



Five Challenging Weeks

UNHCR's Response to Humanitarian Crisis in Georgia — 8 August to 13 September 2008



The largest challenge in this crisis was that it necessitated very different actions to be taken simultaneously, pushing UNHCR staff to the limits of their capacities: They needed to locate new arrivals, distribute emergency relief, conduct protection monitoring in an ever changing security environment that required a continuous adaptation of logistical responses. Registration proved an ongoing challenge with large segments of the displaced constantly on the move.

As the immediate displacement situation shifted into a return and stabilisation phase, negotiations, coordination and planning for winterisation of shelters and for long-term solutions started only twelve days after the outbreak of the emergency.

UNHCR kept coordinating with a large number of stakeholders, including the respective Governments, the UN system, international organisations (such as the ICRC), donors and a multitude of NGO partners.

While frequent updates on the emergency were issued to keep stakeholders informed about the day-to-day progress, this brochure provides the larger picture of UNHCR's strategies and their implementation during the first five weeks of the emergency in Georgia.



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Georgian Crisis Timeline



8 August 2008

After days of minor clashes, the conflict escalates; UN Country Team activates contingency plan; UNHCR meets with NGO partners to share information and identify humanitarian response capacities.

9 August 2008

First arrival of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Tbilisi; UNHCR provides beds and requests emergency stocks for 15,000 people from Dubai warehouse; WFP starts food distribution.

10 August 2008

UNHCR and WFP assessment mission to Gori finds that 80 percent of the city's population have fled; UNHCR and WFP combine their logistic capacities for emergency distribution; transit centre established in Mtskheta, situated at the exit route from Gori region; High Commissioner Antonio Guterres appeals for humanitarian access and safe passage for civilians.

11 August 2008

UNHCR releases \$ 2 million from emergency reserve; 3,500 IDPs registered, many more sheltered by relatives unregistered; UNHCR multiplies numbers of monitoring teams: more

than ten missions collect information about locations, numbers and needs of new arrivals.

12 August 2008

First UNHCR airlift from Dubai to Tbilisi arrives carrying blankets, jerry cans, kitchen sets and tents; the estimated number of uprooted approaches 100,000; registration remains a challenge for government authorities, since 9 August UNHCR has delivered assistance to 4,500 beneficiaries.

13 August 2008

Over 1,000 civilians from Upper Kodori Valley retreat to Georgia proper; UNCHR transfers them on three convoys from Chuberi to Zugdidi; Gori is out of bounds for UN due to military presence; western Georgia is inaccessible by road; reports of criminal elements looting depopulated areas; UN Country Team adopts sectoral approach in humanitarian response; UNHCR takes lead in protection, shelter and non-food items; first two emergency staff arrive.

14 August 2008

UNHCR security assessment mission stopped by tanks on the way to Gori; armed civilians carjack two UNHCR vehicles; cars are returned later in the day; the number of IDPs is increasing rapidly and now approaches 123,000 persons; second

airlift from Dubai arrives; relief stocks now cover basic needs for 40,000 people.

15 August 2008

UNHCR continues needs assessment and distribution in Tbilisi; Western Georgia not accessible for aid convoys by land; more and more IDPs report to authorities; majority of IDPs are in Tbilisi, either with host families or in shelters; over 500 collective centres of different size in and around Tbilisi; airlift with NFIs from UNHCR's emergency stockpile in Copenhagen arrives in Tbilisi.

16 August 2008

Number of IDP registrations in Georgia is doubling every day and reaches 72,000; according to UNHCR fact finding mission 5,700 IDPs registered in Western Georgia and placed mostly with host families receiving modest food assistance from local authorities and local population; in Tbilisi, UNHCR teams have visited 260 out of some 500 collective centres.

17 August 2008

First UN aid convoy arrives in Gori bringing food from WFP and NFIs from UNHCR for 1,500 persons; city appears deserted; in Tbilisi, WFP and UNHCR distribution is largely synchronised as kitchen sets are useless without food and *vice versa*; winterisation planning starts.

18 August 2008

150 IDPs evacuated from mountain village next to Abkhaz border; in Tbilisi, 13 UNHCR teams are assessing needs and distributing NFIs to 11,000 IDPs.

