

Policy Department External Policies

THE SITUATION OF REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (IDPS) IN ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN AND GEORGIA

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Introduction

The South Caucasus is a small but diverse region, comprising the three states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as well as three separatist breakaway territories of Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The region has an official population of only around 17 million people, but also contains one of the highest concentrations of refugees and IDPs per capita in the world -- almost 1.5 million people have suffered displacement by conflict over the past 20 years.

The three conflicts that plagued the South Caucasus in the years 1988-94 over Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, although tragic and brutal, were less bloody in their death-toll than the wars in the Balkans, costing perhaps 40,000 lives in total. Arguably, however, they were more disastrous than the Balkans in terms of the displacement of people that they caused. None of the conflicts have been solved and almost none of the displaced have returned home. The much bloodier conflicts in Chechnya of 1994-6 and 1999 onwards have created small refugee flows to the South Caucasus, but their humanitarian impact has mainly been confined to the borders of the Russian Federation.

A decade and a half after the ceasefire agreements that ended the three South Caucasus conflicts, the issue of refugees and IDPs remains highly politicized and the displaced persons remain hostage to failing peace processes. These people in many instances find themselves as “double strangers,” expelled from their homes but failing to find understanding in their new places of abode. Many of them are still politically, socially and economically marginalized, with little voice in the peace processes that determine their future.

With all three countries having been part of one state, the Soviet Union, until 1991 and with sovereignty of territories being disputed, even the use of the term “refugee” or “IDP” to describe a particular person is not straightforward.

As is to be expected, there has been a transition from humanitarian relief to developmental aid in response to the refugee crises. However, in the main two host countries of the displaced, Azerbaijan and Georgia, with no speedy resolution of the unresolved conflicts in sight, the issue of their integration into society remains controversial. Governments fear that unequivocal integration policies would signal an abandonment of the commitment to see refugees return to their homes and would be interpreted by the other side as a sign of weakness in negotiations.

On the other hand de facto integration is occurring, sometimes sponsored by government but more generally as part of natural socio-economic processes. Furthermore, in what is to a large degree a taboo topic in all three countries of the South Caucasus, mass emigration by permanent and seasonal guest workers, means that as much as a quarter of the official population is actually outside Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Naturally this phenomenon has disproportionately affected poorer groups in society, such as refugees and IDPs, meaning that a large number of those displaced by the conflicts are almost certainly not in the South Caucasus at all but abroad, chiefly in Russia.

The three conflicts in the South Caucasus are the following:

Nagorny Karabakh conflict.

The conflict began as a territorial dispute within the Soviet Union in 1988 over the status of the autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh, which had an Armenian majority but was situated within Azerbaijan. The Armenians appealed to the Soviet government to permit that the territory should join Soviet Armenia, a move the Azerbaijanis strongly resisted. The crisis quickly uncovered a dangerous pattern of “mutual insecurity” between the two nations. Violence flared between the two communities both inside Karabakh and in Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Soviet authorities failed to maintain order.

In the first Soviet-era phase of the dispute in 1988-90 around 200,000 Azerbaijanis and Muslim Kurds fled Armenia, mainly for Azerbaijan, and around 350,000 Armenians fled Azerbaijan, mainly for Armenia. Casualty figures ran into the low hundreds.

In 1991-4 as the Soviet Union fell apart and the conflict escalated into a dispute between two newly independent states, the violence worsened and the displacement became more brutal. A ceasefire agreement was signed in May 1994 that cemented a de facto Armenian victory on the ground. Casualty figures numbered around 20,000 dead. Up to 600,000 Azerbaijanis fled Nagorny Karabakh and the seven surrounding regions occupied wholly or partly by Armenian forces; some 40,000 Armenians were [permanently](#) displaced from their homes north of Karabakh; in addition tens of thousands of Armenians and Azerbaijanis were temporarily displaced by fighting on both sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. (It should again be emphasised that all these figures are disputed).

Negotiations mediated by the OSCE – for the past several years by the French, Russian and US co-chairmen of the so-called OSCE “Minsk Group” – have failed to secure a peace agreement. Unlike for example Cyprus, the situation on the ground is not sustainable in the long term as Armenian forces occupy what amounts to 13.6 per cent of the territory of Azerbaijan (if you include Karabakh itself). The Armenians hold a vast swathe of territory outside Karabakh which they call a “security belt” which they say they are prepared to return in exchange for a favourable deal on sovereignty. This land, with the exception of the town of Lachin, has been stripped of everything and lies empty and in ruins – it is from there that more than 80 per cent of the Azerbaijani IDPs come.

Abkhazia conflict

The diverse multi-ethnic Black Sea region of Abkhazia traditionally enjoyed a large degree of autonomy from Georgia in Soviet times. Its native people, the Abkhaz, although a minority in their own autonomous republic, sought, assisted by other non-Georgians, to claim greater sovereignty in the perestroika era of the late 1980s. A nationalist dispute broke out on the political level, accompanied by low-level violence.

Full-scale conflict broke out in August 1992, after an armed intervention by then Georgian defence minister Tengiz Kitovani. After suffering initial defeats, the Abkhaz and their allies rallied with Russian military support and won a military victory in

September 1993, driving out the ethnic Georgian population. Casualty figures are estimated at 15,000 dead. The dispute is mediated by the UN, which has a small unarmed group of military observers on both sides of the ceasefire line, working with a larger group of around 1,700 CIS (in practice currently entirely Russian) peacekeepers.

