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THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN SOUTH OSSETIA

Throughout much of history, Ossetians and Georgians have lived peaceably in South Ossetia, with widespread intermarriage and frequent travel across the border with Georgia. Under Soviet leadership, South Ossetia was forced to become part of Georgia, though it kept its autonomous stature. In 1989, Georgia abolished South Ossetia's semi-independent status and began a campaign to force Ossetians to assimilate into Georgian society. Georgian was proclaimed the national language and Ossetians were forced to take Georgian names. Ossetians were harassed and beaten. Resistance to these harsh measures grew, and in 1991, Georgia sent in troops to crush the growing independence movement. During that conflict, more than 1,000 Ossetians died. Over the past two decades, more than 150,000 Georgians and Ossetians have been forced to flee their homes in South Ossetia because of Georgia's continuing military aggression.

The following points are designed to provide background on the refugee situation in South Ossetia:

- **HOW MANY PEOPLE IN SOUTH OSSETIA HAVE BEEN FORCED TO LEAVE SOUTH OSSETIA DUE TO GEORGIA'S ONGOING HOSTILITIES?**

That is not an easy question to answer, because the Georgians have been engaging in armed conflict against South Ossetia for several decades. In addition, the Georgians have harassed and discriminated against Ossetians living in Georgia, forcing thousands of them to flee to North Ossetia and Russia. In total, the Republic of South Ossetia estimates that more than 150,000 people have become refugees and internally displaced people since 1989. Of those:

- More than 100,000 have fled Georgia to North Ossetia and Russia
- At least 35,000 have fled South Ossetia to North Ossetia and Russia
- At least 15,000 have been forced to leave their homes in conflict areas and have fled to other parts of South Ossetia or Georgia, thus qualifying as IDPs.

- **HOW MANY GEORGIANS HAVE FLED SOUTH OSSETIA SINCE THE 1989-1992 CONFLICT AND THE AUGUST 2008 WAR?**

An estimated 5,000 Georgians left their homes in South Ossetia after the 1989-92 conflict and an additional 13,000 after the August conflict.

- **HOW MANY GEORGIANS HAVE RETURNED TO SOUTH OSSETIA?**

The government of the Republic of South Ossetia, working with the UNHCR, the NRC and others, has successfully resettled 1,760 Georgians to South Ossetia, mostly to the Znaur region. This has occurred in spite of an ongoing campaign by the Georgian government to politicize the refugee process by provoking ethnic tensions, creating impediments to the safe return of refugees and establishing legal and diplomatic barriers to an international resolution.

- **WHAT IS THE SITUATION IN LENINGOR REGION, WHICH WAS THE HOME OF A LARGE GEORGIAN POPULATION BEFORE THE AUGUST 2008 WAR?**

After the August 2008 war, the RSO established policies to protect any Georgians who returned to Leningor and is maintaining their homes so they can resettle successfully. But the Georgian authorities continue to make it difficult for people to live in Leningor, cutting the gas and electrical supply to the Ossetian side of the border. The Georgian government convinced a number of Georgians to leave Leningor region, after spreading false reports that Georgians were being harassed. Those Georgians are living in U.S.-financed housing built across the border in Georgia.

- **WHAT RIGHTS DO GEORGIAN RETURNEES HAVE?**

Under South Ossetian law, all citizens-regardless of ethnicity-are treated the same.

- **HOW ARE OSSETIAN REFUGEES WITHIN GEORGIA TREATED?**

As part of its nationalist campaign to make "Georgia for Georgians," the Saakashvili regime has harassed and discriminated against Ossetians who are living in Georgia or fled there as a result of the fighting. Since the summer of 2009, 56 Ossetian families were expelled .

- **ARE THERE ANY REFUGEES WHO HAVE NOT BEEN ALLOWED TO RETURN?**

The South Ossetian government maintains the right to prosecute any citizens who have participated in subversive activities, such as armed attacks or kidnappings. The government has a list of people accused of those activities and they will be arrested and prosecuted if they return to South Ossetian territory.

- **HOW HAS THE GEORGIAN GOVERNMENT IMPEDED THE SUCCESSFUL RESOLUTION OF THE REFUGEE PROBLEM?**

To begin with, Georgia's government is responsible for creating the refugee problem by its repeated and unsuccessful efforts to retake its former territories in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force. Those failures have led President Mikheil Saakashvili to use the refugee issue as a tactic to shift responsibility for the results of his aggression from him to the governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For example, Georgia has demanded that international groups freeze economic development and social programs in Abkhazia and South Ossetia or risk prosecution under Georgian law. Georgia also adopted a law that makes it a crime under Georgian law for representatives of international organizations to enter Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These laws have forced international groups to make a choice between working in Abkhazia or Georgia. Economic sanctions sponsored by Georgia have also made it difficult for South Ossetia to obtain the necessary funding needed to implement a successful refugee resettlement program