

Unwanted Ossetian Neighbours

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The return of Ingushetian refugee families to North Ossetia fuels ethnic tension in the region.

The return of 10 Ingushetian families to their ancestral village of Ir in the North Ossetian district of Prigorodny has revived a nine-year-old ethnic conflict that spiralled into a new spate of violence and kidnappings in early September.

Prigorodny's local capital, Octyabrskoye, is the only place in the district to which Ingushetian refugees have not dared return since inter-ethnic fighting between Ossetians and Ingushetians broke out on October 31, 1992 when the Chechen-Ingushetian republic was divided into Ingushetian and Chechen autonomous republics.

Over 800 civilians were killed in five days, more were taken hostage and thousands of homes were burned down. Tens of thousands of Ingushetians were expelled to Ingushetia by the new Ossetian authorities, or fled fearing persecution. Some argued at the time that the expulsion was the only way to save their lives.

Sandwiched between the Ossetian part of the Terek River and the western Ingushetian border, Prigorodny had been home to the Ingushetian before 1944 when they were deported by Stalin for alleged collaboration with the Nazis.

Their differences with the Ossetians date back to the Russian revolution when the Ingushetians were fervent supporters of the Bolsheviks, while the Ossetians opposed them. This situation changed in 1930s when Moscow started to favour Ossetians over than Ingushetian.

What precipitated the fighting in 1992 was the Ingushetian demand that Prigorodny district and half of the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz, should be incorporated in the new republic of Ingushetia. Talks between North Ossetia and Ingushetia have since moved on from territorial matters to the repatriation of Ingushetian nationals.

The return of 10 Ingushetian families in mid-August to Ir, a part of Octyabrskoye, has reignited the issue. Fearing that Ingushetia will try to reclaim its rights on the district when enough Ingushetians have returned, the authorities have forced the refugees to settle outside the village.

"Let them live on the outskirts," said one Ossetian, "we are not yet ready to have Ingushetians for neighbours." Another said, "We are not ready to mix with people we don't trust. Let them live in the open, where we can keep an eye on them."

The Ossetians live in one part of the village, the Ingushetians in another, often with Russian soldiers to guard them. Their children even go to separate schools.

The Ingushetian families in Ir live in 15 metre square metal containers, designed as temporary accommodation for construction workers. Their original homes are either ruins, or dumping grounds for rubbish.

"We are not guilty of any crime," said one of the returnees, "we just want to live where our ancestors

lived."

"They say we should ask for forgiveness," said another, "but I lost twelve of my relatives in this conflict. Let the criminals be condemned, but peaceful people should not be punished for no reason. What right do they have to tell us where to live?"

Moscow played a major role in settling the 1992 fighting. Three days after it started, Russian troops arrived to keep the sides apart and large amounts of federal funding were devoted to the resettlement of Ingushetian refugees, 28,000 of whom have since returned.

The authorities in Prigorodny responded by encouraging Ossetians from the Georgian breakaway mini-state of South Ossetia to settle there on the grounds they shared a common language, history and kin.

On August 28 and 29, thousands of people gathered in the Ingushetian capital, Nazran, to demand that Moscow introduce federal rule in Prigorodny and Vladikavkaz to halt the discrimination against Ingushetian nationals. They appealed to President Vladimir Putin, accusing North Ossetia of "trying to affirm the results of the ethnic cleansing in 1992".

The appeal caused widespread resentment in North Ossetia and triggered a wave of violence against Ingushetians. On September 3, near the predominantly Ingushetian border village of Chermen, two Ossetians attacked an Ingushetian regional security official.

The next day, in the same village, a bomb damaged a cross-border bus, and a gang of Ingushetians kidnapped an Ossetian.

On September 7, an old Ossetian man was found dead near the border, apparently the victim of a kidnapping that went wrong. And a day later, two Ossetian youngsters disappeared near Chermen and their car was later found with traces of blood. They are thought to have been taken as hostages to Ingushetia.

The Ingushetian authorities no doubt contributed to the tension by leaking news of a resolution by the Sunzha district court to demand the surrender of the neighbouring Prigorodny district, a decision that caused as much resentment as the call on Putin to introduce federal rule.

The mutual accusations prompted Russia's acting special envoy in the region, Yakov Stakhov, to meet with officials from both sides. Both agreed to form a commission of reconciliation to resolve their differences, but whether this will be enough to diffuse tensions remains to be seen.

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