Almost the entire pre-war Georgian population of Abkhazia was displaced by the fighting – around 240,000 people, or half of the pre-war population. (Figures of Abkhaz and other nationalities displaced by the fighting – who do not face any obstacles to return – are not registered). The IDP issue remains central to the vexed negotiations over the future of Abkhazia. Having declared unilateral independence and being concerned about losing their current demographic majority, the Abkhaz say they are prepared to countenance the return of large numbers of Georgians only under strict conditions. They say they will reject the return of those who fought in the conflict and want to see a recognition of Abkhaz sovereignty before return begins. For Tbilisi, concessions on other issues are impermissible unless its central demand of the right of return for most or all IDPs is granted.

Gali, the southernmost district of Abkhazia, is a partial exception, being the only part of the territory where substantial numbers of Georgians live – 45,000 to 65,000 by various estimates. They do so only semi-legally, without support from their own government, tolerated by the Abkhaz authorities, but not enjoying the same civic rights or protection as other residents of Abkhazia. Many of these Gali residents move back and forth from Zugdidi region in Georgia proper and their exact residence status is unclear. Some Gali Georgians were displaced for a second time in a brief upsurge of fighting in 1998 and their situation remains precarious. (Some, especially in Abkhazia, stress that most of the Gali Georgians are from the Mingrelian ethnic subgroup of the wider Georgian family and speak a distinct language, which is however not written down. Most surveys suggest that these people readily identify themselves as Georgians and opt for Georgian as their language of education).

South Ossetia conflict

South Ossetia Autonomous Region had autonomous status within Soviet Georgia, while enjoying strong ties to North Ossetia, an autonomous republic with a much larger Ossetian population in Russia on the other side of the Caucasus mountains. Ossetians were the largest ethnic group but did not form a clear majority in what was an ethnically mixed region.

Conflict broke out at the beginning of 1991 when the South Ossetians pressed for enhanced autonomy and the new nationalist government in Georgia abolished their autonomous status. In a year and a half of fighting, around one thousand people died. A ceasefire in 1992 cemented a de facto South Ossetian victory, establishing a quadripartite joint control commission which supervises a joint peace-keeping force and gives a mediating role to the OSCE.

Around 60,000 Ossetians were displaced during and after the conflict, mainly fleeing to North Ossetia. Around 12,000 Georgians were displaced from South Ossetia into other parts of Georgia. As a result of emigration, the Ossetian minority in “Georgia proper” (ie outside South Ossetia) dropped from 98,000 in 1989 to 38,000 in 2005.

South Ossetia is the smallest of the separatist territories – with a current population possibly of no more than 65,000, living in a chess-board pattern of Georgian and Ossetian villages. Having for many years been the most peaceful of the three South Caucasus disputes, it is now the most volatile, having in 2007, two alternative unrecognized “presidents.” One the separatist leader Eduard Kokoity in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali enjoys strong backing from Moscow. The other a new pro-Georgian leader, Dmitry Sanakoyev, situated only a few kilometres away, was in May 2007 made part of the Georgian government by receiving the status of the “head” of the newly created “temporary administration of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region.” He is now being strongly promoted by Tbilisi.

1. Azerbaijan

1.1 Basic information

Although it is beyond dispute that Azerbaijan has the largest IDP population in the former Soviet Union – and one of the highest populations proportionally in the world -- the precise figure for Azerbaijani refugees are disputed.

It can be said with some accuracy that around 200,000 refugees (or Soviet-era IDPs), mainly ethnic Azerbaijanis but also including some Muslim Kurds, were displaced from Soviet Armenia in the period 1988-90. Although many of these people still receive state benefits, they are no longer objects of major humanitarian concern, while there are very low expectations that they will return to Armenia, even if a peace deal is signed over Karabakh. They were housed at the time of their flight, mainly in the homes of Armenians fleeing Azerbaijan and most have been well integrated into society.

Estimates of numbers of IDPs displaced by the 1991-4 armed conflict over Nagorny Karabakh differ and range between 550,000 and 620,000. Of these, only around 40,000 came from Karabakh itself (mostly from Shusha town and district), having fled in 1991-2. A further 60,000 fled the Lachin region that links Nagorny Karabakh and Armenia in 1992. The vast majority come from the other six regions around Karabakh of Aghdam, Fizuli, Jabrail, Kelbajar, Kubatly and Zangelan which were wholly or partly occupied by the Armenians in 1992-4. A small number of these IDPs from Fizuli and Aghdam districts have been able to return, because the Azerbaijani recaptured some territory in 1993.

IDP numbers have grown since the end of the conflict as more children have been born. UNHCR in 2004 quoted a figure of 578, 545 IDPs who were “of concern” in Azerbaijan. In December 2005, Azerbaijan’s State Committee on Refugees and IDPs estimated the number of IDPs to be 558,387 persons. In November 2006 the government of Azerbaijan put the number of IDPs at 690,000. [International Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), March 2007. p 30, 9].

While the overwhelming number of refugees and IDPs in Azerbaijan are ethnic Azerbaijanis, there are also two other communities worth mentioning.

Meskhetian Turks have a complex and tragic history. Turkish-speaking Muslims, they were deported from southern Georgia to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944 and still have not been able to return to their native lands, even though this was a condition of Georgia joining the Council of Europe in 1998. Around 50,000 were registered and given citizenship in Azerbaijan, after fleeing violence in Central Asia in 1989. A new law passed by the Georgian parliament in 2007 has increased the possibility of return (though considerable practical problems remain, see below); however most Meskhetian Turks are well-integrated in Azerbaijan and share both religion and language with Azerbaijanis.

