

North Ossetia Flooded With Refugees

Local parliament calls on Moscow to formally recognise independence of its southern kin. North Ossetia, no stranger to conflicts on its border, is once again dealing with a flood of refugees with tales of horror and misery.

“We had neither light, nor water and food,” said Tatyana Valieva, 40, from Tskhinvali, recalling the Georgian bombardment of the South Ossetian capital. “We only heard explosions, but had little idea of what was going on.

“When the bombing ebbed, we would shout out to the people in other cellars, and they would shout back, but this would last only briefly until it all started again. We had to sleep on wooden planks.”

Tatyana worked as a teacher in a kindergarten in Tskhinvali. She was at her neighbours’ house on August 7 when the bombing attack on the town started, and spent the next four days in their cellar.

During a lull in the fighting on the fourth day, Tatyana and six other women left their shelter and found their house completely ruined and surrounding streets strewn with bodies. A truck was picking up women and wounded to take them to North Ossetia. On the way there, the vehicle came under an attack, but, luckily, no one in it was hurt. Tatyana is now in a refugee camp in North Ossetia.

“It’s no longer possible to live there, our homes are destroyed, as well as our lives,” she said. “I don’t know what will happen next, I just don’t understand.”

The camp, consisting of several dozen tents, is located in Alagir, a town 100 kilometres away from the border with South Ossetia. The camp meets only the most basic needs of the refugees. Some of them have moved to the neighbouring republics of the North Caucasus, finding shelter in sanatoriums and hostels there. But many prefer to stay in the camp in order to be as close as possible to their sons and husbands still fighting on the other side of the mountains.

According to official information, around 35,000 people fled the fighting to North Ossetia. Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin has said 500 million rubles (around 20 million US dollars) will be provided to support the refugees.

Around eight thousand have now returned, mainly to see what condition their houses are in, although it is not clear how many can move back in permanently.

There are chaotic scenes on the mountainous border between the two Ossetias, with numerous tanks, armoured personnel carriers and military tanks rumbling slowly in the direction of Tskhinvali. Passenger vehicles, many of them badly battered, carrying civilians pass in the opposite direction. Groups of young volunteers wearing military uniforms, but not armed, are waiting to be sent to the conflict zone.

“Before the Russian army came to our aid, we had only grenade-launchers to use against the Georgian tanks that were moving on Tskhinvali, firing indiscriminately at all the buildings,” said one of them, a middle-aged man, who refused to give his name. “They just razed the town to the ground.”

“If what this country [Georgia] has is democracy, then I just don’t know what to think.”

In North Ossetia, volunteers started to sign up to go to South Ossetia as soon as the conflict broke out last week. Anyone aged between 20 and 45, who’s served in the Russian army, could be recruited. Around 500 volunteers crossed over to South Ossetia on the first day of the hostilities. Several days later, 10,000 volunteers were registered in Vladikavkaz. Many have been killed or wounded.

A total of 178 wounded civilians from South Ossetia, including 17 children, have officially been admitted into hospitals in North Ossetia.

However, officials say the casualty toll is much higher as many wounded have not been registered and many more are in South Ossetia.

An accurate death toll from the fighting of August 7-8 has yet to be compiled.

The parliament of North Ossetia adopted a resolution on August 13 calling on the Russian leadership to recognise the independence of South Ossetia.

“All the suffering will have been pointless if the borders of South Ossetia are not defended by Russian forces and we cannot put off this question any longer,” said one parliamentarian.

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