

2012 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting

Warsaw, October 2012

Statement of the Georgian Delegation

Working Session 3: Refugees and Displaced Persons

It is a sad fact that in the 21th century there are millions of displaced persons in the OSCE area and unfortunately close to half a million of them were forcefully displaced within Georgia and to other countries. Georgia has suffered from ethnic cleansing, expulsion and human rights abuses of its population on occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in the beginning of the 1990s and as recent as 2008. As a result of the August 2008 Russia-Georgia war, the ethnic cleansing that ensued and the occupation of the significant part of Georgia's territory, the Government has recorded a new wave of over 130,000 IDPs. Some of them were able to get back to so-called buffer zones, but almost 26,000 are still unable to return to their homes on occupied territories. These people are deprived of their inalienable right to safe and dignified return to their places of habitual residence.

The plight of displaced population remains an acute concern for the Georgian government. Until the rights of these people are not ensured and protected, until they are able to return in a dignified and safe manner to their homes, from which have had been expelled- it is hardly possible to talk about progress towards durable solution of a conflict.

To cope with this problem, the Georgian government makes efforts to address the plight of IDPs both internally and on international arena.

The Government of Georgia has adopted the Action Plan for the Implementation of the State Strategy on IDPs. The main goal of the State Strategy is to improve their living conditions and promote socio-economic integration. To reach this goal the AP aims to provide durable solutions to the accommodation needs of the IDPS and refugees, lessening their dependence on the State aid and enhancing their integration into the social assistance programs based on clear and transparent criteria of vulnerability.

Taking into account different categories of the IDPs in terms of their places of habitation, the AP envisages:

- Rehabilitation of the Collective Centers where feasible and their transfer to the ownership of the IDP families;
- Improving the living conditions of those IDPs who live in collective centers;
- Identifying and rehabilitating the state owned and unused buildings with an aim of turning them into the IDP residences sites,

- Constructing new accommodation, with the priority given to the regions where IDPs are already residing and are integrated,
- Providing of individual houses in rural areas with access to land and in tandem with livelihood-improvement measures.

Since August 2008 the Government established 39 new IDP settlements, up to 200 rural houses were bought for IDPs, 2000 families received financial assistance for housing in the amount of 10,000 USD each; More than 860 hectares of land – kitchen plots attached to cottages and arable lands for agricultural activities – were allocated to IDPs living in cottages and in rehabilitated flats.

Displaced farmers were given financial aid for restoring their activities and in kind assets; Wide range of income generating programmes was implemented to support their livelihood and self reliance.

Simultaneously, the Government continues to provide financial assistance to the estimated 239 000 IDPs registered in Georgia as a result of the displacement in the early 1990s: up to 900 Collective Centres were partially or fully rehabilitated; 80 vacant buildings were rehabilitated and transferred into ownership of IDPs; 64 new apartment blocks were constructed for 6 254 IDPs, as a result of which up to 167 Collective Centres in disrepair were closed; up to 50 individual rural houses were constructed.

In total, 28, 861 so called IDP families from both “old” and “new” caseloads have been provided with durable housing solutions, including 5 517 IDPs who received monetary assistance.

To achieve the goal of providing improved livelihood of internally displaced persons envisaged in the IDP State strategy and the Action Plan, under the Steering Committee on IDP issues, special Expert group on livelihood was created, which coordinates efforts in this direction.

In 2009, Legal Entity under Public Law – the IDP Communities Development Center was created under the Ministry of IDPs from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia. The goal of this Center is to enhance the social and economic reintegration of the IDPs by increasing opportunities for IDPs communities to participate in the community development activities, improvement of social services and livelihood opportunities through direct participation of IDPs in selection of micro-projects, their monitoring and management that provides IDPs with the participation and decision making opportunities.

Further plans for 2012 include the construction of 9 new apartment blocks in Zugdidi by KfW starting in autumn, 9 new apartment blocks built with support from EU and 4 apartment blocks with support from USAID in western Georgia. Construction of 35 new cottages with support from Swiss Development and Cooperation Agency (SDC) in Kutaisi is ongoing for those IDP families who lived for already 20 years on the same location in dilapidating cottages.

Progressing towards improving the livelihood of IDPS, the fulfillment of the rights of refugees to return to their homes in dignity and safety remains the main priority of Georgian government. This is shared by international community, including relevant international organizations, OSCE, UN, CoE and EU, which have committed to support Georgia in this endeavor.

As a result of our efforts in the UN, the UNGA has consistently reaffirmed the right of Georgian refugees and IDPs to return through adoption of a Resolution on IDPs and Refugees tabled by Georgia. The increasing support for the resolution of humanitarian nature, which upholds the fundamental right for dignified and safe return of IDPs, is a testament to the support of this cause on international arena.

