interested in separating hostile Georgian groups so that they could fight more effectively against the Abkhaz.

All of these groups however retain a strong pro-Georgian position. Both WGP and the White Scarf Movement have Nanuli Shevardnadze, Georgia's first lady, as their nominal president. Resolution is often seen as regaining Georgian control of the territory rather than compromise. Both groups mix an unabashedly anti-Abkhaz political viewpoint with a desire do something to resolve the conflict.

Although Guranda Gabunia from the WSM regrets not taking up arms with her Georgian brothers, she still feels that "women have a great role to play. Each woman has to restrain their husband, their sons, their brothers."

Nana Chanishvili, vice-president of the WGP, criticized international organizations for being neutral in the conflict. Portraying the conflict as a struggle between good and evil, she feels that the UN and the international community should back the Georgians, "arming the prince so that he can kill the evil dragon." These sentiments have prevented her from approaching Abkhaz who are connected with or support the current government in Abkhazia, but she has tried to make contact with other Abkhaz women through acquaintances in Moscow with hopes of establishing a dialogue.

The task of simply making contact with counterparts from the other side of the border is extremely difficult for both the Georgians and the Abkhaz. The front line is mined and virtually sealed off to visitors from other side. "I am sure that Abkhaz mothers would support us," Gabunia commented, "but there is no communication possible."

Local initiatives have been hampered by the feeling, among both Abkhaz and Georgians, that conflict was more a result of Russian geopolitical maneuvering than local animosity. (See Appendix - The Russian Factor) Seeing themselves as pawns of Moscow based intrigue, has both strengthened peoples sense of powerless in the conflict and lessened their sense of personal responsibility. People in the area often comment that action on their part is worthless, since

“everything is determined by Moscow anyway.”

## THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE.

### UNHCR

UNHCR opened its mission in Georgia in July 1993 while fighting still raged in Abkhazia. UNHCR has channeled most of its programmatic involvement through NGOs in the country. The mission's focus has been primarily on the official peace process and the repatriation effort.

UNHCR was in the unusual position of participating directly in the agreements which put an end to the 16 month old war in Abkhazia. Known as the Quadripartite Agreement (QPA) the parties to the talks included the Georgian, Abkhaz and Russian Governments. UNHCR likewise chaired the Quadripartite Commission (QPC), charged with implementing the accords.

Together with the other members of the QPC, UNHCR developed plans for the repatriation of 80,000 Georgian IDPs to the southern districts of Abkhazia in the first six months following the agreements. (May 1994-October 1994).

Apart from some distribution of some foodstuffs and clothing to IDPs in Georgia, UNHCR channeled most humanitarian assistance through INGOs. In coordination with the repatriation, UNHCR planned rehabilitation projects in the war destroyed areas of Abkhazia. Some of these projects were funded in the early stages of the program, in anticipation of mass repatriation, and are also being implemented by INGOs.

UNHCR field offices were established in the western Georgian town of Zugdidi, where many Georgian IDPs were located, and in Gali, a town in southern Abkhazia where the first stage of the repatriation was to concentrate. Two of the three expatriates in these offices were Norwegian Refugee Council staff seconded to UNHCR.

The anticipated mass repatriation, however, stalled almost before it began. The QPA gave the Abkhaz government the ability to screen and exclude certain IDPs from the repatriation process. Although the Abkhaz had demanded the right of exclusion so as to prevent former Georgian fighters from returning, in practice they began using this clause to stall all repatriation. Some Abkhaz officials implied that they could legitimately exclude the majority of ethnic Georgian IDPs under the QPA provisions.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of these concessions, the Abkhaz leaders agreed to repatriation in the QPA only with great reluctance. Among the Abkhaz population, the decision was highly unpopular. The agreement to begin repatriation provoked anti-Georgian demonstrations in Sukhumi and other parts of Abkhazia. Repatriation is controversial in Abkhaz because the return of even half of the IDPs would again make the Georgians the most numerous ethnic group in the area frustrating Abkhaz plans for securing greater autonomy for the region and preferential treatment for ethnic

Abkhaz as the region's "native population."

The Abkhaz also fear that a return of the Georgian population would give the Georgians a critical advantage in the not-unlikely resumption of hostilities. With support from Russia now questionable, many Abkhaz feel that next war could lead to the extinction of the Abkhaz as a people, a fear stimulated by the comment of some Georgian leaders, such as the Karkarashvili statement mentioned above. The Abkhaz eventually agreed to the repatriation without a political settlement, under severe pressure from the other three parties to the talks, but they had neither the desire or capability to implement it.

Only 311 individuals were repatriated under the auspices of the QPC repatriation process. These individuals were often subject to harassment by Abkhaz forces in the area. UNHCR was forced to repeatedly intervene with local authorities to protect the returnees and provided food assistance to these families until the early spring of 1995.

#### Save the Children Federation - US (SCF-US)

SCF-US opened its Georgia Field Office in October 1993 to manage a USAID umbrella grant. In this capacity, SCF-US provides sub-grants to other INGOs and handles many of the evaluation and monitoring functions normally taken by the donor.

