

JANUARY 2009

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

# UP IN FLAMES

Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims  
in the Conflict over South Ossetia

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH









# UP IN FLAMES

A photograph capturing a scene of destruction in a village. In the foreground, a large, rusted red metal pipe runs horizontally across the frame, supported by a vertical post. To the left, a building is engulfed in bright orange flames, with smoke rising into the air. The building appears to be made of brick or concrete, with some structural damage visible. In the background, a line of mountains stretches across the horizon under a cloudy, overcast sky. A road or path is visible in the lower foreground, leading towards the burning building. The overall atmosphere is somber and chaotic.

A Russian APC drives past a Georgian house, set on fire by South Ossetian militia, as it burns in the ethnic Georgian village of Kvemo Achabeti. August 16, 2008.

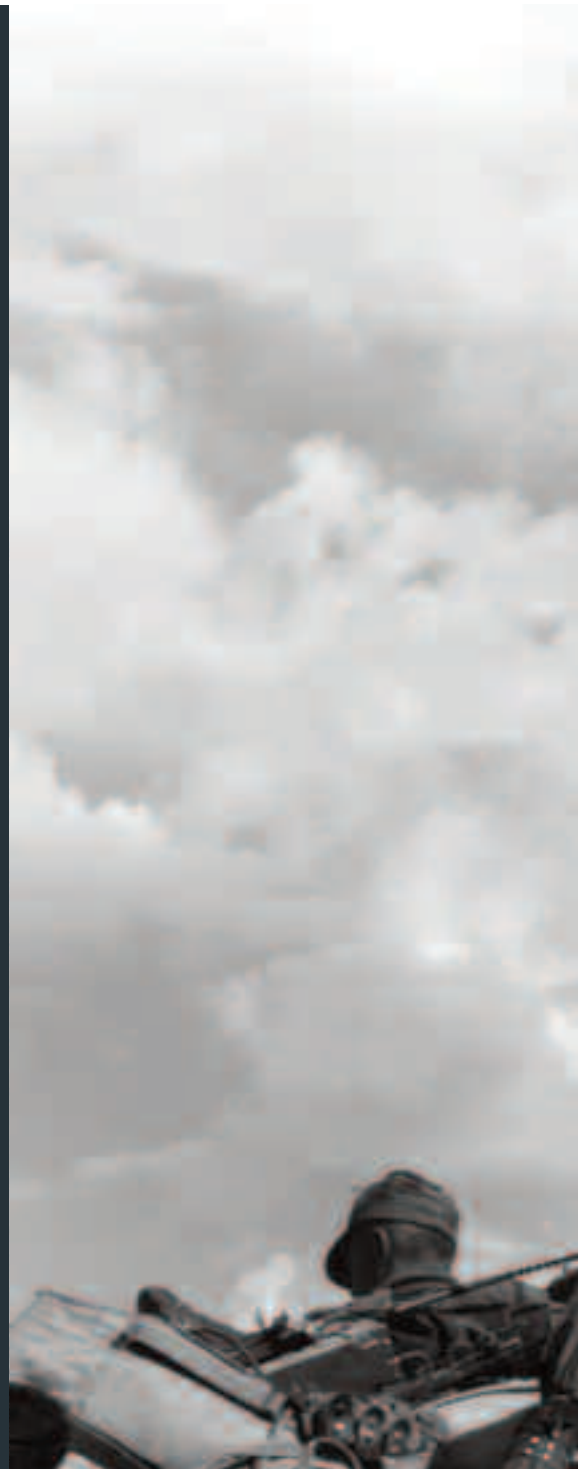
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(right) Russian soldiers advance further into Georgia. August 16, 2008.  
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**The armed conflict over South Ossetia lasted one week in August 2008 and will have consequences for lifetimes and beyond. The conflict and its aftermath have seen lives, livelihoods, homes, and communities devastated in South Ossetia and bordering districts of Georgia. A significant casualty of the conflict was all sides' respect for international humanitarian law.**

South Ossetia is a breakaway region of Georgia that shares a border and has very close ties with Russia. The armed conflict, in the making since spring 2008, started August 7 with Georgia's military assault in South Ossetia and Russia's military response the following day, and lasted until a ceasefire on August 15, with Georgian forces in retreat and Russian forces occupying South Ossetia and, temporarily, undisputed parts of Georgia.<sup>1</sup> The week of open conflict, and

the many subsequent weeks of rampant violence and insecurity in the affected districts, took a terrible toll on civilians, killing hundreds, displacing tens of thousands, and causing extensive damage to civilian property. Today, there is an acute need for accountability for all perpetrators of violations of human rights and humanitarian law, and for security conditions to allow all displaced persons to return in safety and dignity to their homes.