19 August 2008

Western Georgia still inaccessible by road; Georgia and Russia exchange prisoners of war; High Commissioner Antonio Guterres visits Tbilisi to assess humanitarian needs and makes commitment to mobilise international support to assist IDPs; airlift from Dubai to Batumi carries NFIs (blankets, kitchen sets, jerry cans and a few tents) for distribution to 15,000 people in Western Georgia; in Tbilisi total number of assisted IDPs reaches 30,000; UNHCR teams have monitored situation in 450 collective centres in Tbilisi; UN flash appeal for Caucasus emergency launched, UNHCR needs US\$ 16 million for six months to cover protection, shelter and assistance for IDPs.

20 August 2008

New warehouse established in Kutaisi to cover entire area between Gori and Black Sea; Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) assists with aid delivery in Western Georgia; mapping of IDP situation and NFI distribution in Tbilisi completed.

21 August 2008

UNHCR distributes NFIs to 500 "old" IDPs in Senaki; simultaneously rapid assessment of rehabilitation needs for two IDP shelters destroyed by shelling is being made; in Eastern Georgia, UNHCR starts NFI distribution for 6,000 beneficiaries; fact finding mission to Gori and Ateni valley; first UNHCR convoy to Gori enters Gori carrying blankets and jerry cans for 1,000 persons and 110 tents.

22 August 2008

Emergency relief distributions nearly completed in the entire country; operation shifts to long term planning; protection monitoring missions along Abkhaz border reveal micro-movements of local population; UNHCR starts drafting winterisation programme and overall shelter strategy.

23 August 2008

UNHCR team assesses return conditions in Gori and Ateni Valley; first 100 IDPs spontaneously return to Gori town; centre for pregnant IDP women opened in Tbilisi.

24 August 2008

More IDPs return to Gori spontaneously from Tbilisi; final day of distribution in Western Georgia; NFIs delivered for 15,000 beneficiaries in 21 municipalities in a radius of 100 km around Kutaisi. Kutaisi warehouse is empty apart from a few tents; UNHCR verifying missions check on distribution by operational partners.

25 August 2008

UNHCR opens office in Gori to assist with return and monitor return conditions; villages in "buffer zone" North of Gori still not accessible; within UN Country Team, UNHCR takes the lead on telecommunications; UNHCR teams monitor voluntary nature of returns from departure points in Tbilisi; UNHCR warns IDPs not to return to villages that have not yet been declared safe.

26 August 2008

New humanitarian crisis evolves in Gori after arrival of 365 elderly IDPs from villages in “buffer zone” reporting about raids by armed militia; simultaneously, returnees from Tbilisi to “buffer zone” get stuck in Gori due to security situation; UNHCR starts erecting tents on football field; UNHCR appeals to all parties in conflict to establish public order and prevent further displacement.

27 August 2008

Influx to Gori continuing both from ‘buffer zone’ and Tbilisi; already 1,200 IDPs in Gori; municipality assigns 17 kindergartens as shelters; UNHCR organises more blankets and mattresses from NGO partners; water and sanitation installed in tented camp; warehouse in Tbilisi has been emptied.

28 August 2008

2,300 IDPs registered in Gori; no new arrivals from “buffer zone”; UNHCR tented camp hosts 800 IDPs; relief organised in collaboration with WFP and UNICEF; UNHCR teams monitor returns to villages in Gori region that have been declared safe.

29 August 2008

Georgian Government invites UNHCR to coordinate shelter rehabilitation process; Government provides first list of buildings in need of refurbishment. Ten new arrivals from Beloti (South Ossetia) to Gori.

30-31 August 2008

UNHCR reinforces team in Gori; ongoing planning for winterisation of shelters; UNHCR appeals to Government not to press IDPs to leave collective centres located in schools but to offer alternative solutions.

1 September 2008

6,000 IDPs registered in Gori: 1,200 in UNHCR tented camps 2,500 in collective centres, 2,300 with host families; those include 450 new arrivals from “buffer zone” and 1,750 would-be returnees.

2 September 2008

UNHCR signs letter of intent with Georgian Civil Registry Agency to assist registration of all IDPs.

