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POVERTY ALLEVIATION FOR INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS: CASE STUDY OF GEORGIA

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The frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have created anywhere from 200,000 to 350,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Georgia. The number of IDPs worldwide has steadily risen and has now surpassed the number of refugees globally. Problems of poverty permeate the IDP issue. On one hand, displaced Abkhazian and South Ossetian people suffer from extensive poverty due to insufficient infrastructure, lack of job opportunities and the ambiguity surrounding which agency or government is responsible for the IDPs' needs. On the other side of the issue, the stagnation of the frozen conflict precludes efforts at positive long-term poverty alleviation. To better understand the conflicts in these regions and their implications for IDP poverty in Georgia, this note explores the history of these tensions and how Russian interests may have worked against their resolution.

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly every aspect of international development is touched by the issue of poverty. In the case of Georgia, the poorest of the poor make up part of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) population in the country. IDPs are people who flee their homes but not their countries, unlike refugees who cross international borders. These individuals were forced from their homes due to separatist struggles known as frozen conflicts in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of the country. To better understand the conflicts in these regions and their implications for IDP poverty in Georgia, this note explores the history of these tensions and how Russian interests may have worked against their resolution.

INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE REGIME AND ITS LIMITATIONS FOR IDPs

United Nation’s High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) typically works on refugee-oriented issues and has a global mandate to intervene in refugee crises. The United Nations’ “Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement” state that “national authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons within their jurisdiction [and] that internally displaced persons have the right to request and to receive protection from these authorities” (United Nations). In recent years, UNHCR has been inclined to work with IDPs when there is a clear link between IDPs and refugee populations or when the internal displacement has a likely chance of becoming a refugee issue (Human Rights Watch). The rubric below outlines the dominant differences between refugees and internally displaced persons. Though the IDPs in Georgia are not considered refugees, UNHCR does have a limited scope and the resources to carry out poverty alleviation work for the Georgian IDPs.

Refugees	Internally Displaced Persons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have crossed an international border • Have lost the protection of their own country • Have a special status under international law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are displaced within their own country • Causes of flight: violence, war, human rights violations, disasters • Home country still in charge of their protection • Do not have special status under international law but enjoy the same rights as other citizens

Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

IDPs are particularly vulnerable to being placed in inhospitable environments, being under intense psychological distress, losing their livelihoods, and being unable to benefit from international organizations’ aid. IDPs currently outnumber the number of “traditional” refugees worldwide. However, due in large part to the structure of the international refugee regime, IDPs qualify for significantly less assistance than refugees. In fact, UNHCR is currently involved in providing assistance to only 5.4 million IDPs worldwide (UNHCR). This figure represents only

20% of the world’s current IDP population; the other 80% rely nearly exclusively on their own national governments for support.

Table 2: Internally Displaced Persons Outnumber Refugees

Year	Refugees	IDPs
1970	9 million	5 million
1980	14 million	9 million
2000	16 million	22-25 million
2004	13.2 million	25 million

Source: UNHCR and NRC/Global IDP Project.

GEORGIA’S FROZEN CONFLICT

Georgia is located in the south Caucasus, sharing borders with Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey. A small country with a population of just over 4 million people, Georgia declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The Black Sea and south Caucasus region, on the periphery of Europe, is home to the world’s so-called frozen conflicts. The area is commonly considered to be in a geopolitical stalemate, directly related to the collapse of the Soviet Union (ICG, OSCE, Council for Europe). Conflict in the Black Sea region has been declared a global security concern because it is recognized as a breeding ground for terrorism, drugs, arms smuggling, weapons proliferation, and illegal trafficking of goods and human beings (Blank 2005). The most notable of these conflicts are located in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova and Nagorno-Karabakh in Armenia (Chivers 2006).

The frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have created anywhere from 200,000 to 350,000 internally displaced persons in Georgia (UNDP). The number of IDPs worldwide has steadily risen and has now surpassed the number of refugees globally. Georgian IDPs are among the most marginalized of groups in the country. Since the outbreak of war nearly 15 years ago, they have lived away from their homes, some in camps, others in makeshift “temporary” housing. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and representatives of international organizations alike have spoken out against the horrible conditions and high poverty rates among IDPs. However, the Georgian response has been inadequate, resulting in international intervention.

