Displacement and return

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The brutal nature of the war in Abkhazia was characterized on both sides by ethnic sweep operations, terror, expulsions, looting and rape inflicted on civilians of the other ethnic group. Taking on an increasingly ethnic imprint, violence extended into villages and even families within which Georgians and Abkhaz had previously lived together peacefully. Personal experiences of ethnically based violence led to cycles of retribution, many of which were interrupted, but by no means finished, when the ceasefire was enacted in May 1994. The outcome of the war was a near complete separation of Georgians and Abkhaz, with many harbouring deep mutual hostility.

The forced flight of some 250,000 Georgians and Mingrelians from Abkhazia gave the Abkhaz a demographic advantage that they have proved reluctant to surrender. An en masse return would again put the Abkhaz in a precarious minority position. There are well-placed fears among the Abkhaz that post-return security arrangements would not be adequate to prevent uncontrolled Georgian fighters from seeking revenge for events during and after the war. These fears have generally not been recognized by the Georgians, nor have they been addressed meaningfully by the official peace process. In addition, land disputes can be expected to figure prominently once repatriation begins, since many Abkhaz have reportedly moved into the homes of displaced Georgians, often because of the destruction of their own homes. The number of ethnic Abkhaz and others who are displaced within Abkhazia, or who have fled as refugees, is unknown.

In 1994 the Quadripartite Agreement on Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons which followed the

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ceasefire led to a misplaced optimism that rapid progress could be made towards removing the major impediments to a political resolution of the conflict. Although many in the humanitarian community regarded a return as dangerously premature, UNHCR mobilized quickly for a major return operation. The anticipated quick fix failed due to the absence of meaningful security for returnees and Abkhaz insistence that returnees be screened so that participants in the war could be excluded. The experience highlighted the dangers inherent in approaching the conflict resolution process in a vacuum, without due regard for the humanitarian implications of political decisions.

Fuelled partly by its need to realize scarce income from fertile agricultural areas, Sukhumi has demonstrated a willingness to allow limited Georgian and Mingrelian resettlement in the Gali region. However, Sukhumi's unilateral effort in March 1999 to encourage those displaced from Gali to return has been regarded with scepticism at best and as a provocation at worst. Georgian militant groups and many Georgian politicians see the Abkhaz tactic of allowing a partial return as a threat to their all-or-nothing approach, which includes the return of Georgians to Sukhumi.

Estimates of spontaneous returnees to the Gali area have been as high as 55,000 in periods of calm, although numbers fluctuate with the ebb and flow of security conditions, the planting season, the hazelnut harvest and the availability of humanitarian assistance in Zugdidi. Despite limited reconstruction assistance many returnees have been able to muster the resources necessary to start anew. However, protection needs have been acute and largely unmet. Periodic ethnic sweep and registration operations by Abkhaz militia around Gali have typically been violent episodes with little CISPKF intercession on behalf of civilians, prompting people to flee across the Inguri River until calm returns and serving to discredit the peacekeepers. At particularly tense moments, some returnees have formed self-defence cadres to protect their homes and families. Security in the region has worsened since 1995 with escalating attacks by Georgian partisan groups and reprisals by Abkhaz militia. Many homes rebuilt since 1995 were burned again in the violence of May 1998 when up to 35,000 people were displaced for the second or even third time.

A humanitarian impasse

The extended period of frozen hostility since 1994 has resulted in a humanitarian impasse. Continued displacement for tens of thousands of Georgians and the perpetuation of difficult conditions for Abkhaz render political negotiations more difficult and the eventual consolidation of peace less certain. The right of return, as well as reconstruction and rehabilitation assistance within Abkhazia, has become deeply subordinated to and contingent upon success in resolving what have proved to be intractable questions of political and territorial status.

The quality of life for people on both sides, already struggling to recover from the shock of the Soviet collapse, has been further undercut by the war, which disrupted normal transportation and trade channels and created the immense additional burden of providing for a large war-affected population. In light of its significant depopulation, Abkhazia's prospects for economic viability in the long term are marginal at best. Meanwhile, growing impatience and militancy among the displaced has meant diminished prospects for their safe and orderly return and diminished readiness among Abkhaz to welcome them.

Aid donors have indicated that they are unwilling to maintain the status quo indefinitely when there is negligible progress in peace negotiations. Five years after the ceasefire major aid agencies and donors are now openly discussing the propriety of disengaging, rightly questioning whether their limited resources would be more effectively applied to other conflict and post-conflict situations where tangible progress is being made.