In addition, SCF-US's Data Collection and Analysis Unit (DACA), also funded by USAID as part of a three country Transcaucasus program, compiled extensive information on humanitarian and development work throughout the region. The information is gathered in monthly reports in Georgian and English for use by government officials and other NGOs. The DACA unit also serves as a resource center for technical materials and Georgia specific assessments and evaluations.

Although SCF-US was not involved in any program implementation, the umbrella grant and the DACA Unit gave it the role of coordinator and, at times, spokesman for NGOs working in Georgia, particularly concerning the debate over repatriation.

#### International Rescue Committee (IRC)

IRC conducted assessments in Georgia in September 1993 and began operation two months later. With a combination of USAID (through the SCF-US umbrella grant) and UNHCR funding IRC has distributed non-food relief supplies (beds, blankets, soap, stoves) to IDPs from Abkhazia in Georgia.

In western Georgia, IRC has also worked to rehabilitate the collective housing for IDPs from

Abkhazia. IRC engineers worked to improve the water and sanitation facilities in over 200 IDP centers in western Georgia.

In order to increase the self-reliance of IDPs from Abkhazia, IRC initiated several income generation projects for IDPs in western Georgia. In the artisanry program, IRC provides tools to IDP artisans who then provide a certain amount of community service and training for other IDP apprentices. An agricultural support program provides livestock and seeds to rural IDPs and their host families in western Georgia. Key farmers were identified to receive training which they would then pass on to others in their areas.

All of IRC's programs were focused in western Georgia where the bulk of IDPs from Abkhazia are currently located. A UNHCR funded project to rehabilitate some community buildings in the Gali district of Abkhazia was initiated but never completed. The project, which involves the Gali hospital and a reception center for returnees, was taken over later by AICF.

#### Agence Internationale Contre la Faim (AICF)

AICF is one of the few NGOs which is working both in Abkhazia and in Georgia proper. AICF began operations in western Georgia in February 1994 and has been active in Abkhazia since the beginning of 1995.

AICF currently runs 17 food canteens for IDPs living in collective centers in western Georgia. In addition, they distribute food parcels to IDPs living with host families in the same region. The programs in western Georgia reach approximately 21,000 beneficiaries, who are selected in coordination with the Georgian Refugee Committee and local governments.

In Abkhazia AICF runs a school feeding program involving 20,000 children. Schools were chosen in cooperation with the Abkhaz government and include 6 towns in south and central Abkhazia.

In addition, AICF has opened canteens for vulnerable groups in 4 cities, in a program similar to that implemented in western Georgia. A mobile canteen in the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi is planned in the near future. So as to reduce the logistical difficulties of crossing the front line dividing Abkhazia and Georgia proper, AICF brings commodities directly into the Abkhaz port of Sukhumi by ship.

In addition to the feeding programs, AICF has embarked on a large rehabilitation program in Abkhazia, starting with the rehabilitation of 10 schools in various cities. AICF also assumed responsibility for the rehabilitation of the Gali hospital initiated by IRC.

## Medicines Sans Frontieres - France (MSF-France)

MSF Holland, Spain, Greece and France are all currently working in Georgia in different parts of the country. MSF - France was the first NGO to begin operations in Abkhazia and is still the only MSF working in the area. MSF-France also works in the conflict torn areas of South Ossetia but has no operations outside of these areas in Georgia proper.

MSF-France is providing medicines to hospitals and clinics throughout Abkhazia. In addition, they provide direct medical services in the mostly Georgian areas of southern Abkhazia (Gali and Ochamchira) where insufficient medical personnel have returned for the system to function autonomously and where security concerns prevent villagers from traveling to urban areas for treatment. In coordination with UNICEF, they implemented a vaccination campaign for diphtheria and other childhood diseases.

In addition to medical assistance, MSF-France has been working to improve the water and sanitation systems in several Abkhaz towns. They have partially rebuilt town water systems helped restart refuse generators in 5 towns.

## United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)

UMCOR opened an office in Tbilisi in October 1993 with a US State Department funded program for the distribution of non-food relief supplies to vulnerable groups. In a USAID -SCF funded program, UMCOR provided medicines to state women's and children clinics in the Georgian capital. The program included training of medical staff in the receiving institutions.

In cooperation with UNICEF, UMCOR plans to conduct an Immunization Coverage Survey to assess the status of vaccination programs and the viability of the state vaccination system.

In May 1995, UMCOR began preparations for a program of physical and psychological rehabilitation of women with trauma in Abkhazia and Georgia. The program will be the first program which involves both Georgians and Abkhaz in a single endeavor.

The program, which is funded by the US Congress' War Victims Fund with support from USAID and SCF, will provide psychological and physical rehabilitation for 20 women in Abkhazia and 20 women in Georgia. The beneficiaries from Abkhazia will be selected by the local Women's Council. Participants in Georgia will be selected by the Georgian Refugee Committee together with the participating psychologists.

The program will be coordinated by an expatriate psychologist who will provide training to the Abkhaz and Georgian psychologists who will actually provide the therapy. The therapy, and any

necessary surgical interventions, will be conducted at a women's hospital in Armenia. While the women are in Armenia, UMCOR will provide in-kind support for their families.

#### United Nations Volunteers (UNV)

In February 1995 UNV, sent Greg Hansen, a Community Facilitator, to Georgia "to promote the confidence-building process in Georgia through confidence-building with local authorities, NGOs, and internally-displaced people and to help initiate national capacity for conflict resolution, mediation and facilitation."