Human Rights Watch carried out a series of research missions in Russia and Georgia, including in South Ossetia, focusing on violations by all parties to the conflict. We interviewed more than 460 victims, witnesses, and others, and looked at reporting (and misreporting) of the conflict in Russia and in Georgia. The international legal framework within which Human Rights Watch examined the conflict includes international humanitarian law—chiefly the Geneva

Conventions—relating to the conduct of hostilities, humane treatment, and occupation; and international human rights law, including international law concerning displaced persons and the right to return.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘undisputed’ is used to refer to any part of Georgia, except South Ossetia and Abkazia, both areas which have disputed Georgian sovereignty over them and have made bids for independence.

Human Rights Watch found:

- In a number of instances Georgian forces used indiscriminate and disproportionate force in artillery assaults on South Ossetia, and in some cases used disproportionate force in their ground assault. The majority of these instances derived from Georgia's use of multiple rocket launching systems, which cannot distinguish between civilian and military objects, in areas populated by civilians. Many civilians were killed or wounded.
- In a number of instances in South Ossetia and in undisputed Georgian territory Russian forces violated international humanitarian law by using aerial, artillery, and tank fire strikes that were indiscriminate, killing and wounding many civilians.
- Cluster munitions were used by Russian and Georgian forces, causing civilian deaths and putting more civilians at risk by leaving behind unstable "minefields" of unexploded bomblets. Their use and impact on civilians in the conflict demonstrates why in December 2008, 94 governments signed up to a comprehensive treaty to ban cluster munitions, which had been negotiated just months before the conflict commenced.
- As an occupying power in Georgia, Russia failed overwhelmingly in its duty under international humanitarian law to ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety in areas under its effective control, instead allowing South Ossetian forces, including volunteer militias, to engage in wanton and widescale pillage and burning of Georgian homes and to kill, beat, rape, and threaten civilians.
- After Georgian forces withdrew from South Ossetia on August 10, South Ossetian forces over a period of weeks deliberately and systematically destroyed ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia that had been administered by the Georgian government. They looted, beat, threatened, and unlawfully detained numerous ethnic Georgian civilians, and killed several, on the basis of the ethnicity and imputed political affiliations of the residents of these villages, with the express purpose of forcing those who remained to leave and ensuring that no former residents would return. From this, Human Rights Watch has concluded that South Ossetian forces attempted to ethnically cleanse these villages. Approximately 22,000 villagers, the majority of whom had fled South Ossetia before the conflict started, remain displaced.





Ossetian women mourn the deaths of two girls and their father, killed in Georgian forces' artillery attack when they tried to flee Tskhinvali in their car. August 12, 2008.

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- In committing this violence, South Ossetian forces egregiously violated multiple obligations under humanitarian law, for which there must be individual criminal accountability and prosecution for war crimes where appropriate. To the extent that a number of these prohibited acts were committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against the civilian population, they may be prosecuted as crimes against humanity.
- Residents of Akhlagori district—an area in the east of South Ossetia populated mostly by ethnic Georgians and currently occupied by Russian forces—face threats and harassment by militias and anxiety about a possible closure of the district's administrative border with the rest of Georgia. Both factors have caused great numbers of people to leave their homes for undisputed Georgian territory.



Two elderly Georgian women tell Human Rights Watch researchers about looting and burning in the village of Kekhvi, an ethnic Georgian village in South Ossetia, August 12, 2008.

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- During the time when Russian forces occupied Georgian territory south of the South Ossetian administrative border, Ossetian militias looted, destroyed, and burned homes on a wide scale, deliberately killed at least nine civilians, and raped at least two. Russian forces were at times involved in the looting and destruction, either as passive bystanders, active participants, or by providing militias with transport into villages.
- Georgian forces beat and ill-treated at least five of the 32 Ossetians detained in August in the context of the armed conflict.
- After the withdrawal of Georgian forces from South Ossetia, South Ossetian forces, at times together with Russian forces, arbitrarily detained at least 159 ethnic Georgians. South Ossetian forces killed at least one detainee and subjected nearly all of them to inhuman

and degrading treatment and conditions of detention. They also tortured at least four Georgian prisoners of war and executed at least three. All of these acts are war crimes, for which individual criminal accountability must be established.