3 September 2008

Italian Red Cross field kitchen in Gori tented camp provides hot meals for all IDPs in Gori and some centres in Tbilisi.

4-5 September 2008

UNHCR with NGO partners starts collecting information on flight histories to understand safety risks and detect possible traumatisation; UN rapid assessment of safe villages in “buffer zone” starts; villages North of Karaleti checkpoint still not accessible for UN; increase of new arrivals from Tbilisi in Gori tented camp.

6-9 September 2008

UNHCR-UNOMIG fact finding mission to Upper Kodori Valley; living conditions found unsuitable for return before winter; UN still denied entry to “buffer zone” North of Gori; UNHCR monitors enrolment of IDP children to schools in Tbilisi; arrivals from host families and from Tbilisi collective centres in Gori continue, simultaneously a few IDPs are leaving for their home villages North of Gori.

10-13 September 2008

UNHCR mission finally allowed to enter “buffer zone” to assess shelter situation and conditions for return; situation in Gori is slowly easing as first families return to villages; construction works for winterisation are about to start.

No Relief without Protection

As with all rapid displacements of large groups of the populace, delivery of humanitarian assistance is the most visible element of UNHCR and the one that gets nearly all media attention.

However, UNHCR's core mandate is the protection of victims of forcible displacement. This requires an immediate understanding of the causes of displacement, the profile and the situation of the displaced. Hence, from the very first day UNHCR protection officers were out in the field interviewing new arrivals, enquiring about their fate, reasons which triggered their departure, risks faced during the flight and investigated their immediate needs. Based on this information shaped the immediate humanitarian response was shaped.

Physical safety was the main concern in the beginning

In the first phase, UNHCR paid particular attention to the physical safety of the IDPs. In light of ongoing warfare in the Gori region, UNHCR promoted their relocation to safer parts of the country. More than 20 buses took people to Tbilisi and beyond. To the same end UNHCR sent three convoys to Chuberi to evacuate over 1,000 new arrivals from Upper Kodori Valley to Zugdidi and further.

Registration of IDPs was a continuous challenge

Right from the beginning of the crisis, UNHCR supported the government with regard to swift and accurate registration of IDPs. Knowing the locations, numbers and profiles of the beneficiary population ensures that no one is left without assistance and that persons with special needs (children, pregnant women, persons with diseases and handicaps, traumatized persons, etc.) are taken care of. Also, early registration enables authorities to replace ID documents that might have been lost during the flight so IDPs can exercise their rights regarding social assistance, health care and education.

For UNHCR, early and accurate registration is necessary in order to aid distribution or assistance and to plan winterization and long-term shelter programs for IDPs.

For many reasons, the registration of IDPs in the Georgian crisis was a major challenge, especially in the Georgian capital Tbilisi which had the largest concentration of displaced:

600 shelters mushroomed in a few days all over Tbilisi

- Initially, a large group of IDPs who found refuge with host families did not care to come forward and register.
- During the first days, nearly 600 shelters were mushrooming in the capital; people spontaneously entered deserted buildings or were offered accommodation spontaneously by managers of buildings and private persons (kindergartens, sports facilities etc.) This required ongoing monitoring and comprehensive data collection — efforts that were supported by numerous young Georgian volunteers.

Displaced population constantly on the move

- The Government did not have sufficient equipment to deal with registrations which reached several tens of thousands every day in mid August.
- At all times there was a considerable movement of displaced persons:
 - + **8-12 August:** flight movements from South Ossetia and adjacent areas and from Abkhazia, mainly Upper Kodori Valley;
 - + **Entire reporting period:** movements from host family to host family and as host family fatigue set in, from host families to shelters and between shelters for family reunification;
 - + **After 23 August:** returns from shelters and host families to Gori and a few villages; attempted returns to “buffer zone” which ended in Gori due to the security situation; new arrivals from “buffer zone” villages in Gori;
 - + **After 31 August:** Relocation of IDPs from shelters in schools to alternative locations to vacate schools before academic year starts.