The effects of prolonged displacement

Displaced ethnic Georgians tend to live visibly separate lives from their hosts and this has led to an increasing sense of estrangement between the two communities. There is considerable ill feeling between displaced and host populations who feel that IDP-owned business interests have enjoyed undue advantages and near monopolies over some aspects of trade and commerce. Coupled to this, as a visible drain on government resources the displaced have borne the brunt of resentment over Georgia's slow emergence from systemic economic collapse. International assistance earmarked for the displaced to the exclusion of the population at large has, at times, made matters worse.

Field studies conducted by UNHCR in 1997 revealed that among displaced Georgians and war-affected Abkhaz the prolonged experience of displacement, isolation and hardship has resulted in a hardening of resentment against the other ethnic group. Daily reminders of the war's violence, destruction and ensuing deprivation contribute to their self-identification as distinct, separate and victimized groups. Within these groups, which often have limited contacts outside of their own improvised post-war communities, the repeated telling of personal stories of war and ethnic cleansing has helped to keep wounds fresh. Surrounded by unrepaired war damage many Abkhaz fear the worst if displaced Georgians return en masse. Similarly, many displaced Georgians are not

convinced that their safety can be guaranteed if they return to live among the Abkhaz. Institutionalization of the ceasefire has ruled out most possibilities for constructive contact between the two populations across the lines of conflict. While large-scale bloodshed has been held in check by the ceasefire, the persistently unstable 'no war, no peace' situation has led to replication of the conditions under which animosities flourish.

Against the backdrop of a lacklustre peace process, fear, frustration and growing militancy among elements of the displaced population constitute resources that can be employed for political opportunism. Some observers hold that the Georgian government benefits from having a highly visible and politically mobilized IDP constituency which can garner international sympathies, maintain pressure on the Abkhaz authorities and lure the attention of the electorate away from Georgia's other pressing difficulties. Any significant integration of the displaced, therefore, would prove to be politically costly. Political organizations claiming to represent the interests of the displaced, notably the Abkhaz Liberation Party and the Co-ordinating Council for the Persecuted, have played on frustration and incited militancy. These organizations have sought to discredit the negotiating process, advocating a violent resolution of the conflict and raising false hopes about the imminence and conditions of return. Escalating guerrilla activity mounted in and around Abkhazia by the so-called White Legion and Forest Brothers has led to mutual recrimination between Georgian and Abkhaz interlocutors on a number of occasions, jeopardizing their ability to seek compromise solutions. Spontaneous returnees to the Gali region have been subjected to attacks and threats both from Abkhaz paramilitaries and from the Georgian guerrillas who purport to be protecting their interests.

The Zviadist factor

Prolonged displacement may be widening a potentially dangerous identity gap between the large numbers of displaced who are of Mingrelian (West Georgian) ancestry and the host population in other parts of Georgia. Since Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who had considerable support in Mingrelia, was ousted as Georgian leader in 1992, the gulf between Zviadists in western Georgia and the regime in Tbilisi has been allowed to fester as a continuing threat to Georgian statehood marked by low-level, sporadic violence. There is a widespread perception in western Georgia that Tbilisi has been repressive, undemocratic and unresponsive. Meanwhile, the more visible and internationalized conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have claimed greater resources from Tbilisi and international sources.

Although the fight between West and East Georgians was discontinued in late 1992 so that all could join in the fighting in Abkhazia, it was resumed briefly in late 1993 and into 1994. Memories of the bloody reprisal attacks, looting and lawlessness that prevailed in western Georgia remain relatively fresh. Increasing militancy within the displaced population may be due in part to the crystallization of a shared Mingrelian identity. Issues that have arisen within the increasingly restive IDP community have periodically taken on overtones of the Gamsakhurdia/Shevardnadze divide. Zugdidi has been an epicentre for IDP activism, with frequent demonstrations and disruptions in the city and nearby on the bridge separating western Georgia and Abkhazia over the Inguri River. The economic position in western Georgia has been worsened by the area's absorption of large numbers of displaced.

Impunity

Perhaps the greatest unmet challenge facing protagonists in the Georgia–Abkhazia conflict is their assumption of genuine responsibility for the welfare of the people they claim to represent. Their conduct of the war in Abkhazia and management of the ceasefire has not inspired confidence. Exemption from punishment remains a serious obstacle to mitigation and resolution of the Georgia–Abkhazia conflict in a variety of ways. Throughout the life of the conflict, Georgian, Abkhaz and CISPKF military and paramilitary personnel have repeatedly demonstrated a lack of military professionalism. Poor discipline, lack of adequate command and control and excessive and arbitrary use of force have been commonplace, with dire consequences for civilians. Georgian and Abkhaz authorities each disclaim responsibility for the existence or conduct of paramilitary and guerrilla groups that, for several years, have mounted lethal attacks on civilians, UNOMIG and the CISPKF in and around Abkhazia. Self-appointed leaders of the IDP community and the Abkhaz 'parliament-in-exile' have incited violence and raised false hopes among the displaced about the imminence and conditions of return. These groups have not been held to account by the Georgian authorities. A disturbing number of serious attacks on aid agency operations and personnel have gone unpunished and have jeopardized a continued humanitarian presence and assistance to those most in need.

