

## **Georgia: Pankisi in Firing Line**

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Chechen refugees in Pankisi fear they will be in Russia's sights after Beslan tragedy.

With ducks waddling outside farmhouses and children playing in the sun, the Pankisi valley in northern Georgia could not look less like a potential war zone.

But a threat in the wake of the recent Beslan hostage crisis by the chief of the Russian general staff, General Yury Baluyevsky, to attack "terrorist bases in any region" of the world, has people here on edge. Analysts have widely interpreted the threat as targeting Russia's tense, 723-kilometre border with Georgia and especially Pankisi.

"Everyone is frightened," Albert Margashvili, 26, said in the hamlet of Dzibakhevi.

"The entire reason we came here was to escape the bombardments," said his neighbour Khava Dozurabova, a Chechen refugee who fled over the mountains five years ago with her five children.

The Pankisi is a narrow, wooded valley in the Caucasus foothills, about 50 km south of the border with Chechnya. More than 3,000 Chechen refugees live among the local population of Kists – an ethnically related, Muslim people, whose descendants left Chechnya in the 19th century.

Until two years ago, hundreds of Chechen guerrillas and a small number of foreigners linked to international extremist groups were also here. Georgia's government insists that the militants have all left. Russia disagrees. "Terrorist bases still remain in Pankisi," deputy foreign minister Valery Loshchinin said last week.

In the Pankisi Gorge itself refugees, locals and the police strongly deny that any militants are still there. "That's impossible. We've been everywhere – right up to the border with Chechnya," said police inspector Zurab Pareulidze at the checkpoint controlling the entrance to the valley.

However, the row comes at a time of extreme distrust between Tbilisi and Moscow, as a thaw that followed the January election of Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili appears all but forgotten.

Russian politicians and media portray Georgia as an unstable southern neighbour harbouring terrorists. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov hinted at links between Georgian policies and the Beslan hostage-taking, despite admitting he had no proof. Meanwhile, Georgia accuses Russia of imperialist ambitions and wanting to sabotage Georgia's pro-western policies.

All summer there has been tension over Saakashvili's attempts to regain control of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both of which have overt Russian political backing. Georgian officials claim that Russian forces aided South Ossetian rebels fighting Georgian troops this summer and were even preparing an invasion.

Just in the last week, the Georgian government has twice alleged that Russian military aircraft have violated Georgian airspace. According to the Russian media, Russian helicopters have launched regular patrols of the border. In addition, Moscow has closed the Georgian-Russian border to road traffic since

Beslan and also recently threatened to ban Georgian air carriers, citing disagreement over debts.

This is not the first time that the Pankisi has been a flashpoint.

In 2002, Moscow threatened intervention against alleged Chechen rebel camps in the valley. That same year, warplanes – which Moscow denied sending – bombed nearby forests. One Georgian local was killed.

Today, Georgia's state security ministry acknowledges that until 2002 there were approximately 700 Chechen fighters and 100 Arab and other foreign allies, including some alleged to have links with al-Qaeda. Arab backers also funded a large new mosque in the main Pankisi village of Duisi.

However, Tbilisi insists that by the end of 2002 the government had the region back under control and that now only Chechen refugees and locals remain. "There have been no fighters or terrorists in Pankisi for a long time," the interior minister, Irakly Okruashvili, said.

Today, 80 per cent of the refugees are elderly, women, or children, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

The United States, which has spent millions of dollars over the last three years training and equipping Georgia's impoverished special forces, has also linked Pankisi to al-Qaeda and fugitives from Afghanistan.

The US ambassador to Tbilisi, Richard Miles, said last week that in his opinion "there are still a few international terrorists in the vicinity of the Pankisi Gorge".

The statement caused consternation in Georgia and within hours the US State Department issued a statement of clarification saying that the valley "is no longer a haven for terrorists".

Despite the beauty of the area in summer, life for refugees in the Pankisi is hard. Gas and electricity supplies are rare. Refugees from Chechnya still have no money or employment opportunities. They rely on the UNHCR for food. Recently, many of the refugees have been applying to emigrate to other countries.

Now, fear of attack is rekindling harrowing memories of the war back home, where tens of thousands of civilians have died in Russian bombing and shelling in the last decade.

Sitting by a wood stove in the village of Birkiani, Esila Shakhgerieva, 39, described how one of her children is too frightened to look at soldiers on television, while another cowers at any sound resembling an airplane. "We all have nightmares," said Anzur Israpilov, 29, who lost his right leg from the knee down, and the use of an eye and hand, in a landmine blast.

It is hard to find anyone among the refugees – man, woman or child – who is unsympathetic to the rebels and their goal of driving Russian troops from Chechnya.

Asked what he would most like, a slight, 16-year-old refugee boy called Ramzan replied, "If the war won't end – to fight for my homeland."

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**Location:** Caucasus  
Stavropol  
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