Hansen worked to compile and disseminate a database of local NGOs working in peace-building or related activities. Together with representatives of some INGOs and local academics, Hansen organized a series of seminars for Tbilisi-based NGOs to help them develop their organizational capabilities, and design and improve their peace-building interventions.

Although Hansen left Georgia May 1995, he continued to develop proposals for peace-building interventions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia which are still under consideration by UNV.

## THE DEBATE OVER REPATRIATION

The repatriation plan developed by UNHCR and the QPC came under severe criticism soon after it was unveiled and became an extremely divisive issue for the humanitarian community in Georgia. Almost all of the NGOs working in Georgia expressed reservations about the feasibility and worthiness of rapid mass repatriation.

The critics of the repatriation plan accused UNHCR of bending to political pressure in the negotiations and forsaking their own principles in the rush to return the IDPs to Abkhazia. Both the Russian and Georgian governments, two of the participants in the negotiations with UNHCR, were very eager for a quick return of the IDPs. The Russian government was seeking to portray itself as a peacemaker in this way while the Shevardnadze government was frantic to rid itself of the political and economic burden of the IDPs - a constant reminder of Georgia's military defeat at the hands of the Abkhaz. Akram Ali Eltom, the SCF-US director in Georgia, provided an articulate and forceful voice to the NGO concerns.

Particularly disturbing for Akram was the right to exclude returning IDPs from the repatriation process given to the Abkhaz government in the QPA. Exclusions were technically allowed only for those who fought on the Georgian side during the war, but this determination was left entirely to the Abkhaz authorities with no effective right of appeal. "The exclusion clause which the Abkhaz successfully included in the QPA serves their interests in an all-win manner; they can either allow only children, women and elderly men to enter thus jeopardizing any hopes for a productive life for the returnees once they are in Abkhazia, or the Abkhaz may allow those young men whom they feel vindictive about in order to dispose of them once they are allowed inside Abkhazia."<sup>8</sup>

NGO critics of the plans were dismayed at what they thought was a lack of effective safeguards for the security of the returnees. Although the QPC was empowered to raise protection issues, it was not endowed with any real policing functioning, nor were the UN military observers in the region capable of fulfilling this task. UNHCR protection officer reports, looking at the very limited repatriation that did take place, tend to bear out the NGO concerns. "Quite many UNHCR returnees, upon return have questioned their decision to return. They claim that if they had been fully aware of the prevailing condition in Gali, they would not have gone back. There is a widespread feeling that the return to Gali did not provide the expected solution ... return under conditions of complete safety, freedom and dignity."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most serious of the criticisms was that the repatriation was planned without serious attention to preparing the ground for the IDPs' return to the area. According to the SCF-US director, insufficient attention was given to de-mining, rehabilitation and economic opportunities for the returnees prior to the start-up of repatriation. Little or no attention was paid to the attitudes of either the potential returnees, overwhelmingly Georgian, or the mostly Abkhaz and Armenian populations who would have to welcome them back. Both NGO and local Georgian observers felt that the planned rapid mass repatriation would simply return the sides to a position



where they could resume the bloodshed which characterized the area before cease-fire as described in Local Attitudes and Local Initiatives above.

“The return of the refugees now could create a testing ground for conflict,” said Gia Tarkhan Mouravi, a researcher from the Tbilisi based Caucasian Institute for Peace and Democracy. “We would have to expect constant eruptions of tensions and actual fighting.” For this reason SCF-US insisted on the need for an attitudinal survey on both sides before repatriation could be considered.<sup>10</sup>

UNHCR officials in Georgia were well aware of these and other controversies concerning repatriation and, although they thought that the NGOs were often less than constructive in their criticism, they agreed with many of the issues raised. Geldolph Everts, the UNHCR head of mission in Georgia, was actually “delighted” when the repatriation effort was called off due to Abkhaz refusal to comply with the QPA.

UNHCR was, however, limited in its ability to counter the flaws in the repatriation program because of its role as the broker of the peace process and the chair of the QPC responsible for repatriation. “We were in sometimes conflicting roles of upholding our principles and working towards compromise between the sides,” said Everts. “We started repatriation in October 1994 under a political pressure (from the Georgians, Russians, and donors) which we could not have resisted.”

As the brokers of the peace process and the chair of the QPC, UNHCR was also restricted to dealing only with those returnees who were part of the official repatriation process and which involved only 311 persons. As the official repatriation process stalled, however, tens of thousands of IDPs began to repatriate spontaneously, returning in small groups to their shattered towns and villages. Working with these returnees, however, would have violated the very agreements which UNHCR had presided over, which gave preference to officially registered returnees.

As a result, the one area of the region where the hostile groups were living together in single or neighboring villages was outside of the focus of UNHCR’s programs. In contrast, MSF deliberately focused on these areas, providing both a reassuring presence, contact and some positive inter-group collaboration.

