

REFUGEES IN GEORGIA

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SPECIAL REPORT

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Victim of the ID thieves

Millions of lari in aid is lost to counterfeiters

■ **Nato Gubeladze**

JOPUA, IRMA, paternal name - Vladimir; Jopua, Zlata, paternal name - Vladimir; Kvaratskhelia, Zlata, paternal name - Vladimir. These three names and surnames in fact belong to one person, (one is her maiden surname, another - her husband's; another name is her real first name, another, a nickname) but three different internally displaced person identification cards have been issued to them.

The same photo is attached to two of these IDs, though it is not of Irma Jopua. From 1995 till 2000, cash aid worth 11 lari per month was issued on the strength of each card. She only knew peo-

ple had stolen her identity when we traced her.

The first IDP identification card in her name was issued by the Ochamchire Gamgeoba [local governance unit] in Tbilisi on August 14, 1995. Two days later, the same Gamgeoba issued another ID by manipulating Irma's name and using a different woman's photo.

When war started in Abkhazia, then 22-years-old Irma Jopua was captured by a Georgian battalion in Ochamchire. But she was not captive for long - Tamaz Kvaratskhelia, an officer of the battalion, fell in love with her, asked her to marry him, and released her from captivity. Military operations were still underway when Irma and Tamaz wed at the Il-



Irma Jopua with her daughters. She was astonished when shown the forged papers in her name

ori Church. Irma was baptized in the same church. Tamazi's brothers-in-arms were very proud of such a beautiful sister-in-law and gave her a nickname - "Zlata," or golden girl. That's how Abkhazian

Irma Jopua became Georgian Zlata Kvaratskhelia. Today she lives at a Samtredia boarding-house with her husband and brings up four children.

Zlata looked at the fake IDs is-

sued in her name with astonishment.

"This woman is not me. I swear by the children, I swear by the children," she frequently repeated. "I

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Residents ordered to check out of the Iveria

■ **Nino Patsuria**

"THE IVERIA hotel must be cleaned and returned to its initial state." So ordered President Mikhail Saakashvili in May.

It has been two months since, and the mayor's office has just officially informed the refugee residents of Iveria of their imminent eviction. For the past month, residents have been woken by officials at midnight in a registration drive, so the hotel residents were neither

surprised nor delighted at learning about their eviction.

"Neither the city government nor our own has remembered us for 12 years. Now they intrude at midnight for registration, in order to catch all of us at home. Of course I will leave. I prefer to be anywhere but here," says one elderly woman, Eteri, who refrained from mentioning her last name.

"Nobody has come to us, nobody is asking our opin-

ion," IDP Guliko Murushidze said the day before the Mayor's Office's official statement on the hotel on August 7. "They have been promising to return us for 12 years. What if they fail to keep their promise for 10 more years? What should our people do? Let them give us \$15,000 and then we will leave."

The residents did not even know until early August that the Iveria had been sold long ago and that they had no right to raise

any financial claims toward its private owner. However, Silk Road Group, the new owner of Iveria, is ready to pay \$7,000 to each family residing in the hotel in order to avoid trouble. The company plans to raise \$60 million to completely refurbish the hotel. They do not rule out that this giant of the Soviet tourist industry might be pulled down and a modern, five-star hotel be built in its place.

"Those, who will not agree will be evicted by force af-

ter August the 20," the vice mayor, who is responsible for ensuring the IDPs' welfare, said at the press conference held at the Mayor's Office.

"In this case the Iveria IDPs have the advantage. What can the other IDPs, who live elsewhere, do? We will try to offer the IDPs acceptable conditions, however, everybody must consider the state interests."

IDP Dato Pakeliani is unimpressed. "Our eviction from Iveria will turn us into

refugees again. "This is a repeat humiliation. One government ousted us from there and the other is ousting us from here. I do not believe that they can do this so easily."

The commission set up by the mayor's office inventoried 330 rooms in total in the Iveria Hotel, which means that the Silk Road will have to spend more than \$2 US million to evict the IDPs. In order to cover this and other expenses, the

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A rock and a hard place

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Forgers steal millions in aid meant for IDPs

“Everybody ... IDPs, the local Abkhazian structures, the Ministry and the bank ... was involved in this falsification”

From front page
am shocked. Who is this woman who used to receive assistance in my name? It could have helped me a lot. Six of us live on 66 lari.”

Falsification of IDP ID cards is not rare. The scale of such activities can be seen from the recent re-registration programme: in 1995, 350,000 IDPs from Abkhazia were registered. That has been slashed to 130,000 through a re-checking of the lists. According to unofficial data, roughly 30,000 IDPs live abroad. But even considering that number is appears that, every month 1.5 million lari was stolen from the aid destined for IDPs.

The fact that a significant sum was also issued to cover electricity and other bills is another issue.

“Everybody, including the IDPs, the local Abkhazian structures, the Ministry of Refugees and Re-settlement and the Post Bank, which distributed the aid, were involved in this chain of falsification,” says Mirza Kochiashvili, the first deputy Minister of Refugees and Re-settlement.

She detailed several common ways forgers outwitted the authorities.

■ The same person is registered as an IDP in various

cities under different passport number;

■ Several persons are registered in the same city under the same passport number;

■ Deceased people were not removed from the list and aid was still issued in their name;

■ Non-existent children were registered as IDPs through false birth certificates.

Avto Kokhraidze, a representative of Kutaisi service for IDPs, says that the latter method is especially easy, as birth certificates issued by several agencies at the same time have legal force.

“Lepter Danelia, an IDP living in Kutaisi, was registered as a guardian of three children and had been receiving their aid on the basis of their birth certificates for years. Last year, according to the documents, the children came of age, and they had to get their ID documents. However, Danelia, in order to get the aid, showed new birth certificates, in which the children’s age was reduced,” says Kokhraidze.

Work on exposing the forgeries and preventing future falsification is continuing apace at the Ministry.

“After these activities, more than 500,000 lari per month will be saved.



Identities, fake and real, in Irma Jopua's name

We plan to direct this to the IDPs. We may even increase the amount of the aid we pay, however, it is still difficult to say how and ac-

cording to what principles this will be implemented,” says Kochiashvili.

■ *Nato Gubeladze is editor of P.S. newspaper in Kutaisi.*

“Who is this woman who used to receive assistance in my name?”

