

Mountain Men Beef up Georgia's Border Patrol

Author: [Irakly Aladashvili](#)

Scores of men from the mountains of Khevsureti are being enlisted to help guard Georgia's troubled border with Chechnya.

Early on the morning of February 12, the entire population of Barisakho gathered on the edge of the Georgian mountain village.

Excited men and women, young and old watched as a column of vehicles approached through a blizzard, the foreign-made jeeps cutting a path through deep snow.

The column decamped Georgia's defence minister David Tevzadze, a group of journalists and military attaches from a number of foreign embassies, whose unusual uniforms attracted special interest among the village children. All had come to attend a special ceremony in which local people would take the oath of allegiance to a new mountain rifle unit named Khevsureti, after the region where they live.

Khevsureti borders two troubled regions of the Russian Federation on the other side of the mountains, Chechnya and Ingushetia, and it is here that the Georgian authorities are most worried that, when the snows thaw and the passes open up in the spring, Chechen armed groups will cross into Georgia.

President Eduard Shevardnadze has said several times that if Chechen fighters cross the frontier and come into Khevsureti, Georgia must be prepared to face them. Last year, Moscow put intense pressure on Tbilisi for harbouring Chechen militants on its territory, most of whom are now believed to have left.

The new mountain unit has been created to work alongside Georgia's hard-pressed border guards, while coming under the authority of the National Guard. It is following a precedent set in the troubled Kodori Gorge of Abkhazia, the valley divided between Georgians and Abkhaz, where local Svans have formed a similar unit in the upper Georgian-controlled section of the ravine.

So far the Khevsureti unit has only one company of 96 men. All of them, said Dmitry Lezhava, head of the personnel section of Georgia's defence ministry, have undergone emergency military training. They have signed contracts with the ministry, giving them a salary of 120 lari (around 60 US dollars) a month, ammunition and weapons, including sniper rifles and grenade-launchers.

"My subordinates are not soldiers in the full sense of the word," Gia Gedelauri, the head of the unit, told IWPR. "We will all live at home most of the time and patrol the frontier, as if it's a normal job. Members of the unit are also forbidden to take their weapons home and they have to be kept in a special safe."

In May, as the weather warms up, the plan is to move the unit into field tents, closer to the parts of the frontier, where the fighters may try to cross over. At the same time, the defence ministry hopes to recruit a second and third company of local Khevsurs and then form similar units in the mountainous regions of Tusheti and Pshavi.

Since the beginning of the second Chechen war in 1999, Georgia has faced constant problems along its mountainous border with Russia.

In December of that year, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, sent unarmed monitors to the frontier with Chechnya. In early 2002, it sent more to the border with Ingushetia and intends to dispatch others to that with Dagestan in the spring.

Khevsureti is the most important link in this chain. "The formation of this unit right here is quite deliberate," Koba Kobaladze, head of the National Guard told IWPR. "Three years ago a big group of armed Chechens crossed here from Ingushetia down the Asa gorge. It was very difficult to block them, as it was impossible to send reinforcements quickly to this very remote mountainous area."

In the ceremony in Barisakho, all 96 Khevsurs swore an oath of allegiance to the motherland and the flag, going down on one knee and proudly holding themselves upright. All of them bared their heads, even though some clearly did not want to take off their hats to reveal the grey hairs underneath.

"There are not many young people here, they go down into the valley, where life is easier," said Goderdzi Chincharauli, one of the new recruits. He was full of praise for the new scheme saying, "By making this unit, they've done two good things at once. It will help the country a great deal and people will get jobs which are well-paid by local standards."

However, although almost everyone supports the new initiative, some are worried at the prospect of giving weapons to the local population. Even Kobaladze acknowledged this had its dangers.

"Battalions were formed in the armed conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia ten years ago, which were manned by people living in the same areas," he said. "Several of these battalions had a criminal reputation and this came about mainly because the soldiers had old connections with one another. But we know about this risk and that means we will build up and maintain a special military discipline in the unit."

In the meantime, while winter still lasts in the mountains, the Khevsureti unit has begun special and intensive training. Come spring, the hope is they will have added military skills to what is already their biggest asset, their local knowledge.

"You are experienced men and you know all the difficult mountain paths just as well as those who are trying to break into Georgia," defence minister Tevzadze reminded the new guardians of Georgia's frontier.

Irakly Aladashvili is a military analyst with the newspaper Kviris Palitra in Tbilisi.

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