

## **Georgia: Partisans Split Over Chechens**

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Georgians living in the Kodori gorge are not sure what to make of their new Chechen neighbours.

Getting to the Kodori gorge is no easy matter. Ever since the main road linking it to the outside world was closed by Abkhaz troops in 1993, the only way in has been along a rough trail through the Sakeni-Chuberi pass.

We managed to catch a lift into the area with a convoy of trucks delivering flour - part of an annual transport organised by the Georgian authorities. The supplies are essential for locals who will be cut off from the outside world in a matter of weeks.

It's a cold and uninviting place. Snow will shortly begin to fall - eventually blocking the pass and isolating Kodori for several months. When tens of thousands of Georgian refugees fled through here in late 1993, at the height of the Abkhaz conflict, dozens froze to death. Now locals are on the move again.

Villagers in Georgian-controlled parts of the region are being uprooted by recent clashes between Abkhaz troops and groups of Chechen fighters and Georgian partisans. The latter are hemmed in by Sukhumi forces on one side and Russian soldiers, deployed along Russia's southern border, on the other.

Some suggest the Chechens volunteered to help Georgian partisans in their fight against the Abkhaz, others that they were attempting to leave the country via the republic's northern border with Russia.

Whatever the explanation, it seems the Chechens are stuck and will be forced to spend winter in the region. Georgians who have elected to remain in the rugged, inhospitable Kodori are a tough lot, and they are divided over the newcomers.

"If Chechens intend spending the winter in the gorge, bloodshed is inevitable," said Nugzari Tsulukidze, from the central Kodori village of Azhara. Dressed in fatigues and brandishing a Kalashnikov, he is resolute in his determination to drive them out.

Tsulskidze said he had heard that the notorious Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelaev who is reportedly leading the rebel group here was looking to buy houses in the area. If this is true, he won't find many sympathetic neighbours.

"We cannot imagine how we should live with the Chechens here," said local schoolteacher Marina Gurchiani, " They are not satisfied with shooting people, they slaughter them like pigs."

Others welcome their new neighbours. They say they are models of courtesy, refusing to pick fruit off villagers' trees and paying women in dollars to bake them bread. "They were very polite in general," said Zoya Mikiani, a villager from Azhara in central Kodori.

Some partisans also see them as useful allies in their struggle against the Abkhaz. Some even joined up with the Chechens back in September and hold them in high esteem. They speak of a committed, ruthless fighting force. "No Chechen will take so much as a step without talking to their leader," said one partisan who lost a leg in recent clashes.

A partisan called Vakhtang told us the Chechens had joined their struggle to regain the separatist Russophile republic, in repayment for sheltering them in Pankisi in the last couple of years.

He described how one had told him they felt remorseful for fighting with the Abkhaz during the civil war, as Georgia had been the only country to support them in their struggle against the Russians. "I have cut the heads off 18 Georgians with this dagger. I will have paid for my crimes only when I cut the heads off 18 Abkhazians," the Chechen had said, flashing his weapon.

One way or another, if the Chechens remain in Kodori over the winter, blood is bound to be spilled.

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**Location:** Stavropol  
Russia  
North Ossetia  
Ingushetia

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/georgia-partisans-split-over-chechens>