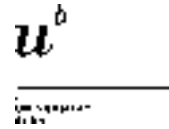




Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement



Georgia must act on promises to end displacement crisis

by Walter Kälin

In December 2005, I undertook an official mission to the Caucasus republic of Georgia. In addition to Tbilisi, I visited the Samegrelo region and the *de facto* autonomous regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

I was shocked by the misery in which thousands of IDPs are still living, more than a decade after the violent fighting that caused them to flee their homes. At the same time, I received firm assurances from the Government that plans are under way to develop and implement a new IDP policy to end their plight through recourse to durable solutions. The main obstacles are the absence of political solutions to regional conflicts and the ensuing widespread feelings of insecurity. As a consequence, return movements are slow – and almost non-existent in some areas. International support for rehabilitation and development investment is hampered.

The sustainable return of persons to the Gali region of Abkhazia is obstructed by administrative measures directed against returnees, by attacks and harassment, as well as by widespread impunity for perpetrators. Even if it has no international significance, the so-called 'Law of the Republic of Abkhazia on Citizenship of the Republic of Abkhazia' of 2005 discriminates against persons of non-Abkhaz origin and may thus create difficulties for returnees. Reportedly, Abkhaz authorities have restricted the use of the Georgian language in schools, with detrimental effects on the provision and quality of education.

In South Ossetia, some IDPs have returned and integrated locally, although many live under deplorable conditions with insufficient

international assistance. I was informed that most prefer not to return to their original homes for fear of discrimination and harassment. A property restitution mechanism for Osset IDPs is sorely lacking, a situation which I urged the Government to remedy without further delay.

In Georgia, almost half the remaining 200,000 IDPs are still accommodated in decaying and sometimes very isolated collective centres which frequently lack running water, electricity or insulation. Their inhabitants often belong to particularly vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as elderly without family support, female-headed households, disabled and severely traumatised persons. The rest of the IDPs continue to live with host families and communities, putting a considerable strain on a population suffering generally from high unemployment and widespread poverty. Many IDPs have no income of their own and thus depend on a monthly state allowance. This allowance currently equals around \$6, which does not afford even the most basic necessities, buying just half a pound of bread per day.

The IDPs' misery can be explained in part by the previous Government's policy of heavily promoting return while making local integration difficult. Also, donors and international organisations have drastically reduced their support for humanitarian assistance, discouraged by inefficient public management of funds, renewed tension and destruction in return areas, little prospect of lasting solutions to the conflicts, and a perceived lack of political will of the Government to tackle the displacement crisis appropriately.

Government officials assured me that the new leadership, elected in 2003, embraced a different approach. Acknowledging the prevailing insecurity and lack of basic infrastructure in return areas, officials informed me of their intention to facilitate the economic and social integration of the displaced into local communities, including through the privatisation of collective centres to the benefit of IDPs.

I expressed my appreciation of this shift in approach, and urged the Government to formalise it in a comprehensive policy encompassing the whole range of political, civil, social and economic rights of IDPs. Under international law, and as enshrined in bilateral agreements between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, IDPs have the right to return voluntarily to their former homes. But their right to live in safety at the site of their displacement, as well as an adequate standard of living, must equally be ensured, as stated in the Guiding Principles. Crucially, integration and return are complementary, not mutually exclusive: well-integrated people are more likely to be productive and contribute to society, which could give them the strength to return once the time is right.

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After the next Human Rights Commission, the mission report will be available online at www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/index.htm. For further information about IDP issues in Georgia, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre www.internal-displacement.org