

Refugees Unhappy with Georgian Hotel Project

People displaced by war and now living in Black Sea hotels complain that they are being short-changed by a scheme to rehouse them, to make way for a huge redevelopment programme.

A massive tourism investment project on Georgia's Black Sea coast is getting under way despite complaints from refugees who say they will not move out of their hotel accommodation because the compensation on offer is too small.

Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili, visiting Kazakhstan late last year, said a consortium of Kazakh investors led by TuranAlem Bank would invest "between 800 million and one billion [US] dollars" in developing tourist infrastructure on the Black Sea coast of Ajaria.

The announcement raised high hopes in Ajaria, but media reports in Kazakhstan are now suggesting the scale of the investment will be much lower, at around 200 million dollars. It is unclear why the figure has fallen so much.

TuranAlem's press secretary in Almaty, Valentina Vladimirskaia, told IWPR that many parts of the investment project, for which the bank is providing financing, were still at an early stage.

"TuranAlem Bank is giving credits to companies which are investing this money in various projects in Georgia," she said. "Some of these projects are being negotiated, while others have reached the signing stage. Kazakh banks plan to attract western partners and finance these projects gradually.

"The reconstruction of the Radisson Iveria in Tbilisi and the surrounding territory area has already been agreed - this project specifically is worth 150 million dollars. As for the overall sum [for the whole of Georgia including Ajaria], it's very hard to name it."

In Ajaria, people have been eagerly anticipating the investment boom as a potential source of jobs and money.

The regional government of Ajaria has been working since the beginning of the year to make the project a reality. In February, the head of the local government Levan Varshalomidze ordered that the entire state-owned company Resorts of Ajaria consisting of 20 hotels, rest homes and sanatoria should be sold to a new company, Ajaria Resorts Holding, established to implement the Kazak investment project. A 53 per cent share of the Meskheta Hotel was also included in the sale.

The total price for the sites, including the Meskheta shares, was set at 17.5 million dollars, of which just four million is the value of the state-owned hotels.

The other 13.5 million dollars represents compensation to help rehouse just under 2,000 refugees from Georgia's civil wars, who have lived in the hotels for more than a decade.

Ajaria's deputy finance minister Tamaz Mgebrishvili, who has been overseeing the process, rejected suggestions that the 21 hotels were being sold off cheap. "Given the condition of these buildings, it is a

very realistic price, since most of them need serious repairs and several need to be completely demolished,” he said.

Tourism has been a major source of income for Ajaria, especially since Georgia lost the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia following the conflict of 1992-93. Every summer, Ajarian resorts overflow with holidaymakers from Georgia and further afield.

Last year, there was a big influx of tourists from Armenia. Tengiz Surmanadze, head of the ABK+ tourist firm, told IWPR, “This year we forecast that there will be even more Armenian tourists. The flow has increased from Ukraine and Russia and also from Central Asia.

“As for Georgians, you know the joke: if you can’t find someone in Tbilisi in summer, go to Batumi and you’ll definitely see him there.”

The compensation money is intended to help the refugees, mostly from Abkhazia, and works out at about 7,000 dollars for each of the 1,921 families still housed in the Black Sea hotels.

However, this part of the plan has not gone smoothly. All the refugees were supposed to have moved out of the hotels by May 30, but some are still there.

Paata Jalagonia, who chairs a regional human rights group, said 500 families were holding out because they had not agreed to the terms of the compensation package.

“They are six to eight people in a family occupying two or three rooms, but for the 7,000 dollars on offer they can’t even buy a one-room apartment, which in Batumi goes for an average of 11,000 or 12,000 dollars. So they are demanding an increase in the scale of the compensation, so that it corresponds to the amount of space they now occupy,” he said.

However, it looks unlikely that the refugees will get what they want. Nodar Andguladze, a spokesman for Ajaria Resorts Holding, said the compensation had been allocated according to a definition of family size agreed with the Georgian government.

“The list of families who ought to receive compensation was given us by the health ministry,” he said. “So if someone has a complaint, they should apply to the ministry.”

Many families are contesting the way they were designated. Among the 116 cases being reviewed by the prosecutor’s office in Ajaria is that of Mirian Kalandia, who currently lives in two hotel rooms with his wife, daughter, son-in-law and grandson. Until March, they were defined as being two families, but are now being treated as one and are thus only entitled to a single compensation package.

While these arguments go on, the investors have already begun work. In the Kolkhida sanatorium, the glass has been taken out of windows even though there are still refugees living there.

“The time-frame has already been decided on by us and the government,” said Andguladze. “For example,

the Medea and Meskheta hotels and the Kobuleti sanatorium should begin operating in 2007. Five thousand people, mostly locals, will be employed at each stage of the project. The hotels we build will serve all sections of the population and there is big demand for them. So we definitely have to meet our deadlines.”

Deputy health minister Aleko Shvelidze said that if the investors and the refugees could not agree, “other options” would be used to rehouse the refugees. “In any case, I promise that no family will be left on the street,” he said.

This reassurance is not enough for a group of refugees, who have been demonstrating outside government headquarters in Batumi in recent days.

“There is no other way we can achieve anything,” said Vakhtang Ardia, who said he was almost removed from the list of registered refugees. “A grandfather, grandmother, two children, two daughters-in-law and a grandson are living in two rooms. We are being driven out and given money just for one room,” he said.

“If they want to tell us to our faces that we shouldn’t have children, then we can go and look for somewhere else to live, somewhere where people will treat us like normal human beings.”

Revaz Sakevarishvili is a Georgian freelance journalist.

Location: Central Asia
Uzbekistan
Turkmenistan
Tajikistan

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/refugees-unhappy-georgian-hotel-project>