Residents' anger at Hotel Iveria eviction notice

From front page

company plans to attract a foreign investor and is currently in negotiations with two companies – Hyatt and Kempinsky. “The level of investment will presumably equal \$50-60 US million. The sums for compensating evicted IDPs should also be included here. Otherwise, the project might fail,” says Dato Shengelia, one of the owners of the Silk Road Group.

The Iveria Hotel was transformed into a joint-stock company in 1995 and was sold directly, without open contest, the package including 51% of shares, for \$403,508. Initially, there were five or six shareholders. Now, 95% of shares are owned by Silk Road.

In the 22-storey Iveria, only one floor has maintained the function of hotel. But it works at just 2-3% of capacity. Three luxury apartments and around 10 rooms are located on the floor. “This hotel does not work on profit. It is for poor people. First class apartments cost 90 lari, ordinary ones 50 lari. But nobody pays that. Some pay 20, others pay 15, 10, or do not pay at all. Those who sleep on the streets come here. Who else would come?” asks Givi Kutidze, director of the hotel.

“We became interested in investing in Iveria after the November Revolution, because we understood that the climate seriously changed in the country and we could make business in

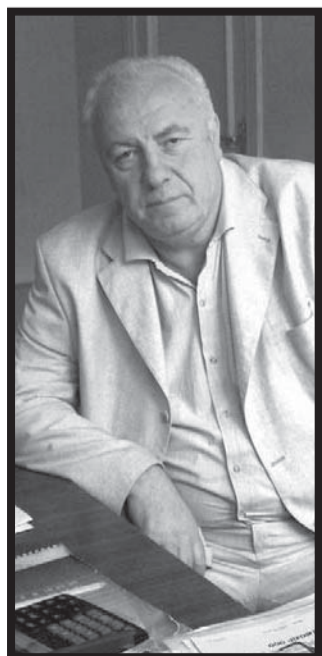


Inside the Iveria
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Georgia as well,” says Dato Shengelia, owner of Silk Road, “Four of us manage the company. All of us are citizens of Georgia. Before, we were mainly occupied in transporting crude oil and oil products from the Central Asia through Georgia.”

Silk Road Group was founded in 1997. Its headquarters are in Geneva, and the financial and management center in Tashkent. Shengelia says the company is very lucky because its interests concerning Iveria coincided with those of the state. “The government of Georgia wanted to restore the image of Republic Square, but was unable to allot the funds required to take the refugees out of Iveria. The company, in turn, could obtain the appropriate funds but was unable to solve, let’s say, technical issues: the exact registration of the IDPs’, inventory of the rooms, and, if needed, the support of police.”

Refugee struggles with conflicting market forces



Nodar Korsantia

■ **Esma Kurashvili**

THE Samegrelo market is something of a blight on Poti’s city centre. The ugly stalls of illegal traders sprawl out across thousands of square meters. In winter, conditions at the market are abysmal. Rain turns the dirt pathways between the stalls into a quagmire, and the market resembles a giant health hazard more than a place to do business.

But within this chaotic bazaar, known as the “IDP’s Market,” refugees and local residents trade side by side, struggling to eke out a living. In fact, internally displaced people make up the bulk of the stallholders, and the owner of the market is himself a refugee.

But Nodar Korsantia

claims his efforts to improve the lot of the stallholders, IDPs and locals alike, is being hampered by bureaucracy and conflicting business interests.

Plans to replace the hotchpotch of stalls and counters with a modern trading centre, first mooted in 1998, have stalled, with the one completed building only part-filled as the government struggles to clear out the thousands of illegal traders that hamper access. Korsantia’s nephew, Gela Naneishvili, the director of the market, claims the government’s main input in the project so far has been to serve notice to the owners about various building consents and petty details over the construction, such as the height of the ceilings.

I arranged to meet Korsantia, to discuss his experiences as a refugee and how he managed to start a new life for himself as a businessman.

As we talked, I later learned that he never spoke about his life since he had left Abkhazia. Neither he has ever talked about the Svaneti road he had walked.

The Korsantia family lived the good life in the village of Dranda, in the Gulripshi region of Abkhazia: Nodar was the director of the Sop-Teknika enterprise.

The family left Abkhazia on the day of Sokhumi’s fall and travelled the Svaneti ‘death road’ the only route left open to those who stayed so long. The extended family – five brothers, their mother, plus wives and children,

walked for 15 days to reach Tchuberi. Their nephews brought them to Poti, where Nodar stayed for two months marked by hunger and deprivation, before heading to Moscow to find work. “For the most part I was hungry in Moscow. Neither it was easy to find a job. I took the type of business that would allow me to earn daily bread. Then I brought my wife and children there. I rented an apartment on a street close to a Georgian school.

“But my brothers living in Poti faced hard times. My mother also lived with them. I bought a house for them in Poti. I also involved my nephew Gela Naneishvili in the business I was embarked in Moscow – it was his idea to participate in a tender [for the market] an-

nounced by the Poti government in 1998.”

At first the local government promised support in every department, but then relations cooled, and the construction of the first block was delayed for six years. Now, construction has been put on hold indefinitely.

“At the moment, we have suspended the construction, as the governmental support virtually equals zero. Moreover, it is clear that certain forces benefit from hampering us.”

He says the government’s attitude jeopardises the whole project. “Money doesn’t fall from the skies. I will not invest it in a business I am about to lose.”

Esma Kurashvili is a correspondent for Martali Tribuna in Poti

Voluntary hostages

Those returning to Gali face an uncertain future

■ Nani Mosidze

BY NOW, more than 50,000 internally displaced persons have returned to Gali and its 24 villages. Most have returned because they see no option but to support themselves as subsistence farmers, a step up from living in cramped condition in Zugdidi, struggling to feed themselves on 11 lari a month.

But getting to Gali is no easy feat, especially in these tense times.

Women are most numerous among the bus passengers disembarking at the bridge. Most of them are elderly, and dressed in black. Bright colours are rare.

They all want to cross the bridge as soon as possible, as if they are trying to escape from some kind of danger. On this road, it is best to carry the old Soviet, "red" passport. Presenting a Georgian passport or identification card is asking for trouble.

After handing over the 100 roubles (about 7 lari, or \$3.7US) to the Abkhazian customs post, you are greeted by the a giant poster inscribed: "Republic of Abkhazia".

Whether you like it or not, from this point on you must accept this: if you don't, again, you're asking for trouble. This acceptance is expressed first in spoken languages: in the worse case, one should speak Mingrelian. Russian is good, while Abkhazian, of course, is the best option.