The situation for **Chechen** refugees, totalling some 8,500, [European Council on Refugees and Exiles, ECRE Guidelines on the Treatment of Chechen Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Asylum Seekers & Refugees in Europe, Revised March 2007] who found refuge in Azerbaijan since 1999 because of the second Chechen war, remains problematic. Although a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Azerbaijan has not recognized their refugee status, thus limiting their access to legal employment and social services. The government has allowed children to attend school but does not issue new-borns with birth certificates. The reasons for this harsh policy are twofold: the continued presence of the large IDP/refugee population from the Karabakh conflict and Russian political pressure, aimed at forcing Chechen refugees back to Chechnya.

The Russian authorities have in the past pressured Azerbaijan to extradite Chechens accused by Russia in terrorism. Although Azerbaijan has generally not extradited Chechen asylum seekers, there have been numerous reports alleging the government has at times turned down some Chechens, suspected of crimes or militant activity to Russia without prior notification to the UNHCR. Chechen refugees have occasionally held hunger strikes and demonstrations in front of the UNHCR office in Baku demanding recognition of their refugee status and increase of financial aid provided to them.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles has urged EU member states “as a minimum not to transfer Chechen asylum seekers or Chechens who have had their applications for asylum rejected to [Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Ukraine]” because of “limited access to a legal status that provides a durable solution and protection from *refoulement*.”

1. 2 Conditions and Status

Azerbaijan’s IDPs are scattered all over the country and live in compact communities. Half of them live in urban areas, primarily in Baku and nearby Sumgait, with the remainder living in rural and semi-rural settlements, primarily in Fizuli, Barda and Aghdam districts close to the frontline.

Housing conditions have improved in recent years. In September 2007, the Azerbaijani government moved to shut down the last three “tent camps” housing IDPs and to move their residents to new and better settlements. Many however still live in poor-standard accommodation, such as sanatoria or former student hostels, which are badly in need of repair.

The IDPs remain the poorest and most vulnerable group in society, heavily dependent on state allowances and benefits. In 2005, President Ilham Aliyev claimed that 72 per cent of the IDP population lived below the poverty line, compared with 40 per cent of the general population, [ICG report, *Viewing the Conflict from the Ground*, 2005]. According to 2004 data, only 30 per cent of working age IDPs were officially employed. The situation is even worse amongst IDP women, with only some 12.7 per cent of them working. [UNIFEM, *The Status of IDP Women in Azerbaijan – A Rapid Assessment*, 2006]. Of the large numbers of Azerbaijanis reported to be living and working in Russia (sometimes put at more than two million) a large number can safely be assumed to be IDPs.

Many IDPs also have poor access to education and healthcare. Many of them have to study in makeshift schools and have difficulties in obtaining school materials. A 2005 government report showed that 58 per cent of IDP parents said they could not afford school education expenses for their children. Between 1998 and 2002 the infant mortality rate among displaced children was some three to four times higher than in the rest of the population. [Amnesty International, 2007]

Some have also argued that the fact of displacement by itself should no longer be viewed as the sole determinant of vulnerability and that the socio-economic situation of the IDPs, especially those living in urban areas, is similar to that of the general population. In 2005 UNHCR said that IDPs, particularly urban, “do not seem to be any poorer than the non displaced families”. However, the report stressed that “their relative welfare is contingent upon continued assistance, particularly from the Government”, “should such support be withdrawn, IDPs would see their welfare considerably undermined.” [UNHCR, 2005]

IDPs have a marginal status within society and few political rights. A recent report by Amnesty International said that they “suffer violations of their rights to freedom of movement, adequate housing, health care and work. Taken together, these violations constitute a system of discrimination against the displaced. Practices of discrimination and segregation discourage and inhibit the integration of displaced people into local communities.”

Of particular concern is the continued application (in defiance of the Azerbaijani constitution) of registration regulations (often known by the old Russian term “propiska”) that limit the freedom of IDPs to move within Azerbaijan. This limits their ability to find work, especially in Baku, get education for their children or healthcare privileges. A rural IDP coming to Baku also risks losing his eligibility to receive state-provided allowances, such as food packages and “bread money.”

It should also be mentioned that IDP women and children suffer disproportionately from the poor status they have in society. Many also suffer from continuing psychological problems of war-trauma and displacement that have been only been addressed by a small number of projects.

1.3 Government policies

The Azerbaijani government makes much of the plight of its refugees and IDPs in its political statements, both at home and abroad, (using the inflated figure of “one million refugees”).

The government is caught between the competing agendas of wishing to push the Armenians hard in the negotiating process over Nagorny Karabakh and insist on speedy return for IDPs, set against the need to integrate them into society as long as a peace deal remains elusive. Centralization, bureaucracy and corruption have also made the development of an effective government strategy harder. One body, the State Committee for Refugees and IDPs, headed by deputy prime minister Ali Hasanov, has overall control of refugee policy and has been slow to adapt to the changing social status of the people it is responsible for, still tending to look at the IDP issue in the same terms as in the 1990s.

IDPs have complained that they were not consulted in advance when decisions were made on their future accommodation. Many say corruption and mismanagement resulted in them being placed in low-quality houses, built in remote places with no infrastructure, unsuitable cultivating lands and little prospect of employment.

The assistance provided by the government to the IDPs includes virtual exemption from utility payments, monthly allocation of the equivalent of nine USD per person for the purchase of basic foodstuffs (commonly referred to as “bread money”), discounted income tax, free higher education for those who pass entrance exams, and food and medicine for those living in collective centres or new settlements.

