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UNHCR ACTIVITIES IN THE CAUCASUS

AN OPERATIONAL REVIEW

INSPECTION AND EVALUATION SERVICE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Scope of the Review	(i)
Map	(ii)
Executive Summary.....	1
Regional Overview and Recommendations	3
Country Profiles :	
Armenia	9
Azerbaijan	11
Georgia	13

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

This review analyzes the effectiveness and impact of UNHCR programmes in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. It also endeavours to outline major options available to the Organization, and attempts at formulating the blueprint of a regional strategy for continued involvement in the Caucasus.

In carrying out the review, key documents were examined and in depth discussions were held with UNHCR staff in headquarters and the field. Extensive discussions were also held with officials of other United Nations agencies, donors, the governments, and staff of non-governmental organizations. Information covering essentially all activities was collected and analysed during the review. In the interest of brevity, however, only the minimum information required to facilitate an analysis of major issues and support conclusions is provided.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although it had been somewhat hesitant to deploy in the Caucasus, UNHCR quickly produced a significant impact in all three countries of the region. Whether for refugees or internally displaced populations, the Organization's programmes were able to substantially relieve the plight of the many who had fled ethnic strife.

Now, two years later, a relative stability has returned to the region. Most observers agree that the political and economic situation has overall improved. Armenia, while still the poorest of the three has seen some net economic growth during 1994. It also has the strongest institutions. Georgia is still struggling, but the political and security climate seems to have improved. As for Azerbaijan, its institutions are still challenged by opposition and attempted palace revolutions, but it has secured a bid for the first place in the region's economy through an important oil contract.

For UNHCR, the improvement of the overall conditions in the region means leaving the emergency relief phase and finding a new programme strategy. Armenia has entered in a transition phase of pre-development activity. Georgia and Azerbaijan have in different ways moved on to a rehabilitation or protracted emergency phase. Programme options are diverse and may include closing field offices. Perhaps a viable strategy for a continued and meaningful UNHCR presence in the Caucasus could be developed along the following recommendations.

- I. Given the artificial relevance of the legal status of the uprooted populations in the Caucasus, UNHCR should not make its continued presence in the region contingent upon traditional mandate considerations. The development of General Programme activities should be selective and meet clearly defined objectives.
- II. UNHCR should not continue open-ended assistance programmes that tend to become substitutes for failed economies. Instead, it should encourage and facilitate the involvement of other agencies.
- III. The political significance of the Organization's involvement in the region should be carefully analysed so as to avoid becoming party to protracted confrontations.
- IV. UNHCR should carefully weigh its involvement with general human rights activities so as not to raise unrealistic expectations.
- V. A longer-term strategy could best respond to the needs in the region through contingency planning and institution building and could address technical preparedness as well as societal development.

- VI. A longer-term strategy would have to be defined in cooperation with the region's governments. Field representatives should ensure that UNHCR's capabilities and objectives are well understood by the authorities and expectations are kept realistic.
- VII. A longer-term strategy could be implemented with a limited field presence. Required regional support could be provided from Georgia. UNHCR would be represented in Armenia and Azerbaijan by liaison officers only.
- VIII. A comprehensive fund-raising strategy involving both field offices and the desk should be developed in support of UNHCR continued presence.

REGIONAL OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pragmatic longer-term strategies should be defined and clearly formulated to ensure that UNHCR programmes meet adequately the region's changing needs.

1.1 The dynamics of what is sometimes called "matrioshka nationalism", have in the Caucasus blurred the formal distinction between Convention refugees and internally displaced persons. The Organization was called into the region to assume the role of a lead humanitarian agency, primarily in response to large-scale internal population displacement. The disintegration of the Soviet Union, the emergence of former federal republics as sovereign states and the ensuing independence claims of smaller nations from within these new states have resulted in conflicts that uprooted more than a million people throughout the Caucasus.