After you clear customs, taxis are waiting nearby. One can reach Gali for 15-20GEL. But you should remember – be careful. Don't talk much and hold back your opinions. It could be said that

here everything – tree, road, sky – has ears and eyes. You are in the "Independent Republic of Abkhazia", i.e. in other state. And if you don't accept that, you might easily wake up in a prison cell.

Gali is a town, though a very small one. The ruins of war are everywhere, while soldiers and policemen are positioned in several repaired buildings.

Among the functioning facilities there is a bank and a school, where subjects are taught in Russian, Abkhazian and Georgian languages. A hospital is functioning and, reportedly, qualified doctors are employed there. But in case of emergencies, the population who returned to Gali prefer the UN volunteers or ask to be taken to Zugdidi for immediate medical assistance.

It could be said that the only viable and life-supporting "cell" in the town is the outdoor market of Gali, which works on Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays. Vendors bring agricultural products or industrial goods either from Lilo or Sochi: Abkhazians trade here together with Georgians. Abkhazians go to Zugdidi via the Enguri bridge without any problems, then go to the Lilo market in Tbilisi and return to Gali via the Enguri bridge.

After 2 pm, the town of Gali "dies." Those who have shelters lock themselves in and just hope, because there is nobody to defend them. Robberies are frequent. The relatively well-off populace is used to this fact and spends each night in fear. My host from Gali said: "Somehow they know when you have something, then come and just say, 'you have it, now bring it over'."

Young Georgian men been drafted to



A Georgian family crosses over the Enguri Bridge, a relatively painless procedure Picture: Nani Mosidze

“
Presenting a Georgian passport or ID card is asking for trouble

the Abkhazian army for two years already, reportedly forcibly at times. Perhaps that's why young men are so rare among those returned to Gali. Children, middle-aged women and older men are common. They are used to their everyday life here, and silently take care of their homesteads and land to survive. The laws of the Abkhazian government are strict: taxes are imposed on everything – electricity, land, harvest, cattle, lumber...

The main harvest in Gali is citrus fruits, although nuts are the mainstay of the villages in the lower zone of the Gali region. Reportedly, the local government has counted every tree in the farms of every villager. Taxes change every year. A new tariff will be set on nuts from August 15, which it is believed will equal 500 grams from each tree. For the residents of Gali, the harvest is associated with fear as well as hope – if the harvest is good, they might be better off. But at the same time, someone might infringe upon their property and even upon their lives. Such incidents do take place, but the residents of Gali seldom talk about their hardships. Trust between each other has also weakened. Nobody knows who is who. If the local government suspects a returnee of not

being all he or she appears, they face severe consequences: in the best case, they are forced to go back to Georgia. The same can happen to someone who does not pay taxes. The residents of Gali are reluctant to speak with strangers or give out their names: the "curious" will leave but they will stay to face the consequences with the local government. It is better to stay silent.

At this stage, the wind of Abkhazian elections has not blown in half-ruined Gali. Candidates have no need to bother themselves as Georgians returning to Gali are not much interested in Abkhazian politics. Many do not even know who is running for president – some are unaware that the republic is holding elections in the first days of October.

Indeed, those who have never walked on this road, those who have never seen tanned-face women carrying large bags on their backs and heading for Gali: those who never followed the tracks of the only moving cart, can not know what it means to head for a half-ruined house in a homeland that has turned into foreign country. They cross the river as voluntary hostages, and if given the right to live, have almost no other claims.

■ Nani Mosidze is the editor of Zugdidi newspaper in Zugdidi.

Poor and hungry risk a dangerous road home

SAMEGRELO and Samurzakano are split by the turbulent River Enguri. People also divide themselves up in those who live on right or left bank – Georgia on one, Abkhazia on the other. There are also two roads going from Zugdidi district, which had its own share of pain during the 1992-1993 war, to Samurzakano.

The Georgian IDPs, who cross the river every day mainly prefer the unofficial road. There are no Abkhaz checkpoints on this road, known as the Kurcha-Nabakevi Way, but buses are slow and crime widespread.

A friend, who had visited a grandchild in Nabakevi on the other side of the river, decided to get back through the unofficial road.

"I had a bad feeling, but there was no other way – I was out of money. My grandson also told me that their neighbours also returned to Zugdidi via this road. We approached Nabakevi, but somebody stopped us. My heart raced, but I did not want the boy to see my fear. Those who stopped us were in police uniforms and spoke Russian. Some passengers also spoke Mingrelian with them.

Some gave money, some other things...when they approached me, the boy started hugging me closely. They pointed a rifle at him and demanded money. The boy murmured he did not have money, but his grandmother did.

"I took out what I had but that did not even make up seven lari. Then they took my bag. I did not say anything. I looked at the boy, he was completely pale. I never usually take risks, as incidents like this might end in another way."

Incidents do end in "other ways," but people still take risks. Old

buses, which shake and lurch alarmingly on the bad roads, are used to transport many things. The driver asks everyone on the way with eyes if "they" have come. "They" are the Abkhazians, who can show up any minute to collect documents and issue one lari single passage permits. It is simpler to get the seven lari permit, valid for a whole month.

The house of our host from Nabakevi, E. K., has only walls, but he lives there permanently, taking care of his land and small nut orchard. These days, he is preparing for the harvest, which he hopes

to transport to a "more peaceful place": that is, Zugdidi. If prices are good enough, he will sell. If not, wait a little bit. He is trying to get back on his feet, but so far with little success.

His neighbours say that until the question of Georgian-Abkhaz relations is finally solved, restoration of houses is not a good idea. They already have the bitter experience of seeing once-restored homes burned down again.

Some 350 families have already returned to their houses in Nabakevi, but only in spring and Summer. In autumn

they return to Zugdidi or Tbilisi to take children back to school, though both a school and a hospital exist in Nabakevi too. Some of the IDP men gather around us. The conversation changes to more controversial subjects. They finger their weapons.

"The Abkhaz know who fought against them," says one. "We do not know how such people will be able to return.

"I never took a gun in my hands and I do not regret it. My co-villagers, who now understand that this war was a lost cause from the start, realise that now."

LIVING IN LIMBO AT

■ Nino Patsuria

THE IVERIA Hotel towers over Republic Square in the centre of Tbilisi. But today its 22 rotting stories are a shadow of its former incarnation as the pride of Soviet tourism and minimalist architecture.

