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## Georgia: Tentative return of some of the people who fled August 2008 conflict

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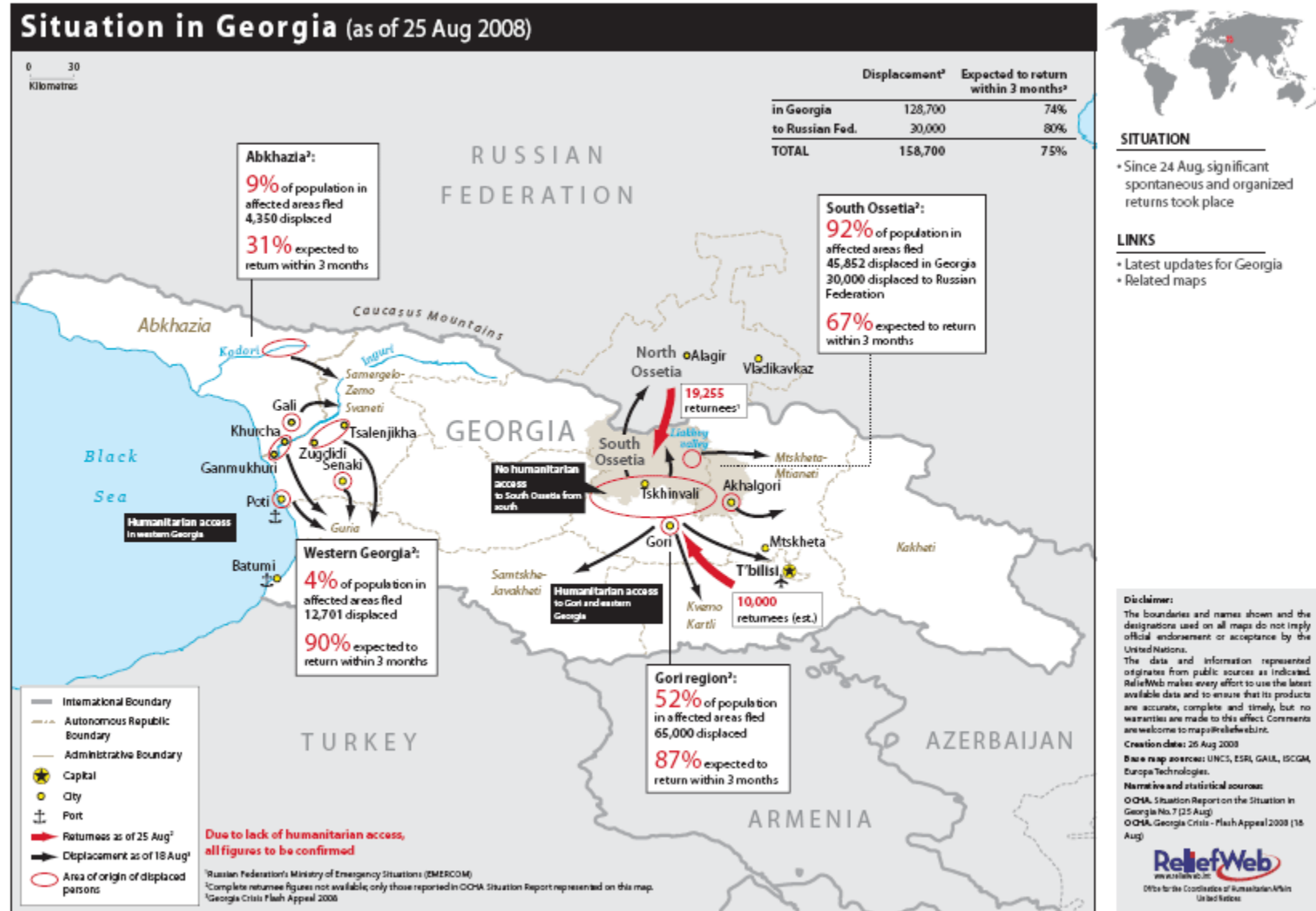
*Two weeks after military offensives by Georgia and the Russian Federation, thousands of the 150,000 or more ethnic Georgians and Ossetians who had fled the conflict had returned home by 26 August. Ethnic Georgians have so far only been able to return to towns such as Gori, but not to South Ossetia proper. Upon their arrival, many IDPs found their houses destroyed. Humanitarian and government agencies have started to assist the returnees, as well as the many people still displaced, most of whom are in the Georgian capital Tbilisi.*

*The large-scale destruction of Tskhinvali in South Ossetia, and of other towns and villages in Georgia, means that as more people try to return home, they will need support to rebuild their house, schools and other infrastructure, to restore water supply, and to ensure mine clearances.*

*The Georgian and Russian governments and international agencies have amended and continue daily to amend their estimates of the number displaced, as the situation has evolved and registration and de-registration processes have gone on. According to figures published in the UN's flash appeal of 18 August, at the height of the conflict, 128,000 people found refuge in Georgia proper and in South Ossetia, while at least 30,000 were reported to have fled to North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. They join some 220,000 to 240,000 IDPs previously displaced in the early 1990s from Georgia's secessionist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, who still live in precarious situations throughout the country. About 50,000 Ossetians had found refuge in North Ossetia then as well.*

