

## **Ingush Refugees Find Way Home Blocked**

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A dispute is still raging over how many Ingush refugees deserve the right of return to North Ossetia.

Eleven years after the small but bloody conflict that divided Ingush and North Ossetians in the North Caucasus, many Ingush who fled the fighting have still not returned to their former homes.

A final resolution to the conflict is being hampered by a dispute between the two sides over the actual number of Ingush who fled, and by the classification of some villages on the North Ossetian side as “closed” to returning refugees.

Since 1993, the Dzaurov family, who used to live in the Oktyabrskoye village in North Ossetia, has lived in two old trailers at a so-called “oil-rig site” just across the border near the Ingush town of Karabulak. The landscape is a wasteland of half-ruined buildings, some of which serve as makeshift housing for refugees from Chechnya and North Ossetia.

It is an extended family. Grandmother Fadiman is 96-years-old, then there are the elderly parents, seven grown-up daughters and four sons, two daughters-in-law, and five grandchildren.

Movlatkhan Dzaurova, 62, mother of the family, has a slight speech defect after a stroke she suffered when she visited her home village in 1997 for the first time since the conflict and found that only parts of the foundation remained of her two-storey house.

The Dzaurovs are officially registered as citizens of the Prigorodny region in the neighbouring Russian republic of North Ossetia. The trouble is that Oktryabskoe, like six other villages, is closed to returning Ingush refugees.

The issue of closed villages caused the head of Ingushetia’s refugees and internally displaced persons committee Kazbek Sultygov this week to threaten that he would stop attending the weekly meetings called by Russia’s special representative to the dispute, complaining that Ingush were not being allowed to return there.

Sultygov said that the heads of the closed villages do not want the Ingush to go back because they say that “the moral and psychological climate is not ripe for Ossetians and Ingush to live together because the Ossetians living in these villages don’t want their Ingush neighbours to return”.

The 1992 conflict lasted only five days, but hundreds of people were killed and thousands taken hostage.

Tens of thousands of Ingush fled North Ossetia and several thousand Ossetians also left the Prigorodny region, where the fighting took place.

The Prigorodny region, formerly part of Ingushetia, was allocated to North Ossetia in 1944 after Stalin deported the Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia. Many Ingush resettled there after their return from exile in the Fifties but did not get proper documents.

The three sides in the dispute - the Ossetians, the Ingush and the Russian federal authorities - all have different estimates for the number of Ingush who fled. Many are now back in the region but thousands more are still in Ingushetia or elsewhere in Russia.

Ossetians have different views on the potential return of their former neighbours.

Ossetian political analyst Soslan Khadikov told IWPR, "Article 11 of the constitution of Ingushetia still calls for the return of the disputed territories of Prigorodny region and Vladikavkaz to Ingushetia.

"So we are entitled to ask: whom are we returning to North Ossetia? Are they citizens of our republic or people who will turn against us tomorrow?"

Others are more positive. Rita Khautova, a first-year student at Vladikavkaz University, said, "To be honest when the conflict happened I wasn't even ten years old, because I have only a vague memory of it. But recently I was at a meeting with Ingush young people and we got on well."

Venera Gatsalova, head of North Ossetia's department for forced migrants maintains that only 3,500 North Ossetian citizens (of Ingush nationality) are currently living in Ingushetia.

She calculates that figure by saying that there used to be 32,567 Ingush in North Ossetia, that 27,000 fled the fighting "and we have helped 21,477 of them to return, so it turns out that we need to help 5,500 more". But at least 2,000, she claimed, had left for other parts of Russia.

However, Kazbek Sultygov puts the number of Ingush non-returnees at 19,000. He explains the discrepancy by saying that thousands of the ethnic group lived in Prigorodny region without proper registration documents - and without these, they cannot prove they once lived there, and therefore cannot return.

This charge in turn is rejected by North Ossetia's census department which said that the numbers come from the 1989 census and that "no one asks for registration documents in the census".

Vitaly Smirnov, head of the refugees department of Russia's specials representative, said they had re-registered forced migrants in Ingushetia in order to prolong their status. "As a result we obtained the following data: In Ingushetia, there are 11,088 persons left, registered as forced migrants from North Ossetia, and another 505 are in North Ossetiam," he concluded.

Smirnov said the figures could be higher if some other Ingush won court cases that proved they used to live in North Ossetia.

Husein Bogatyrev comes from a section of the village of Chermen which is closed to returnees. He now lives with his wife and six children in a refugee camp in the nearby Maisky village in Prigorodny, after a period of living in Ingushetia.

Husein was wounded in a bomb explosion at the security services building in Ingushetia four months ago, and is now partially blind. "Tomorrow I am going to Moscow for my next operation and hope very much that I will be able to see," he said. "I don't see any prospects of us being officially allowed home in the near future."

The aid programmes for the forced migrants are continuing. But the political issue of reconciliation and return is still bogged down by the dispute over who does or does not have the right to come back to what they say were their former homes.

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