

Red Cross Pulling Out of Georgia

International Red Cross officials are to end their operation in the country after falling out with their Georgian partners.

The International Federation of the Red Cross, IFRC, has taken an unprecedented decision to suspend its operations in Georgia after months of bitter dispute with the former head of the national branch of the organisation.

All projects will be stopped as of the beginning of December and its one remaining foreign employee is to be pulled out, ending an aid programme which has directly benefited 300,000 people in the last year alone.

"This is the first case of such an exit of the International Federation from any country," said Nata Tvalchrelidze, the IFRC's information officer in Tbilisi.

The head office of the IFRC in Geneva said the operation would be suspended but

Zlatko Kovac, branch delegate and the last foreign IFRC representative in Tbilisi, said the move was clearly a pull-out, something the spokesman at the ministry of foreign affairs Kakha Sikharulidze has called a "disgrace for the country".

The IFRC's decision comes after accusations of mismanagement and financial shenanigans at the highest levels on the national committee of the Red Cross Society of Georgia, RCSG - a controversy which has revolved around its former president Nodar Tskitishvili.

One of the top officials in the RCSG, Keti Vashakidze, told IWPR that they were demanding an investigation by the state prosecutor into the organisation's affairs under Tskitishvili's presidency. She expected the inquiry would bring up evidence of "financial misappropriation".

A previous inquiry into the RCSG's affairs earlier this year has already shown up irregularities in the way it had been run.

When the IFRC withdrew its diplomatic representative Paul Emes from Georgia back in August, their official statement quite clearly pointed the finger of blame at the RCSG's president.

"The International Federation has no longer the confidence of the leadership of the Georgian Red Cross Society and in particular its president Nodar Tskitishvili," read the statement which went on to say that they had "serious concerns about the integrity of his management of Red Cross finances".

They said that they would review the situation and if they saw no substantial improvement would make a decision "whether to continue to work in Georgia or not".

That decision was made at the beginning of November, at which point the IFRC closed down a number of humanitarian operations in the country.

Tskitishvili told IWPR last week that he wouldn't comment on the accusations against the organisation but said that the withdrawal of the IFRC "would not be a tragedy for the country". He also promised that he would personally raise funds for humanitarian programmes in Georgia.

The first visible signs of trouble within the RCSG's operation came in May when 39 of its members left claiming that the society had turned into a one-man operation.

Unable and unwilling to work with Tskitishvili, the exiting members of the RCSG decided to re-register the society in the hope of salvaging the situation following IFRC decision to leave. Earlier this week, the re-registration was officially confirmed, without Tskitishvili's involvement.

This could lead to a future reconciliation between national and international bodies.

Despite the attempts to reform the RCSG from within, Zlatko Kovac confirmed the IFRC's decision to quit Tbilisi, but did not rule out an eventual return. "We are going to leave anyway," he said.

In future, he said, they will look into possible cooperation with the RCSG if they adopt a more democratic appointments policy and have more transparent financial management.

The call for the former comes in the wake of claims by former RSCG members that Nodar Tskitishvili's re-election back in September was rigged.

According to one former staff member of the Georgian Red Cross, Tskitishvili's September victory was assured by the votes of regional RSCG heads who had been selected by Tskitishvili himself. An NGO responsible for monitoring the vote was barred from carrying out its task.

News of the gradual exodus of the IFRC has already prompted demonstrations. At the beginning of November, a few thousand pensioners protested outside the organisation's offices in downtown Tbilisi. "We'll all die of hunger! Who will help us?" the group chanted.

According to the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, 12,000 pensioners living alone depend almost entirely on the IFRC for assistance while another 25,000 receive varying amounts of aid.

Pensioners and internally displaced people are among the hardest hit by the country's economic problems.

"These are people ... who worked hard all their lives and who expected a decent and dignified retirement," said Emes. "Instead, due to the economic collapse, they find themselves destitute and almost entirely dependent on external assistance."

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