The problems of poverty permeate the IDP issue. On one hand, displaced Abkhazian and South Ossetian people suffer from extensive poverty due to insufficient infrastructure, lack of job opportunities and the ambiguity surrounding which agency or government is responsible for the IDPs’ needs. On the other side of the issue, the stagnation of the frozen conflict precludes efforts at positive long-term poverty alleviation.

Further increasing the importance and timeliness of the IDP crisis in Georgia is the mounting tension between the Georgian and Russian governments. Recently the two have taken

more aggressive stances, ranging from Kremlin statements supporting Abkhaz and Ossetian independence to Georgia's arrest of alleged Russian spies and the continuing controversy surrounding the presence of Russian troops in Georgia. This standoff is indicative of the strained relations between Russia and its former Republic. The tensions between these two nations present a major obstacle for international and local aid agencies in their poverty alleviation efforts.

GEORGIAN IDPS

After the fall of communism in the Soviet Union the majority of the USSR's Republics declared independence. Georgia declared its independence in 1991 and quickly began experiencing the¹difficulties of transitioning to democracy. Ethnic tensions erupted in two regions, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia, resulting in the IDP crisis which continues today. The UNHCR estimates that 95% of IDPs in Georgia originated in Abkhazia, and the remaining 5% come from South Ossetia (UNHCR 1999).

Abkhazia

Shortly before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and immediately after Georgia declared its independence, tensions mounted and war broke out in the Abkhazia region of Georgia (International Crisis Group). The worst fighting among Abkhaz separatists, the Georgian military and Russian peacekeeping troops took place between 1990-1995. Since then, several smaller-scale skirmishes have occurred, and a general cease-fire has not resolved the frozen conflict in existence today.

Currently, although the Georgian government has conceded autonomy to Abkhazia, the Abkhaz government continues to strive for ultimate independence (International Crisis Group 2006). In addition, the Georgian government, uniformly rejected the Russian Federation's proposal of unifying Abkhazia with Russia (Interfax 2006). International mediators such as CIS, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations (UN) have stepped in to aid the process, but the conflict continues to stagnate (UNOMIG 2006). The issue of internally displaced persons persists, adding pressure to the situation (Refugees International).

Internally Displaced Persons from Abkhazia

The pre-war population of Abkhazia numbered 520,000. According to 1989 Soviet Census data, 17.8% of Abkhazia residents were ethnic Abkhaz, while 45.7% considered themselves Georgians. The remainder of the Abkhazian population consisted of ethnic Armenians and Russians. Following the armed conflict and resulting flight of ethnic Georgians, Abkhazia's demographic characteristics drastically changed. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, ethnic Abkhaz currently represent over 40% of the population living in the Abkhazia region of Georgia. Between 1992 and 1994, it is estimated that nearly 350,000 members of Abkhazia's population were displaced (UNHCR 1999) (RefWorld 1999). The most recent United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) estimate has adjusted the original number to 201,000 IDPs, suggesting that there has been some spontaneous return of IDPs to Abkhazia (UNHCR 2005). Abkhazian IDPs are predominately made-up of ethnic

Georgians who were forced from their homes in Abkhazia and now live in makeshift settlements around Tbilisi and central Georgia.

South Ossetia

In November 1989, the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet² voted in favor of unification with its Russian counterpart, North Ossetia (International Crisis Group 2004). Today's ongoing conflict is the result of this attempt to secede from Georgia. Though a general cease-fire, overseen by OSCE peacekeeping troops, has been in place since 1992, tensions have recently escalated as the Georgian government attempts to clamp down on smuggling and illegal activities (International Crisis Group 2004). Separatists have expressed hope for support from Moscow, further straining relations between the Russian Federation, its breakaway provinces, and Georgia (Vaisman 2006). More recently, in June 2006, representatives of the South Ossetian, Abkhazian and Transnistrian (Moldova) breakaway provinces met in Sokhumi, Abkhazia to sign co-operative agreements, proposing the creation of a mutually beneficial relationship between the provinces (Socor 2006).

