

## **Georgian Villagers Relieved as Abkhaz Withdraw**

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But now they must count the cost of a month-long occupation.

On the morning of September 9, the residents of Ganmukhuri about one kilometre from the administrative border with Abkhazia, gathered in the centre of their village. It was empty after four weeks of occupation by Abkhaz militiamen. Everyone had the same question on their lips, "Is it true they've gone?"

The Abkhaz withdrew from the village early that morning as unexpectedly as they had arrived on August 12.

"The Abkhaz had put up a [guard] post in front of my house, in the village administration building. Early on the morning of the 9th, I was woken by the noise of military vehicles and shouts in Russian," said villager Eter Kvaratskhelia. "I was too frightened to go outside and I went out only after the vehicles had left. I saw that all the Abkhaz had left the post. I didn't believe they would leave so quickly."

The Abkhaz departed after Georgian police and officials arrived in the village – and after European leaders had received a pledge in Moscow that Russian forces and their allies would start pulling back from the so-called "buffer zones" in Georgian territory outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia (although Ganmukhuri is also within the 12-km security zone where Russian peacekeepers have been stationed since 1993).

The first thing the Georgian policemen did was to throw into the Inguri river a sign the Abkhaz had put up saying "Apsny" ("Abkhazia" in the Abkhaz language).

Then sappers began to comb for mines the territory around the town, especially the Black Sea coastal strip.

After that, work will begin restoring infrastructure destroyed by Abkhaz militias.

The village had been the location for a "patriotic camp" for young people visited by Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili last year. That was badly burned, along with bungalows, restaurants and sports pitches.

"They burned my restaurant," said Gogi Zarkua. "Now the main thing is that they've gone. We will start to restore what we've lost with great enthusiasm."

"This should have been a special season for us," said Guli Akhalaya. "The coastline was beautiful; holiday attractions had been built. Hundreds of people were visiting every day and that all vanished in one day. They destroyed everything in a few hours."

As soon as the Abkhaz went, many villagers who had fled also returned. "I left the village a few hours before the Abkhaz came," said Tea Dagargulia. "Almost all the women and children did and only the men and old people stayed behind. They included my neighbours who did not want to abandon their homes, despite the pleas of the children."

The villagers also said the Georgian military had left them unprotected.

“The government withdrew our forces and didn’t even warn us,” said one woman who did not want to be named. “Of course it was frightening so we stayed behind without any protection and the Abkhaz could do what they wanted. The Abkhaz came into the village at 11.30 on the 12th and set themselves up in the centre of the village.

“Fortunately they didn’t touch the local population and we avoided contact with them. Once they came and asked me for water. They saw that I was frightened, reassured me and said that they wouldn’t touch me. They drank the water and left.”

The invaders took down the Georgian national flags from the school and local administration building, put up an Abkhaz flag at the entrance to the village.

On August 26, the day that Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ten policemen arrived from the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi and daubed graffiti saying “Long live the independent republic of Akbhazia!”

The Abkhaz in the village began celebrating more and more.

“The last three days they were here, they fired their guns almost every day. They went up on to rooftops and started firing at hawks. They competed in target practice. They didn’t touch us but we were still afraid. They were all drunk and we had no idea what they would do next,” said the woman.

One villager said that by the end, the Abkhaz were as keen to go home as the locals were for them to leave.

“They constantly said that it was all just politics and they had nothing to do with it,” she continued. “There was one young lad who had left a two- or three-month old son at home and could only think about when they would send him home.

“On the morning that the Abkhaz began to leave I saw how glad they all were to get into their vehicles, they were all saying ‘Home at last!’”

It will take a long time for life in Ganmukhuri to get back to normal.

“The main thing is that there is no war and that people can rebuild what was destroyed and get back what they lost,” said teacher Nino Jikia.

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