

Abkhazia: Searching for the Missing

Author: [Koba Liklikadze](#)

Official mistrust hampers Georgian and Abkhaz parents in their search for the remains of their missing sons.

Bella Zaldastanishvili has been dressed in black for the past 14 years. On September 22, 1993, just four days before the war in Abkhazia ended, she lost four people dear to her - two sons and her twin brothers.

An Abkhaz missile hit a plane carrying Bella's sons and brothers along with other Georgian soldiers as it was landing at Babushera airport in Abkhazia, killing everyone on board.

Despite all her efforts, Bella has failed to find the remains of her loved ones so she can give them a proper burial.

Guli Kichba, an Abkhaz woman, lost her son Arzamet at the very start of the conflict. On September 27, 1993, the day Abkhaz forces recaptured the city, the first thing the broken-hearted mother did was to start searching for her son's grave.

Soldiers from the Abkhaz military told her that her son had been buried in the courtyard of a green-painted house in a village called Achadara near the Abkhaz capital, Sukhum (which the Georgians call Sukhumi).

Guli has yet to find her son's resting-place. She now heads a group called Mothers of Abkhazia for Peace and Social Justice, who are dedicated to finding out what happened to their loved ones.

The experiences of Guli and Bella are just two of the thousands of similar stories from the three conflicts of the South Caucasus - Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia.

According to data provided by an information centre set up by the European Union, a total of 7,538 people are still registered as missing from these conflicts. All, or almost all, are presumed dead.

Up to 2,000 of the missing are from the conflict in Abkhazia, the majority of them ethnic Georgian civilians and soldiers whose fate was unknown after the Abkhaz victory in 1993.

The fate of more than 100 Abkhaz combatants, mainly from the first phase of the conflict, also remains unknown. Mothers of Abkhazia for Peace and Social Justice recently published a book containing an incomplete list of 131 missing people.

When fighting ended in 1993, the issue of missing combatants and civilians was low on the political agenda. No efforts were made to compile lists of the dead, or information on burial sites.

Georgian parents took the matter into their own hands and founded an organisation named Molodini (Expectation) headed by Vladimir Doborjginidze, who lost his only son in the conflict. The group's members

set about collecting their own information.

Doborjginidze says more than 860 Georgian soldiers and about 1,100 civilians are still listed as missing. The number whose bodies have been found and reburied is much smaller.

"To date, we have managed to rebury 164 people. In addition, we have brought back 231 Georgians across the border alive, and handed over 87 people - living and dead - to the Abkhaz side," said Doborjginidze.

His own son is among those whose bodies were never found.

"I was told that in September 1993, the Abkhaz shot 13 Georgian young men at the April 9 memorial in Sukhumi, and that my son was one of them. He was 25."

In an attempt to find out more, the Abkhaz and Georgian groups led by Kichba and Doborjginidze, respectively, agreed to meet.

"My son also died and is missing," said Kichba. "To help each other and prevent such things from happening again, we parents of dead warriors decided to hold a meeting with the Georgian committee, purely out of human considerations."

Bella Zaldastanishvili took part in the first meeting, in the Abkhaz town of Ochamchira, and recalls that the first encounter was difficult.

"The Abkhaz mothers were very aggressive to start with," she said. "They rebuked us for having let our sons fight in an unjust war. But when they listened to our stories, they were deeply moved. Later, we remembered our dead sons together and wept."

The Abkhaz passed on the bad news to the Georgians that many of their men were probably never buried at all. "Unfortunately, the military leadership used to throw many of the bodies of Georgian soldiers into the sea," said Kichba. "That's a well-known fact. For that reason, many Georgian mothers will not find the remains of their sons."

With United Nations-brokered political negotiations between the Georgian and de facto Abkhaz authorities currently stalled, progress on the exchange of information at an official level is painfully slow.

"The parliamentary commission of the Council of Europe notes with regret that despite the end of hostilities, the problem of the missing remains unresolved in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia," said a statement by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in May this year.

Both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides have official commissions tasked with investigating the issue, but they have little to do.

Analyst Paata Zakareishvili, who has been involved in a number of cross-border projects with the Abkhaz, said almost nothing had been done since 1997.

"The Abkhaz side lost interest," he said. "The ones they were able to find quickly have already been found. I think the Georgian side should persuade [the Abkhaz] to give permission for them to look for burial sites and to rebury people. There is actually a lot of information about these sites."

Otar Kukhalashvili, an official with Georgia's "Abkhaz government in exile", based in western Georgia, blamed the lack of progress on this issue on "lack of political will on both sides, a low level of trust, and a lack of funding."

In this discouraging environment, Molodini continues to work on its own. Last year, the group located the remains of three Abkhaz citizens and handed them over to their relatives.

"During the war, they were in the mental hospital in Sukhumi, and the doctors took them along with other patients to Tbilisi, where they died," said Nineli Andriadze, one of the co-chairs of Molodini. "It still took us a long time to find their unmarked graves."

Andriadze said work continued at a slow pace, but noted that information was often withheld because the other side wanted something in return.

"Some Georgian soldiers who have information about the location of Abkhaz fighters' graves are totally against sharing it, as they want to get information about the remains of their own comrades in exchange," said Andriadze.

The de facto government in Abkhazia has said it will not reveal information until it receives a map of the graves of 153 Abkhaz soldiers who are believed to be dead and whose whereabouts it believes are known to the Georgians.

Parents from Molodini visited Abkhazia last year to identify the bodies of Georgian soldiers buried at the Babushera airfield near Sukhumi on in September 1993.

"The bodies of 95 Georgian fighters were buried there," said Andriadze. "We have reburied 62 of them. We are unable to rebury the remaining 33 bodies because the Abkhaz side are making demands which are unclear."

Adgur Butba, an adviser to the Abkhaz state commission for the missing says that until the Georgians hand over better information about the bodies of the missing Abkhaz, it would be inadvisable to hand over the remains from the Babushera burial site.

"We are supposed to receive maps from the Georgians," said Butba. "They do hand over maps, but they are not reliable or accurate at all. In addition, they send people who were not eyewitnesses. Those who did take part are afraid to come, even though we guarantee that they will be safe."

Deprived of graves for their sons, grieving parents mourn instead at the war memorials set up by both sides after the conflict.

Standing by the eternal flame in Tbilisi that commemorates those who died in Abkhazia, Bella Zaldastanishvili has tears running down her face as she looks at a photograph of her two sons.

She feels she has let them down.

"When my younger son was leaving for Abkhazia, he said to me, 'Mother, if anything happens to me and I die, do not leave me there,'" she said.

"Now I can do nothing, son. That is why I am so angry.

"Had they been the sons of some officials, they would have found them immediately. But who remembers Temur and Zuriko? I am praying for peace and asking God that no mother should ever lose her child again."

Koba Liklikadze is a military analyst with Radio Liberty in Tbilisi. Anahid Gogorian is a journalist with Chegemskaya Pravda newspaper in Sukhum. This article was written as part of IWPR's Cross Caucasus Journalism Network project.

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