For as long as Abkhazia is not recognized as a sovereign state, the Mingrelians who have fled into central Georgia will remain internally displaced persons, not refugees. Notwithstanding, when considering their return, UNHCR as other parties concerned uses the term "repatriation" and the issues addressed by the Quadripartite Commission resemble those commonly tackled in refugee repatriation operations. The same paradox is likely to apply to the eventual return of ethnic Azeris to Nagorno Karabakh and to that of ethnic Georgians to South Ossetia. In all of these situations, protection issues arise only in connection with the return of the displaced populations.

Equally paradoxical is the situation of ethnic Azeris or ethnic Armenians who fled to their respective nations following the 1989-1990 clashes in Baku. Before Armenia and Azerbaijan had acceded to independence, in 1990 and 1992 respectively, these groups could be considered as internally displaced populations. Afterwards, however, they formally became refugees. At present, it is expected that Armenia will soon grant citizenship to these refugees, a development that would technically place them outside UNHCR's mandate. In reality, protection has never been an issue and their assistance needs have remained unchanged.

Given the artificial relevance of the legal status of the uprooted populations in the Caucasus, UNHCR should not attempt to make its continued presence there contingent upon traditional mandate considerations. Instead, the Organization should plan the engagement of limited resources to address selectively actual and potential population displacement problems in the region.

2. UNHCR will need to choose a realistic path from the diverse expectations its involvement has generated.

2.1 UNHCR should not provide assistance indefinitely in open-ended situations such as those prevailing in Georgia and Azerbaijan. At the outset, UNHCR has responded as a lead operational agency confronted with a significant humanitarian crisis. The Organization has endeavoured to meet the emergency needs of the displaced populations. It has also in the process contributed to contain population movements and to maintain relative stability in the region. Major donors as well as the region's governments, including Russia, have been satisfied with the impact of UNHCR's relief programmes. Beyond emergencies, however, UNHCR cannot become a substitute for failed economies and such expectations should not be fueled with continuing relief activities. Other agencies will have to step in to address relief and rehabilitation needs that equally pertain to the displaced and non-displaced populations.

2.2 UNHCR should carefully craft the scope and flexibility of its political involvement so as to avoid being drawn into deadlocks. In the Caucasus, UNHCR has rapidly become involved with several unresolved confrontations. In the case of the conflict over Abkhazia, the Organization has become an active party in the mediation process between the separatist authorities in Sukhumi and the Georgian government. As it appears now, Sukhumi does not accept the repatriation of Mingrelians and the Abkhaz may have intended to use their relationship with UNHCR merely to boost their claim to sovereignty. Wisely enough, UNHCR drew the limits of its engagement during the February 1995 meetings of the Quadripartite Commission when it presented a firm timetable. The ambiguous attitude of the government of Azerbaijan towards UNHCR's assistance to the populations displaced from Nagorno Karabakh is yet another example where continued humanitarian assistance may serve unintended political objectives. Authorities in Baku are reluctant to allow the local integration of the displaced populations which they fear would be tantamount to accepting the territorial status quo, and favour instead emergency relief. While the legitimacy of Azerbaijan's claim to territorial integrity is understandable, UNHCR cannot in the longer-term meet expectations that discount the welfare of the displaced populations.

In both cases, albeit differently, conflicting parties have attempted to use UNHCR to achieve greater political leverage. Clearly, such situations are not uncommon and may be unavoidable. It is important, however, that UNHCR conveys to all concerned that it is willing to be party to solutions, not to protracted confrontations.