From the beginning, UNHCR cooperated with the Government and local authorities to assure accurate IDP registration. In Western and Eastern Georgia there was less secondary movement and local authorities were well informed about the IDP situation so that needs assessment and NFI distribution could be carried out in parallel.

In Tbilisi, which had the largest concentration of IDPs (86,000 out of a total of 127,000) UNHCR assisted directly, by sending out assessment teams on a daily basis. From 9 to 20 August 2008 protection monitoring teams composed of UNHCR staff, NGO partners and volunteers visited over 500 collective centres in the capital to locate IDPs, assess their needs and monitor movements. The obtained information was entered in a data base and shared with the government daily in order to get updated information.

Taking care of old and new caseload in parallel

On 17 August, UNHCR reached an initial agreement with the Civil Registry Agency (CRA) to purchase additional IT equipment and financially assist with additional costs incurred by travel and decentralisation of registration services. The formal agreement was signed on 2 September.

While the newly displaced persons were the most vulnerable, UNHCR made a point not to neglect the “old” caseloads, i.e. 220,000 IDPs who had been displaced in conflicts during the nineties as well as a small number of Chechen refugees living in Georgia.

Throughout the reporting period, UNHCR teams visited IDPs and refugees in all parts of the country interviewing them on various aspects of protection in order to obtain a clear picture of protection needs:

Hundreds of protection missions all over Georgia

- Population movements
- Living conditions in shelters and general needs
- Response to special needs, especially those of pregnant women
- Flight histories and possibly traumatising experiences
- Security concerns
- Voluntary character of returns
- Enrolment of IDP children in schools
- Conditions in return areas

As far as Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is concerned, UNHCR Georgia adapted a previous, EU funded, SGBV project to newly arising needs of IDP women. So called “Women’s Clubs” were initiated in Tbilisi and Gori to offer legal counselling, medical referrals and psychosocial assistance to women in need.

Shelter is the Most Pressing Need

While UNHCR and its partners were still busy distributing emergency relief to the displaced population and temperatures in Georgia were still high in the thirties, the office already started putting its strategic vision about winterisation on paper. Where will the IDPs be? Will they be able to go home or live in shelters? Simultaneously, UNHCR Georgia started to reflect on long-term solutions: what will happen after the 2008/09 winter season? Who will still need assistance – in displacement or upon return?

The UN Country Team granted UNHCR the lead for shelter which is the most complex part of IDP assistance. UNHCR categorised the IDPs into three groups with different needs:

Three groups
with different
needs
identified

- **Immediate return:** IDPs who will be able to go back before winter sets in if the security situation and conditions of their homes allow (planning figure as of 12 September: 73,000 individuals)
- **Temporary accommodation:** IDPs who will need short term shelter either in collective centres or in host families for one winter before they can go back and repair their homes in spring (planning figure: 23,000)
- **Durable housing:** IDPs originating from South Ossetia, inaccessible parts of the “buffer zone” or from Abkhazia who will not be able to return in the foreseeable future (planning figure: 31,000)

Given the scale of the problem, it became clear that durable housing could not be provided for the entire target population before winter, but that some would have to move into temporary accommodations first and only be provided with long-term accommodation at a later stage.

In order to assist returns — immediate or after the winter — UNHCR together with its partner organisations began assessment missions into the “buffer zone” between Gori and the South Ossetian border as soon as they were allowed to enter, on 13 September. Daily missions served several purposes: to assess the conditions for returns in safety and dignity and to determine the needs of returnees and to deliver what was needed.

Missions to
buffer zone to
assess return
conditions

First missions indicated that rehabilitation of some of the houses would be necessary. Having lost their harvests (and their income for this year) as a consequence of the war, large parts of the returnee population would need supplementary food assistance and firewood for one season.

Regarding temporary accommodation, UNHCR was confronted with a challenging planning process. It was necessary to coordinate a large

number of partners and the Government and move as fast as possible to get shelters ready in time. During several weeks of negotiations with the Georgian Government and partner organisations, UNHCR refined its first vision into a consolidated strategy paper that foresees several lines of action.