This report measures each party's compliance with obligations under international law, rather than measure it against the conduct of the other party. Exposing violations committed by one party does not excuse or mitigate violations committed by another party. Which party started the conflict has no bearing on parties' obligations to adhere to international humanitarian and human rights law and to hold violators accountable. Those seeking answers to questions about who committed worse, or more violations, or who bears responsibility for starting the conflict, will not find them in this report.

Human Rights Watch urges the Georgian and Russian governments to investigate and hold accountable those from their respective forces responsible for international humanitarian law violations, including war crimes. As it exercises in effective control over South Ossetia, Russia should investigate and hold accountable South Ossetian forces responsible for war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. The Russian and Georgian governments should provide compensation for civilian damage and destruction caused by violations of international humanitarian law for which they are respectively responsible.

The permanent forced displacement of thousands of people cannot be countenanced. As it exercises effective control over South Ossetia, Russia has an obligation to provide security to all persons living there, regardless of ethnicity; this is







especially urgent in Akhagori district. Ethnic Georgians displaced from South Ossetia should be allowed to voluntarily return. Russia should publicly promote and implement the right of all persons displaced by the conflict, without regard to their ethnic background or imputed political affiliations, to return and live in their homes in South Ossetia in safety and dignity. Russia should prevail on South Ossetian authorities to publicly acknowledge this and to facilitate returns.

Armed looters take household items from the ethnic Georgian village of Kvemo Achabeti.

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A Georgian villager protests Russian forces' airstrikes, which destroyed his house and left him homeless. Tkviavi, August 19, 2008.

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## BRIEF CHRONOLOGY OF THE ARMED CONFLICT

After months of escalating tensions between Russia and Georgia and following skirmishes between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, on August 7, 2008, Georgian forces launched an artillery assault on Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's capital, and outlying villages. Assaults by Georgian ground and air forces followed. Russia's military response began the next day, with the declared purpose of protecting Russian peacekeepers stationed in South Ossetia and residents who had become Russian citizens in recent years. Beginning on August 8, Russian ground forces from the 58th Army crossed into South Ossetia and Russian artillery and aircraft hit targets in South Ossetia and undisputed Georgian territory. South Ossetian forces consisting of several elements—South Ossetian Ministry of Defense and Emergencies, South Ossetian Ministry of Internal Affairs, South Ossetian Committee for State Security, volunteers, and Ossetian peacekeeping forces—also participated in the fighting.

Georgian commanders ordered their troops to withdraw from South Ossetia on August 10, and two days later Russian forces moved into and occupied undisputed Georgian territory south of the administrative border with South Ossetia, including the city of Gori. In a separate operation from the west, moving through the breakaway region of Abkhazia (also supported by Russia), Russian forces also occupied the strategically important cities of Poti, Zugdidi, and Senaki in western Georgia.

Russia said that its forces completed their withdrawal from undisputed Georgian territory on October 10, in accordance with an August 15 ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia brokered by the French European Union presidency. The Georgian government disputes this, pointing to Russian forces' presence in Perevi, a village on the South Ossetian administrative border, as well as Akhalgori.

## **VIOLATIONS BY GEORGIAN FORCES**

### *Indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force*

During the shelling of Tskhinvali and neighboring villages and the ground offensive that followed, Georgian forces frequently failed to abide by the obligation to distinguish between military targets that can be legitimately attacked, and civilians, who may not be targeted for attack. This was compounded by Georgia's failure to take all feasible measures to avoid or minimize civilian casualties. While Human Rights

a determination. Yet many of the attacks on South Ossetia during the brief conflict can be clearly attributed to Georgian forces—based on witness accounts, the direction of the attack, and the timing of the damage in light of the advance of Georgian forces.

In many cases Human Rights Watch researchers found no evidence of military objectives in the area under attack, while in many others we found that Georgian attacks struck legitimate military targets, causing combatant and, in some cases, collateral civilian casualties. In some cases we



Watch found no evidence that Georgian forces sought to deliberately target civilians, from our research Human Rights Watch concluded that Georgian forces demonstrated disregard for the protection of civilians during the shelling campaign, resulting in large-scale damage to civilian objects and property, and civilian casualties.

The sole fact of civilian casualties or destruction of civilian objects is not an indication that a violation of international humanitarian law occurred. What is important to seek to determine is whether there was evidence of a legitimate military target in the attack area at the time, and how that target was attacked. Circumstances did not always allow such

Many buildings in Tskhinvali were damaged or destroyed during Georgian forces' artillery strikes. August 17, 2008.