2.3 Whenever possible, UNHCR should leave the task of human rights monitoring to specialized agencies. In the context of the repatriation of refugees or of the return of displaced persons, UNHCR is commonly confronted with human rights issues. Field staff quickly gain the confidence of the communities and are called upon to check disputes or abuses. In the Caucasus, following the attempted repatriation to Abkhazia, the UNHCR field office in Gali has assumed such a function far more effectively than the United Nations military observers or the Russian peace keeping forces also present in the area. Notwithstanding, UNHCR de-

facto human rights monitoring has generated among the population expectations that cannot continue to be met unless the repatriation programme is revived. To facilitate withdrawal from situations where UNHCR cannot justify its presence through continuing programmes, but has nevertheless a critical impact, the Organization should endeavour to develop early cooperation with specialized agencies. The example of Tajikistan has shown that the OSCE is capable of continuing in a systematic manner human rights monitoring activities that had started informally on the fringe of UNHCR programmes. The OSCE has also been moderately active in South Ossetia, and is likely to be involved on a larger scale in Nagorno Karabakh.

3. A longer-term strategy for the Caucasus could include limited UNHCR presence, contingency planning and institution building.

3.1 UNHCR should first recognize that the role it developed in the emergency phase could now be better assumed by others. The humanitarian crisis that had developed in the Caucasus at the beginning of the 1990s has by now subsided. Consequently, the needs of the uprooted populations have changed from emergency relief to rehabilitation assistance. Although in some areas, of Azerbaijan for example, conditions are still harsh, the type of assistance generally required in the region calls for large-scale and longer-term involvement. The role of lead humanitarian agency assumed by UNHCR in the emergency phase has encouraged a number of international NGOs to step in either under the umbrella of UNHCR funding or on their own. Save the Children Fund, who have become the umbrella funding agency for USAID in the region, aspires to a general coordination role for rehabilitation activities. WFP and CARE have invested heavily in a regional logistical network that should meet basic food needs. Furthermore, ECHO has attracted and is funding a number of French and German NGOs who cater various care and maintenance programmes to the uprooted populations.

In light of such developments, the importance of UNHCR's role with respect to the delivery of assistance to the internally displaced populations has significantly diminished. Decreased funding capacity will further consolidate this trend. Some degree of authority could be artificially maintained in areas such as general coordination or procurement, but it would impact more UNHCR's standing with the governments than the efficient delivery of international assistance. Perhaps the most effective contribution UNHCR could make to these changes would be the sharing of its experience with those agencies who are now developing programmes in the region. Field offices could invite concerned agencies to participate in systematic reviews of the activities that had been undertaken by UNHCR and to jointly assess continued assistance needs.

3.2 The development of assistance activities under the UNHCR General Programme should be highly selective. The quasi totality of the caseload in Armenia and more than two hundred thousand persons in Azerbaijan are, technically speaking, refugees. Assistance to these groups could conceivably be funded under the General Programme. In both cases, the

characteristics of these groups would also allow UNHCR to invoke the certain prospect of durable solutions. Notwithstanding, the needs of these refugees should be carefully weighed against those of the general population, in both countries, and in Azerbaijan against the large displaced population. In Armenia, particularly favourable circumstances, that also included adequate funding, have allowed UNHCR to move very quickly into rehabilitation and pre-developmental activities. The degree of integration now achieved by the refugees justifies early disengagement. Clearly no assistance activities for these populations should be continued in Armenia under the General Programme.

In Azerbaijan, some six years after its arrival, this group has presumably been integrated without the intervention of UNHCR. Differentiating refugees from Armenia from the internally displaced populations was impossible then, and might seem a futile attempt at this stage. Furthermore, the view that including assistance projects for the "Armenian refugees" under the General Programme would give UNHCR the political leverage it would need with the government to compensate for the closure of the programmes for the displaced is debatable. First of all, this view assumes that governments expect from UNHCR only large-scale material assistance. Second, it fails to comprehend the long-term rationale for UNHCR's involvement in the region, which cannot be presence for presence's sake. Third, it also fails to recognize that frameworks for long-term involvement can be negotiated to meet satisfactorily both UNHCR's and the governments' objectives. Fourth, it discounts the possibility that these objectives may coincide.

The same argument applies to the programme in Georgia, where after a failed repatriation UNHCR had been considering stepping up assistance to the displaced populations.