For the cities of Tbilisi and Gori which have the largest concentration of IDPs, the Government provided a list of nearly 270 public buildings ready for conversion into temporary shelters. The Government and aid organisations are coming forward with their proposals and UNHCR will coordinate the mega-project and distribute responsibilities among all stakeholders. Remaining gaps will be identified and filled by UNHCR at a later stage.

**Durable shelter
\$ 2000 p.p.
and temporary
housing \$ 500**

Projected average costs per person for emergency rehabilitation will amount to US\$ 500. Apart from UNHCR, major funders are going to be USAID, the US Government, ECHO, SDC and the German Government through GTZ. The major NGO partners conducting the rehabilitation works are NRC, DRC, Premiere Urgence, IRD, CARE, CHR, World Vision, UMCOR and IRC.

In order to maximise the number of shelters available for IDPs on short notice, UNHCR also convinced the government that host families should receive financial compensation for housing IDPs. This project will be financed and carried out by SDC and USAID and will concentrate mainly on Western and Eastern Georgia.

**Host families
increase
shelter
capacity**

The most costly part of the project is the durable housing for long term displaced. For those, the Government provided an initial list of empty buildings that can be adapted as durable residences for IDP families. They are located all over Georgia. Initially, UNHCR agreed to take over the funding and rehabilitation for 12 objects. UNHCR is examining the technical and financial feasibility of the refurbishments of each building. Also, property rights and availability of communal services (water, sewage system, electricity and gas) have to be checked so that constructing work can start as early as possible.

Moreover, basic furniture, a stove and firewood will be distributed to those families who move into newly rehabilitated apartments.

For durable houses, projected costs per person amount to US\$ 2,000. In the reporting period calculations regarding the total costs for shelter are not yet established, but given the poor conditions of some of the buildings assessed and given the necessity of firewood distribution, they are expected to be considerably higher than the USD 15 million estimated under the first Flash Appeal on 19 August 2008.

Abbreviations

CHR -Commission on Human Rights

DRC - Danish Refugee Council

ECHO - European Commission Humanitarian Aid Department

GTZ - German Organization for Technical Cooperation

IRC -International Rescue Committee

IRD -International Relief and Development

NRC - Norwegian Refugee Council

SDC - Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

UNHCR Assistance reached 56,000 IDPs

UNHCR and WFP coordinated distribution

From the very beginning of the conflict, UNHCR and its cooperation partners have been putting great effort in providing the displaced population with non-food items (NFIs). Food was provided in parallel by UNHCR's sister agency WFP, as in most cases kitchen sets were useless without food and the other way round.

The first airlift arrived in Georgia on 12 August 2007 carrying blankets, kitchen sets, jerry cans and tents; distribution started the following day. Mattresses were only available after 21 August and were distributed giving priority to pregnant women, children, and elderly people.

Three more cargo planes arrived in Tbilisi (14 and 15 August) and Batumi (19 August) bringing non-food items for 60,000 beneficiaries.

Within twelve days, UNHCR with the help of DRC, MERLIN and local authorities distributed NFIs for more than 56,000 individuals in the entire country. This practically covered the entire population in need as UNHCR mostly targeted collective centres. Where IDPs stayed with host families, NFIs were usually not required.

Local purchases in this operation were minimal (1,200 jerry cans and 16 locally made stoves for collective centers) as the market could not provide the necessary quantities of relief items at short notice.

Humanitarian aid delivered with many partners

Since the outbreak of the crisis, UNHCR has acted as a lead agency among partner organizations. UNHCR centrally collected all information on needs, locations and numbers of IDPs and coordinated who was to distribute what, where and when for the entire country. This system ensured speed and prevented reduplications.

Distribution activities are conducted in close cooperation with the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation (MRA) and with the assistance of partner organisations, including UNICEF as well as CARE, CHF, Counterpart, CRS, DRC, GYLA, ICRC, IOM, IRD, Mercy Corps, NRC, OSGF, Oxfam GB, PAH (Poland), PEOPLE in NEED, Première Urgence, Save the Children, USAID, WVI and UMCOR. Many of the NGO partners agreed to distribute UNHCR's relief items together with their own, not asking for financial compensation.

Distribution was conducted in a phased approach.