The government’s unwillingness to look afresh at its overall IDP strategy has led to a policy aimed at preserving the IDP communities largely intact, which has perpetuated their marginal status within society. IDPs were excluded from land privatization. They can vote in municipal elections but cannot run for municipal office. They can elect and be elected to the parliament only representing their pre-war places of residence. At the same time, access to the IDP camps and settlements has been restricted to opposition and civil society activists. The authorities have also effectively denied the Karabakh Azerbaijanis the right to elect a community leader to represent them in the peace negotiations. The presidential appointee and long-term head of the Shusha executive authority “in exile” Nizami Bahmanov has kept his role as de facto but unelected head of the Karabakh Azerbaijani community.

Azerbaijan’s oil boom has benefited the refugees, with funds from a new Oil Fund being allocated to them. The government allotted 141 million USD from the Oil Fund in 2007 for improving the living conditions of the IDPs.

More than 70,000 IDPs in the Aghdam and Fizuli regions have relocated to their original villages in areas which were re-captured by the Azerbaijani army in 1994. These programmes have been supported by international agencies. Despite many positive stories, there is also a consensus that the return was made too precipitately before a proper infrastructure had been put in place or even all minefields had been cleared.

1.4 International actors

Over the past 15 years Azerbaijan has received some 700 million USD in donor aid to refugees and IDPs. However, because of the length of displacement, “donor fatigue” and government’s increasing oil-driven revenues, international assistance has been steadily decreasing. International assistance to refugees and IDPs has decreased from its 1994-1995 peak of 120 million USD to some 30 million in 2006. [IDMC report 2007, p132, 130]

In recent years, similarities between the problems of the IDPs/refugees and other non-displaced poor population in terms of poverty, unemployment and access to social services, have prompted international donors to reduce their assistance designed exclusively for IDPs, focusing on long-term development programmes for the wider population. Similarly, the international community has increasingly urged the Azerbaijani authorities to allocate more funds for bettering the socio-economic situation of the IDPs and provide for long term and sustainable income generating solutions for them.

The US has been the largest individual donor in the region so far, having provided Azerbaijan with aid worth 200 million USD since 1992, (although it should be noted that humanitarian and development assistance to Armenia, pioneered by the US Congress, lobbied by Armenian interest groups, has been worth over 1.5 billion USD since 1992). Assistance provided by the EU, the second largest donor to Azerbaijan and Armenia, has been more even-handed. Overall, by 2006 Azerbaijan received some 400 million euros as financial aid from the European Union¹

The EU has been less active in Azerbaijan than in Armenia and Georgia. This is slowly changing after all three countries adopted five-year Action Plans as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy in November 2006. The EU also has plans to open its first full-fledged delegation in Baku by the end of 2007.

The steady decrease in international funding threatens thousands of the most vulnerable IDPs. Thus, for example, WFP, which provides food assistance to 154,000 most vulnerable IDPs, operates under serious shortfalls of resources and has several times warned it could halt its operations if it is not provided with the necessary funds. A crisis was averted in August 2007 when Russia provided its first-ever two-million USD donation to support WFP operations in Azerbaijan. However, WFP still faces a 38 per cent shortfall in funding. Those most at risk are IDPs in rural areas.

Although a positive development, the strategic shift of the international donors from humanitarian to developmental aid should be a careful and gradual process, allowing the most vulnerable IDP communities to adapt to changing assistance arrangements and be able to compensate the loss of direct humanitarian assistance with self-sustaining income generating activities.

¹ This includes assistance under the TACIS programme, TACIS Exceptional Assistance Programme (EXAP), food security programme (FSP), post-war rehabilitation activities, support under thematic budget lines such as the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and humanitarian assistance provided by ECHO. See http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/pdf/country/enpi_csp_azerbaijan_en.pdf

1.5 The Future

The eventual potential return of Azerbaijan's IDPs is dependent on progress in the Nagorny Karabakh peace process.

Draft peace arrangements under discussion, if implemented, would put Azerbaijan's IDP and refugee population into three categories.

- A total of 450 – 500,000 IDPs from the six districts of Aghdam, Fizuli, Jabrail, Kelbajar, Kubatly and Zangelan regions. Under peace proposals under discussion over the last decade but not signed, these people would enjoy immediate right of return (although the timetable for a return to Kelbajar region is a sticking-point in current negotiations). These regions are currently de-populated and there is no expectation that Armenians would live there in the future. The only impediment to return will be a purely physical one in that their home regions are almost entirely destroyed and it will take several years for them to be reconstructed.
- IDPs from Nagorny Karabakh and Lachin regions who fled in 1991-2, who number around 100,000. Azerbaijani IDPs from these areas, especially the towns of Shusha and Lachin, are in a more complex position as the Armenians have identified their towns as being key to their future security– Shusha lies in the heart of Karabakh and Lachin is situated on the road connecting Karabakh and Armenia. Armenians currently live in both places (in the case of Shusha, this includes a small native Armenian pre-war population, while both towns also have recent settlers, some of whom are themselves IDPs). Azerbaijanis from Karabakh and Lachin would be given the right of return under a peace plan. Conditions under which this return would be possible are currently being negotiated, with options varying from leaving returnees under de facto Armenian control to placing them under international administration. Putting Azerbaijan returnees from Lachin and Nagorno-Karabakh proper under de facto Armenian control would make it difficult for security reasons for many of these people to return to their homes. The Azerbaijani position is clear that any sustainable peace deal should envisage the recognition of Karabakh Azerbaijanis' right to return and put in place international security guarantees that ensure their return is possible in dignity and safety. There is no doubt that the right of return of these people must be asserted, but the security structures needed for it to take place will need to be more robust than for the IDPs listed above and may take longer to put in place.
- Approximately 200,000 refugees from Armenia itself from 1988-9. These are mostly integrated into society, although some still receive refugee benefits. Although enjoying some kind of theoretical right of return under peace plans, there are no serious expectations that this group would return to Armenia. Many of these refugees are also now living outside Azerbaijan.