In the past, the hotel hosted only foreign tourists and high-ranking officials; ordinary citizens couldn't get through the doors. Today, the Iveria is a shelter for those uprooted by the horrors of war. Some 393 families – 1,111 people – live there. One room, just 12 square meters, is allocated for each family.

Dato Pakeliani, 28, a resident of Iveria, sums up how the residents feel they are perceived by many in Tbilisi. "Refugee is a stereotype and illegally displaced person is a status. Both of them are bad. The word 'refugee' prevails among the populace and is associated with the person who asks for something.

"If you take a look at the Republic Square you will immediately understand that here is a separate world.

"I have many Tbilisian friends, but when you meet a stranger he will instantly let you know that 'you are not one of us.' But I would also add that as soon as I find out he is not from the region I am, I also avoid him – not because I don't want to feel offended, but because he will make you know later, in business, that he doesn't trust you, because you have no support here. This is a social boundary, not a difference based on the fact that one is from Tbilisi and another is refugee, or one is from Western Georgia and the other is from Eastern."

This shabby, deteriorating building is an inexhaustible

Residents tell of poverty and crime within the capital's most infamous landmark

source of Tbilisians' indignation and reproach – residents of the capital will never get used to rows upon rows of balconies crammed with motley underwear, covered with plastic and veneer and knee deep in garbage – this is the new image of Iveria.

The building jars so totally with the city center, that a foreigner might deem it a surreal fragment, or even some sort of protest on the part of 300,000 IDPs towards a government unable to guarantee peace for citizens on its own territory. In fact, the shattered façade of the Iveria reflects the trauma – economic, social and psychological -- of the people who are "temporarily" sheltered there.

"Of course, I don't like it either that the Iveria is a mess. But I assure you, it was a compulsory step. We have no kitchen to cook. I've covered this balcony with boards in order to protect from dust," says Anzor Lobzhanidze from Gudauta, once a chef and now unemployed, as he walks out to the balcony.

"Neither do I like to see underwear hanging on the balconies of Iveria. But where should we take our laundry? It is impossible to do anything except cook and sleep in an area of 12 square meters."

As for financial conditions and the oft-cited "privileged" status of IDPs to be provided with a job, most Iveria residents just laugh. Only 10 percent of the Iveria residents are employed.

But some come up lucky. "I was provided with workplace



“A stranger will instantly let you know that 'you are not one of us'”

right after I came here," says one elderly woman, Gogutsa Oniani. "I started working as a nurse in a dental clinic on Leselidze Street. No-one's ever offended me. Everybody liked me, and nobody wanted to let me go when my legs started to suffer and I had to quit. This is the way of things: decent workers are always needed everywhere, while nobody needs non-professionals."

Nana Kokosadze is less sanguine. "Nobody is glad if a refugee buys an apartment. I have often heard people say 'take a look at how they messed it up, how they spoiled the place'. Rows break out because of this.

Nobody likes this. We have lost everything. One cannot compare us to other poor people. During these 12 years I felt nothing but heartache."

The majority of Iveria residents are involved in some kind of private industry. Some have shops, others trade in outdoor markets, and some have opened stores on the hotel floors – with prices increasing by 5-10 tetri as you ascend. Everyone is circumspect regarding their income. They claim that they mainly support themselves with the aid given by the government. Officially, the state gives 17 lari per person, but out of this sum, 3 lari is deducted for communal services. Electricity and water is covered by the state (IDPs staying outside the hotel get an extra 3 lari for this) while another 3 lari is deducted for bread, leaving just 11 lari.

It's not surprising as the crime is widespread in the Iveria. When Tsitso Murushidze-Gvaramia found she could earn just 5 lari a day working in a kiosk, she left for Russia with her sister. There she worked hard and saved \$17,000US. On her return to the Iveria, however, this entire sum, as well as jewellery brought from Abkhazia, was stolen.

The desire to return home is the one thing that ostensibly unites all older IDPs, though, the younger generation are starting to see things differently.

"I prefer one withered tree in Sokhumi over entire Tbilisi," says Jemal Patchkoria, 50.



Zviad Okujava, an 18-year-old prospective diplomat, feels more at home in Tbilisi. "I do not remember Abkhazia at all. But I have many friends here. There, I should start everything anew. I think many of friends think this way and won't return there."

Natia Abesalashvili, 17, who has just entered univer-

Government struggles to prove

'Every IDP should feel that something is being done for him'

■ Rusiko Machaidze

A SOLUTION to the problems faced by IDPs was a key pledge by the National Movement and the Burjanadze-Democrats before their November 2 election victory.

During the inauguration,

the new president, Mikhail Saakashvili, even gave an oath to solve the problem of IDPs. "We made an oath that we would reunite Georgia. We are starting to fulfill this oath by solving the problems of each and every illegally displaced person," he said at an Independence

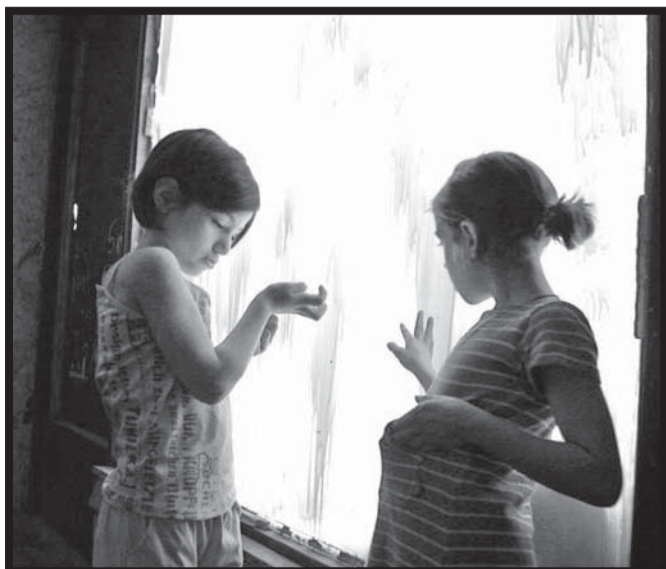
Day parade on May 26.

But despite promises made in the 2004 budget, the sum envisaged for the IDPs was not increased. In fact, several months after the budget was approved, the government did allocate an extra 3m lari for the Ministry of Refugees and

Resettlement. But this sum is only to cover those affected by natural disasters.