Meanwhile it is a regretful fact that against the background of the occupation and absence of the international mechanisms for Human Rights monitoring on the ground, the Human Rights situation of the Georgian population still residing in occupied territories is not improving. There are multiple cases of physical abuse, forced conscription, abuse of property rights. The Russian occupation forces and their proxy regimes continue to severely restrict the rights of the ethnic Georgian population residing in the occupied regions. The freedom of movement, as well as the right to receive education in native language is severely restricted.

On 17th of September this year the educational process started in all schools throughout Georgia. Russian so-called "border" guards did not permit the children from 1st through 7th grade studying at the Tskoushi and Pakhulani public schools, Tsalenjikha district, to cross the occupation line. They were told to apply to the school in Saberio where instruction is conducted only in Russian language.

As is known, the OSCE and UN missions that used to function before 2008 in Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia respectively, have been terminated after the Russia-Georgia war due to the political veto by Russia. The absence of the international monitoring mechanism not only has a negative effect on the human rights situation in these occupied regions, it also solidifies the feeling of impunity among the occupying forces and their proxies. In August this year Leonid Tibilov, the leader of the occupation regime in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia publicly announced his intention to demolish the remainders of the villages to the north of Tskhinvali, which used to be predominantly populated by ethnic Georgians prior to the ethnic cleansing conducted during the August 2008 Russian military invasion of Georgia. Back in 2008 the majority of the houses of ethnic Georgians were destroyed and torched by South Ossetian militias, who acted under protection and with direct aid of the Russian army, as documented by numerous observers and relevant international organizations, including the Tagliavini team and the OSCE. In his statement last month, Mr. Tibilov ordered the obliteration of the very signs that would indicate that Georgians ever lived on these territories, including eradication of the historic toponyms.

Following the statement by Mr. Tibilov, the newly-appointed so-called “minister of construction and architecture of South Ossetia”, has confirmed the intent to bring to completion the destruction of Georgian villages of Tamarasheni, Kurta, Kekhvi and Anchabeti.

Is there still a necessity to explain that such rhetoric and intentions are totally unacceptable in the 21 century Europe, in the OSCE area?

Georgia is grateful to the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) Mr. Vollebaek for the timely and unequivocal condemnation of the gruesome intent by the Tskhinvali puppet regime, who declared in his statement that “apart from being a potentially criminal act, such a step will certainly constitute an impediment to peace and stability in the region.” It is crucial that OSCE, in its capacity of a co-chair of the Geneva discussions, raises this issue at the next round of discussions and uses its clout to make it crystal clear, to Tskhinvali regime and its masters, that not only such acts, but even such rhetoric will not be tolerated by the international community.

But it is not enough to simply condemn such acts. It is necessary to act in order to alleviate the suffering of these vulnerable groups of people, and to seek ways for solution to the conflict. While the government’s effort can and must help these people to be warm and fed, help their children have a better future, our effort alone is insufficient to restore their rights and their dignity. It is necessary that international community steps up its efforts to introduce the presence of international mechanisms for monitoring the HR situation in the occupied regions of Georgia and to help create conditions for their safe and dignified return.

There are several important areas where concrete steps have to be taken to end the suffering and injustice that these victims of ethnic cleansing go through and to bring about the possibility for finding a solution for the conflict.

First of all, Russia has to respect the rights of the refugees and IDPs and cooperate in creating the conditions necessary for their return. The international community should continue to call on Russia to do so, especially considering the fact Russia and its proxy regimes consistently block the discussion of the IDP issues at the Geneva discussions.

Secondly, it is important that the dialogue in Geneva format bears fruit and serves as a forum to reach progress. It is therefore vital that the relevant international organizations, taking part in the discussions, including OSCE, intensify their efforts towards this goal. It is necessary to elaborate concrete measures and modalities for the safe and dignified return of the refugees.

The OSCE must become more active in confidence building between the war-torn communities. OSCE has a capacity to undertake humanitarian projects aimed at restoring ties between the divided communities. OSCE ran an extremely successful Economic Rehabilitation Program before 2008 which was instrumental in bringing together Ossetian and Georgian villages. We need a similar program.

In addition, we need a follow-up to the 2008 report by the ODIHR/HCNM “On Human Rights in the War-Affected Areas Following the Conflict in Georgia”. Unfortunately, 4 years after the war, the follow-up still has not materialized.

And finally, I would like to reiterate, that the establishment of international human rights monitoring mechanism for these regions, is critical for the protection of the rights of IDPs and refugees.

Thank you.