

Georgian Army in Crisis

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The Georgian Army is struggling to cope with rampant desertion.

Dogged by chronic under-funding and medieval conditions, the Georgian army is being decimated by desertion on an epidemic scale.

In some units, brutal hazing and rape are said to be occupational hazards whilst officers extort crippling bribes from recruits in return for an early release from the miseries of army life. In the worst cases, the desertion rate is thought to be as high as 50 per cent.

By law, all Georgian men are obliged to serve in the army for a period of 18 months. In practice, the system is widely abused with well-connected and wealthy families paying military officials to exempt their sons.

Of the 12,000 conscripts called up for military service last autumn, only 4,820 actually reported to recruiting stations. Others resorted to a variety of tried and tested dodges, ranging from forged doctor's certificates (costing between \$600 and \$700) to falsified college credentials (\$25 to \$50).

Students are not drafted for the period of their study but, as one officer puts it, "Georgia boasts universities in every garage and it's not hard for conscripts to procure fake certificates."

Conditions in army barracks are appalling. Leven Gvarjaladze, who recently completed his military service, said a soldier's daily rations were pitifully inadequate. "We got oat porridge for breakfast, oat soup for lunch and, in the evening, tea without sugar, some rotten fish which it was impossible to eat and a few crusts of brown bread. The porridge was so awful that even pigs would have refused to touch it."

Chairman of the Organisation for the Protection of Soldiers' Rights, Nodar Epremidze, said the conscripts' uniforms were "disgraceful" and wore out in a few months. Many recruits had taken to wearing jeans and trainers instead of the regulation issue. The situation showed some signs of improvement after the United States sent military uniforms to Georgia as part of a recent aid package.

Temur Lomsadze, the acting public defender, said that ritual bullying was endemic in the ranks, with new recruits being subjected to physical and, on rare occasions, sexual abuse. "It [rape] takes place in many units, but it's difficult to prove because both the soldiers and their officers usually attempt to conceal the facts," he added.

The informal hierarchy which exists amongst Georgian recruits differs from the notorious "dedovschina" which is the bugbear of Russia's armed forces. Russian units are ruled by the "old hands", conscripts nearing the end of their two-year stint, whilst Georgia's barrack-room tyrants are dubbed "the tough guys" and their authority is based on personal strength and charisma rather than length of service.

As conditions in the Georgian army show few signs of improvement, the desertion rate is said to be steadily climbing. Lomsadze estimates there are more than 4,000 cases a year - 10 times more than the official government figures.

However, neither set of figures include recruits who pay bribes to officers for extended leave or early discharge - which analysts say could bring the total as high as 12,000. Ex-servicemen say that one month's unofficial leave can cost anything from 30 to 100 lari (\$15 to \$50). In some units, desertion and absenteeism are thought to account for between 30 per cent and 50 per cent of the total force.

The lack of a credible officer class is blamed for much of the misery in the Georgian army. General Hening von Ondarza says it is vital to replace officers of the old Soviet school but the military's tarnished image keeps more able candidates away.

The general added, "Georgia's president and the rest of the ruling cabal should set an example to the military by showing their own commitment and enthusiasm... I know what I'm talking about."

However, Georgia's foreign allies have been quick to rally round. The Turkish defence ministry has agreed to help form and equip a crack battalion while Great Britain has pledged between \$4 and \$5 million towards rebuilding the Georgian navy. In 1999, the army received more from foreign aid (\$25 million) than it did from the state budget - estimated at 42 million lari (\$21 million) for 2000.

Meanwhile, an advisory council on national security has presented President Eduard Shevardnadze's government with a package of proposed reforms. The council's chairman, General Sir Harry Johnson, comments, "It may take between five and 10 years to introduce the reforms. The most important thing is that we should make the necessary decisions to ensure the process is irreversible."

Earlier this month, Shevardnadze told the Georgian parliament, "In the last five years, we have succeeded in creating an army which meets all the international standards. Of course, it still has numerous defects, but the main task has been accomplished."

However, General Von Ondarza says that the government's strategy fails to tackle the real issues. "What does an MP say to voters who ask why their sons have to go into the army for a year-and-a-half while their wealthy neighbours get away scot-free?"

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