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investigated, evidence suggests that the Georgian attacks against lawful military objectives may have been disproportionate, as the expected loss of civilian life or destruction of civilian property would have exceeded any anticipated military gain.

The massive shelling of Tskhinvali and neighboring villages by Georgian forces was indiscriminate because, at the very least, the Georgian military effectively treated a number of clearly





Shalva Hutsenashvili, an 84-year-old ethnic Georgian, and his wife Mesurat Hutaeva survived Georgian forces' artillery strikes in Tskhinvali. August 16, 2008.

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separated and distinct military objectives as a single military objective in an area that contained a concentration of civilians and civilian objects. In a number of artillery attacks Georgian forces failed to take all feasible precautions to minimize loss of life or injury to civilians.

Georgia's use of multiple rocket launching systems, such as BM-21s ("Grads") in civilian populated areas violated international humanitarian law's principle of distinction. These weapons cannot be targeted with sufficient precision to be accurate against military targets, and their broad area effect makes their use incompatible with the laws of war in areas where civilians or civilian objects (such as schools or hospitals) are located. The use of such weapons in populated areas is indiscriminate by nature and thus prohibited under international humanitarian law.

Georgian forces attacked vehicles in which many Ossetian civilians were trying to flee the conflict zone on August 8–10,

which resulted in death and injuries. The cases Human Rights Watch describes in this report indicate that—in those cases at least—disproportionate force was used and precautions were not taken to avoid or minimize loss of civilian life.

### *Conduct of ground troops*

During Georgian forces' ground offensive there were also attacks which, Human Rights Watch's investigation suggests, failed to respect the principle of proportionality: attacks such as when Georgian tanks targeted buildings in which Ossetian fighters may at times have been present, but where there were also many civilians sheltering in the basement. Several Ossetian civilians reported looting by Georgian ground forces but otherwise generally did not report other specific incidents of abusive treatment during the ground offensive by Georgian troops. Those detained by Georgian forces, however, reported they were ill-treated when taken into custody.







The streets of Tskhinvali after Georgian  
forces' shelling. August 17, 2008  
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*On August 8, my neighbor rushed to the hospital and told me that my house was hit and was on fire—I knew my wife was there, but I couldn't do anything, I was in the middle of a surgery. I had to stay in the hospital. My wife survived—she and other women found shelter in a different house, but for several days I didn't know what happened to her. Everything we had burned in the fire—clothes, furniture, everything!*

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH INTERVIEW WITH AIVAR BESTAEV,  
TSKHINVALI, AUGUST 17, 2008.

A doctor in the basement of the Tskhinvali hospital where, despite poor lighting and inadequate equipment, medical personnel managed to save, during the fighting, all 273 of their wounded patients.

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Ossetians weep in front of their destroyed house.  
August 15, 2008.

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Residents of Geroev Street in Tskhinvali  
tell Human Rights Watch researchers  
about civilian casualties resulting from  
Georgian forces' shelling.

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## **VIOLATIONS BY RUSSIAN FORCES**

### *Indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force*

Russian forces attacked areas in undisputed Georgian territory and in South Ossetia with aerial, artillery, and tank fire strikes, some of which were indiscriminate, killing and injuring civilians. With regard to many aerial and artillery attacks Russian forces failed to observe their obligations to do everything feasible to verify that the objects to be attacked were military objectives (and not civilians or civilian objects) and to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians. In one case, Russian forces attacked medical personnel, a grave breach of the Geneva Conventions and a war crime.

As noted above, the mere fact of civilian casualties or destruction of civilian objects does not mean that a humanitarian law violation occurred. In each attack examined, Human Rights Watch sought to determine whether there was evidence of a legitimate military target in the attack area, and if so how that target was attacked.

Between August 8 and 12, Russian forces attacked Georgian military targets in Gori city and in ethnic Georgian villages in both South Ossetia and undisputed Georgian territory, often causing civilian casualties and damage to civilian objects such as houses or apartment blocks. The proximity of these military targets to civilian objects varied. In several cases, the military targets were within meters of civilians and civilian homes, and the attacks against them resulted in significant civilian casualties.

In other cases the apparent military targets were located as far as a kilometer away from civilian objects, and yet civilian casualties also resulted. In attacking any of these targets the Russian forces had an obligation to strictly observe the principle of proportionality, and to do everything feasible to assess whether the expected civilian damage from the attack would likely be excessive in relation to the direct military advantage anticipated. In many cases the attacks appear to have violated this proportionality principle. In yet other cases, Human Rights Watch investigated—but was not able to identify—any legitimate military targets in the immediate vicinity at the time of the attacks. The absence of a military target in the vicinity of an attack raises the possibility that Russian forces either failed in their obligation to do everything feasible to verify that the targets were military and not civilian, that they were reckless toward the presence of civilians in their target zone, or that Russian forces deliberately targeted civilian objects.

