

Georgia: Joint Police for Dispute Region

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Practical steps taken to improve law and order in troubled South Ossetia.

Georgia and South Ossetia are taking serious practical steps to mend their relationship, though a final settlement to the conflict remains some way off.

Officials have until June 10 to come up with a plan to introduce joint policing in South Ossetia, whose status has been disputed since a short but bloody war in 1992. Perhaps even more importantly, they also have to design a programme which will see large-scale construction in villages that suffered in the conflict.

The deadline was set when the joint commission overseeing the slow process of peace-building met on May 14-17. As well Georgia and South Ossetia, the body includes officials from Russia and its constituent republic of North Ossetia.

“This time we achieved more than I expected,” Georgian co-chairman Irakli Machavariani told IWPR. His South Ossetian equivalent Boris Chochiev added, “We have finally got down to practical work.”

During Soviet times, South Ossetia was an “autonomous region” within Georgia. That gave it its own assembly and cultural identity, but little else. Separatist feeling strengthened as the Soviet Union began to break up, and tensions reached breaking point in 1992. The ensuing war left about 2,000 people dead and 70,000 refugees before a ceasefire was called the same year.

Since then the truce has been enforced by a joint peacekeeping force involving Russian as well as Georgian and Ossetian troops. The new plan now under development will see the first joint civilian policing in the region. It envisages the establishment of two police stations, with a mixed Georgian-Ossetian force.

They will be located in Tamarasheni and Kekhvi, both of which are ethnic Georgian villages inside South Ossetia. They will straddle the main road leading north to Russia which is of great strategic importance to Georgia, since road and rail links through Abkhazia in the west were cut by the war there.

The police station in Kekhvi will be sited next to a peacekeeping garrison. “When it is in place, the police station will free the peacekeepers from functions that they shouldn’t be doing,” Russian general Svyatoslav Nabzdorov, who commands the joint force, told IWPR. “Often the victims of crime come to us instead of the police.”

South Ossetia enjoys a reasonable level of security, and day-to-day relations between the Ossetian and Georgian communities have improved over the years. Around 10,000 members of the latter still live there, accounting for perhaps one third of the region’s population.

Natia Basishvili is one of Tamaresheni’s Georgian residents. The village is located so close to the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali as to be almost a suburb.

“Of course I often go into the town to buy something, or just for a walk. There is no danger for us there,” Basishvili told IWPR.

People from the rest of Georgia also feel safe enough to come to trade. Their Georgian lari are accepted, though they will often get their change in Russian roubles, the currency used in South Ossetia.

Underlying tensions persist, though, and Georgians and Ossetians each tend to blame the other community for rising crime and local economic problems. The unresolved dispute has until now prevented the authorities on either side from tackling organised crime, which has become a major industry in the province.

“Post-conflict zones are dangerous because of their unpredictability,” South Ossetian parliament speaker Stanislav Kochiev told IWPR. “There are many small arms in the hands of the local population.

“The [Georgian and South Ossetian] law-enforcement agencies are separated from each other and so are not really effective. This naturally leads to a rise in crime.”

The killing of four Georgians in Tamarasheni highlighted the continued potential for violence, and may have given impetus to the joint effort to impose law and order. The murder of a father and his three sons was at first thought to have been the result of ethnic conflict, but it was later concluded that the man had been targeted by business partners or rivals.

As well as policing, joint action to build up the economy is seen as crucial to reducing tension.

In many villages, some houses have remained destroyed and unoccupied since the 1992 war.

“Yes, they are Ossetians’ houses,” said Mamuka Basishvili, a peasant in the ethnic Georgian village of Kurta when IWPR asked him about the charred and ruined houses which were at odds with the rest of the homes there. “You should go to Tskhinvali and see how many Georgian houses were set on fire.”

The joint programme should see homes and schools built, and water and gas supplies restored. Funding – 1.3 million euro of it – will come from the European Commission. The Georgians and Ossetians have until the June 10 deadline to agree the programme with the EC.

The South Ossetian parliamentary speaker is optimistic that the two sides can go much further than these steps, and achieve a comprehensive political settlement.

“A big group of OSCE ambassadors was here in March... I told them that the conflict will be settled in any case. Why should that happen after we’ve gone, and not while we are in power? All we have to do is to sew up the wounds, and rub in the ointment of popular diplomacy, trade and education,” said Kochiev.

Although there is much less animosity between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali than there is in the Georgian-Abkhazian dispute, it is unclear what the exact contours of a settlement would look like – how far short of full independence South Ossetia would be prepared to accept, and how much sovereignty Georgia would be prepared to cede.

People in the region, South Ossetians and Georgians alike, are keen to see economic rebuilding but remain cautious about the prospects for a lasting peace.

“Of course I’m armed,” said villager Mamuka Basishvili. “You’d have to be crazy to rely on the authorities. “I’ve got a short-barrelled automatic rifle. Do you want to see it?”

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