Internally Displaced Persons from South Ossetia

The issue of IDPs from South Ossetia differs from Abkhazia. Of the individuals that fled the war in South Ossetia, a large portion of them left Georgia and went to North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation. The fact that they left the confines of their country classifies them as refugees rather than internally displaced persons. This status qualifies them for refugee benefits (which tend to be further reaching and more encompassing than those available to IDPs) (Barnett 2002).

Figure 1: Map of IDPs in Georgia



Though the Georgian government has been actively pursuing a resolution to the IDP problem within their country, it has also requested the assistance of international bodies. UNHCR is present in Georgia and working to repatriate individuals into both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Also, it is important to note that UNHCR works closely with UNDP, UNOCHA, USAID, SDC, World Bank, and a variety of other international organizations to administer the aid they provide to Georgian IDPs. Furthermore, UNHCR expects the Georgian government to provide adequate assistance to its internally displaced population and therefore currently acts as a facilitator, not a leader in assistance.

POVERTY IMPLICATIONS FOR IDPs AND REFUGEES IN GEORGIA

As in most countries of the former Soviet Union, poverty poses a significant problem in Georgia. In 2005, the World Bank measured per capita GDP at \$971. Most recent World Bank poverty estimates suggest that 55% of the Georgian population lives below the poverty line and unemployment has been steady at around 12%. Walter Kalin, the UN Secretary-General's Representative on the Human Rights of IDPs, has said he was "shocked by the misery" in which Georgian IDPs currently live (Kalin 2006). Internally displaced persons, particularly those that live in "collective centers" or camps, have limited access to land, employment and health care, making them particularly susceptible to poverty. Furthermore, according to a study commissioned by UNDP Georgia on "IDP Vulnerability and Economic Self-Reliance," IDPs live under a culture of dependency stemming from the length of time the crisis has dragged on and their lack of social integration and economic self-reliance (UNDP Georgia 2003). On average, nearly 80% of IDPs' income comes from state sources.

Table 1: Share of IDP Households By Source of Income³

Income Source	Poor %	Non-Poor %	Total %
Employment	24.5	48.0	32.2
Savings	43.0	29.4	38.5
State Allowances	75.0	85.6	78.4
Remittances	25.4	17.4	22.9

Source: UNDP Georgia Report: "IDP Vulnerability and Economic Self-Reliance"

Humanitarian agencies have estimated that nearly half of the displaced population lives in "collective centers," usually housed at hotels, schools, factories, and hospitals. Of those facilities, 70% do not meet minimum living standards, lacking access to clean water, adequate heating insulation and safe infrastructure (electricity and gas lines) (UNDP Georgia 2004). Furthermore, access to health care is scarce among displaced persons. This condition stems from the large amounts of corruption and the simple lack of health care facilities in rural areas.

Like most transitioning countries, Georgia is proactive in its fight against poverty, both for IDPs and for its general population. Georgia submitted its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) to the International Monetary Fund in 2003 (IMF 2003). The Georgian PRSP calls for strengthening ties to the West by striving to join NATO and the European Union (EU). However, in order for Georgia to qualify for NATO and EU membership, it must solve its internal territorial disputes (Yasmann 2006). The Georgian PRSP references the influence of the frozen

conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a challenge to poverty reduction and overall economic growth. Specifically, the PRSP targets the immediate problems of IDPs and refugees that have been created as a result of the conflicts. Though poverty is certainly a general problem in Georgia, the poverty experienced by displaced populations is exceptionally challenging to combat due to the unique nature of the frozen conflicts.

