

## **OVERVIEW OF AREAS OF ARMED CONFLICT IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION**

The current map of the former Soviet Union is pockmarked with violent conflict, primarily in Transcaucasia, Moldova and Tajikistan. Some of the conflicts are longstanding territorial disputes inherited from the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods; others are born of governmental power struggles that are peculiar to post-putsch politics. The following is a brief overview of the areas of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Republic of Georgia which currently are experiencing violent, organized, armed conflict.

### **Azerbaijan**

This mountainous Caucasian state is the site of three separate areas of violence. The Autonomous Oblast of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan have erupted into civil war sparked by disputes over territorial autonomy, and Baky, the Azerbaijani capital, has been thrown into a state of violent unrest as government and opposition groups struggle for political authority.

#### **Nagorno-Karabakh<sup>1</sup>**

Control of this Autonomous Oblast has been at the center of four years of undeclared civil war in Azerbaijan, and the cause of some 2,000 deaths since 1988. The Armenian majority — approximately three-quarters of the population of the enclave in 1989 and unquestionably a higher proportion today — has been seeking independence from Azerbaijan, of which it has been a part for almost seventy years, as Azerbaijani militants have been fighting to retain territorial integrity.

Guerilla fighting on both the Azerbaijani and Armenian sides has torn the enclave apart, causing extensive long-term damage. In addition to the loss of life, tens of thousands of buildings have been destroyed, causing mass displacement and homelessness. Since the region is entirely landlocked by Azerbaijan, the blockade of only a few roads leading into Nagorno-Karabakh has caused severe shortages of food and other essential supplies.

Apparent Armenian advances, including the capture on May 9-10, 1992, of Shusha, the last Azeri stronghold in Nagorno-Karabakh, and the forcible opening of an eleven-mile land bridge through Azerbaijani territory to connect Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, have accelerated the conflict in recent weeks. A month later, on June 13, Azerbaijani troops launched a counter-offensive, reclaiming at least fifteen towns lost to the Armenian advance, and leaving as many as 500 dead, according to preliminary reports.

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<sup>1</sup> Helsinki Watch is currently preparing a comprehensive report on events in Nagorno-Karabakh based on a fact-finding mission to the enclave in May 1992.

**One complicating factor has been the demands of Kurdish groups in Azerbaijan for the re-establishment of the autonomous area they enjoyed until its abolition in 1929. Armed Kurdish bands reportedly have engaged Azerbaijanis in heavy fighting around the town of Lachin, near the already troubled Nagorno-Karabakh border, resulting in intense battles on May 16-17.**

**The situation is further complicated by the military balance of power evolving around the volatile area. On May 15 Armenia became signatory to the recent defense treaty concluded in Tashkent which ensures it military aid from cosignatories Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and, most important, Russia, its militarily powerful neighbor to the north, in the case of declared war against Armenia. Russian officials formally have condemned Armenia's advances, however, and have declared their unwillingness to extend aid, making the future of Armenia's military alliances unclear.**

**Azerbaijan, which did not sign the Tashkent treaty, is likely to be protected by NATO, particularly since its political and cultural ties to Turkey, the second most powerful military power in the Organization, are extremely strong. NATO articulated its position on the conflict on May 22 by calling for the withdrawal of troops from the region and issuing a statement refusing to recognize any changes in the territorial integrity of Nagorno-Karabakh or Nakhichevan (see below).**

**The United Nations sent a fact-finding mission to Armenia and Azerbaijan on May 23 and to Nagorno-Karabakh specifically on May 26 to discuss means of ending the conflict. The trilateral negotiations on May 7-8 brokered by Iran have been suspended pending a restoration of calm. The most recent attempt at a diplomatic resolution to the hostilities has been the eleven-nation preliminary peace talks that opened on June 1 in Rome. The meeting resulted in a statement of intent to end the conflict, including instating a permanent cease-fire and ending the economic blockade. So far the demands have failed to hold for even a twenty-four hour period. The next diplomatic negotiations are the CSCE peace talks, set for June 29 in Minsk, Byelarus.**

### **Nakhichevan**

**After four years of heavy fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, the civil war has now also spilled into Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani enclave to the south which is isolated from the rest of Azerbaijan by Armenia to the north, and Turkey and Iran to the south. The hostilities broke out around May 4 when three people were killed in the first Armenian attack on Nakhichevan, and have escalated subsequently. The heaviest fighting there took place on May 18 when it is reported that Armenian forces captured the hills surrounding the town of Sadarak using rockets and shells, allegedly leaving as many as twenty Azerbaijanis dead and 120 injured. Armenian authorities have denied any official Armenian involvement, maintaining that the Armenian advances are being perpetrated by irregulars.**

**The President of the Nakhichevan Majlis (parliament), Geidar Aliyev, declared a unilateral cease-fire on May 23 and now apparently is seeking to conclude a separate peace with Armenia, although the legality of these efforts has been contested. Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian has expressed his willingness to sign a cooperation treaty with the Republic of Nakhichevan to end the fighting.**