*The following update only focuses on people displaced since 8 August 2008. For information on longer term IDPs in Georgia and for more background on the conflict in South Ossetia, please see the overview of October 2007, ["Georgia: New IDP strategy awaits implementation."](#)*

## Map of Georgia



Source: ReliefWeb

More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

## **Latest political developments**

On 8 August, Russia responded militarily to a Georgian offensive aimed at ending secessionist South Ossetia's 16-year-old de facto independence (CSM, 12 August 2008). Georgia's parliament declared a "state of war" with Russia the following day. Meanwhile, Russia maintained that it was implementing ongoing peacekeeping operations. On 15 and 16 August, the Russian and the Georgian governments signed a ceasefire mediated by France. While on 22 August Russian troops left the town of Gori, beyond the limits of South Ossetia and 70 kilometres from Tbilisi, they had as of 27 August not withdrawn to the positions they held prior to the current crisis.

The Georgian government reported that 215 people on the Georgian side had been killed, including 69 civilians (ICG, 22 August 2008), while the Russian Ambassador to Georgia said after the initial Georgian offensive that at least 2,000 civilians had died in South Ossetia as a result of fighting (Reuters, 9 August 2008). However, Human Rights Watch was able to document fewer than 100 civilian deaths in South Ossetia, based on its research on the ground (HRW, 10 August 2008). Forces on both sides in the conflict appear to have killed and injured civilians through indiscriminate attacks on Gori and the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali (HRW, 14 August 2008).

The current crisis between Russia and Georgia comes after several years of deteriorating relations between the countries. Tensions between both countries escalated in 2007 and 2008, particularly after Georgia set up a pro-Tbilisi administration in Abkhazia's Kodori gorge and

supported an alternative administration in South Ossetia to govern the ethnically Georgian villages there.

The security situation in South Ossetia further deteriorated in the months leading to the August crisis. The South Ossetians and Georgians strengthened their forces at the limits of their areas of control, in violation of previous ceasefire agreements, while Russia reinforced its military presence in South Ossetia and also in Abkhazia (ICG, 22 August 2008). Following the renewed conflict in South Ossetia, the Russian president recognised the independence of the two breakaway territories (DPI, 26 August 2008). This makes the hopes for return of the ethnic Georgian population of both entities, who were forcibly displaced in the 1990s and in the current conflict, even more distant.

## **Causes of displacement and areas of refuge**

IDPs include ethnic Ossetians and ethnic Georgians. Ossetians fled when Georgian military personnel entered Tskhinvali and found refuge in other parts of South Ossetia or in North Ossetia, Russia. Ethnic Georgians fled villages in South Ossetia, which were looted and set on fire by Ossetian militias (HRW, 13 August 2008). Other Georgian IDPs include those who fled Russian offensives in areas close to South Ossetia such as Gori, and who found refuge in other parts of Georgia, in particular the capital Tbilisi. Thousands of ethnic Georgians also fled bombings from the Upper Kodori Valley, an area of Abkhazia controlled by Georgia (OCHA, 18 August 2008). They found refuge in the town of Kutaisi, Georgia, with the

assistance of the UN and of the Georgian government (UNCT, 13 August 2008).

The Georgian and Russian governments and international agencies have amended and continue to amend their estimates of the numbers displaced in Georgia proper, within South Ossetia, and into North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. The situation is evolving daily and registration and de-registration processes have continued. Significant movements were ongoing and updated working figures were not published as of 29 August. According to figures published in the UN's flash appeal of 18 August and subsequently, UN agencies and the national authorities estimated 158,703 people fled their homes at the height of the crisis, including 75,852 from South Ossetia, 65,800 from Gori and surrounding villages, 12,701 from Western Georgia, and 4,350 from Abkhazia. 128,000 of them are estimated to have found refuge in Georgia, including 30,000 within South Ossetia, and the rest in North Ossetia, Russia (OCHA, 18 August 2008).

Most of the displaced found refuge with relatives and friends, or in unofficial shelters. The government of Georgia aired some public services announcements on TV and radio encouraging host families to register with them in order to receive appropriate assistance (USAID, 24 August 2008). According to UN assessments, tens of thousands of people found refuge in temporary facilities in and around Tbilisi, Kutaisi and smaller towns, in kindergartens, schools, and public and government buildings, and several hundred people are staying in a tent camp close to the airport of Tbilisi. Nearly 40 per cent of the displaced are estimated to be children under 16 years,

some of whom have been separated from their families (UNICEF, 15 August 2008). According to UNICEF assessments, the dilapidated buildings where many IDPs found refuge generally lack toilets and glass in the windows, and only have sporadic electricity and running water (UNICEF, 22 August 2008).

### **Return to Gori and to South Ossetia**

The large-scale destruction of the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, and of other towns and villages in Georgia means that as more people try to return home, they will need support to rebuild their house, schools and other infrastructure, to restore water supply, and to ensure mine clearances.