3.3 UNHCR should use its resources to contribute to the consolidation of the emerging civil societies in the region. Asylum issues have not yet acquired noticeable importance in the Caucasus. The number of individuals, mainly from Iran and Iraq, requesting asylum in any of the three countries of the region has been modest. UNHCR should see this as an early opportunity to assist the region's governments in developing structures compatible with international standards of treatment. Training and capacity building activities should be continued or developed. Relations with those who represent the polity in these countries should be established and nurtured. While recognizing that governments have more urgent priorities, the Organization should not hesitate to undertake long-term programmes both for targeting the development of asylum institutions and for promoting general awareness of human rights standards, tolerance and communication. Such activities are also preventive in nature.

3.4 Contingency planning and developing the capacity of national institutions in anticipation of future population movements should be UNHCR's major objective in the region. Clearly, there remains in the Caucasus a number of unresolved situations that could either lead to the return of some of the uprooted populations to the disputed areas, or spark new displacements. It is most likely that in either case, UNHCR will be called upon. In anticipation of such developments, UNHCR could in cooperation with the governments work

at establishing realistic contingency plans. In the process, those national structures likely to be involved should be identified and capacity building activities including training and material support should be provided. At present, several international agencies, including IOM, USAID and TACIS, are either already involved or considering supporting the organizational development of national relief and assistance institutions. It appears, however, that these endeavours do not specifically aim at developing preparedness in face of possible population displacements, but more generally, address the management of international aid. UNHCR should bridge this gap as much for the sake of its own efficiency in future operations, as for the constructive impact it would make on national institutions.

The planning of refugee repatriation is inherently limited by the disposition of the receiving party. The value of proposals combining planning and support should not however be discounted, and can arguably raise the efficiency of the negotiating process. In the case of the attempted repatriation to Abkhazia, the formulation of well articulated plans would have either facilitated agreement between the parties, or exposed earlier their irreconcilable differences.

4. UNHCR could implement in the Caucasus a viable longer-term strategy with a limited presence.

4.1 The argument that UNHCR needs sizeable country programmes to justify its presence is not necessarily a valid one. Instead, another rationale should be formulated. First, UNHCR must convey to governments that it has the capacity to field large programmes should the need arise. The Organization has already proven its capacity to deploy in the region in the course of the past years. Second, UNHCR should stress to the region's governments that the Organization's objectives coincide with theirs, namely, to anticipate and prevent population displacements; to develop national institutions; to prepare them to effectively address refugee and displacement issues and to establish a cooperative framework for requesting international assistance if and when needed. Third, representatives in the field should ostensibly redirect their work towards these objectives.

4.2 A small regional liaison office in Tbilisi and two liaison officers with minimal local support in Baku and Yerevan may be an adequate formula. The regional office could provide protection (refugee law and training) support through a single protection officer. It could also provide regional programme support through a trained local programme assistant, and administrative support through local staff. The three liaison officers should have adequate seniority (P4), and if needed undertake training in promotion of refugee law, train the trainers, programme planning and management etc. They would need secretarial support.

The choice of Tbilisi as the location for regional support may be preferable for several reasons. First, there may be a breakthrough over Abkhazia or South Ossetia sooner than over Nagorno Karabakh. Second, Georgia has developed sustainable relations with both Armenia

and Azerbaijan. Third, Russia is likely to be amenable to UNHCR covering the Caucasus from inside the CIS.

An alternative to this regional arrangement could be the posting in Georgia of a single roving liaison officer with the same support structure. It would, however, require from staff in Tbilisi a strict schedule of visits to Baku and Yerevan to ensure adequate coverage. Notwithstanding, since activities should involve scheduled events such as visits, participation in working groups, seminars etc, rather than daily management, this option may still be worth considering.

Covering the Caucasus from Ankara may not be as desirable, primarily because of the political significance it would bear. While Armenia might be slowly opening towards Turkey, relations between the two countries are still a controversial issue. With respect to Azerbaijan, UNHCR's decision might be resented in Tehran. Finally, covering the region from Ankara is simply logistically impracticable.