**UNHCR as the chair of the peace negotiations which produced the repatriation process was politically bound to it, and unable to provide an assessment of that process based on the principles it normally uses to defend the rights of IDPs, including the possibility that they were heightening the likelihood of a resumption of hostilities by their actions.**

**Peacemaking can be broadly divided into two categories. There is the “elite” peacemaking that brings politicians and warlords around negotiation tables to hammer our peace treaties and cease-fires. Then there is the grass-roots peace-making which attempts**

**to bring together hostile communities, enabling them to coexist peaceably and attacks the roots of the conflict.**

**UNHCR's involvement in the "elite" process in the dispute between Georgian and Abkhazia, defined and restricted its relations with the warring parties. This role tended to limit its consideration of more grass-roots aspects of the conflict and thereby restricted its intervention at this level.**

**To what extent should these two aspects of peace-building, "elite" and grass-roots be balanced? Is there an argument for these two aspects to be handled by different agencies - i.e. had a different agency (even a different UN agency) handled the QPA, would UNHCR been freer to have played a more constructive role in the process of repatriation, and to have taken a more active role in community level conflict resolution and peace-building?**

## DIVISIONS IN THE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

The conflict over repatriation caused considerable tensions between the NGOs active in Georgia and the UN mission there. The UN mission felt the NGOs preferred to sit on the sidelines and criticize rather than assist them in a difficult situation. Most NGOs complained of a complete lack of coordination with UN agencies and the paucity of information flowing through the humanitarian community.

The tensions around the repatriation plan caused some NGOs to pull out of the conflict area altogether. IRC, which had been funded by UNHCR to do rehabilitation work in the repatriation area, canceled the work citing problems with the repatriation effort. “UN was pushing NGO’s to work in Gali (the principal repatriation area) but if we are there driving around in our big white cars, we would be encouraging people to come back.” said Allan Jelic, IRC’s country director in Georgia. “Presence and reconstruction creates a semblance of normalcy which de-facto causes people to come back. But you don’t want people returning while it is still dangerous.”

SCF-US, which through its role as the manager of the USAID umbrella grant influenced the activities of several NGOs, took a strong stand against the repatriation plan and also limited their sub-grantee work in the conflict area.

There was very little contact between NGOs working in Abkhazia with those working in Georgia proper. Many of the concerns of NGOs working in Abkhazia and their perspective on the appropriate approaches to the conflict went unheard by the community as a whole as discussed in Objectivity, Mandates and Missions below.

**The lack of coordination and understanding between NGOs and the UN mission in Georgia prevented more complex approaches to the massive problems at hand, including conflict resolution, from being undertaken or even considered.**

**Greg Hansen, the UNV charged with examining peace-building possibilities in Georgia, felt that the lack of communication seriously undermined the possibilities for including peace-building elements to the humanitarian work in the area. Hansen resigned in frustration in May 1995 citing a lack of commitment to conflict resolution and a lack of coordination among the various humanitarian actors in the country.**

**The lack of regular meetings, one of the symptoms of the tensions in the relief community, denied people a forum in which the issues of peace-building could have been raised and addressed more effectively. In addition to the lack of coordination, this led to a dysfunctional division of labor in the community. Most NGOs felt that the work of peace should be left to the UN, while the UN was too involved in political conflict to be of any use in grass-roots peace-building.**

## HUMANITARIAN AID AND LEVERAGE FOR PEACE

More than the conflict over repatriation, the most serious obstacles to humanitarian organizations working in the conflict areas were donor attitudes towards the conflict. For the United States, the political underpinning to humanitarian aid in Georgia was support of Shevardnadze government, seen as the guarantor of stability and Georgia's pro-Western orientation.

USAID, one of the principal donors of humanitarian work in Georgia, refused to allow USAID funds for projects in Abkhazia, which they feared could undermine Shevardnadze and the principle of territorial integrity in all of the former Soviet republics. The US embassy in Georgia feared that work in Abkhazia would tend to legitimize Abkhaz claims to independence.<sup>11</sup>

This posed a serious impediment to many US-based NGOs from even considering work on both sides of the conflict. Nor was conflict resolution seen as one of USAID's funding priorities.

In wake of the failure of repatriation, UNHCR, the other major donor of humanitarian activities also stopped consideration of almost all projects in Abkhazia. Considering the Abkhaz to be principal obstacle to repatriation, UNHCR decided to withhold aid in an attempt wring more compliance out of the Abkhaz. Almost all UNHCR funding went to projects benefiting ethnic Georgians forced out of Abkhazia during the war.

"Our purpose is to bring people back. There is a sense among the staff that the Abkhaz who are preventing this are the baddies and that we should not be paying them," explained UNHCR head Everts.

The combination of the UNHCR and USAID restrictions severely limited the possibilities for projects which dealt with beneficiaries from both sides of the conflict or which were aimed at reducing the hostilities on the Abkhaz communities which would eventually have to welcome back the Georgians if repatriation ever did begin. These policies, likewise, removed the possibility of constructive contact with the Abkhaz government and community.