It should be stressed that, in contrast to the Georgian conflicts, the issue of compensation and restitution is currently not a major part of the negotiations in the Karabakh conflict. As both sides suffered material damage and flight of refugees at different points, this may be because of an unspoken assumption that competing

claims will cancel each other out. However, as inevitably many displaced people will be either unwilling or unable to return home for a variety of reasons if a peace deal is signed, the issue is bound to arise in the future.

The Karabakh negotiations are the preserve of the OSCE, although the EU is cautiously being given more of a facilitation role in the process. The mandate of the EUSRSC (European Union Special Representative to the South Caucasus) has been slightly upgraded, with the post being asked to “contribute to the resolution of conflicts”. The representative, Peter Semneby, has said that the European Union might lead a peacekeeping force if a solution to the Karabakh dispute is found. [IWPR, May 25, 2006]

If a peace agreement is signed, the EU can also be expected to play a major role in the rehabilitation of the seven ravaged Azerbaijani regions outside Karabakh, which were home to the majority of Azerbaijan’s IDPs. A quick and effective rehabilitation of these regions would advance the peace process.

However, the EU has a poor record in its advocacy for peace in Karabakh – which is after all the major priority for the South Caucasus and Eurasia’s most dangerous unresolved conflict.

2 Nagorny Karabakh

The breakaway territory of Nagorny Karabakh, centre of the Armenian-Azerbaijani dispute, has been under de facto Armenian control since the end of the Karabakh war in 1994. It has an Armenian population estimated at being under 100,000 and only a tiny handful of Azerbaijanis (mainly spouses of Armenians), all the others having fled.

The unrecognized “Nagorny Karabakh republic” (NKR) is a self-governing Armenian entity, very closely tied to Armenia, but with its own political institutions.

The NGO “Organization of Refugees of the NKR” says that there are around 32-35,000 “refugees from Azerbaijan” living in Nagorny Karabakh and 25-28,000 “internally displaced people.”

The latter include displaced residents of the former Shaumian district (presently part of Azerbaijan’s Geranboi district) who were driven out by Azerbaijani forces in 1992. (The Armenians say that Shaumian district voted to join Nagorny Karabakh in 1989, the Azerbaijanis say the vote was not valid.) The issue of those displaced from Shaumian in 1992, whose numbers are estimated at 40,000, is a perennial Armenian concern with their case being put before the peace negotiators and appeals for them not to be forgotten.

The figure of 60,000 IDPs in Karabakh seems too high and cannot be verified. However there are undoubtedly displaced people living in poverty in Karabakh. In the semi-ruined city of Shusha there is a large group of displaced Armenians, estimated by one local in 2007 at 483 people. [IWPR June 7, 2007]

It seems clear that the refugee problem is now worse in Karabakh than in Armenia and that the displaced people there suffer from the lack of international status of their territory. According to the local NGO, the refugees suffer from the same problems as in the rest of the South Caucasus – poor accommodation, difficulties in finding work, a language barrier and general social marginalization.

Those who are deemed to have fled from the regions of Azerbaijan have received more government support than those who were displaced within Karabakh, for example from the Martakert and Hadrut districts. Benefits are minimal and poverty levels are high.

Most of the work with these refugees is conducted by the NGO “Refugees Organization of NKR” in cooperation with foreign NGOs and Armenian diaspora organizations.

3 Armenia

3.1 Basic Information

Almost all of Armenia’s refugees from the Karabakh conflict date back to the years 1988-90, when an estimated total of 350,000 Armenians fled Soviet Azerbaijan. The number who settled in Armenia has not been determined, but it is well known that a high proportion of these refugees settled in Russia, while the economic hardships endured by Armenia in the years 1990-4 made many more leave during those years.

The latest available data from this year records that there are only 3,813 registered refugees and 38,000 naturalized refugees resident in Armenia.

In addition, some 80,000 people from border areas of Armenia, especially the Tavush region, were displaced within Armenia by the war over Karabakh. Almost all have returned to their homes since 1994.

3.2 Conditions and Status/Government Policy/The Future

Because of the manageable scale of the problem, the socio-economic problems of the refugees have been mainly resolved, with less than 10,000 refugees in real need.

No refugees are living in train carriages or similar makeshift accommodation any longer, but much accommodation remains poor. Much of the aid work over the last few years has focused on people living in sub-standard public buildings. According to the Government Migration Agency, 2,200 refugee families or approximately 8,000 people are still living in public buildings in very poor conditions. Many of these buildings have been repaired with funds from the UNHCR or the Norwegian Refugee Council and houses have been privatized, allowing their residents to become homeowners. Others have been given “housing certificates” or coupons which they can use to buy property of their own.

Refugees can mostly be characterized as a vulnerable socio-economic group, putting them on the same level as much of the rest of the population.

Much of the criticism has been along the lines that housing compensation has been inadequate or that people have had to move far away to acquire property they can afford.

As elsewhere in the South Caucasus, a poorly articulated government information campaign has made the situation worse, with many refugees for example believing they will lose benefits if they acquire the new national social security cards.

The main government strategy since the ceasefire of 1994 has been to encourage refugees and IDPs to naturalize and take Armenian citizenship.

Uptake of citizenship was initially slow for several reasons and it has taken a long time for many refugees to exchange their Soviet passports for Armenian ones. Reasons for this reluctance included: fear of losing benefits; reluctance to do military service; fear that losing refugee status would reduce the chance of getting compensation for what was lost in Azerbaijan; an aspiration to leave Armenia. However in the end most preferred Armenian citizenship to the inconvenience of being a stateless citizen.

