

PUBLIC

AI Index: EUR 56/005/2008

11 August 2008

UA 220/08

Civilian lives at risk

GEORGIA/RUSSIAN FEDERATION

The lives of civilians in the disputed region of South Ossetia and in Georgia are at risk. Heavy civilian casualties have been reported as a result of fighting between Georgian and Russian forces which has escalated over the past few days. Although reports of civilian dead and wounded vary, with numbers and circumstances difficult to independently verify, media reports and footage indicates damage to homes and other civilian targets as a result of the military attacks from both sides.

All parties to the conflict must not carry out direct attacks on civilians, their homes or other civilian targets. Their military operations must also avoid indiscriminate attacks, that is, attacks which do not attempt to distinguish between military and civilian targets, or attacks that have a disproportionate impact on civilians or civilian objects.

Georgia and Russia must also provide protection and safe passage to people fleeing from the conflict, and allow unimpeded access to humanitarian relief for those in areas affected by the conflict. Thousands of people are said to have already fled South Ossetia, including across the border into the Russian republic of North Ossetia. International humanitarian law, in particular the protection of civilians, must also be scrupulously observed in other related hostilities reported to be breaking out in the Kodori gorge, an area in another disputed region of Georgia, Abkhazia.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After months of increased tension, and recent low-level hostilities, the conflict between Georgia and the breakaway region of South Ossetia escalated in the early morning of 8 August 2008 into the most serious confrontation since the civil war between the two was concluded through a truce in 1992. The ceasefire agreement included the establishment of a tripartite peacekeeping force, with Russian, Ossetian and Georgian peacekeeping battalions.

On 8 August, Georgian troops launched what appears to have been a coordinated military offensive against the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, in order to “restore constitutional order.” Dozens of civilian buildings have reportedly been destroyed as a result of attacks by Georgian forces, including residential homes, administrative buildings, a toy shop, university and the republican hospital.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev responded by sending further troops backed by tanks to reinforce those already stationed in South Ossetia as part of the ceasefire with the stated aim to re-establish the status quo. Additionally, on 9 August, Russian bombs hit a residential area in Gori, which lies just to the south of the disputed region and is said to house Georgian military bases – again with reported civilian casualties. There are reports of further air strikes by Russian forces in Georgia, including the Black Sea port of Poti as well as other targets near Georgia’s capital, Tbilisi.

On 10 August Georgia reported that it had ordered its forces to cease fire and had pulled back its forces from

Tskhinvali and South Ossetia itself to positions to the south of those held before the current hostilities began. However, both Georgian and Russian forces are reportedly still carrying out military actions.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Russian, Georgian, English or your own language:

- urging all parties to the conflict to comply with principles of international humanitarian law which are binding on states and non-governmental armed groups.
- calling on all parties to distinguish between civilian and military targets and to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects and to avoid attacks that do not attempt to distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian objects and attacks that have a disproportionate impact on civilians or civilian objects;
- urging all parties to provide safe passage to civilians fleeing from the conflict and allow unimpeded access to humanitarian relief for those in areas affected by the conflict.

APPEALS TO:

President Mikheil Saakashvili
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0105 Tbilisi
Georgia
Fax: +995 32 99 96 30
Salutation: Dear President

President Dmitrii Medvedev
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103132 Moscow
Russian Federation
Fax : +7 (495) 606 51 73
Salutation: Dear President

Ms Eka Tkeshelashvili
Minister of Foreign Affairs
4 Chitadze Street
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Georgia
Fax: +995 32 28 46 78
Salutation: Dear Minister

Mr Sergei Lavrov
Minister of Foreign Affairs
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Russian Federation
Fax: +7 (495) 244 22 03
Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Russian Federation and Georgia accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 22 September 2008.