- Aid delivery started in Tbilisi (13 to 25 August 2008) because the capital had the largest concentration of IDPs and the largest proportion of displaced in collective centres. There were also practical reasons to that as the airlifts arrived in Tbilisi and all collective centres were placed within a few kilometres. 40,000 IDPs received NFIs in Tbilisi.

Beneficiaries
Tbilisi: 40,000
West: 12,000
East: 5,500

- For a long time, Western Georgia was not accessible by road. Therefore, a cargo plane was directed to the Western port of Batumi on 19 August, carrying NFIs for 15,000 people. On 20 August, UNHCR opened a warehouse in Kutaisi to reach out to IDPs in 22 municipalities in a radius of over 100 kilometres. During the distribution (21 August - 8 September 2008), UNHCR reached 12,000 displaced, including 500 “old” IDPs in Senaki whose shelters had been destroyed during the conflict. Given the large area of distribution, UNHCR utilised the services of local authorities in order to get NFIs to the remotest locations.
- As in Western Georgia, distribution in the Eastern parts of the country started on 21 August. Given the relatively small number of beneficiaries and the proximity of locations, the distribution could be carried out with only two trucks in three days and reached nearly 5,500 IDPs.

Gori Camp Pitched at Record Speed

The UNHCR Emergency Team left Western Georgia upon completion of the emergency distribution there and set up an office on 25 August. At that stage it looked as if they were merely going to assist a spontaneous return movement to the conflict areas North of Gori.

**Unexpected
influx to Gori
from two
directions**

However, things developed in an unexpected direction the next day at noon, when UNHCR witnessed the arrival of newly displaced people from the “buffer zone”. These were elderly villagers who were forced to flee after lawlessness had broken out in the area and marauding militias had entered their houses, beating them up and looting their property.

In Gori, those new arrivals met with another group, would-be returnees, who had started moving from Tbilisi towards their homes in the “buffer zone” and got stuck in Gori due to the security situation.

Within a few hours UNHCR erected enough tents so no one was forced to sleep in the streets that night. In a collaborative effort, the municipalities opened kindergartens and other public buildings.

Within 48 hours, the Gori team managed to pitch an entire camp for over 1,000 persons complete with water supplies, latrines, a play ground for children and – later on – a field kitchen provided by the Italian Red Cross. In spite of the high speed setting up of the camp, its layout was compatible with UNHCR standards from the very beginning. At its peak, Gori tented camp hosted 2,200 persons.

**All aid
agencies
collaborated as
one family**

From the onset there was a special atmosphere about the aid organisations rushing to assist UNHCR. UNICEF provided water and sanitation, food came from WFP.

None of the little jealousies and competitions that sometimes surround such projects occurred in Gori. What UNHCR did not have on stock was supplied by NGOs who never asked to be compensated. (Doctors without Borders, International Rescue Committee, Italian Red Cross, Mercy Corps,

UNHCR Staff Dedicated from the Beginning

Before the conflict, the Georgia offices had 10 international staff members (including 1 UN Volunteer) and 30 national staff members in the capital and in five field offices. This team managed to cope with the sudden influx for the first four days of the conflict.

The first influx of IDPs occurred on a Friday and local recruitments started on Monday, when the first contracts for temporarily recruited national staff were signed. The first 8 international staff on emergency deployment arrived on 14/15 August 2008, less than one week into the conflict.

Swift Recruitments and emergency deployments

From then on, there was a continuous increase in staffing for the capital and for field offices. Drivers, field staff and clerks had to be recruited to increase UNHCR's response capacity. Five more staff members were called to Georgia on emergency deployment, including one field logistician and two shelter experts seconded by the Swiss Development Cooperation and RedR respectively.

As of 13 September 2008, UNHCR Georgia had 80 staff members out of which 23 were international. As the first emergency deployment was phasing out, a second wave of deployment was under way. Also, three UNVs were expected to join the team.

The UNHCR car park (18 light vehicles, 3 trucks and 2 armoured cars) had to be adapted as well to cope with the ever increasing number of staff and missions. UNHCR Turkey kindly offered three light vehicles for temporary use, bringing up the number of light vehicles in Georgia to 21. Meanwhile UNHCR Georgia has ordered two more light vehicles and two armoured cars.