Even UNV, whose mandate included the initiation of a national capacity for peace-building and conflict resolution was largely restricted to working with Tbilisi-based Georgian NGOs far from the conflict areas which severely limited their capacity to promote inter-group reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> (see UNV and PLANS for the FUTURE below)

**Humanitarian work, even when not expressly designed to promote peace-building, can serve that purpose by serving as a conduit for information (both elite and grass-roots), or a**

**forum for collaboration between hostile parties. Humanitarian aid can provide leverage with both leaders and communities which can be used to promote tolerance and reduce tensions. This is achieved both through the provision of material resources and through the contact and trust which emerges through collaborative action.**

**In Abkhazia, this approach was obviously rejected for a more confrontational model by UNHCR. Tore Borreson, the senior UNHCR field office in Abkhazia was convinced that working with the Abkhaz would only support their obstructionism. “A broader UNHCR role in Abkhazia would not have had a positive influence on the attitudes of the Abkhaz. It would have only prolonged the Abkhaz ability to resist repatriation.”**

**NGOs working in Abkhazia took issue with UNHCR’s confrontational approach. Michele Breton, the director of MSF France in Abkhazia, felt strongly that the UNHCR and USAID positions were undermining the prospects for stabilization and peace. Breton, who had been in Abkhazia for over 1 year, felt that only by working constructively with the Abkhaz could their attitudes towards the conflict and towards repatriation soften.**

**MSF was respected by the Abkhaz for beginning work there even before the war. Careful to work in all parts of the region, they were able to work in ethnically Georgian parts of the region in preparation for the return of IDPs without significant opposition from the government. In contrast, Breton said, UNHCR is frequently viewed as “the enemy” by the Abkhaz which severely limited their ability to effect change in the region.**

**To what extent, and in what circumstances can humanitarian aid be used as leverage to promote the reduction of tensions or facilitate the building of bridges between belligerent groups?**

#### **OBJECTIVITY, MANDATES and MISSIONS**

MSF-France’s Breton felt that the refusal of UNHCR, USAID and some NGOs to work with the Abkhaz reflected a deep-seated pro-Georgian bias in humanitarian community in Georgia, which only served to increase the Abkhaz sense of isolation, making them less willing to heed the humanitarian concerns of the international community.

Some of the fund-raising literature distributed by the NGOs read like excerpts from Georgian government propaganda. AICF’s brochure on their work in Georgia laid the blame for the conflict entirely with the Abkhaz. “The Abkhaz (2% of the population) unilaterally declared independence in 20% of Georgian territory ... with military help from the Russia they began ethnic cleansing.”<sup>13</sup>

The roots of the bias, according to most NGO staff in Georgia, were largely mundane. Most organizations have their bases in Tbilisi. Missions to Abkhazia or Ossetia are few and far between

and rarely last more than a day or two. NGOs rely principally on their national staff to form their impressions and opinions of a conflict and it is only natural that they will inherit their biases and those of their surroundings.

UNHCR officials both admitted and defended their bias, saying it stemmed simply from the refusal of the Abkhaz to allow repatriation, UNHCR's paramount issue.

"UNHCR is not a neutral body. We are on the side of people returning. We are viewed by the Abkhaz as their opponents and they are right," commented Tore Borreson.

Breton felt that this exclusive emphasis had blinded UNHCR to the complexities of the problems and the legitimacy of the Abkhaz fears regarding repatriation. Breton attempted to counter this bias with other NGOs by distributing the Human Rights Watch report on the conflict, which he felt gave a more accurate portrait of the conflict, giving equal attention to both Georgian and Abkhaz atrocities and arguments.

**Working effectively in areas of conflict, particularly if that work involves peace-building, demands a sensitivity to the conflict. Yet humanitarian organizations rarely have adequate sources of information about the conflict, particularly where information within the humanitarian community is not flowing briskly. There is always a danger that humanitarian organizations will adopt the biases and perspectives of their surroundings, depriving the situation of an, often much needed, outside viewpoint.**

**What is the relationship between objectivity and effectiveness in dealing with conflict? Is it advisable (or possible) for humanitarian organizations attempting to work towards conflict resolution to maintain a maximum objectivity? ICRC has long maintained that both approaches are necessary. The strict neutrality of ICRC is well complimented by the more normative approaches of other agencies - a diversity of instruments.**

**In Abkhazia the lack of objectivity, which many felt was unjustified anyway, seemed to undermine possibilities for peace-building activities, by excluding many possibilities for work in Abkhazia and further isolating the Abkhaz. The need for objectivity was here sacrificed to the promotion of other values, such as repatriation.**

**A parallel question is how and where the promotion of repatriation as the primary goal of an organization impedes or undermines work towards other goals and colors the perception of the conflict? Did UNHCR's elevation of repatriation as their paramount objective hinder the possibilities for conflict resolution work.**

STAFFING AND OTHER DETAILS

All of the organizations working in Abkhazia paid close attention to the ethnic makeup of their local staff, although diversity was limited by the lack of ethnic Georgians. Maintaining ethnic diversity was not an issue on the Georgian side of the Inguri River, as the local population was identical ethnically to the IDP population and tensions between them were slight. On the Abkhaz side, NGOs all tried to maintain a balance between local Armenians, Abkhaz and Russians as there were almost no ethnic Georgians left in the area. Only UNHCR reported receiving pressure from the government to hire more local Abkhaz.

Only MSF-France had an unspoken policy of considering potential staff's relationship to the conflict when hiring. In selecting staff, Breton would attempt to exclude those who had actively fought in the war. This was a difficult task in Abkhazia as most of the working age male population had fought in the war, but the extra effort, he thought, was justified. "It is a general idea of MSF and a personal conviction. Even if it hampers our work."

