

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI INDEX: EUR 56/004/2008

10 August 2008

Georgia: South Ossetia - Georgia and Russia must Protect Civilians as highest priority

Amnesty International calls on all sides to the conflict in South Ossetia to fully respect International humanitarian law in order that civilians are protected from hostilities.

In fighting in the disputed region of South Ossetia over the past few days, heavy civilian casualties have been reported. Although reports of civilian dead and wounded vary, with numbers and circumstances difficult to independently verify, media reports and footage indicates damage to civilian objects as a result of the military attacks from both sides.

For example, in Tskhinvali, capital of South Ossetia, dozens of civilian buildings are said to have been destroyed as a result of attacks by Georgian forces, including residential homes, administrative buildings, a toy shop, university and the republican hospital. On 9 August, Russian bombs hit a residential area in Gori, a town in central Georgia.

Amnesty International urges all parties to the conflict to abstain from direct attacks on civilians or civilian objects. Their military operations must also avoid attacks which do not attempt to distinguish between military targets and civilians or civilian objects and attacks which have a disproportionate impact on civilians or civilian objects. Amnesty International is concerned that some of the attacks mounted could amount to war crimes.

Moreover, Georgia and Russia must provide protection and safe passage to people fleeing from the conflict and allow unimpeded access to humanitarian relief to areas affected by the conflict.

Amnesty International urges that international humanitarian law, in particular the protection of civilians, 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.

Amnesty International also urges the international community to exert every effort to ensure all sides to the conflict observe international humanitarian law and give the protection of civilians and the negotiated solution of the conflict absolute priority.

Background

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. 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”. 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.

Georgian and Russian forces then engaged in what was reported to be fierce fighting in and around Tskhinvali, with Georgia reporting on 10 August that it had then pulled back its forces from Tskhinvali and South Ossetia itself to positions to the south of those held before the current hostilities began. According to reports later that day, Georgian had ordered its forces to cease fire. Heavy civilian casualties have been reported, but remain difficult to independently verify. Russia is also said to have bombed Georgia’s Black Sea port of Poti, and the town of Gori, which lies just to the south of the disputed region and houses three Georgian military bases – again with civilian casualties.

Thousands of people are said to have fled the area, including across the border into the Russian republic of North Ossetia. Both the Russian and Georgian sides have reported dead and wounded among their troops involved in the conflict. _____

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