In several incidents involving military force against civilian vehicles, Russian forces may have intentionally targeted civilians. Deliberate attacks on civilians amount to war crimes.







A homeless resident stands in front of an apartment building on Sukhishvili Street in Gori, bombed by Russian forces prior to their advance into Gori district. August 17, 2008.

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## *Conduct of ground troops*

Several local residents told Human Rights Watch that many of the Russian servicemen who occupied undisputed Georgian territories behaved in a disciplined manner and in some cases even protected the civilian population from Ossetian forces, militia members, or looters. Nevertheless Russian forces played a role in the widespread looting of Georgian homes by Ossetian forces. Russian forces facilitated and participated in these war crimes, albeit in less prominent roles than South Ossetian forces, but we identified four cases in which Russian forces played an active and discernable role in looting.

Human Rights Watch also documented incidents in which Russian tanks fired at close range into civilian homes.

## *Russia's responsibility as occupying power*

When Russian forces entered Georgia, including South Ossetia, which is de jure part of Georgia, they did so without the consent or agreement of Georgia. International humanitarian law on occupation therefore applied to Russia as it gained effective control over areas of Georgian territory. Russia failed overwhelmingly in its duty as an occupying power to ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety in areas under its effective control in South Ossetia. This allowed South Ossetian forces to engage in wanton and widescale pillage and burning of Georgian homes and to kill, beat, rape, and threaten civilians. Roadblocks set up by Russian forces on August 13 effectively stopped the looting and torching campaign by Ossetian forces, but the roadblocks were inexplicably removed after just a week.







A nursery in Gori was bombed on August 9th  
by Russian forces. August 17, 2008.  
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Luba Tkhasidze, 65, describes how she and her family were attacked by South Ossetian forces. They killed her brother-in-law, looted her home in Avlevi, and destroyed the only photographs she had of her dead son. August 22, 2008.

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## **VIOLATIONS BY SOUTH OSSETIAN FORCES**

### *In South Ossetia*

Beginning just after the withdrawal of Georgian troops from South Ossetia, South Ossetian forces, including volunteer militias, embarked on a campaign of deliberate and systematic destruction of the Georgian government-administered villages in South Ossetia. This involved the widespread and systematic pillage and torching of houses, and beatings and threats against civilians. Starting August 10, after Russian ground forces had begun to fully occupy South Ossetia and were moving onward into undisputed Georgian territory, Ossetian forces followed closely behind them and entered the ethnic Georgian villages.

Upon entering these villages, Ossetian forces immediately began going into houses, searching for Georgian military personnel, looting property, and burning homes. They also physically attacked many of the remaining residents of these villages, and detained dozens of them. Human Rights Watch received uncorroborated reports of at least two extrajudicial killings of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia that took place amidst the pillage. In most cases, Russian forces had moved through this set of Georgian villages by the time South Ossetian forces arrived. In other cases, Russian forces appeared to give cover to South Ossetian forces while they were committing these offenses.

By August 11 the attacks intensified and became widespread. Looting and torching of most of these villages continued intermittently through September, and in some through October and November.

Ossetian forces rounded up at least 159 ethnic Georgians (some of whom were abducted from undisputed Georgian territory), killing at least one and subjecting nearly all of them to inhuman and degrading treatment and conditions of detention. They also tortured at least four Georgian prisoners of war and executed at least three.

Human Rights Watch's observations on the ground and dozens of interviews conducted led us to conclude that the South Ossetian forces sought to ethnically cleanse this set of Georgian villages: that is, the destruction of the homes in these villages was deliberate, systematic, and carried out on the basis of the ethnic and imputed political affiliations of the residents of these villages, with the express purpose of forcing those who remained to leave and ensuring that no former residents would return.



The body of Nudar Batauri, whom villagers said was killed by South Ossetian forces during looting in the village of Tkviavi.

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A resident of Karaleti stands in front of his burned home. Residents said their village was attacked on August 11th by South Ossetian forces. August 18, 2008.

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### *In undisputed Georgian territory*

Beginning with the Russian occupation of Georgia and through the end of September, Ossetian forces, often in the presence of Russian forces, conducted a campaign of deliberate violence against civilians, burning and looting their homes on a wide scale, and committing execution-style killings, rape, abductions, and countless beatings.

