

Emergency Operation in Georgia

Update, 25 August 2008

UNHCR opens office in Gori to assist with return movement

Following the withdrawal of Russian troops from Gori on Friday, a spontaneous return movement of IDPs from the capital of Tbilisi to Gori has set in. People use the local minibuses, taxis and private cars as well as buses provided by the government. According to Georgian authorities, between 10,000 and 15,000 have already gone back to Gori.

On Sunday, UNHCR has opened an office in Gori and established a provisional warehouse. As local authorities currently have no detailed overview about the exact number of returnees nor their places of return, it will be UNHCR's task to assist the local government with mapping and quantifying the return movements. Also, UNHCR will coordinate assistance programmes regarding shelter and non-food items as more and more relief organizations are arriving in Gori.

At departure points and IDP shelters in Tbilisi, UNHCR staff examined the situation over the weekend to ascertain the voluntary nature of the returns. The team learned that many returnees took along their UNHCR relief packages, including blankets, mattresses and kitchen sets as well as food supplies for five to ten days.

Prior to their departure, most returnees had collected information about the state of their homes from neighbors and relatives. On the return buses the UNHCR monitoring team also met a high number of men traveling alone. They said they first wanted to see the situation for themselves before bringing their families along.

Today, local media published a statement by UNHCR Georgia that warns IDPs not to return to villages that have not been cleared of mines and declared safe by the authorities yet. Also, UNHCR promotes a phased return to the city of Gori as an organized home-coming of the citizens will allow the local authorities to bring the town's bakeries to full operation and to replenish food stocks.

Western Georgia distribution finalized

As of 25 August, the distribution of emergency non-food items (blankets, kitchen sets and jerry cans) to 15,000 IDPs in 21 towns and villages spread all over western Georgia has been finalized. UNHCR's warehouse in Kutaisi is now nearly empty apart from 175 out of 200 tents that had been prepositioned for the next phase of the operation.

Currently, UNHCR is monitoring the situation of old and new IDPs in the region and verifying that assistance is reaching them.



Over the weekend, UNHCR observed only a trickle of returns from western Georgia to Gori but expects the return movement to gather momentum soon.

However, IDPs originating from Kodori Valley in northeast Abkhazia told UNHCR staff today, that practically all ethnic Georgians from that region have left and they did not know what the situation was like there nor did they consider returning any time soon.

Today, the ICRC has started repairs of IDP shelters in Senaki that were hit during the recent shelling of the city. All seven shelters that are housing the 1992 caseload of IDPs from Abkhazia were seriously damaged and three IDPs were killed. The shelters need massive refurbishment as all windows and many doors were destroyed.

Relief operation in Georgia is entering a new phase

The emergency phase of the relief operation in Georgia has been successfully finalized for UNHCR. Practically IDPs (122,000 beneficiaries) have been located and issued emergency relief packages — 53 % (65,000 packages) by UNHCR teams and the rest by implementing partners. This was done in close cooperation with UNHCR's sister agency WFP (World Food Programme) who provided the food, whereas UNHCR is in charge of non-food items and shelter.

While UNHCR is still coordinating NFI distribution of other organizations, the Refugee Agency itself is now shifting into a new, more protection oriented phase of the operation. This is all the more complex as currently the picture on the ground is completely changing with a return movement that is increasing by the hour.

UNHCR is currently planning its mid-term and long-term strategy with a twofold goal:

- to assist the government managing the return movements and a phased and organized manner making sure that return is taking place in safety and dignity
- to find durable solutions for those IDPs, old and new caseloads, who will not be able to return in the near future.

The present situation in Georgia is very dynamic and unpredictable. UNHCR therefore has to be flexible enough to keep harmonizing its planning with developments on the ground.

UNHCR supports the UN Country Team on telecommunications

As a co-lead agency (together with WFP) of the logistics and telecommunications group, UNHCR has provided the other humanitarian agencies with technical support since the beginning of the crisis. UNHCR telecommunications team in Tbilisi has installed a VHF radio repeater covering the Tbilisi area, reaching out half way to Gori, for the use of all UN agencies. The team has also programmed handsets for other UN agencies as well ensured that the Codan communication systems, used in UN vehicles are installed for the sister agencies.