Many of the elder generation of refugees from Azerbaijan still report that they do not feel full citizens of Armenia, mainly because they have not fully mastered the Armenian language. That is not a problem for their children who are becoming better integrated than their parents.

The diminishing number of refugees means that there is only a limited need for targeted work from international agencies. While UNHCR maintains a presence in Armenia, the Norwegian Refugee Council is closing its programme in Armenia. at the end of 2007.

The EU remains a large donor to Armenia – though not nearly as influential as the USA. In 2007 it upgraded its delegation in Yerevan. It provided Armenia with 171 million euros of humanitarian assistance between 1992 and 2004 and 99 million euros of non-humanitarian financial and technical assistance between 1992 and 2004. Aid work has now become part of a general poverty-reduction programme, with healthcare an area of particular concern.

One issue that will have to be resolved in the future is of property rights. In a 2004 interview, Tim Straight, former head of the Norwegian Refugee Council in Armenia, has said that Armenian refugees currently occupy 36,000 houses that still legally belong to Azerbaijanis.

4 Georgia

4.1 Basic Information

The majority of those displaced by the conflict in **South Ossetia** are Ossetians, most of whom fled to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation from “Georgia proper” (in other words parts of Georgia outside South Ossetia). According to the last Soviet census of 1989, 164,000 Ossetians lived in Georgia, 98,000 of them living in

“Georgia proper.” Today only 38,000 remain in “Georgia proper,” with the remaining 60,000 mostly having fled in 1991-2 during the conflict. In addition, more than 12 000 Georgians were displaced to Georgia proper, and about 5 000 people were displaced within South Ossetia.

Numbers of those who moved from South Ossetia to North Ossetia because of the conflict are harder to establish, but in 2004 UNHCR registered 10,000 "de facto refugees" from South Ossetia resident in North Ossetia. It is agreed that the population of South Ossetia has dropped significantly to perhaps 50-60,000, but no reliable figures for this are available.

The process of return of IDPs and refugees, organized under the auspices of UNHCR, has been slow – in the 12 years up until 2004 only 1734 IDP (513 families) returned to South Ossetia. The upsurge of violence in 2004 caused a new flight of around 2,000 Georgians from South Ossetia, most of whom have since returned. Most ethnic Georgians have remained in their homes in South Ossetia – indeed the Georgian village of Kurta is now the headquarters of the new pro-Tbilisi “alternative government” of South Ossetia.

The pre-war population of **Abkhazia** was 525,000 of whom just under half – or 239,000 people – were ethnic Georgians. Almost all of them had fled Abkhazia by the end of the war in September 1993.

According to the latest official registration data of the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia from 2004-5, Georgia currently has 12 673 IDPs from Tskhinvali Region (or South Ossetia) and 232 623 from Abkhazia in Georgia – in total 245 296 IDPs. Among them there are 110 782 men, 134 514 women, 58 016 children under 16. They constitute six per cent of the Georgian population. A new annual registration exercise has been launched, which should be completed in late autumn. In parallel, on-going registration of those applying for status, is continuing, and today the number of IDPs in the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation is 250 957, which includes also those IDPs, whose status is temporarily suspended.

Another count is currently underway and should come up with accurate figures, as registration procedures are now strict. (Eg to be registered, you need physically to come to registration centres, where your photo will be taken and your IDP card and passport will be checked. This will exclude from registration those who have left Georgia for Russia and other places. If you leave the country temporarily your IDP status is suspended and can be re-conferred).

A number of Georgian IDPs have been returning of their own accord to Gali region, the southernmost district of Abkhazia, which had a 96 per cent ethnic Georgian population before the war. This is a highly sensitive issue, with the Abkhaz claiming they have invited the Georgians to return and citing this as a sign of cross-community cooperation, while the Georgian authorities deny this. This has been a spontaneous process and the returnees live a precarious existence, with little security. Conditions have improved somewhat, with some schools now operating and EU-funded medical programmes improving healthcare standards. The return is partly seasonal and depends on the agricultural cycle but the number of returnees is

estimated at its height to be 45,000 – 65,000 out of a pre-war population of about 79,000.

There is no reliable data on the number of people who were internally displaced within Abkhazia by the 1992-3 conflict, but this category does exist. Many people lost their homes to fighting in Ochamchira and Tkvarchal/eli districts and resettled in Sukhumi and other parts of the de facto republic. They do not enjoy special rights within Abkhazia, but their possession of homes that in many cases belonged to ethnic Georgians will pose a puzzle if issues of restitution and compensation become more relevant.

Georgia is still host to a small number of **Chechens** who fled the second military campaign in Chechnya that began in 1999. Numbers have fallen from around 8,000 initially, when most settled in the Pankisi Gorge region, which is home to the ethnic kin of the Chechens, the Kists. There are now around 1,000 remaining. The remainder have either repatriated voluntarily, moved to third countries, had their refugee status removed because they presented false documents or received Georgian citizenship.

In the last year the Georgian government has been working to improve the rights of refugees, making it easier for them to receive temporary residence and to have the freedom to travel, as set out in the 1951 UN convention.

Also in 2007, the Georgian parliament finally passed a law authorizing repatriation for tens of thousands of **Meskhethian Turks** deported from Georgia by Stalin in 1944 and who have endured a tragic odyssey around the former Soviet Union since then. The promise to adopt this law was a pre-condition for Georgia being admitted to the Council of Europe in 1999. However, the law has already been criticized on the grounds that it gives the Meskhethians the theoretical right to return but no practical or financial support for doing so (this is an area where international donors may be called upon to intervene).