The IDPs still receive 11 lari in cash per month. The new government, unlike the former one, distributes the aid on time, and has promised to repay arrears. So far, this remains an empty promise.

"Since the new government came to power, we have no arrears. At first, we were unable to cover the sums for two months – November and December. But



Do these girls in the Iveria look out on a brighter future?

THE HOTEL IVERIA



Life in the Iveria's gloomy corridors; below, business is slow at one of the many stores



Images: Marika Amurvelashvili

sity, disagrees: "What are you saying? Of course, I will return to my home. I will return and gain new friends there."

Three or four journalists visit IDPs in the Iveria every day, but there is little evidence for this in the media. During the November revolution, almost everyone in the Iveria supported the new government, but some

residents are aggrieved that the new administration appears to be ignoring them. "The president does not like us, the refugees," says one, who wishes to remain anonymous. "He went everywhere: Adjara, Shuamta, Ossetia. He never visited us. He, or at least his wife, could just meet us and give us some moral support."

Others, however, are more optimistic. "Shevardnadze was ruining us for 12 years. Let this young man do his work. Don't be impatient".

One of the new government's first actions was to abolish aid worth 11 lari per month for non-refugee women marrying refugees. According to Eter Astamirova, the Georgian Minister of

Refugees and Re-settlement, the aid was set illegally in 1996, as the parliament had not voted for any such directive.

Some residents of Iveria managed to buy apartments elsewhere; they can then lease or sell their former hotel accommodation, in some cases leaving other occupants out on the street.

Ninutsa Pakeliani, 80, was made homeless this way. Nobody has explained to her the exact reason, but it seems obvious to her.

"I was resettled in Borjomi," she says. "My husband died before the war. I never had a child. I could not stand the climate and our ministry gave me a free room in Iveria. Before I came here, a

neighbor managed to buy the room from the one who left it. I became homeless. The police tell me they are unable to evict him, because he is also a refugee. I am staying overnight in different places. I have even slept in this corridor several times."

Nino Patsuria is a correspondent for Georgia Today in Tbilisi

pledges are more than just hollow promises

this sum is already distributed and now we will start distributing the arrears of previous years," says Eter Astamirova, the Minister of Refugees and Re-settlement. There is one more promise – the minister says the aid is likely to increase to 20 lari. She cannot specify when, however.

Besides the monthly aid, the government also pays for electricity, water and other communal services for the IDPs residing in compact settlements. Even though

electricity is almost never provided to the regions, the sum still flows from the budget. As for the natural gas consumption fee, the government has never paid it before, and does not plan to change that now.

The new government has increased the amount of one-time assistance for the IDPs from 17-50 lari to 50-100 lari, but without changing its budget: from now on the number of the IDPs eligible for one-time help will be cut by 2.5.

The issue of the IDP employment also needs to be settled. The minister says: "We do not want to be limited with a one-time payment and want to employ all the IDPs somehow. We intend to build houses in the villages where land are allocated for them. They will be given agricultural tools as well as domestic animals and poultry. Naturally, there are some financial problems for this but the main problem is that nobody wants to leave Tbilisi."

Another change, which the government implemented without telling the IDPs, is the abolition of IDP representation in parliament.

"We were informed about this several hours before, and told that they no longer need us," says Anzor Tsotsonava, the single mandate MP from the Gulripshi region. "The government failed to find a place for the IDPs in society for 12 years. First they had no right to participate in the elections. Fortunately this issue was

settled in the end. Now the IDPs no longer have their representation in parliament. Nobody is interested in the IDPs' opinion. Why? Are they not the citizens of Georgia, too?"

Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region had 11 representatives in parliament. Three out of them were single mandate MPs, while eight were elected through party lists. They were elected in 1990, then their mandate was automatically prolonged.

According to Davit Usupashvili, the president of the Young Lawyers' Association, their authority should have been prolonged after the elections of 28 May, because the international community recognises Abkhazia within Georgia, and from now on this administrative unit does not have any representatives in the Georgian parliament.

■ *Rusiko Machaidze is a correspondent for Resonance newspaper in Tbilisi*

A lucky few refugees still call Sukhumi: HOME, SWEET HOME

■ Natia Bilikhodze

TRAVEL from Tskaltubo to the village of Maghlaki, and you can't miss a charming hamlet of wooden houses set among the maize fields.

It is said to be inhabited by the IDPs from Abkhazia, but in reality this settlement, dubbed Tskhumi, the ancient name of Sukhumi, has a special history.

The three-room cottages have been manufactured by Orgteknika, an enterprise that was ousted from Sukhumi because of the war, and have been transferred to the IDPs in return for the latter's help. They look after the tea-plantation around the settlement and give the collected raw material to the local tea factory leased by Orgteknika.

The residents of Tskhumi chose this name for two reasons: "This makes us feel we are in Sukhumi and in addition gives us hope that we will not be dubbed refugees any more," says Ketevan Kharziani, a mother of four who lived in the Samguruli Hotel in Tskaltubo prior to Tskhumi.

Due to the lack of space, the elder members of the family often had to lie on the floor. "And here when I open the gates of our cottage-yard I feel as if I enter my own yard in Es-



The sign welcomes visitors to the 'Tskhumi Abkhazian Community'

hera, Abkhazia where I used to live before, and this makes me happy," she says.

But their former neighbours are conspicuously absent, – including Vladislav Ardzinba, the incumbent president of Abkhazia.

"We used to be the neighbours of Ardzinba in Eshera. We called him Slavik. He has a dead brother. His mother, aunt Nadezhda, was always asking him to give up his fight. 'I have buried one son and I do not want to lose you as well' she said.

"Slavik did not obey. When Eshera was bombed I was in the Eshera bomb shelter along with Ardzinba's parents. Aunt Nadezhda told the Abkhazian women never to fight the Georgians. Finally she asked me to leave for Moscow together with her."

