

Nut Thieves Add to Ethnic Woes

Author: IWPR

Abkhazia's Georgian minority fears robbery during nut harvest.

The Georgians of southern Abkhazia depend on the hazelnut harvest for their income, but they fear this year's high prices will encourage robbers who have long preyed on them.

The Gali region, the nearest part of Abkhazia to Georgia proper, is almost entirely inhabited by ethnic Georgians. They accuse the government in the pro-Russia breakaway territory's capital Sukhumi of not protecting them and say their villages are an easy target for criminals keen for easy profit.

"We all feel defenceless. Last year in my village someone was robbed almost every week. I then, happily, avoided this, but who knows what awaits me now?" said Lamara, a resident of the village of Repi.

"But not bringing in the harvest is impossible. It is the only source of income for my whole family, and I just don't know what to do."

The villagers said that thefts had already started this year, and three families were robbed in the village of Saberio in just one night. The robbers took the hazelnut crop as well as money and valuables.

Last year, the maximum price growers could get for their hazelnuts was around 30 tetri (about 20 US cents) a kilogramme, but this year the price has risen to 2.20 lari, (around 1.30 dollars), and could rise as high as four lari by winter. This makes theft potentially even more profitable than it was.

"The high price of nuts is, in a way, a relief for farmers. My family of seven people lives only from this. Two children study at university and I pay for their study with money I raise from selling hazelnuts. But in another way, the high price brings a great risk," said Valeri Akobia, resident of the village of Tagiloni.

"Someone can come to my home and take the harvest. Who knows how many people have already been killed in such incidents. Our source of income is also a threat to our lives."

Abkhazia's disputed status complicates any attempt to investigate the incidents. Georgian officials, at a meeting on August 11 between representatives of Russia, Abkhazia, Georgia, the United Nations and the European Union, suggested holding joint investigations, but were rebuffed by the Abkhazians.

"The Georgian side suggested having joint trips into the Gali region of Abkhazia and the Zugdidi region of Georgia in connection with joint investigations. However we think there is no need for this," said Ruslan Kishmaria, the Abkhazian president's envoy in the Gali region.

"We said that on the territory of the Gali region, representatives of Abkhazia and Russia will conduct investigations, while on the territory of Georgia, representatives of Georgia and the European Union will do so. And representatives of the United Nations, visiting both Abkhazia and Georgia, can coordinate the investigations."

Russia, which has a veto in the Security Council, blocked a new mandate for the UN observers' team in Abkhazia in June. This has, according to Tornike Kilanava, who represents the Georgian governments' Gali administration "in exile", complicated attempts to investigate the crimes committed against the farmers.

"We, together with international organisations, are attempting to create mechanisms of defence for the local population, since the lives of the people living there come under threat almost every day. Real control over this territory is necessary. It turns out that this is hard to do, especially since the Abkhaz side does not allow EU observers onto their territory," he said.

It is a difficult theme for journalists to investigate, because of disputes over Abkhazia's status. Russia last year recognised Abkhazian independence, but so far only Nicaragua has joined it in doing so. The rest of the world backs the Georgian claim that Abkhazia is a rebel province. As such, the Gali region with its ethnic Georgian population, is in a particularly tense position.

Abkhaz journalists do not venture into the Georgian villages, and Georgian journalists cannot work in Abkhazia. IWPR interviewed Georgians who crossed the bridge out of Abkhazia, or spoke to Georgians inside Abkhazia by telephone.

There are no accurate figures for the number of people killed during the harvest season, but the villagers said it was probably about 30-40 a year. Most of the villagers IWPR spoke to were unconcerned by the political dispute, and just wish someone would step in to ensure their security.

"It would be good if we had Georgian police, but if that is not possible, then their nationality is already not important. We are just tired of living in constant fear. No one is troubling themselves with fighting these bandits. Therefore, anyone who wants to can get into our homes. They take the nuts and, if there's even the smallest resistance, they kill people. Months never pass without someone getting killed," said a 50-year-old resident of the village of Nabakevi who asked not to be named.

As if the security situation was not enough, villagers are also concerned by the Abkhazian government's decision to hand control of the border - which is formed here by the River Inguri - to Russian troops. The farmers fear this may make it hard to transport their nuts to the neighbouring Zugdidi region where the price is higher than it is in Abkhazia itself.

"As soon as the Russians started to control the border, it became harder to pass into the Zugdidi region. The Russians closed all the crossings across the River Inguri, apart from the central bridge, where they toughened controls. Anyone who wants to get to Zugdidi has to go five times further by a roundabout route," said Naria Agumava, a resident of the village of Otobaia.

"There are those who ford the river, but that is dangerous. The water level can rise at any time. Taking all this into account, taking our nuts for sale in Zugdidi will probably be much harder."

All the same, said one of Agumava's neighbours who asked not to be named, the villagers had no choice but to stay in their homes.

"I have nowhere to go. I would rather live in fear than move to Zugdidi and live as a refugee without work, depending on the government. There is no other option for me. I need to feed my family and if I'm lucky

and I keep my harvest, then all will be well.”

Irakli Lagvilava is an IWPR contributor in Zugdidi.

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

Focus: Caucasus

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/nut-thieves-add-ethnic-woes>