

Uneasy Calm on South Ossetian Border

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Georgian villagers begin to rebuild as a fortified frontier is erected. The wounds Georgia has suffered as a result of its August war with Russia are slowly beginning to heal. Georgians left homeless by the conflict are being moved into new houses that the government has built for them. But having a place to live is less important to these people than a guarantee that they will live in peace – something no one has given them yet.

Since fighting ended in August, the landscape on both sides of the Tbilisi-Gori highway has changed considerably. There is a huge new “refugee town” near the village of Tserovani, and as you travel further towards Gori, more settlements, smaller in size, come into view. Almost finished now is an entire refugee town near Gori, on one side of the road that leads to the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali. Workers are busy fitting out the small houses with modern conveniences such as gas heaters and bathrooms.

IWPR happened to chance upon refugees moving into Berbuki - one of the newly-built encampments, on another road leading from Gori to the village of Mejvriskhevi on the border with South Ossetia. The Okropiridze family, who are refugees from the village of Disevi in South Ossetia, had been living in a kindergarten in Gori since the conflict. As other members of the family were unloading their belongings from the bus that had brought them here, Revaz Okropiridze said that each house in the settlement was fit to accommodate four people, which meant that his family of six would occupy two houses.

Asked if he liked his new living quarters, Revaz said, “I don’t have any choice, do I? This is not our fault, nor the government’s. We all know well who is to blame.”

And asked if he had any hope of going back home, he said, “Of course, we have to hope. We trust the government. If not this year, we will return there in a couple of years, that’s for sure.”

The family’s home village, Disevi, lies just beyond Georgia-controlled territory. Shalva Okropiridze, head of the family, said some of his fellow villagers were still creeping into the village, now occupied by Russian and Ossetian militaries, to see how things were going there. But his own family could not get close to their own house. “Our apple trees are groaning with fruit, I wish we could harvest the crop,” complained Tanya Okropiridze.

Russian and Ossetian soldiers now have control of all the heights around Mejvriskhevi. Local farmer Zakro Ginturi shows us a tent pitched on a nearby hillside and trenches dug around it. A flag is fluttering above the tent, though we could not tell whether it was a Russian or Ossetian flag.

Ginturi says the villagers have avoided grazing their cattle in pastures and going out to the woods after the war, for fear of bumping into Ossetian militiamen.

The population, except for most of the old villagers, left Mejvriskhevi on the morning of December 10 and started to come back only after the Russians had withdrawn from the buffer zones.

There are no visible traces of the war in the village – all the houses are as they were before the conflict,

having been spared both burning and looting.

Except for a stolen flock of sheep, the village suffered no damage. Zakro was even able to keep his cows. That Mejriskhevi suffered less than other villages during the war was, he said, due to the good relations with residents of the neighbouring Ossetian village of Gromi.

“We’ve always had good relations with the Ossetians,” said Ginturi. “On Sundays, they would cross over to trade at our market, some still manage to come here. I’ve been to every family in Gromi. I am a vet and residents of that village would often ask me for help. They still call me now and then, asking for advice, but I don’t go there any more.”

He said he avoided crossing over to the Ossetian-controlled territory not because of the people living there, but for fear of meeting “fighters from Tskhinvali”, from whom he said he could “feel the aggression”.

“In 1991, we stopped Georgian militias from entering Gromi,” said Ginturi. “This time, I think, [Gromi residents] intervened on our behalf.”

In Tkviavi, local workers were busy digging a foundation pit for a cottage. This is going to be a small house with an area of only six square metres, but at the least the family that will live in it will not winter under the open sky.

The construction of temporary houses is being funded by the government. People, whose houses were destroyed during the war, are receiving financial compensation as well.

A total of around 60 houses were burnt down in Tkviavi. The construction of the cottages that will temporarily replace them was due to be finished by December 20.

The village of Ergneti is right on the border with South Ossetia overlooking Tskhinvali. Almost all of its houses were burnt. There were few people about.

The Tsereteli family are building a new house themselves, using money and building materials provided by the government.

“We are building a cottage in our own field, not in the yard, so that we don’t have to look at the burnt wreckage of our house every day,” said head of the family Akaki Tsereteli. He said he had not been given compensation yet, but he is not happy with the sum he is likely to receive. “Even fifty thousand will not be enough to rebuild my house.”

The Georgian side of the Ergneti checkpoint is being fortified with a crane busy lowering breeze-blocks onto the road. A few metres ahead is another post, also fortified, but sprouting Russian and Ossetian flags. Beyond that is Tskhinvali.

Ambulance and Red Cross vehicles stand on the new “border”, waiting to take a patient from Tskhinvali for

treatment in Gori hospital. A Georgian officer said that since the war, there have been several cases of people crossing over from Tskhinvali for medical treatment.

The villagers of Mejvriskhevi and Ergneti, living right on the edge of South Ossetia, harbour no great hopes that what happened in August will not be repeated in the future. Some people in Ergneti have even refrained from repairing their burnt houses or building new ones. "Who knows what awaits us," one said, complaining that shots are still fired from the direction of Tskhinvali now and then.

The locals have not taken much encouragement either from the presence amongst them of European Union and OSCE observers.

"Thanks to international aid, people were able to work their lands in the autumn," said Mejvriskhevi, a resident Zakro Ginturi. "But we have a joke here - what if the Russians, as they watch us from their heights, are saying, 'You sow, and we will reap'."

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Location: Stavropol
South Ossetia
Russia
North Ossetia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uneasy-calm-south-ossetian-border>