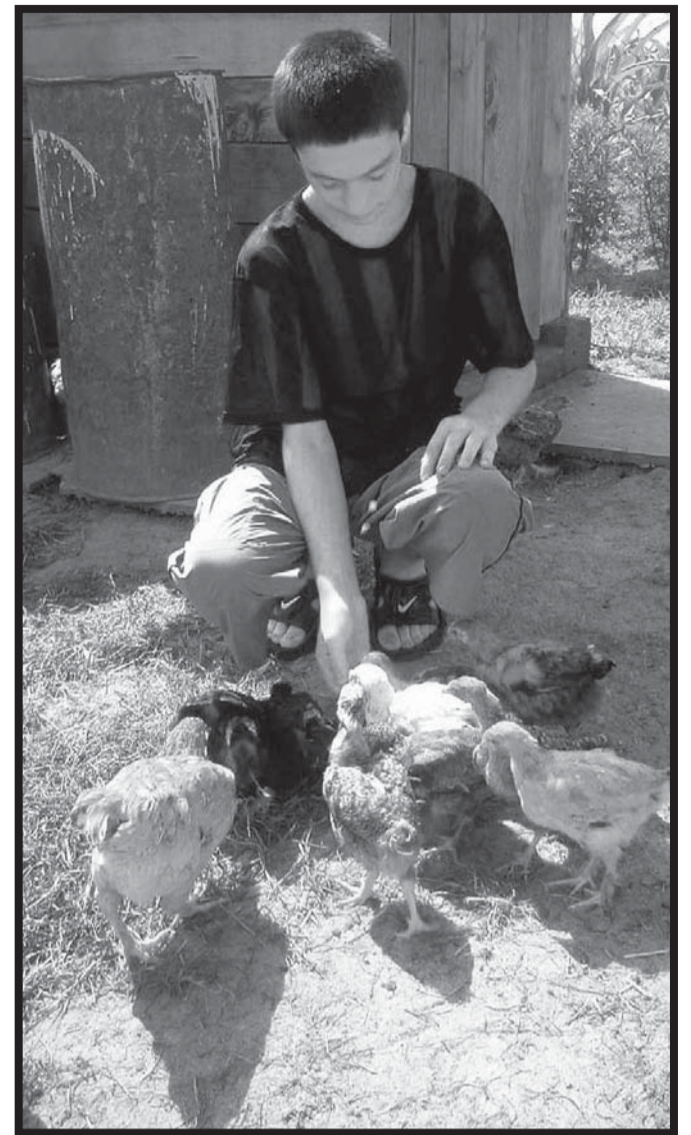
Kharziani's two young brothers, brother-in-law and parents-in-law were killed by the Abkhazians. For years she thought she would never

shake hands with the Abkhazians again, however, when she suddenly met her Abkhazian neighbours in Sochi she forgot everything and embraced them. She learned that the neighbours had been looking after their family tomb and protecting the house where the Chkhetianis used to live once.

Similar settlements are going to be established in other places. "When you lose everything your sense of survival becomes sharper," Alu Gamakharia, the director of Orgteknika, says of the IDPs' attempt to establish themselves in the business.

The 16 families residing in Tskhumi make up a community, which has its own Gamgeoba [local government] and a 5,000 lari fund. Mamuka Chkhertiani, 14, is one of the community's youngest livestock farmers, and is proud that he has raised 41 chickens. Mamuka was 3 when he left Abkhazia. He remembers his home mostly from his parents' stories.

In the event of a solution to the conflict, the Orgteknika management plans to give those IDPs whose houses were burnt down in Abkhazia the wooden cottages of Tskhumi to take and assemble there.



Resident Mamuka Chkhertiani, 14, with some of the dozens of chickens he has raised

On the brink of a new crisis

■ Natia Bersenadze

UNLIKE the thousands expelled from Abkhazia, those Georgians forced to leave their homes in Tskhinvali in South Ossetia have maintained close contact with their former neighbours throughout the 12-year conflict.

"The neighbours used to meet me very warmly whenever I arrived in Tskhinvali. We were so close to each other that we thought everything that had happened passed into history. They would take me over the whole valley – Java, Roka..." says Ramaz Kulichishvili, a refugee from Tskhinvali, who lives in the Abkhazia Hotel.

His neighbours their say the same: "Six kinsmen from Ossetia visited me a month ago. We went to Jvari Monastery in Mtskheta and had a feast, - we could not even imagine that the situation would become tense again just a few days later," says Elguja Jojishvili:

"I visited my brother-in-law in Tskhinvali at New Year's eve. The neighbours invited us to the feast. When the tamada (toastmaster) learned I was from Georgia he tried to say the toast in Georgian. We had such a mutual respect... And now the Ossetian villagers are being made to take up arms!"

The Tskhinvali government appears to be doing little to calm the situation, and these days it is difficult and dangerous for Georgians – and especially for journalists – to enter Tskhinvali. A Georgian peacekeeper said of my request to be taken to Tskhinvali: "Have you gone mad? They're at war there.

In Ossetia, once-close bonds are being pushed to the limit

They will arrest you and keep you in the jail for days."

Finally, an Ossetian taxi-driver, Eduard, took me to Tskhinvali. He used to live near Kareli, but moved to Tskhinvali to work at the Ergneti market to support his wife and children. "Everything was good, but now the situation is tense again. Nobody knows who started shooting. I was at home that time and shielded my son just in case."

Eduard circles the center of Tskhinvali. He advises me not to speak with people at the bus stop: "The people will not speak with you. And 'they' will notice you." But he could not tell me who "they" were.

Mostly, it's women, children and the elderly that you see in the streets of Tskhinvali. When young men put in an appearance they're dressed in uniforms and carrying weapons. We left Tskhinvali without incident – soldiers looked into the car but did not say anything.

There are Georgian taxis on the other side of the border: the drivers are Georgians expelled from Tskhinvali. One of them, Vazha, drives towards the Liakhvi Valley before leaving for Tbilisi and shows me the Ossetian lines beyond the village of Parsi. "These are the trenches, the Ossetians are lying in them. If we had time I would take you there and show what they are doing," says Vazha,

"I have a lot of friends in Tskhinvali. They are very scared. They say they cannot lead such lives any more. They want to reconcile but cannot say a word aloud, they are afraid," he says.

He has heard all the rumours of Tskhinvali from his Ossetian friends: "The Ossetians clashed with the Cossack mercenaries they brought in. The Cossacks did not have money and broke into people's houses. The Ossetians have slaughtered the Cossacks in the forests and the forest has been stinking for already a week. Neither the Georgian nor the Ossetians can enter this forest, each side is scared of the other."

Vazha operated a container at the Ergneti market. He claims he made around \$400 profit each day. "Since our government closed down the market I find it difficult to support my family," he says. "I had great hopes for that empty container: finally, I thought I would sell it as scrap, but I almost had a heart attack when I found it had been stolen."