Breton felt that the refusal to hire former fighters avoids both symbolic and practical dangers when working with victims of the conflict on all sides. Hiring only those who, if not neutral were at least not violent, enables a greater degree of communication with all of the affected populations, which could be used to promote reconciliation and mute the demands of vengeance. Breton feared that using former fighters could have the effect of delegitimizing the work/influence of the humanitarian group in the eyes of the local population.

Other than UNHCR, none of the other NGOs in the area had considered the matter of hiring former fighters. Tore Borreson, the UNHCR representative in Gali had obviously given that matter thought, but came to the opposite conclusion as Breton. Borreson felt that the conflict here was "popular" on both sides and that the fighters were integral and respected parts of their communities. Not only was there no reason to discriminate against them, but hiring them was also valuable to establish trust with those communities.

This approach, however, did lead to difficulties when an Abkhaz UNHCR translator, and former fighter, was working in mostly Georgian areas of Abkhazia. The local Georgian returnees expressed dissatisfaction with his presence in the area and threatened physical violence against him if he ever came to the area unescorted.

All of the agencies in Abkhazia and western Georgia hired local militias to provide security to warehouse and office space. Most were unhappy about the situation, but could not see any alternative given the security situation in the region.

**When and where is it advisable to exclude former soldiers from the staff of humanitarian organizations? What is the symbolic effect of using former fighters in humanitarian roles? When is it possible to place former fighters in new positive roles?**

## UMCOR

All of the agencies working in Abkhazia and the conflict area in 1993 through the end of 1994 came in response to an emergency situation immediately following the war. UMCOR, which began setting up a program for psychological and social rehabilitation for women in May 1995, was the first organization which was coming in with a more developmental and non-crisis approach.

Although the program has no explicit conflict resolution elements, it is the first program in the area being implemented on both sides of the conflict, and which will bring together professionals from both sides working towards a common goal.

According to Rick Spencer, the director of UMCOR's programs in Georgia, the original proposals for the program, which will provide physical and psychological rehabilitation for women in the war-torn areas, involved only women from the Abkhaz side of the conflict. At the suggestion of UNV's Greg Hansen, however, the program was expanded to include women on both sides of the conflict.

The actual counseling of women will be performed at a women's hospital in Armenia by local psychologists working separately - psychologists from Abkhazia working with the Abkhaz women, and Georgian psychologists working with the women from Georgia. Mike Kaprelian, the American psychologist who will be coordinating the training of the local psychologists, however, does not rule out having joint sessions for both groups of women.

Kaprelian thought that such meetings could be a positive part of the healing process for the women. The meetings, he thought, would be unlikely to be a confrontational experience, "because the women would have more identification with each other as victims of the war than as representatives of opposing sides." Kaprelian did not exclude the possibility that the women could become "instruments of dialogue" as a result of the experience. The decision on whether or not the two groups will actually meet will be taken only after the beginning of the program.

Georgian psychologists were hesitant about the possibility of a joint meeting. Tsitino Grdzlishvili, a Georgian psychologist with the program who is herself an IDP from Abkhazia, doubted that the women would be able to recognize the commonness of their positions over the ethnic walls that have divided them since the war. But, she said, there always was a chance that the close ties which people had before the war provide an opening for the overcoming of hatred. "We have many blood ties, human ties that remain. It could turn out that some of the women in the different groups are relatives. They could find they have the same grandmother."

The psychologists who were organizing the program together with Spencer and Kaprelian were the first local staff in Georgia who are working across the lines of the conflict. Several of the Georgian psychologists had lived previously in Abkhazia and were themselves IDPs. In Tsitino's



first meetings with her Abkhaz counterparts, it took some time for them to get over “the politics and the painful points” and get to working.

In addition to the difficulties of crossing boundaries, all of the participants are forced to overcome hostilities and suspicions from their own sides. Tsitino was criticized within the Georgian Refugees Committee for even meeting Abkhaz participants in the program. When some wanted to use her research on women with trauma for propaganda purposes, Tsitino refused, both to protect the program and the women beneficiaries. “We must be women first, and only then Georgian patriots.”

With help from UMCOR, IRC and others, Tsitino is drawing up plans for similar programs involving children instead of women. The plans currently are to run the program only in Georgia proper, although the organizers are not averse to widening that focus as happened in the women’s program. The psychologists involved in the program may also consider including an explicit peace education aspect in the program.

**UMCOR had to overcome great logistic and political difficulties in order to run the program on both sides of the conflict simultaneously. It is still not clear whether there will be positive peace-building consequences to the program, but there is certainly that possibility. Their experience, once the program is fully underway, will shed light on the value of running projects on both sides of a conflict, even where no explicit conflict resolution is intended.**

**Even in the preparatory stages of the program there are already positive developments in the attitudes of the staff and the possibility of locally generated spinoffs.**

**By most standard evaluation methods, the UMCOR program has very high costs in relation to the number of beneficiaries. The extremely interactive approach involving a small number of women definitely has its benefits in terms of potential attitudinal changes, but it is necessary to ask whether a broader scale program with lower costs per beneficiary would be more justified.**

## UNV AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

In spite of frustrations of his first months in Georgia, after his resignation UNV Greg Hansen drafted a proposal for further peace-building and reconciliation activities in Georgia. The proposal represents an attempt to rectify what he saw as the lapses in UNV’s previous work and those of relief community’s work in Georgia as a whole.

