

February 2000

## Georgia on My Mind

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### Recommended Citation

Lokey, Joe (2000) "Georgia on My Mind," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 36.  
Available at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol4/iss1/36>

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# Georgia

## on my mind

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**THIS ISSUE OF THE** *Journal of Mine Action* focuses on one of the world's most interesting regions as it examines landmines and unexploded ordnance in Europe and the Caucasus as well as highlighting organizations from that region engaged in humanitarian mine action. Whether we are discussing landmines, post-conflict reconstruction, geo-politics, resources or regional security, you can't seem to have a comprehensive discussion of the region without, in some way, viewing Georgia as a key to the future of the Caucasus.

The landmine situation in Georgia is arguably heaviest in the contested Abkhazia region resulting from the internal conflicts between separatists and national forces in 1992-1993. There are estimates of approximately 35,000 landmines in 500 different areas with only a few being marked by HALO Trust. The post-war violence continues as the UN Observer Mission In Georgia (UNOMIG) has been targeted by terrorists as have civilians and CIS peacekeeping forces who have had to contend with renewed laying of mines in the Gali region. The mine incidents from the attacks since 1994 are estimated at 106 injuries and 64 people killed. There are 480 amputees in Abkhazia with the ICRC estimating that 375 of them using their orthopedic workshop. No psychosocial rehabilitation programs are evident and mine awareness programs are minimal. HALO estimates that Abkhazia could be relatively mine safe within 5-7 years with an increased emphasis and the necessary resources. Much of the aid to Abkhazia is predicated on political issues being resolved. Therefore, the Abkhazi themselves hold the key to a solvable and definable mine problem that is key to their reconstruction and redevelopment.

In addition to these internal concerns, Georgia's neighbors provide a mine threat of a different kind.

As the war in Chechnya shifts from an all-out ground assault to one of counterinsurgency and guerilla warfare, the southern Caucasus along the 80-kilometer (48-mile) Chechnya-Georgia border has become a focus for the Russian military looking to wipe out the remnants of Chechen resistance. Control of the mountainous border, particularly in the Argun gorge and the village of Shatoi, is a strategic imperative for what remains of the Chechen fighters looking to preserve their claims to independence from Russia.

Georgia refuses to become involved in the war and has stated that it checks all incoming refugees and has registered over 5,800 Chechens sheltered in five different villages in the Akhmet area. The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicates 1,000 of these are men of fighting age. This stated Georgian neutrality is unlikely to sway Russia where the words 'Chechen,' 'paramilitary' and 'terrorist' are used interchangeably. Russian intelligence claims the Chechens have bases and medical facilities in Georgia and fly two helicopters to resupply units within Chechnya. Even though there have been joint border operations (code-named Undercover) by the Georgian and Russian police and border forces in January, the existing situation is likely to disintegrate rapidly. The Organization for Security & Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also has a monitoring unit along the border. The first test of how effectively Russia has sealed off the borders may come in late February marking the anniversary of Stalin's deportation of the entire Chechen population to Central Asia in 1944. This date is expected to draw some sort of offensive action from the Chechen resistance. The probable outcome can realistically be a Georgia-Chechnya border heavily mined by the Russians, to seal off whatever insurgents remain in Georgia.

This tactic would mirror that used in Afghanistan which saw an indiscriminate and heavy proliferation of air-delivered PFM-1 landmines by the Soviets into inaccessible regions believed to contain large groups of the Mujahadeen.

These 1,000 Chechens in Georgia, believed to be gathering in Pankis gorge, were described by Konstantin Totsky, director of Russia's Federal Border Guard Service, as militants waiting to break into Chechnya. This is raising the possibility that the Russians are generating a "self-defense" rationale and providing justification for an incursion into Georgia. Russia still retains a large military presence in Georgia under the terms of Georgian Independence signed in 1991 but are presumably in the process of closing their three largest bases by July 2001 although talks on handing over the last of these don't begin until sometime this year. The implications for additional APL use by the Russians are significant and the response from the West will be crucial in swaying Georgia toward a more pro-Western stance.

The ties between the U.S. and Georgia are growing. Last October, the U.S. presented the Ministry of Defense with over \$1.8 million USD in uniforms and in the same month, demonstrated the capabilities of the UH-1H helicopter, which also will be part of a 10 helicopter package granted to Georgia under the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program. These were preceded earlier by a \$1.6 million USD package of NATO-compatible radios and the establishment of a full-time Military Liaison Team based in Tblisi and coordinating activities with the Georgian Armed Forces. These and other significant cultural exchanges and economic arrangements have been a clear indication of support for Georgia and desire for an expanded US-Georgia relationship.

Probably the most crucial mine action program

planned to date was announced by the US Interagency Working Group (IWG) on Humanitarian Demining on December 9, 1999. In what is being referred to as the *Beecroft Initiative*, the US Embassy in Tblisi has been asked to approach the Georgian government on the possibility of establishing a training center for humanitarian demining to work with not only the Georgian forces, but also to host units from both Azerbaijan and Armenia to be trained together. This innovative training concept was developed by, and thus named for, Mr. Robert Beecroft, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs. Armenia has agreed to participate and Azerbaijan was recently approved for US support as well. The U.S. is sending a Requirements Determination Site Survey (RDSS) Team to work with the Georgian government to develop a specific course of action for implementing this training program. This initiative, once underway, will be a significant step toward regional stability and cooperation, demining capacity building and effective information sharing and communication necessary for security and development.

The geography and economy of Georgia reflect a pivotal position in the Caucasus, and overtures by Georgia to the West indicate a willingness to establish itself as a key player in the formulation of the future of the Caucasus states. Balancing these new relationships with historic ties to Russia and ethnic and cultural influences from Iran will certainly challenge the Georgian government. The landmine threat and the region's ability to address it, can be a success story very quickly with a broad range of cooperation. The threat of new mines, both in Abkhazia and along the Chechen boarder, must be avoided if any progress at all is to be achieved. As the Beecroft Initiative unfolds and the Chechen end game plays itself out, Georgia will be on my mind—a lot. ■



Joe Lokey