The Ergneti market, a major source of income for Georgians and Ossetians over the past few years, was opened in 1994; the Georgians arrived there from various parts of Georgia and bought the space from the Ossetians.

"It should not have been closed down until the government offered these people some alternative place. The new

“
Our situation is very difficult. There is no Ossetian who does not have a Georgian relative

market could have been set up in the village of Nikozi. If the government controlled it and made them pay the taxes, the Georgian economy would receive a significant income, and the ties between Georgians and Ossetians would not break down," says Marina Meshvildishvili, who heads the union of non-governmental organisations of the Tskhinvali region. One of her organisation's activities is to run joint recreation camps for the Ossetians and expelled Georgians. Despite the tensions, one such camp was held in Kobuleti several days ago and around 40 Ossetian pensioners and expelled Georgians gathered there. They also went to Khulo to meet President Mikhail Saakashvili, there for the Shuamtoba Festival. They were so pleased with the meeting that after returning to Kobuleti they petitioned the Tskhinvali government asking it to confiscate weapons from the youth.

Valia Gobokhova is fearful about the future. "I have Georgian sons. Two of them are policemen, one – a serviceman. They are potential servicemen; if the turmoil begins they will be drafted and some Ossetian friend of mine might put a gun against them. Our situation is very difficult. There is no Ossetian who does not have a Georgian relative."

Nana Ksieva is defiant: "I think the Ossetian should unite and demand peace from the government. They say anyone who will back the Georgians will be shot. Let them shoot us then. They can not slaughter all of us, can they?"

■ Natia Bersenadze writes for New Version in Tbilisi



Men gather to protest over the August 3 police action in the Pankisi Gorge area

A rock and a hard place

For Chechen refugees – and their Kist neighbours – harassment is an almost everyday occurrence

■ Veriko Kobiashvili

ON THE morning of August 3, the Department of Security and the Anti-Terrorist Centre carried out a joint “special operation” in the area of the Pankisi Gorge. Masked policemen arrested 12 Chechens and Kists in the villages of Duisi, Salatsani and Jokolo at dawn.

While these “special operations” are nothing new to the area, residents could not hide their anger at the treatment of the Kist and Chechen women that morning.

The Kists in North Georgia are ethnically close to Chechens – the first wave of Kists entered Georgia in the 1830s and settled in the Pankisi Gorge. During these early years the government offered to open a Russian school for them, but the Kists refused. Those Chechens who became homeless as a result of the 1999 Russian-Chechen War also settled with the Kists of the Pankisi Gorge. Today, 127 Chechen families live there.

N.K, a Kist woman who like most of those interviewed would only give her initials, said: “I am the mother of one of the detainees. When they entered I told them: ‘why are you taking him. He is not a drug-addict, he is not a criminal.’”

“They also killed my dog. I asked them why they had killed my dog. Had they asked, I would have opened the door and let them in. They were beating us,

the women. Some of them are in hospitals now. We do not even know who they are and where they came from.”

M.I. a Chechen refugee, sees the operation in light of her people’s suffering: “Russians were annihilating us, and Georgians also want to contribute in this. The whole world battles us. ‘Russianism’ is same as Fascism. There is no difference.”

But the Georgian security operations are not without motivation. The Pankisi Gorge became something of a “black hole” during recent years and is associated with the drugs trade and terrorism.

Nana Kakabadze, head of the NGO Former Political Prisoners for Human Rights, said bluntly: “Special operations are being held ostensibly to detain criminals and drug lords, while in fact they oppress the populace. Women are also among the injured. Ten of them have been transferred to the Akhmeta hospital, where four are suffering from serious concussion. One of the women is pregnant.

“The population to whom the government of Georgia gave the status of refugee is being harmed. I will definitely appeal to the international human rights organisations as today the NGOs face difficulties even in Tbilisi to publicise the serious problems.”

The detainees were soon freed, but were given a deadline to decide whether they would cooperate with the police.

S.I., a Chechen refugee detained during the August 3 special operation said: “They gave me two weeks to decide whether I would cooperate with them. Otherwise, I’ll face either deportation or arrest. I have already turned down the offer. I will stay here and wait till these two weeks pass. Let’s see what happens.”

Against the background of the “special operation”, the hostility by some of the refugees does not fully reflect their disposition towards Georgians. In conversation they admit that “after Ingushetians, Georgians are the closest



Russians were annihilating us, and Georgians also want to contribute in this

[to us] in the Caucasus.” Chechen children even study Georgian poems.

Three secondary schools are located in the Pankisi Gorge. The teachers receive their salaries in the form of humanitarian aid, and Chechens study how to read and write in Georgian. After three Chechen refugees had passed entrance exams at the Georgian State University, the United Nations granted a stipend worth \$100US per month to them. About 20 Chechens are also receiving higher education in Rustavi with the help of the UN, and receive aid worth \$80US every month.

But these bright spots cannot change the hard economic conditions they found themselves in after leaving their homeland. Poor housing, scarce food and trauma have taken their toll on the refugees’ health. At least 47 cases of tuberculosis have been registered in the Akhmeta region, 39 in the Pankisi Gorge. But there is no opportunity to hospitalise and isolate such patients in the region, and it is feared many more are afraid to disclose their sickness and so do not undergo any form of treatment, resorting instead to ineffectual home

remedies. The potential for an epidemic in Pankisi.

On July 29, representatives of the Ministry of Health visited the Pankisi Gorge. Their aim was to study the situation on the ground, but active measures have yet to get underway.

Chechens say only the Organisation of Technical Assistance is interested in those with TB.

Non-governmental organisations and the media may sympathise with Chechen refugees and give them the opportunity to defend their rights, though this does not necessarily improve their living conditions.



Children take a break from playing in the Pankisi Gorge. Below: women are treated in Akhmeta hospital for injuries sustained during the ‘special operation’

Pictures: Veriko Kobiashvili



As for Chechens, they think the international community has changed its attitude towards them after the events of September 11 2001 in the United States: previously, they used to receive considerable assistance from different states, now only the United Nations is concerned about them.

But the Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge have issues with the UN, as well. They say that the UN mission in Georgia deliberately hampers the re-settlement of refugee families in Western countries. The Chechens even organised a protest against this in May.

A.M, a refugee, said: “We held the action from May 6 to May 17. We were demanding security guarantees. Because of what happened today, we demand: send us to a third country. Others go there instead of Chechens. The United Nations is manipulating us.”