Hansen proposed continuing UNV’s work to increase the peace-building capabilities of local NGOs. In the previous program, this goal was undermined by the exclusive focus on Tbilisi-based

Georgian NGOs. The exclusion of other areas deprived the conflict of some of the only potential bridges between the warring parties. The disproportionate focus on Tbilisi and the neglect of non-Georgian areas “was actually limiting the potential contributions of some of the more capable Tbilisi NGOs who were looking to the United Nations ... to nurture contacts between themselves and potential partners in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”<sup>14</sup>

In the proposals for 1995/1996, this work is extended to the conflict regions themselves. In the proposal UNV would create Community Peacebuilding fund, which would provide small grant (up to \$500) to local NGOs and community groups for specific projects. The fund would be managed by locally based UNVs, who would also assist in the formation of local NGOs and the identification of potential projects.

The actual grant activities would be selected by the groups themselves, although Hansen hopes that they would include reconstruction/development projects, peace-education programs and alternative income generation schemes for former combatants. The fund would be supervised by a voluntary review committee bringing together representatives of the various regional and ethnic groups involved in the program. The UNV representatives in the area would also be responsible for promoting a awareness of human rights issues and international law among the local groups and local authorities and for encouraging contacts between community groups on different sides of the conflict.

Certain parts of the proposal are intended to deal with some the unintended consequences of the international community’s work in Georgia over the past several years. The overriding focus on repatriation in the international community combined with the action of Georgian politicians had time and time unrealistically raised expectations among IDPs of their impending return. The repeated dashing of these hopes had added significantly to the tensions in the regions and the level of frustration of the IDPs. In addition, many IDPs decided to return spontaneously based on false information, only to be forced to flee again as a result of the lack of security in the area To combat these tendencies, the UNV proposal included the creation of an information service directed at the IDPs. The service aimed to provide reliable information on the situation in the region, to give the IDPs a realistic sense of expectations and enable them to make more informed decisions. It was hoped that this service would lessen the overall uncertainty of the IDPs’ future, thereby eliminating a source of tension and aggression.

## Appendix 1 THE LEGACY OF SOVIET NATIONALITIES POLICY

### The Hierarchy of Nations

Ever since Stalin, Soviet ethnic groups have been placed in a rigid hierarchy of nationhood. “Peoples”, such as Ukrainians, Georgians and Armenians, were entitled to “Union Republic” status, considered as independent states “voluntarily” united in the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union crumbled in 1991, all of the Union republics have become wholly independent countries.

Other ethnic groups, such as the Tatars in Russia or the Abkhaz in Georgia, were given the lesser status of “Autonomous Republics,” within the larger Union Republics. These areas boasted their own Cabinets of Ministers and Supreme Soviets capable of enacting laws, but were largely subordinate to the Union Republic governments above them. Further down the Soviet ethnic hierarchy were groups given “Autonomous Region” (*Oblast*) status, such as the South Ossetians in Georgia. These areas had no legislative or governmental authority outside of limited cultural and administrative autonomy. Both under Stalin and his successors, the autonomy was hemmed in by the rigid dictates of government policy, including the promotion of Russian language and culture as the foundation of Soviet unity. With the fall of communism, the leaders of autonomous areas seized these once symbolic power with a vengeance.

In a cynical policy designed to preserve Moscow’s control over the republics, elements in the Soviet, and later Russian, government consciously worked to heighten the conflicts between autonomous areas and their host Union republics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The conflicts, it was hoped, would demonstrate the dangers of independence for the republics and the need to maintain Moscow’s influence as the final arbiter between potentially hostile ethnic groups. To promote this policy, parts of the central government in Moscow sought to promote separatist and extremist leaders in the autonomous areas while flooding them with weapons. While these policies did not initiate the conflicts, they tended to radicalize them and facilitate the leap from ethnic tension to open warfare in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

With the decline of Moscow’s political control, Autonomous Regions throughout the Soviet Union unilaterally attempted to upgrade themselves to Autonomous Republic status, over the inevitable objections of their host Union Republics. South Ossetia made the leap from Autonomous Regions to Autonomous Republic in 1989, leading eventually to war with the Georgian government.

## Demography and Politics

Soviet nationalities policies, particularly under Stalin, in many ways laid the groundwork for the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Soviet government undertook a vast and chaotic campaign to change the country’s ethnic map - moving ethnic groups around the country like chess pieces. The policy was designed to dilute or eliminate the influence of potentially disloyal ethnic groups. The most well-known and brutal of these moves were the arrest and deportation of the Chechens and Crimean Tatars, in which entire ethnic groups were arrested and shipped on cattle cars to Siberia or Central Asia. In Abkhazia, a milder form of this policy was implemented. Throughout the 1930s, the government forcibly resettled Georgian farmers in

Abkhazia. The project was instigated and supervised by Lavrenti Beria, then head of the NKVD (later known as the KGB), who was himself an ethnic Georgian from Abkhazia.<sup>15</sup> During this period Abkhazia, which had been a separate Union Republic, was re-merged with Georgia.