Following the withdrawal on 22 August of Russian troops from the town of Gori, 10,000 to 15,000 IDPs who had found refuge in Tbilisi returned to Gori and to surrounding villages, on their own or by buses provided by authorities. Most of them were men who said they wanted to see the state of their homes and the general situation before bringing their families back. Many returnees carried basic supplies given out by relief agencies (UNHCR, 26 August 2008; ICRC, 25 August 2008). Gori had been mostly abandoned following attacks by Russia, and many shops and homes had been looted (UNCT, 13 August 2008). Many of the returnees, particularly those living north of Gori, close to South Ossetia, had their homes destroyed during the fighting, and the government plans to accommodate them in camps, former kindergartens and pre-fabricated cottages (NRC, 26 August 2008).

A major concern is how to ensure the physical security of returnees to Gori and to make return sustainable. According to Georgian authorities, many lethal mines in different forms are in the area. They have conducted demining operations in Gori and surrounding villages, but only public buildings and main streets have reportedly been demined. On 24 August, two mines exploded in villages close to Gori which had not yet been de-mined, causing one death. North of the town, returning IDPs and others were reported to be afraid of approaching their fields due to risks of mines and unexploded ordnance (NRC, 26 August 2008). In addition, some 1,200 people in the area – some who had just returned home, as well as others who had remained in their homes during the conflict – were forced to flee by armed gangs apparently operating along the boundary line with South Ossetia (UNHCR, 27 August 2008).

Meanwhile, since 12 August, some 23,000 ethnic Ossetians have returned to South Ossetia from North Ossetia, out of 30,000 people who had left the area, according to Russian estimates (UNHCR, 26 August 2008).

### **Government and international responses**

The UN Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator is leading the current coordination efforts through a Humanitarian Coordination Group, which includes UN agencies, the Red Cross and NGOs. While the cluster approach has not been formally implemented, humanitarian response is organised by sector: food, protection (which includes education), water and sanitation, shelter and non-food items, logistics, health and nutrition, telecom-

munication, security and recovery. Each sector is led by a UN agency or by USAID, and has a government ministry as counterpart (NRC, 26 August 2008). The Georgian government has appointed the Minister of Health, Labour and Social Affairs to coordinate national humanitarian assistance (OCHA, 16 August 2008). Georgian health authorities have announced that IDPs are receiving health services free of charge in government health facilities (WHO, 26 August 2008).

The Georgian Ministry for Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) informed the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that it lacked staff capacity to conduct systematic registration of new IDPs, and that it did not have funding to pay the cash assistance to newly-registered IDPs as required by Georgian law (UNCT, 10 August 2008). UNHCR is working with the government to reconcile different databases of IDPs, including the separation of old and new caseloads of IDPs (USAID, 24 August 2008).

Agencies, in particular the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR, airlifted aid supplies all over Georgia in the aftermath of the conflict (UNHCR, 12 August 2008; WFP, 13 August 2008). UNHCR has also opened an office in Gori to assist returning IDPs there. In addition to providing aid, it plans to assist local authorities in mapping and assessing the numbers of returnees to the town (UNHCR, 26 August 2008).

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs are also raising additional funds and scaling up their operations to bring food, basic necessities, shelter, and medical assistance to the dis-

placed. The ICRC has opened an office in Tskhinvali and in Gori in order to provide assistance to returning IDPs and people who stayed behind (ICRC, 25 August 2008). Médecins Sans Frontières gained access to Tskhinvali as well (MSF, 27 August 2008).

International donor governments mobilised quickly to pledge support to IDPs and other vulnerable populations. Assistance is channelled through humanitarian agencies present on the ground. Meanwhile the American government sent military planes as well as naval forces to deliver humanitarian supplies to Georgia directly (US Government, 13 August 2008). The Russian government announced that it was actively involved in the reconstruction of South Ossetia and the provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees in North Ossetia and vulnerable populations in South Ossetia.

In order to respond to the many humanitarian needs of IDPs and other vulnerable populations in Georgia, UN agencies and some NGOs issued a special flash appeal to donors seeking some \$59 million for activities to be carried out over the next six months (OCHA, 18 August 2008).

One of the main constraints to the quick delivery of assistance has been poor access due to continuing insecurity. On 15 August, two UNHCR vehicles were hijacked at gunpoint on the outskirts of Gori, but access to the town has since then improved (OCHA, 16 August 2008; UNHCR, 26 August 2008). Due to restricted access, agencies have not been able to carry out comprehensive, cross-sector needs assessments in Georgia. Most agencies have not gained access to South Ossetia from Georgia, and have had to enter the area via North Ossetia, Russia.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has met several times since the beginning of the crisis, but has not been able to reach any resolution, as the Russian Federation, one of the permanent members, is also one of the parties to the conflict.

*Note: This update only focuses on people displaced over the last few days. For information on longer term IDPs in Georgia and for more background on the conflict in South Ossetia, please click [here](#).*

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## About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at [www.internal-displacement.org](http://www.internal-displacement.org)

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