### *Crimes against humanity*

In both locations South Ossetian forces, including volunteer militias, egregiously violated multiple obligations under humanitarian law. Murder, rape, acts of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment, and wanton destruction of homes and



A house destroyed by fire in Eredvi, an ethnic Georgian village in South Ossetia. September 6, 2008.

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A house ablaze in Avnevi, an ethnic Georgian village in South Ossetia. September 4, 2008.

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property are all strictly prohibited under both humanitarian law and serious violations of human rights law, and the perpetrators of such acts should be held criminally responsible for them. To the extent that any of these prohibited acts was committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population,





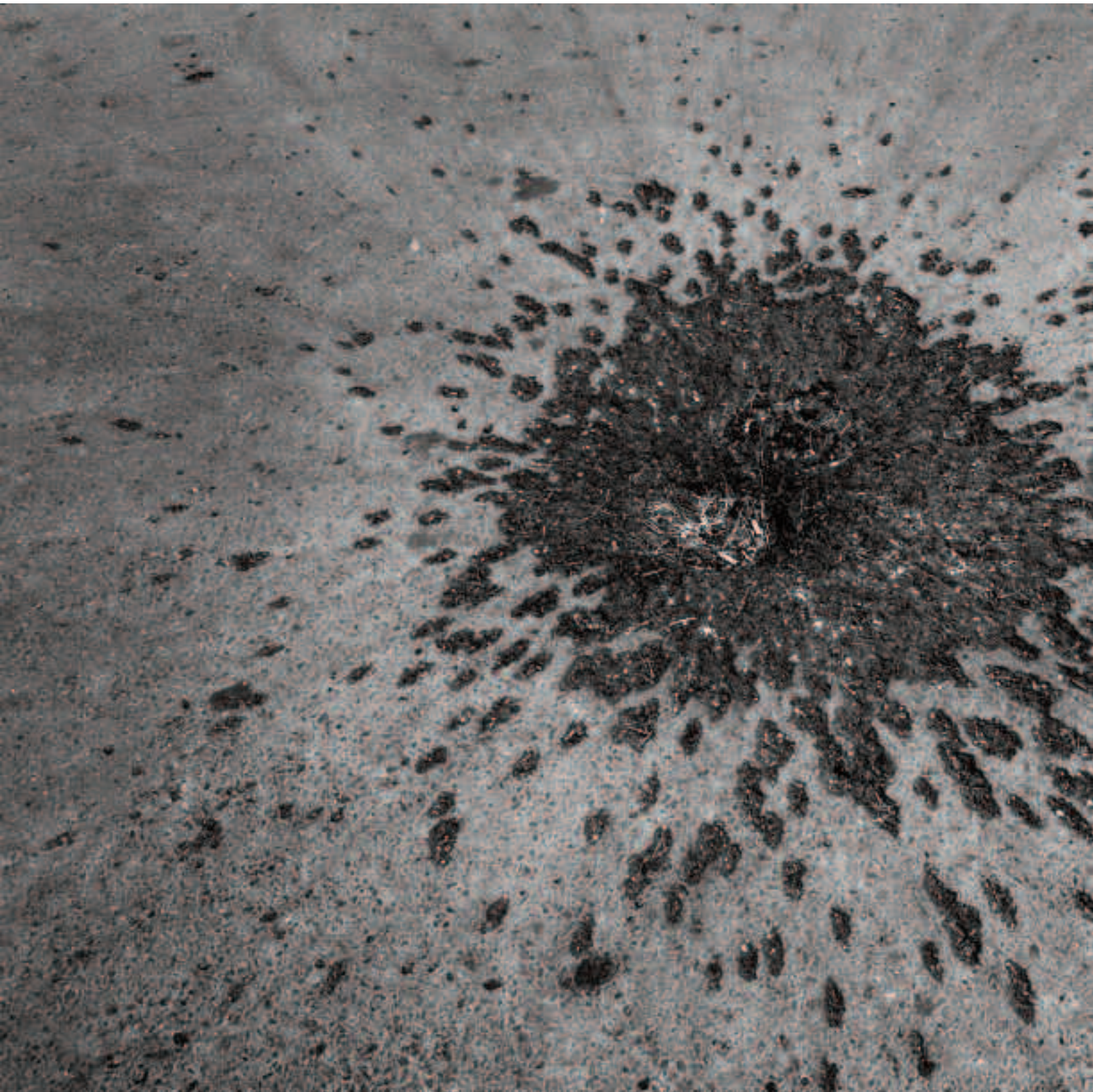
they may be prosecuted as a crime against humanity. Where any of these acts, as well as acts such as imprisonment, unlawful detention of civilians, pillaging and comprehensive destruction of homes and property, were carried out with discriminatory intent against a particular group, in this case ethnic Georgians, they also constitute the crime of

An ethnic Georgian man and his wife escape from a house set on fire by the South Ossetian forces in Kvemo Achabeti. August 18, 2008.