After Stalin's death Soviet nationalities policy reverted to a more benign local ethnic preference within the limits of Communist Party loyalty and acceptance of overall promotion of Russian language and culture. Until the end of Communist rule, top spots in the leadership of Autonomous Republics and Regions were always reserved for (Communist Party approved) representatives of the "title" ethnic group (i.e. Abkhaz in Abkhazia, Ossetian in Ossetia) regardless of the fact that occasionally they represented a minority of the population of the territory. Moscow, likewise, ensured the favored status of the "title" group's language and cultural institutions. The Abkhaz feared that control by Georgia, given the nationalist mood of the post-Soviet period, would mean an end to these preferences. Democratization, where ethnic Abkhaz are a small minority in the area, would obviously mean an end to their political influence in the region.

The Abkhaz are particularly sensitive to the ethnic dilemma of democracy because they feel that the current demographic situation is the result of a conscious policy to extend Georgian control over the region. "We are not guilty that as the result of historical processes and artificial assimilation we have a minority in our own territory," commented Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzhinba in arguing for special consideration for the Abkhaz minority in the region.<sup>16</sup> Although the Abkhaz concede that the ethnic Georgians have a near majority in the region, they refuse to recognize the political legitimacy of the Georgian population. The Abkhaz, like other minorities in the newly independent republics, fought tenacious, albeit, losing battle against the breakup of the Soviet Union and the decline of Moscow's influence.

The conflict in Abkhazia was almost avoided. In spite of the nationalism of the Gamsakhurdia regime, a compromise power sharing agreement was hammered out between the ethnic Abkhaz and Georgians living in the Autonomous Republic in 1991. Under the agreement, the parliament of the region was elected according to a system of ethnic quotas ensuring that the area's Georgians could not adopt any legislation without the cooperation or consent of either the Abkhaz or a bloc of the area's other ethnic groups. Twenty eight seats in the parliament were reserved for Abkhaz deputies, 26 for Georgian representatives and 11 for the remaining ethnic groups. The representation in parliament did not reflect the area's population, discriminating both against the Autonomous Republic's Armenian and Russian populations as well as ethnic Georgians who comprised the single largest group, but it did provide a measure of stability even while fighting was raging in other parts of Georgia.<sup>17</sup>

## THE RUSSIAN FACTOR

As the center of the collapsing empire, Russia is intimately involved in all of the conflicts of the former Soviet Union. As the conflict in Abkhazia turned military, the role of Moscow and the Russian army has steadily increased. The Russians provided weaponry through official channels to Georgia during the war, while funneling arms to the Abkhaz through existing Russian military

bases in the region. The military assistance was a mixture of official policy a lack of control over the commanders at these bases. Many Russian soldiers stationed in the area freely admitted selling their military services to both sides although the bulk of this aid went to the Abkhaz.<sup>18</sup>

Many analysts accused Moscow of using the Abkhaz conflict to force concessions from Georgia on military questions. The Soviet, now Russian army, formerly maintained both military bases and luxurious beach resorts in Abkhazia. Some cynics dubbed the fight, “The War for the Generals’ Dachas.” Others saw Russia using the fighting as a stick, forcing the Georgians to accept a permanent Russian military presence in the country. This policy seemed to render fruit when in 1994 Georgia consented to a permanent Russian military presence in the country, along with Russian control of the border with Turkey.

Soon after this agreement Russian policy towards the conflict changed dramatically. The policy of protecting Abkhazia from an aggressive Georgia was replaced with heavy-handed pressure on the Abkhaz leaders to cut a deal with Georgia. In late 1994, Russia added a tight economic blockade of Abkhazia in an attempt to push an agreement. By the summer of 1995, many expect a resumption of hostilities, this time with clear Russian support for the central Georgian government.

Juny, Ronald Grigor, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington:1988, p. 318

id. p. 3

id. p. 3

As Abkhaz independence is not recognized by the UN, the Georgian who fled to Georgia proper are considered refugees.

UNDP, Draft 1995 Human Development Report (unpublished)

Republic of Abkhazia, Sukhumi, May 3-5, 1995

Borgen, Jan. Gali Region Protection Report, Medio October - ultimo December 1994.

Borgen, Akram A. Confidential Memo to Rudolph von Bernuth of May 31, 1994

Borgen, Georgia/Abkhazia - Gali Region Protection Report: Medio October - Ultimo December 1994.

Borgen, Akram A.

A similar restriction regarding the breakaway region of South Ossetia seemed to be weakening in wake of US Ambassador Kent Brown’s trip there in the spring of 1995.

Hansen, Greg. Draft Country Program: UNV Activities to Promote Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in the Republics of Georgia 1995/1996, (DRAFT)

AICF brochure, Paris 1994.

Hansen, Greg. Draft Country Program: UNV Activities to Promote Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in the Republics of Georgia 1995/1996, (DRAFT)

Myrba, Guerorgui, “War in Abkhazia: The Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict.” in

Myrba, R. ed. *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. W.E Sharpe. NY:1994

Myrba

Myrba, Vladislav, interview, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* Moscow, May 11, 1991

Myrba, p. 287

Human Rights Watch, *Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russian’s Role in the Conflict*, vol. 7 No. 7 March 1995