

Bearing witness to displacement in Georgia



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The IDP Voices Project tries to give some idea of the personal reality of the loss of close family members in conflict, the loss of all your belongings and being uprooted.

Tens of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) from Georgia's secessionist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been waiting more than a decade for a solution to their displacement following conflicts which broke out in the early 1990s. Over 240,000 IDPs found refuge in the region bordering Abkhazia and in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Many of them still live in precarious conditions in former hotels and public buildings, dependent on meagre state benefits. During the past few years, some 45,000 people have returned to the Gali district in eastern Abkhazia, despite the poor conditions and economic prospects.

A Heavy Burden, Internally Displaced in Georgia brings the reality behind these facts to life.¹ Published at the end of April 2008, it brings together 13 individual accounts from Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The stories address universal human experiences and responses rather than specific political issues. By reading what the displaced people themselves want to tell us, we may learn what is important to them and what issues particularly concern them. The interviews allowed the displaced individuals to direct the course of the narrative and have allowed unexpected facts and ideas to emerge which challenge generalised notions of displacement.²

The stories in *A Heavy Burden* reveal issues that go beyond typical assistance and protection needs and touch on values, identity, feelings and emotions. Most narrators said they felt relieved or even privileged to be able to tell their story to an attentive and sensitive listener; however, some acknowledged that it was also difficult to recount painful experiences. Some

narrators stated that they were afraid to talk much about these experiences but found it to be of great value.

The title *A Heavy Burden* comes from the great weight of trauma that most narrators reveal. After years of displacement, narrators still need to share their sense of loss and their continuing grief that they could not carry out traditional mourning ceremonies and processes. How can you come to terms with your loss if your loved ones cannot be buried next to their ancestors on their own land, as tradition requires? In these stories we also meet strong women and men who have found their own coping mechanisms and strategies to move forward.

The interviewees were selected from NGOs working with IDPs and communities affected by conflict and forcible displacement. The project gave them the opportunity to develop oral testimony skills to collect and compile the life stories. Together they identified themes, ethical guidelines and appropriate security policies to protect everyone involved in the project. They were also trained to manage the psychological impact of the process on the narrator and themselves.

One of the narrators described the interview process. "Only after talking about our own tragedies did we truly learn about each other... It took time to trust each other. It was when we believed that we understood each other's pain, when this moment came, that we could sit down and talk openly – without aggression, without accusations." Creating space for this dialogue is of the utmost importance in the process of healing the wounds of the displaced people themselves and of the peoples of the region.

It is our hope that that this book will be widely circulated and used by governments, regional organisations, the UN and other international agencies, NGOs, civil society actors, researchers, students and, last but not least, IDPs themselves, to give them a deeper understanding of the concerns of the people displaced in Georgia. Without really listening to people affected and engaging them in the development of programmes, there is little chance that realistic durable solutions will be developed.

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1. *A Heavy Burden, Internally Displaced in Georgia: Stories of People from Abkhazia and South Ossetia* is being published in Georgian, Russian and English jointly by IDMC in Geneva, the Norwegian Refugee Council in Georgia and Panos London's Oral Testimony Programme. Its stories join those of displaced Colombians at www.idpvoices.org.

2. 59 interviews were completed, 29 of which were selected and edited for the website and 13 for the book.

Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2007

In 2007, the number of people displaced within their countries by armed conflicts and violence passed the 26 million mark, according to IDMC's annual overview launched on 17 April. IDPs in over 50 countries faced continuing attacks as well as hunger, disease and the effects of inadequate shelter. Millions fled their homes in 2007 to escape long-standing internal conflicts, while millions more continued to endure protracted displacement with few prospects of return or resettlement. The report is online at: www.internal-displacement.org.

