

Georgia: NATO Hopes on Hold

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Tbilisi now accepts that membership of the Western military alliance is a long way off

NATO is urging Georgia to press ahead for early NATO membership, despite the fact that the deplorable state of the country's armed forces means it could be years before they are in a fit state to join the alliance.

President Shevardnadze last week admitted that the way things were going Georgia was unlikely to make his 2005 target date for membership, and suggested that the process could take much longer.

Keen to exploit Georgia's strategic importance, the Western alliance, however, continues to urge Tbilisi, already a member of its Partnership for Peace, PfP, programme, to join the military coalition as soon as possible.

This year the alliance stepped up its activities in the region. In June, Georgia took part in military and naval exercises with NATO. And in recent weeks a decision was made to use the port of Poti as a base for joint western humanitarian aid operations for Afghanistan.

Upgrading the Georgian armed forces will be a huge undertaking as they have been all but ignored over the past decade. The military has been starved of funds, with the authorities instead concentrating resources on police and elite special forces.

The defence ministry is currently asking for 35 million US dollars to pay salary arrears and make other vital payments. But since parliament recently voted to slash its overall budget for the third year running, it's likely the armed forces will again be going short.

The sort of reforms vital for NATO membership will need substantial Western help and a crackdown on graft which proliferates throughout the ranks. Much of overseas aid earmarked for the overhaul of the military has been misappropriated.

Recognising the extent to which financial assistance goes awry, the defence ministry has asked NATO to deliver only material aid from now on.

The challenge of turning the armed forces around is considerable, and some of the top brass concede that the goal may not be achievable.

"I am not ashamed to say that the Georgian army has fallen to the level of a beggar on the street," said a ministry of defence official. "We wait until someone throws something at us."

NATO officials are keenly aware that the 30,000-strong force has suffered from nearly a decade of stagnation.

A couple of weeks before the joint NATO training exercises in June, around a thousand officers

demonstrated in the capital demanding the payment of salaries which hadn't been received for over a year.

Hardly surprising that morale is currently at an all-time low. At a call-up last month in three Georgian regions, just two reservists out of an anticipated nine hundred bothered reporting for duty.

The majority of soldiers who have not bought their way out of service or deserted are malnourished, hardly ever touch a gun and suffer their years of service.

"My two years in the Georgian army were the worst in my life," said one reservist. "The huts we slept in were falling down, the food was inedible and half of the lads spent the entire time in hospital which had no medicine." In the two years he served he held a weapon just three times.

Desertion is increasing. Unofficial figures put the number at several thousand.

Another option is to buy your way out. Which is easy enough as officers are keen to supplement their meagre incomes. "I have no option but to take bribes," said an ageing veteran of the Abkhaz war. "Otherwise I will die of hunger."

Morale is so low that Colonel Koba Otanadze, one of those leading the May wage protests, described the army as filled with the "sick and debilitated".

"If a guy does not want to go the army, I understand it," an employee at a Tbilisi conscription office told IWPR. "I wouldn't send my son there."

And so he assists those who want to pay to avoid the draft. He sees it as his due since he hasn't been paid for months. How much he demands depends on the individual in question. It might be a hundred dollars. It might be thousands.

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