None of the refugees can return while they have declared Jihad (Holy War) against Russia.

They are under no illusions: they know that “this third country” is not a Promised Land.

Like any displaced people, they want to return to their homeland. “We will defeat Russians in a year and we will become free,” says one. Meanwhile, the Chechen children painstakingly draw tanks, assault rifles and bombs from memory.

■ Veriko Kobiashvili is head of the Telavi bureau for Kakhetis Khma

Doing it for themselves ...

Meet the Georgian youths who are forging bonds with their counterparts in Abkhazia – against all the odds

■ Maya Beridze

GIORGI Kakulia, a tall and fair boy of 22, appears at the appointed time along with his friends in his own car. All are well-dressed, with that typical Tbilisi fashion sense, and are educated and well spoken. Far removed from your typical image of IDPs. However, they come from Abkhazia and are trying to resolve the Abkhazian conflict in their own way. On their own initiative, and with international funding, Kakulia, Achiko Chochia, Rusiko Kardava, Ketis Sulava and Ia Akhalaia have been forging friendships with their Abkhazian peers in Georgia as well as abroad.

Giorgi Kakulia explains: “The first meeting took place in the State of Georgia, in the US, where our group of 20 Georgian and 20 Abkhazian children was taught conflict studies, English and management; however we passed a selection stage as there were a lot of children who wished to get in the US; around 500 children participated in the competition in Tbilisi and Sukhumi.”

Giorgi lives in IDPs’ Block in Vake dormitory and studies at Abkhazian branch of Tbilisi State University. He is convinced that his generation will solve the Abkhazian conflict by all means because he easily finds common ground with his Abkhazian peers; the common ground is the English language. They contact each other either by phone or via the internet. “I have received the letter today,” Giorgi says and opens his E-mail, - “Hello Giorgi, I hope you have not forgotten us!!! How are you? I have already lost hope to see all of you together...” writes Artur from Sukhumi. He asks Giorgi to send him their photos they had taken during the meeting in Likani.

“The internet contacts are more safe because when I

speak with them over the phone they have some problems – on the very next day they are interrogated, as it seem the phones are being tapped,” says Achiko, a student at the Medical University who is keen on soccer and even has correspondence with Inter Milan.

Achiko lives in the IDPs’ Hotel and hopes to accumulate enough money to purchase his own flat one day. “We met a lot of interesting people in America, for instance Kofi Annan, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations,” Achiko recalls.

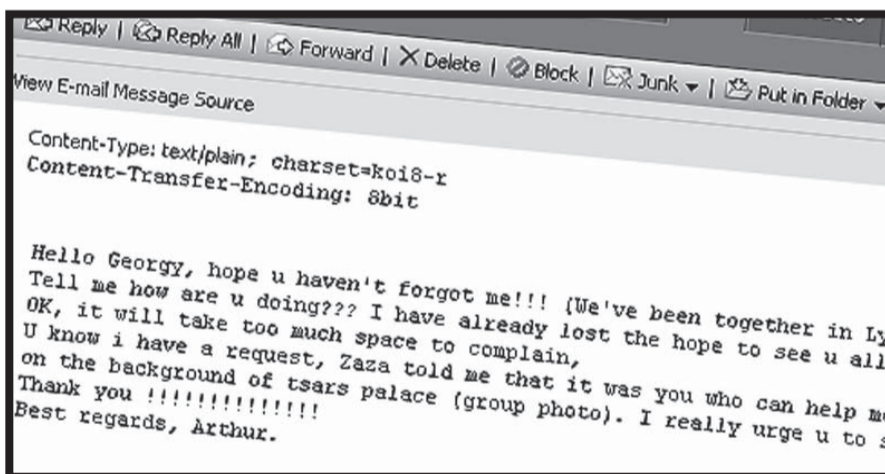
“At the beginning we were somehow restrained with the Abkhazian children but the gifts helped us – all of us had gifts. We gave them to each other and soon felt already at ease,” says Ia, the future lawyer with black hair and serious expression, the most active speaker among the friends. “The Abkhazians had very strict instructors who held meetings with their groups every evening and discussed how we, the Georgian, reacted to this or that issue. They arranged the plans in order to spite us, however, we never had problems with the children themselves.”

“One Abkhazian girl I made friends with was very upset because their trainers did not allow her to contact the Georgian children,” says Rusiko, the tall, slim future sociologist. “Finally my Abkhazian friend fell in love with a Georgian boy and they plan to get married soon. They asked me to be her bridesmaid. This girl is in Moscow now. Though her parents are against their marriage I think they will still get married.”

“As I see there are no obstacles in the relations between the Abkhazian and Georgian children, the problems emerge only when a third side interferes,” says Ketis, the self-confident future linguist. She says: “There was such a game: we were to speak about the Ab-



Above: Georgians wave goodbye to their Abkhazian friends after the camp in Turkey; bottom: a group shot in Armenia, inset: Abkhaz girl gets up close and personal with a Georgian boy during a “kissing game” at the US camp; email from Abkhazia



“ My Abkhazian friend fell in love with a Georgian boy and they plan to get married soon

khazian conflict, however, the Abkhazians were to protect the Georgian side’s position and vice versa. Sometimes we were arguing so that some of us could not stand it and left the room in tears.

“But at the end of the project when we were getting on the buses and when we had to leave each other, the children were crying for a different reason: they did not want to leave any more. They on the inside and we on the outside of the bus were tapping on the windows ... we nearly broke the vehicle! It was a very emotional moment – everyone was crying.”

As a result of the meet-



ings over four years, the participants of the programme established their own non-governmental organisations in Sukhumi and Tbilisi and intend to independently continue their relations. In July, the Georgian organisation the Academy for Peace and De-

velopment received a grant from the European Commission in order to hold a meeting with their Abkhazian peers in Tskneti. Unfortunately, the meeting failed. “Only the coordinator arrived from Abkhazia and said the situation was very tense at that time and

it was impossible to bring the children,” Achiko says.

Giorgi says of the tensions: “I know that the Sukhumi government poses great problems to the families of those children who participated in the meetings with us. So we avoid mentioning their names.”

Ketis concludes: “There was a sort of mistrust towards us as well. At the beginning our neighbours and kinsmen asked us – did you take part in that programme? And what has changed? I understand that these programs will not resolve our conflict, but I know that a significant step was made.”

■ Maya Beridze is a reporter for Daily Adjara in Batumi