RUSSIAN POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SECURITY INTERESTS IN GEORGIAN FROZEN CONFLICTS

Since the 19th century, Russia has attempted to control the Caucasus region in pursuit of security and resource interests. Russia's continued involvement in the frozen conflicts —through public support in the form of Russian troops in the conflict zone and through its rhetoric — is an attempt to reassert Russian hegemony in the region (International Crisis Group 2006). Today, Russia houses military bases on Georgian soil, one of which is in Abkhazia (President of Georgia 2005).⁴ Additionally, in accordance with CIS agreements, Russia has provided peacekeeping troops for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The dominance of Russian troops in the Georgian frozen conflict zones has been perceived as a Russian effort to thrust its influence on its “near abroad” and retain control of the situation. Russian rhetoric has included strong statements reinforcing the break-away regions' attempts at independence. Russian President Vladimir Putin has gone as far as to say, “If someone thinks that Kosovo can be granted full independence as a state, then why should the Abkhaz or the South-Ossetian peoples not also have the right to statehood?” (Kremlin Press Conference 2006).

Further complicating matters, 85% of Abkhazian and South Ossetian residents hold Russian passports, provided to them by the Russian Federation and whose possession fuels the separatist drive (Yasman 2006). The possession of Russian passports, and hence Russian citizenship, creates additional concern for the Georgian government due to the fact that the Russian constitution declares authority to protect its citizens living inside and *outside* Russian borders. The Russian Federation could very easily contend that it is defending the rights of its citizens living abroad by actively engaging on the behalf of the Abkhazians in Georgia. The possession of dual citizenship creates additional complexity to the IDP/refugee issue because the individuals who possess dual citizenship revoke their rights to refugee status if they leave Georgia and settle in Russia. In most cases individuals fleeing their home country into a neighboring state would be eligible for special benefits but in the Georgian situation this is not the case.

One of the biggest interests Russia has in the Georgian conflicts relates directly to conflicts inside its own borders. The secession of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the creation of independent nations, could send a signal to Russian regions in turmoil, specifically Chechnya. A domino effect could potentially ensue, with pockets of dissent and secession throughout Russia leading to an uncontrollable crisis of desired sovereignty – a push for independence from the Russian Federation. Therefore, it is in Russia's best interest to maintain the frozen, status quo nature of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

CONCLUSION

The question of internally displaced persons in Georgia is a complex one. While international organizations, NGOs, and the Georgian government have attempted to alleviate the growing poverty among IDPs, much remains to be done. Due to the strict nature of the international refugee regime, and the uniqueness of the Georgian case, it is imperative that the internally displaced persons from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are not ignored, thereby losing the attention and aid necessary to pull them out of their current poverty trap.

The Georgian government has made attempts to improve the living conditions and bring IDPs out of poverty (Refugees International). Namely, President Mikhail Saakashvili has called for a privatization of large hotels in order to 1) boost economic growth and 2) to provide housing for the countless numbers of IDPs. Additionally, organizations like the United Nations Development Program and USAID are sponsoring projects like the “New Approach to Internally Displaced Persons’ Assistance” and “Youth Houses” in conflict-affected areas, focusing efforts on fighting poverty among the poorest of the poor in Georgia (UNDP). Since 1998, no UN agency or international NGO has provided shelter for returnee families in Abkhazia or South Ossetia and the state of the so-called “collective centers” is abhorrent (Svendson 2005). Shelter support in the form of grants for infrastructure reconstruction and development are necessary both outside and inside Abkhazia.

Certainly, the issue of poverty is not exclusive to the internally displaced populations in Georgia. However, poverty alleviation strategies for IDPs are complicated due to the distinction between refugee and IDP, as well as on-going frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Long-term solutions are needed that take into account Georgia’s unique situation not only inside its borders, but also in relation to its Russian neighbor. With parliamentary elections taking place in Georgia and Russia this year, and Presidential elections coming up in Russia in 2008 and Georgia in 2009, the issues surrounding South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the IDP/refugee problem will continue to take on heightened importance (ElectionGuide.org).

ABBREVIATIONS

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

ENDNOTES

¹ This is also the case with South Ossetia.

² The Supreme Soviet was the highest legislative body during the reign of the USSR.

³ These numbers represent IDPs living in collective centers and among the population at-large.

⁴ As the result of an agreement reached between Presidents Putin and Saakashvili, the Russian military bases are scheduled to be shut down by 2008.

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