5. A comprehensive fund raising strategy that would involve both field offices and the desk should be developed.

The disappointing response to the DHA consolidated appeal does not necessarily mean that selected donors would not react more positively to smaller, well structured, programme proposals. The cause of the last consolidated appeal's failure may have been lesser donors' concern for post-emergency situations in the region or the complexity of the objectives claimed by diverse agencies. Furthermore, consolidated humanitarian appeals tend to lock fund raising onto short-term relief objectives rather than linking it to longer-term strategies donors could relate to. It would seem unlikely that donors who see major political stakes in the Caucasus could not be sensitized to programme proposals that reflect longer-term needs if they are properly formulated. Shevernadze is still a significant factor in the West's perception of Georgia. Azerbaijan holds vast oil resources, and Armenia is supported by powerful lobbies in several western countries. In future, relations with DHA permitting, UNHCR should launch its own Caucasus appeals.

First, a fund raising strategy should be constructive. The threat of withdrawal cannot in itself constitute enough of a funding motive. Second, to be effective it should be based on continuous feedback to the donors. Communication with embassies at field level could include the regular release of newsletters in addition to the customary briefings. Moreover, field offices and the desk could collaborate in ensuring that programme information is flown regularly from headquarters to donor governments. Third, and most important, programme objectives should reflect a strategy with specific goals, time limits and scales for appreciating progress.

COUNTRY PROFILES

UNHCR PROGRAMME IN ARMENIA

6. UNHCR activities in Armenia have significantly contributed to bring a durable solution to the refugee problem in Armenia. After providing emergency relief to many of the 325,000 refugees in the country, UNHCR assistance shifted in the course of 1994 towards local integration. In addition to providing adequate shelter to some of the most vulnerable refugees, the housing construction programme has also contributed to the stabilization of these populations and prepared the ground for rehabilitation and development work.

6.1 Much of the positive impact made by UNHCR in Armenia can be attributed to effective project planning, delivery and monitoring that has extensively involved nationals. Solid cooperative relations with government authorities have allowed for the development of a reliable local needs assessment and monitoring capacity. The liaison office first won the confidence of the government by using established structures such as the state shops network for the distribution of relief items. Later, it has encouraged the deployment of government refugee officers throughout the country. UNHCR field staff work together with the refugee officers to assess local needs, formulate small projects and monitor their implementation.

6.2 Another factor of success has been UNHCR's ability to improve the conditions in which it had to operate. Where adequate project implementation capacity did not exist UNHCR has developed it. In the case of the shelter programme, the liaison office has supported the Armenian chapter of YMCA to become its main implementing partner. UNHCR has provided training and coaching to the YMCA team to bring its performance up to expected standards.

6.4 The liaison office has also proven capable of using effectively external resources to enhance its own programme management capacity. Opening four new field offices in Armenia could have been a costly undertaking. Fielding UNVs in lieu of UNHCR short-term staff, however, significantly reduced both the costs and the lead time to deployment.

6.5 There is no doubt that the role of humanitarian coordinator delegated to the UNHCR representative by DHA has reinforced the impact of UNHCR activities. This function has enhanced recognition of UNHCR as the leading agency in Armenia both in the eyes of international agencies and of the government. The relationships developed by the DHA representative with most of the agencies in Armenia should also enable the liaison office to prepare more effectively the scaling down of UNHCR assistance programme.

6.6 Contrary to Georgia's and Azerbaijan's, Armenia's political environment has been favourable to the efficient development of assistance activities. Most importantly, the government's policy of integrating refugees has been clear and consistent with the refugees' aspirations. Furthermore, with Armenians accounting for more than ninety percent of its population, the country has been spared ethnic conflict. The government has been committed to democratic change, and thus has received strong support from the influential Armenian

diaspora and some western states. While still at a dramatic low, the economy has shown encouraging signs of improvement. Finally, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict does not so far pose a direct threat to Armenian territorial integrity.