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persecution, a crime against humanity, prosecutable under the statute of the International Criminal Court.

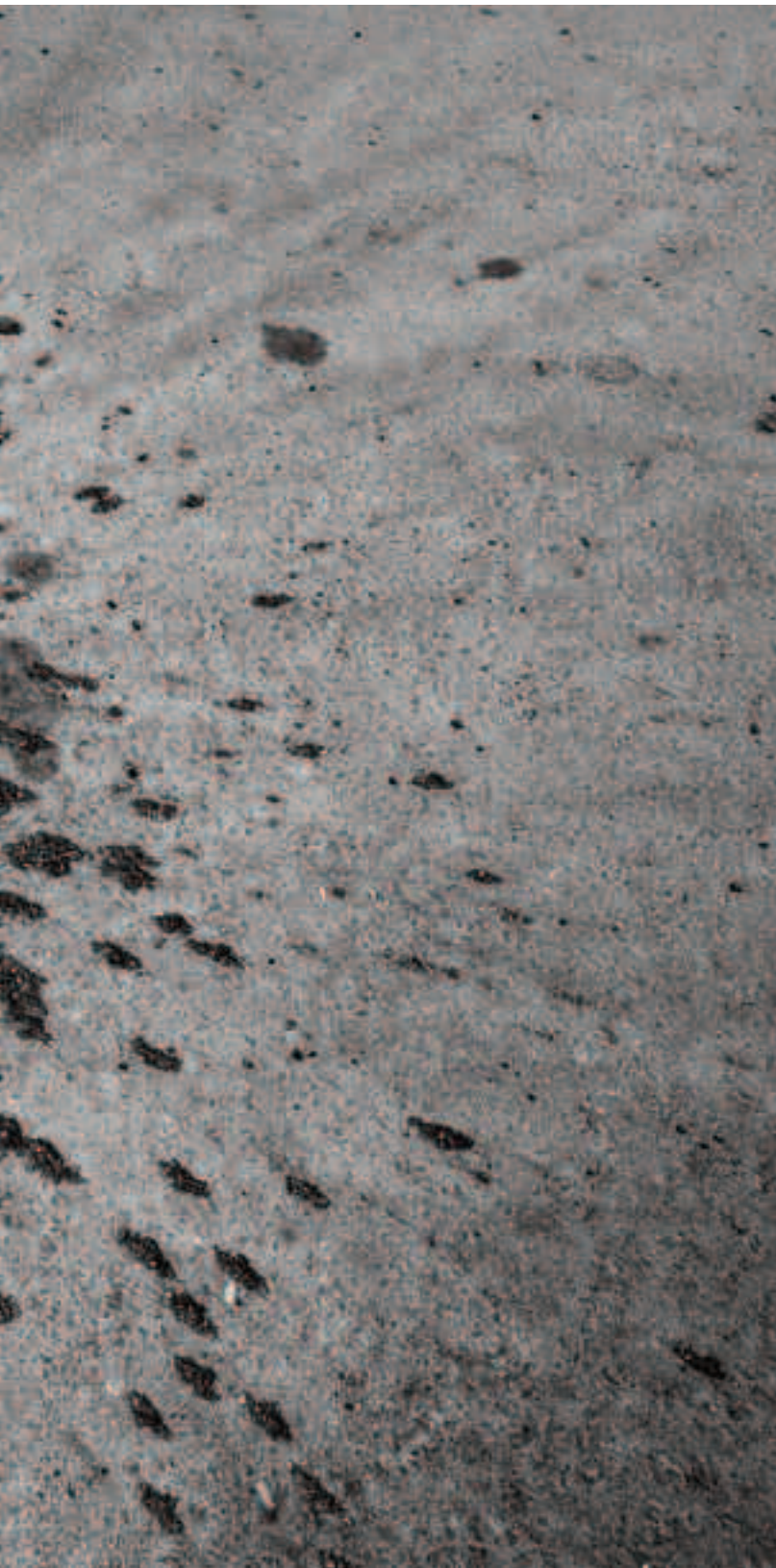




Fragmentation marks typical of a cluster munitions strike on Stalin Square in Gori, Georgia. August 17, 2008.