4.2 Conditions and Status

The displacement from Abkhazia coincided with a total socio-economical crisis in newly independent Georgia and the settlement process was chaotic and unplanned. Members of the same family were separated, people with rural background were settled in huge collective centres in towns and did not have access to land and *vice versa*.

According to the 2007 data, 34,917 IDP families are accommodated in collective centres and 47,980 families in the private sector – with relatives, friends, rent flats or having purchased their own housing.

Many IDPs in collective centres still live in very poor conditions in former public buildings, such as hotels, hostels or hospitals. Many of these buildings are in a very poor state of disrepair.

The usual assumption of the international community is that those living in collective centres are more vulnerable, while IDPs who are accommodated in private sector, are better off and more or less integrated. However the latter group suffer because they do

not receive utility subsidies, often have to pay rent and are a lower priority in donor programmes.

As in Azerbaijan, IDP women and children suffer disproportionately. The new IDP State Strategy adopted by the Georgian government in February 2007 notes that IDP children lack access to good quality education and healthcare. They also feel excluded and marginalized vis-à-vis their non-IDP counterparts. Psychological stress and trauma, especially for those who go back to unsafe conflict zones such as Gali, is a significant problem.

Arguably, Georgian IDPs enjoy fewer opportunities than they did a few years ago. An ICG report in 2006 said of the IDPs, “Today they have less money, fewer jobs and less political visibility than they did before 2004.” There are a number of reasons for this. Inflation has hurt their benefits, which have not risen. An arrangement whereby members of parliament from Abkhazia kept their seats, meaning that the IDP community was guaranteed of representation in the legislature, was abolished after the Rose Revolution. The community lacks strong advocates in Tbilisi and the influence of the ethnic Georgian “government in exile” has diminished.

4.3 Government Policy

Georgian government policy towards IDPs has been through many phases, reflecting much debate and disagreement within government circles about overall policy towards the two unsolved conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. There have been changes in policy on what is best for IDPs while the overall strategy – insisting on their unconditional return – remains the same.

With regard to the biggest problem -- the large number of IDPs from Abkhazia -- the policy for most of the 1990s was one of narrowly-focussed humanitarian assistance. IDPs were entitled to receive government benefits and subsidies.

In 1999, in cooperation with the international aid community, a “New Approach” strategy was devised, which was supposed to focus more on long-term development and integration for IDPs. New policies began to be implemented but, mainly due to lack of funds, no significant reforms were made until the last two years.

In late 2005, the Special Representative of UN Secretary General, Dr. Walter Kalin visited Georgia and declared he was shocked “by miserable conditions of the IDPs living in some of the collective centres.”

In 2006, this helped persuade the Georgian government to announce the creation of the State Commission on elaboration of an IDP National Strategy. This new strategy was designed to reflect a number of realities: “donor fatigue,” with many donors unwilling to continue to fund the repair of “temporary accommodation” on an annual basis; a desire to integrate the IDP community better into society, as no breakthrough was imminent in the peace process; a desire to reclaim public buildings for common use; privatization of buildings, inhabited by IDPs, as resources for potential investors. Civil society also backed this strategy, making the point that improving material conditions did not diminish the right of return, while a new generation of IDPs were unwilling to tolerate their poor living conditions.

The main message from these different actors is that, as with the Azerbaijani “tent-camps,” the time has come to close the collective accommodation centres.

At the same time IDPs are losing out from government social policies. Health and transport allowances have been cut for example, while IDPs were the only section of society whose government benefit payments were not increased after the Rose Revolution, meaning that when inflation is taken into account they are now worse off than before. IDPs have been resettled from centres privatized and sold to private investors and some are complaining that this has disenfranchised and they are now in worse accommodation than before. A pilot voucher scheme has been launched to compensate IDPs for the loss of their previous accommodation and enable them to acquire their own property.

An ongoing argument is as to whether it is still worth treating IDPs as a separate social group or whether their problems should be tackled within an overall poverty reduction programme for Georgia. IDP representatives argue that it is “too early” to do this, citing a number of factors, amongst them the fact that IDPs do not generally own their own property; their particular psychological problems of trauma; their marginal status has given them disadvantages when it comes to finding employment or earning money; and problems with mobility and registration.

As noted above, Gali region in Abkhazia remains a sensitive issue, which is politically manipulated by both sides. The de facto Abkhaz authorities point to the return as proof that their unrecognized state is a multi-ethnic entity that also includes Georgians. The Georgian authorities point to the crime and insecurity prevalent in Gali and to the fact that the de facto Abkhaz authorities have blocked the opening of a UN human rights office there.

There have been attempts to have UNHCR conduct a verification exercise of IDP numbers in Gali but the process is problematic. It is hard to determine what is the precise status of the seasonal returnees especially as their security cannot be guaranteed. In 1998, many thousand Georgians fled from Gali when there was a renewed upsurge of fighting in Abkhazia.

Georgia’s Ministry for Refugees launched in 2006 a programme entitled “My House” according to which IDPs can register their land titles in a state inventory, and thus assert their property rights in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The government later plans to support claims for restoration of property to international courts. There were reports that IDPs were sometimes made to fill out property declarations under duress and refused registration if they did not do so, drawing protests from IDPs. However the programme as a whole has broad support in the IDP community.

In South Ossetia, the main focus has been on a restitution law for Ossetian refugees passed by the Georgian parliament in December 2006 but not implemented since then. This is designed as an act of good faith and practical commitment to thousands of Ossetians, now resident in Russia, who fled Georgia in 1990-2. However, the passing of the law comes at a time of fast deteriorating trust between Tbilisi and the authorities in both Tskhinvali and Vladikavkaz. Reports from North Ossetia suggest that few Ossetians have heard of the law and it is unlikely that the commission needed

to implement it will be able to function or that Ossetian refugees will be able to apply to it.