7. The main issue currently faced by UNHCR in Armenia is that of determining the future scope of its involvement in the local integration of refugees. Observers generally agree that Armenia has passed the emergency stage and has now entered a transition phase that should lead to social and economic development. With regard to refugees, this has meant the stabilization and the establishment of refugee communities on land plots or in buildings that have been allocated by the government. UNHCR has acknowledged the transition by shifting its programme from relief items distribution to shelter construction, rehabilitation and income generation. The liaison office recognizes, however, that its involvement should be limited and should pave the way for longer term development activities to be undertaken by others. UNHCR integration assistance would thus be scaled down.

7.1 Legal changes in the beneficiaries' status may encourage UNHCR to shorten its involvement. The enactment of a nationality law, expected during 1995, that should grant citizenship to the refugees having fled Azerbaijan would confirm the government's commitment to its integration policy. While UNHCR may find itself further away from its mandate, the need to prevent secondary flows or out-migration may be enough a reason to continue its integration programme until a proper hand over is completed.

7.2 While DHA and UNDP could conceivably come forth as coordinating and funding agencies, they do not feature and are unlikely to develop adequate field operations capabilities. Handing over the UNHCR integration programme implies identifying an institution capable to secure funding, and to plan, coordinate and implement field activities. Government structures are excluded. Despite the capacity building efforts deployed by UNHCR and other agencies, they are still weak.

7.3 Several NGOs (AAA, SCF(USA), YMCA) aspire to coordination and umbrella agency roles, but Save the Children Fund may be better positioned than the other ones. SCF has been the umbrella funding NGO for USAID in the Caucasus for the past years. With its contract expiring in 1995 SCF is bidding on an extension and seeks also to become operational. SCF seems to endorse UNHCR planning premises. It intends to open field offices and would consider integrating with UNHCR's own network.

7.4 Handing over assistance programmes will leave UNHCR with the choice of either withdrawing its team or maintaining a liaison office *stricto sensu*. Given the specific situation of Armenia and the dynamics of conflict in the region, it seems now unlikely that UNHCR should have a major role to play there in the near future. A liaison office could, nevertheless, contribute to the normalization of conditions in the country through institutional development. This could in turn be seen as preventive policy against out-migration. Continued presence would also leave to UNHCR the option of stepping into regional political processes should negotiations over Nagorno Karabakh bring substantial displacement and repatriation issues on the agenda.

UNHCR PROGRAMME IN AZERBAIJAN

8. While significant, the impact of UNHCR relief activities in Azerbaijan is somewhat dwarfed by the magnitude of the internal displacement problem. In the course of the past two years, the UNHCR team in Baku has tried its best to relieve the plight of the most vulnerable among some 700,000 Azeris who fled from the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region and the adjacent fighting areas. While most observers concur that emergency relief programmes, in which UNHCR played leading role, have shielded the populations from major famine and epidemics, many of the displaced still live in very precarious conditions.

8.1 Under these conditions, UNHCR's main achievements may have been the stabilization of displaced populations in areas where local integration could be eventually envisaged and the prevention of secondary flows. Preventing mass movements of IDPs into the capital has been a crucial effect of forward-reaching relief activities because of the generally volatile nature of the security situation in Baku.

8.2 The liaison office's ability to develop and maintain excellent working relations with international NGOs has been an important factor of success in the relief items distribution phase. The UNHCR team has taken responsibility primarily for the procurement, storage and monitoring of relief assistance while various international NGOs proceeded with actual distribution to the beneficiaries. NGO staff have also worked together with UNHCR officers at needs assessment and relief planning. Furthermore, close cooperation with international NGOs have enabled UNHCR to keep abreast of developments in the provinces without incurring the additional costs of maintaining field offices or increasing staff levels.