Implications for safe and orderly return

As one aid worker in the region has observed, repatriation is a big word involving many incremental steps. Reconciliation may be an even bigger word. Among the roots of the conflict are perceptions of long-standing denials of security and justice, unfair and inadequate

access to resources, impingement on human rights, perceptions of threat and victimization, fear of genocide and demographic oblivion. Return agreements that are not sensitive to these issues may well result in a resumption of war. The deep-seated animosities, severe destruction and vulnerability of residents and returnees to fear and manipulation all point to the need for long-term investment by aid agencies, diplomatic actors, local authorities and civil society. Cutting corners in deference to political expediency, speed and frugality have proven to be dangerously counterproductive to the welfare of returnees and the sustainability of returns.

In the event of an agreement on the return of the displaced, a number of potential pitfalls will require careful management by humanitarian assistance agencies and diplomatic actors. The willingness of Abkhaz to receive or live alongside returnees will not be determined by signatures on political agreements. This will come through a mix of local factors including security concerns, the absorptive capacity of local infrastructure, the availability of proportionate reconstruction assistance on the basis of need and confidence that adequate safeguards will be in place to ensure that disputes will be resolved without violence. The attitudes that displaced Georgians and Mingrelians take with them upon return will be as important, if not more important, than the skills they possess. Prolonged displacement has heightened the need for a carefully conceived synergy of political and humanitarian measures to temper unrealistic expectations, address frustrations, ease isolation and promote of a sense of community among potential returnees, host communities and residents in areas of return.

Security in areas of return

The potential for intercommunal violence is likely to be acute in some areas of return. Renewed blood feuds, revenge attacks, criminality and competition for scarce resources all have strong potential to serve as flashpoints for armed clashes between residents and returnees. Experience throughout the Caucasus suggests that meaningful protection cannot be entrusted to ill-disciplined and poorly trained local police, soldiers and militia. Nor would the track record of CISPKF, as it is presently constituted, inspire sufficient confidence. Political agreements will determine whether returnees and residents enjoy the protection of international police and peacekeeping forces. Meanwhile, assistance efforts which support local capacities for dealing with local conflicts such as training and provisioning of accountable local civilian police, and creative aid programming which improves the opportunities for people to live together peacefully, will be important adjuncts to political protection.

Return, reconstruction and rehabilitation

Since the war, aid to Abkhazia has been heavily conditioned by implicit donor biases against engaging in reconstruction and rehabilitation assistance in an insurgent area. Beyond life-saving humanitarian assistance, little has been done by the international community to help normalize living conditions for Abkhaz or to prepare Abkhazia for the absorption of returnees beyond the Gali region. The dearth of rehabilitation activity appears to have worked against progress in conflict resolution by feeding into pre-existing notions among Abkhaz that they are isolated and victimized, leading the Abkhaz authorities to be less inclined to co-operate with mediation efforts.

In the event of an organized return, aid-centred tensions in Abkhazia can be anticipated when large-scale reconstruction of homes and infrastructure begins. From village to village, war damage often reflected the ethnic origins of the homeowner or the ethnic make-up of the neighbourhood. Assessments of need for reconstruction assistance, therefore, are likely to identify beneficiary groups which are a mirror image of ethnic and other divisions. To be specific, it will mostly be Georgian homes that will receive first call on international assistance in the rush to get people resettled. Homes presently or formerly occupied by Abkhaz and others, some of which have been occupied without legal authorization, are already habitable and thus are unlikely to be targeted for assistance. Transparent and creative targeting strategies, including those which take collective or community needs into account, may prove useful for avoiding perceptions among Abkhaz and other minorities that aid is biased in favour of ethnic Georgians.

The challenges facing normalization in Abkhazia and a return of the displaced are formidable. Year by year the costs accruing from the intractability and lethargy of regional political authorities steadily mount. A safe, orderly and sustainable return process will rest on renewed commitment and a new-found sense of urgency from those who claim to represent the interests of people affected by the conflict.