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South Ossetia: Observation of international humanitarian law and protection of civilians essential

Amnesty International calls on all sides in the conflict in South Ossetia to fully respect international humanitarian law and as such, to ensure that civilians are protected from hostilities. The same standards must also be respected in other related hostilities reported to be breaking out in the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, another disputed region of Georgia.

"All parties to the conflict must abstain from direct attacks on civilians. Their operations must also avoid attacks which do not attempt to distinguish between military and non-military targets. We are concerned that some of the attacks mounted in South Ossetia could amount to war crimes," said Amnesty International.

In addition, Georgia and Russia must provide protection and safe passage to people fleeing from the conflict and allow unimpeded access to humanitarian relief to those in affected areas.

Background to International Humanitarian Law

All parties to the conflict must comply with principles of international humanitarian law which are binding on states and non-governmental armed groups.

Key among these is the principle of distinction between civilian and military targets, and the protection of civilians; direct attacks against civilians or non-military objects are prohibited; also prohibited are indiscriminate attacks which do not attempt to distinguish between military and non-military targets, or which use inherently indiscriminate weapons; disproportionate attacks are prohibited too which, while aimed at a legitimate military target, but have a disproportionate impact on civilians relative to the military objective; parties must take measures to protect the civilian population from the dangers arising from military operations - this includes not locating military objectives among civilian concentrations; civilians must have access to humanitarian assistance, and humanitarian agencies must be allowed access to the civilian population; all prisoners, the wounded and those seeking to surrender, must be treated humanely - prisoners must never be killed or held as hostages; anyone responsible for grave breaches of international humanitarian law should be brought to justice in a fair trial, and reparations should be provided to the victims of such violations.