8.3 UNHCR's reliance on established national structures has been limited. While some relief assistance has been channeled through local executive committees, in many instances they proved to be unreliable partners. Under more favourable circumstances, UNHCR could have engaged in capacity building. In light of the magnitude of the emergency in Azerbaijan, however, turning directly to international NGOs has been a more efficient alternative. The same rationale justifies the liaison office's initial lack of interest in local NGOs or voluntary work capacity.

9. Conceivably, more could have been done to shift earlier towards post-emergency activities. The liaison office could have assumed a lead role in stimulating community development planning among NGOs. UNHCR has indeed distributed some seeds and tools in an attempt to stimulate self sufficiency, but it could have perhaps linked such activities better and earlier with the efforts of other agencies. ECHO, for example, has built clusters of shelters which they saw as potential villages. Similarly, the idea of multi-sectoral integrated planning could have been taken up with more persistence to other UN agencies.

9.1 It must be acknowledged, however, that the operational environment in Azerbaijan has not been favourable to such initiatives. The government's instability and the weakness of

its refugee structures have hampered concerted planning. Furthermore, the government has continuously used the Nagorno Karabakh conflict as a reassembling theme. Accepting refugee integration could mean acceptance of the status quo and of defeat.

10. The first question that should be clarified is the extent to which UNHCR is prepared to continue assisting the displaced populations in Azerbaijan. Options range from protracted emergency relief to integration assistance. If the organization's objectives are to be limited to emergency relief, then they have already been met and no further programmes should be developed. Conversely, if the objective is to facilitate the local integration of the displaced communities, UNHCR should be prepared to make a major commitment both in terms of time and funding.

10.1 Furthermore, opting for local integration would require that UNHCR takes a clear position on the possibility of returning the displaced populations to the areas in and around Nagorno Karabakh. Under the current conditions, the probability that the peace negotiations deadlock be broken, thus opening the way to the return of the displaced persons to the occupied areas, appears to be very low. Most observers contend that the return of Azeris to the Nagorno Karabakh Region proper may not ever be possible. It is conceivable, however, that an agreement could be reached to allow the return of the displaced to some of the occupied areas east, south and even west of the Region.

10.2 The decision to engage or not into local integration activities might be more sensibly reached after such expectations are discussed with the government. Discussions should also include the issues of land allocation and of the extension of existing community structures to the displaced populations.

10.3 Short of a clear agreement with the government on the scope and objectives of local integration, UNHCR may have to reconsider its involvement in Azerbaijan. The value of undertaking integration activities in a grey area characterized by piecemeal assistance and government tolerance is debatable. In fact, it may well amount to an endless form of care and maintenance programmes.

10.4 Similarly, UNHCR planners may want to determine more precisely the value of open-ended programmes against the Organization's overall objectives. Would shelter construction be another step in relief assistance, or could it be structured in a way where it would link with self-sufficiency and integration? Does the impact of a classroom building project make it cost-effective? Can such projects be integrated into an assistance strategy that links with government policy and with the activities of other international agencies?

UNHCR PROGRAMME IN GEORGIA

11. The impact of the UNHCR emergency relief programme has been primarily felt among the Mingrelian populations who had fled fighting in Abkhazia. The quasi-totality of the 300,000 displaced persons have found shelter with relatives or in communal buildings. The burden for the receiving communities, however, has been substantial. In the area stretching from Zugdidi to Kutaisi, the presence of thousands of displaced persons has added to the generally poor economic conditions. UNHCR activities have aimed at reducing the dependency of the displaced on the local communities primarily through relief distribution. In the course of 1994, assistance has increasingly shifted to the provision of community and social services and the development of self-sufficiency activities.

11.1 Assistance to some 150,000 beneficiaries and to a certain extent to the receiving communities has been delivered effectively through several dedicated implementing partners. Cooperative planning with notably IRC and OXFAM has resulted in the timely improvement of living conditions for the most vulnerable displaced populations.