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## USE OF CLUSTER MUNITIONS

During the armed conflict both Georgian and Russian forces used cluster munitions, which are munitions that release dozens or hundreds of bomblets, or submunitions, and spread them over a large area. Because cluster munitions cannot be directed at specific fighters or weapons, civilian casualties are virtually guaranteed if cluster munitions are used in populated areas. For this reason, using cluster munitions in populated areas should be presumed to be indiscriminate attack, which is a violation of international humanitarian law. Cluster munitions also threaten civilians after conflict: Because many submunitions fail to explode on impact as designed, a cluster munitions strike often leaves a high number of hazardous unexploded submunitions—known as duds—that can easily be set off upon contact.

Human Rights Watch was not able to conduct adequate research to establish whether Georgia's use of cluster munitions was indiscriminate. Due to either malfunction or human error, Georgian cluster munitions landed in undisputed Georgian territory on days prior to the arrival of Russian forces there, killing at least one civilian and wounding two others. The report documents how at least three people were killed and six wounded by cluster duds that exploded upon contact in three villages in undisputed Georgian territory.

Georgia has acknowledged its use of clusters, and conducted a campaign following the armed conflict to warn civilians of the dangers posed by unexploded submunitions.

Russia has not acknowledged its own use of cluster munitions. Russian forces used cluster munitions in strikes against targets in populated areas in the Gori and Kareli districts just south of the South Ossetian administrative border, killing at least 12 civilians and injuring at least 46 at the time of attack. All of these strikes amounted to indiscriminate attacks.

The Russian and Georgian governments should join the 95 nations that have signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which imposes a comprehensive ban on the use of these weapons. Russia should make every effort to assist demining organizations with clearance and risk education in contaminated areas currently under effective Russian control, and Georgia should expand its cooperation with these organizations.

## INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE CONFLICT

Since the end of the conflict the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe have put in place mechanisms to monitor the human rights situation and promote security and stability near and in South Ossetia. Russia and Georgia should fully cooperate with these initiatives. The Russian government in particular should provide full, unimpeded access to South Ossetia to these intergovernmental organizations so that they may fully implement these initiatives.

At the end of 2008 Russia refused to approve budgetary support for the OSCE's presence in Georgia, claiming that the organization had to separate its work on Georgia's two breakaway regions—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—from work on other parts of Georgia. At this writing the OSCE was in the process of closing its offices in Georgia. Human Rights Watch urges the Russian government to reconsider its objections and to facilitate OSCE access to South Ossetia.

The United States government, a close ally of Georgia, should press the Georgian government to investigate and hold accountable violations of humanitarian law, and should prevail on the Georgian government to cooperate with various intergovernmental inquiries. The European Union and the United States, as participants in ongoing talks on security and returns of displaced persons, should urge Russia to uphold its responsibility to facilitate returns of all displaced persons to South Ossetia.







Russian troops pull out of Gori. August 22, 2008.  
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# UP IN FLAMES

## Humanitarian Law Violations and Civilian Victims in the Conflict over South Ossetia

The armed conflict over South Ossetia lasted just one week in August 2008, but will have long-lasting consequences. The conflict and its aftermath have seen lives, livelihoods, homes, and communities devastated in South Ossetia and bordering districts of Georgia.

The armed conflict between Georgian, Russian, and South Ossetian forces, and the many subsequent weeks of rampant violence and insecurity in the affected districts, took a terrible toll on civilians. It killed hundreds, displaced tens of thousands, and caused extensive damage to civilian property.

This report, based on more than 460 interviews with victims, witnesses, and others, examines the conflict within the framework of international humanitarian law, chiefly the Geneva Conventions, and documents violations by all parties to the conflict. The report details how both Georgian and Russian forces carried out indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks. It describes Russia's failure as an occupying power in Georgia to do what was possible to ensure public order and safety in areas under its effective control. And it documents South Ossetian forces' campaign of deliberate and systematic destruction of certain ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia.

Today, there is an acute need for accountability for all perpetrators of violations, and for security conditions to allow all displaced persons to return in safety and dignity to their homes. Human Rights Watch calls on the Georgian and Russian governments to pursue accountability and create conditions for the voluntary return of all displaced persons.

*Top: After hiding in a basement for nearly a week in her home village, a displaced Georgian arrives in Gori. August 18, 2008.*

*Bottom: Residents of Tskhinvali pass destroyed homes in the city center. August 21, 2008.*

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