4.4 International Response

Aid to Georgia has increased since the 2003 Rose Revolution, although there are fewer humanitarian programmes and more development projects. In the UN context, UNDP is playing a higher profile, although UNHCR still remains a major player.

The USA is the largest donor and has the highest profile, with USAID having spent around one billion dollars in aid there since 1992. The Millennium Challenge Georgia fund is now worth 300 million dollars.

The international community and the EU in particular has recently begun to fund projects inside the breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – causing some political arguments with the Georgian government about to what degree it should be allowed to control these projects.

In 2005 nine million euros of European Commission funding was approved for programmes in Abkhazia, almost half of it on economic rehabilitation projects. The EC is also currently the major donor in South Ossetia and has spent some eight million euros on assistance programmes to the region. The EU is also hoping to open “information offices” in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In 2006, the EC launched a new programme of support for IDPs worth half a million euros and supporting six NGOs. Four of the projects are designed to help boost IDPs’ legal and political rights.

With regard to IDPs in particular there are three broad international aid initiatives.

1. When a new IDP State Strategy Action Plan is adopted in the autumn of 2007, it is expected to contain about 40 “Action Lines.” There are plans for the Georgian government to chair a donor conference to coordinate implementation of these lines.
2. The First Millennium Development Goal in Georgia is to overcome poverty and achieve socio-economic integration of the marginalized population, including IDPs by 2015 and also to halve of the number people with poor diets (of which IDPs form a large part).
3. The European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plans running from 2006-11, which also aims to help integrate IDPs better into society.

5 Conclusions

The peace processes in the South Caucasus are all in trouble in 2007. The OSCE-chaired Armenian-Azerbaijani talks over Nagorny Karabakh failed to achieve a breakthrough ahead of a year of presidential elections in both Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2008. There are currently not even direct talks between Tbilisi and the de facto authorities in either Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

This suggests that prospects are very remote for any breakthrough and therefore for prospects of a return home for the two largest groups of IDPs in the Caucasus – the Azerbaijanis displaced by the Karabakh conflict and the ethnic Georgians of Abkhazia.

The consequence of this is that a medium-term strategy should focus in the first instance on ameliorating the lives of IDPs in their current locations, while also working on projects that will make a return for them easier and more efficient, should a peace deal be made in the future.

International policy-makers are still caught in the dilemma of how to best deal with the three de facto separatist territories of the South Caucasus, recognizing that they now form an unavoidable reality on the ground with real political institutions, while not wishing to undermine the claims of Baku and Tbilisi to territorial integrity.

There is a good argument that greater engagement with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh will inspire greater trust, improve the peace processes and thus improve the chances of a settlement under which IDPs can return. To take examples from each conflict in turn: cooperation with the authorities in Abkhazia is needed to make progress in providing an international presence in Gali region that will improve the security of Georgian returnees there; better cooperation with the authorities in Tskhinvali is needed to facilitate implementation of Georgia's restitution law for those displaced by the conflict in South Ossetia; and serious discussion is required with the de facto authorities in Nagorny Karabakh over the issue of security arrangements in a peace settlement for the seven Azerbaijani territories outside Karabakh, where most of the IDPs come from – Karabakh Armenians' security fears are the major reason why the Armenians are reluctant to give up these territories and allow the IDPs to return.

The EU still has a relatively low profile in the resolution of these conflicts and certainly has less political influence than its large aid budget to the region deserves. While acknowledging that the unresolved conflicts and in particular the Karabakh dispute are by far the biggest issue for the region, the EU does not engage sufficiently in advocacy to push the parties in the conflicts to behave more flexibly and with greater strategic vision. With the USA and Russia the biggest strategic players in the region and no clear prospect of eventual EU membership for the South Caucasus countries, the EU's leverage is limited – though less so in Georgia than in the other two countries. (NATO has more leverage as it holds out the prospect of potential membership for the three countries and especially Georgia.)

With regard to specific programmes for IDPs, the era of big humanitarian programmes has passed and aid policy is becoming "smarter" and more targeted. In some areas IDPs as an entire group still deserve comprehensive support – for example in their struggle to achieve their full legal and political rights within society. But socio-economic aid is better spent being targeted at especially vulnerable sub-groups among IDPs, such as those in poor housing, those still suffering from post-conflict trauma, women, the elderly and children. In this regard, work with NGOs across a wide range of sectors may pay more dividends than work with larger international organizations. The EU can also play a useful advocacy role, reminding governments of their duties in upholding IDPs' civic rights and supporting more forward-looking creative policies towards them.

It should also be said that lack of consistent statistical data on IDPs, especially in Azerbaijan, also hinders effective monitoring of the welfare of the IDPs and that more regular surveys and studies of the needs of the IDP community will be profitable.

The EU has much useful experience to draw in from the Balkans in planning the next phase of a post-conflict strategy. It should consider drawing on the Balkan experience to tackle the issue of property ownership, restitution and compensation which is not currently a major issue but will inevitably become one as soon as a peace settlement draws near.

Any future international strategy for IDPs in the South Caucasus needs to strike a balance. On the one hand it should promote policies that will give maximum support to those IDPs who wish to return home under a peace agreement, to provide them with the necessary international protection mechanisms that allow them to do so and to assist cross-community reconciliation measures that will make the post-conflict territories more secure; on the other hand it should also work to assist those who are unwilling, unable or afraid to return and who wish to integrate into their adopted home societies.