11.2 While assistance may have also contributed to preventing secondary flows to the Tbilisi area, the main cause of the displaced populations' relative stability may have been their determination to return to Abkhazia as early as possible.

12. The failure of the planned repatriation to Abkhazia may have been in part due to flawed negotiations within the Quadripartite Commission. The feasibility of the repatriation to Abkhazia and the failure of UNHCR endeavours should be examined in the overall context of political negotiations that have involved the belligerents, the United Nations and Russia. Clearly, the reluctance of the Abkhaz and the inexperience of other parties with refugee issues have contributed the operation's failure. Notwithstanding, some UNHCR staff believe that in the process that followed the signing of the Quadripartite Agreement, the Organization could have brought the focus more effectively on practical issues. For example, a firm time frame for repatriation should have been secured before committing significant resources to the operation. Other observers, including representatives of the Georgian government, contend that UNHCR negotiators could have approached more boldly the issue of the returnees' safety, and resent what they see as the casual approach taken by the liaison office.

12.1 UNHCR's rapid shift from assistance to the displaced populations to repatriation may not have greatly affected the beneficiaries, but has resulted in alienating many of the international NGOs. Save the Children Fund, which is the funding umbrella for USAID, has taken the lead in denouncing what they perceive as UNHCR's hasty and weak planning. While NGOs' scepticism towards early repatriation is not unusual, coopting them into the assessment and planning process could have enhanced UNHCR's ability to coordinate future assistance activities independently of the nature of the operation's outcome.

12.2 Despite the failure of repatriation, important lessons can be learned from the Abkhaz experience. First, it is clear that UNHCR programmes can play substantive roles in mitigating

the consequences of ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union. Second, UNHCR can work more effectively at building confidence between the parties on the ground than in formal international consultations. Third, UNHCR could despatch emissaries to consult the parties and initiate a dialogue before violence breaks out. Fourth, UNHCR should resist the temptation to engage in purely political diplomacy and instead negotiate on practical terms.

12.3 The main issue UNHCR faces in Georgia at present is whether to continue providing assistance to the displaced populations. While the need for assistance persists, UNHCR's contribution at this point might be only of marginal value. In the second half of 1994 when UNHCR was preparing for the repatriation movements to Abkhazia, a number of international NGOs stepped up their assistance to the displaced. By the end of the year, most of the community services provided to displaced persons were delivered by international NGOs independent from UNHCR funding. Furthermore, as in the case of the Zugdidi area, these NGOs had excluded UNHCR from the assistance coordination process. Rather than try recovering a lead role, the liaison office could encourage NGOs to extend their initiative to activities still funded by UNHCR: notably the rehabilitation of communal centres. Under such conditions, UNHCR could consider phasing out its assistance programme.

12.4 Notwithstanding the decision reached on the assistance issue, a stronger UNHCR presence may still be warranted in Georgia. As a result of its involvement in negotiations on the return of displaced populations to Abkhazia, UNHCR has become party to a precarious status quo that has so far prevented the mass slaughter of the Mingrelians who have remained or returned to the Gali region. Most observers concur that the withdrawal of the UNHCR team from Gali would send a strong signal both to the Abkhaz authorities in Sukhumi and to the Georgians. It is likely that the Abkhaz would feel relieved from international pressure and resume ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, the Georgians are now more confident in their military capabilities and would feel compelled to resume hostilities. While debatable, this view is worth a careful assessment.

12.5 The benefit of a UNHCR field presence in Gali, however, should be carefully weighed against its actual impact. In the event that the security situation spins out of control, monitoring may become superfluous if UNHCR is not in a position to denounce exactions with authority.

12.6 In the recent round of consultations, UNHCR has stood firmly for the acceptance of a time frame for repatriation. Promoting agreement on realistic deadlines, and proposing to resolve practical issues are clearly appropriate negotiating strategies. Nevertheless, the pressure felt by the Abkhaz may in the short-term cause them lock onto an intractable position.