**The reaction to the crisis among regional powers has been mixed. In the face of the cease-fire, Turkey, which frequently has expressed its strong support for Azerbaijan in the conflict, opened a new border into Nakhichevan on May 28 — to date the only operative one — through which to bring in supplies**

and reinforcements, and has promised the region \$100 million in credits. Turkey justifies its avuncular interests in Nakhichevan by pointing to the 1921 Treaty of the Kars that grants Turkey special legal responsibilities over the enclave. Iran has also become involved, sending observers on May 21 to monitor the extensive border it shares with the volatile region. Neighboring Georgia, too, has proposed calming measures, including establishing a Caucasian regional consultative council to try to broker a settlement. **Baky<sup>2</sup>**

Leadership battles in the Azerbaijani capital of Baky left several dead on May 14 as ousted President Ayaz Mutalibov returned to power by parliamentary vote after a two-month hiatus in what some in the opposition have deemed a "constitutional coup." His immediate imposition of a state of emergency and, most dramatically, the accompanying suspension of presidential elections originally set for June 7 (which nonetheless took place as scheduled) set off angry protests and violent attacks by Azerbaijani irregulars. One more civilian died and three were wounded when Popular Front forces seized control of the television station, parliament building, the airport and other key positions on May 15 in an unsuccessful effort to prevent Mutalibov from fleeing the capital.

The initial decapitation of the Azerbaijani leadership came on March 6 of this year when Mutalibov was forced to step down over public dissatisfaction with his handling of the undeclared war in Nagorno-Karabakh. In a dizzying succession of ousters, Mutalibov was unseated only one day after his reinstatement by the Azerbaijani parliament on May 14 by Yagub Mamedov, the former rector of the Baky Medical Institute, who himself resigned under pressure only three days later. On May 18, Iskander Gambarov, a former leader of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, was elected acting president and parliamentary chairman.<sup>3</sup> Gambarov's ascension to power so far has failed to restore stability, however; indeed, on May 28 the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry ordered a ban on demonstrations and called for censorship of the press to enforce the peace, calling into question the legality of the behavior of even democratically elected officials — a question that has had particular resonance in recent Tajik and Georgian politics, as well (see below). Another Popular Front leader, Abulfaz Elchibey, was voted president of Azerbaijan on June 7, confirming the popular rule of the political opposition.

## **Georgia**

The Republic of Georgia, like its neighbor to the east Azerbaijan, is also experiencing multiple internal conflicts. The bloodier and more longstanding of the two — a territorial and political dispute between Georgians and Ossetians, who are ethnically, linguistically and, in some cases, religiously distinct from each other — is being played out on the territory of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.<sup>4</sup> A battle has also been raging since December 1991 for control of the political leadership of Georgia.<sup>5</sup> Supporters of

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<sup>2</sup> See Helsinki Watch/Memorial, *Conflict in the Soviet Union: Black January in Azerbaidzhan*, May 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The parliament then ceded its powers to the fifty-member National Council, now National Majlis.

<sup>4</sup> See Helsinki Watch, *Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Violations of Humanitarian Law and Human Rights in the Georgia-Ossetia Conflict*, April 1992.

<sup>5</sup> See Helsinki Watch, "Human Rights Violations in the New Georgia," January 17, 1992, Vol. No.4, Issue No.2.

the democratically elected President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who was declared ousted from power on January 2 following widespread demonstrations and later shelling by opposition forces, are pitted against supporters of the multiple political and military formations which are currently running the Georgian government as the coalition State Council, chaired by Eduard Shevardnadze.

### **South Ossetia**

Hostilities have escalated recently in South Ossetia, where open armed conflict has raged between Ossetians and Georgians since 1991. South Ossetia, an Autonomous Region located within the Georgian Republic, has been seeking secession from Georgia and unification with its counterpart to the north, the North Ossetian Autonomous Region, which lies within Russia. The violence has led to devastation on both sides of the conflict: at least 250 and possibly as many as 500 deaths, numerous serious injuries, destruction of villages and mass displacement of the local population.

The incendiary situation was exacerbated when former Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia revoked South Ossetia's autonomy last year and enforced a strict blockade to bring the aspiring republic firmly under Georgian control again. The situation was further destabilized when the Russian troops that had been stationed in South Ossetia were withdrawn on April 25, leaving the Ossetians particularly vulnerable.

It is not surprising, then, that South Ossetia has again become the site of shootings and shellings from both sides. On May 13 eight Georgians were killed by Ossetian fire in the Tskhinvali region near the Georgian village of Ergneti. Following a peace-keeping meeting between Shevardnadze and South Ossetian leader Tomez Kulumbekov, during which a cease-fire was announced for May 14, shooting resumed from the Georgian side. Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, came under fire during the night of May 15 and a mass evacuation of non-combatant Ossetians followed. On May 20, thirty-six of these South Ossetian refugees died and sixteen were wounded when Georgian irregulars stopped a caravan of buses carrying women, children and the elderly to safety in North Ossetia, and shot them wholesale.<sup>6</sup> Heavy fighting resumed in Tskhinvali on June 8 leaving at least ten dead and forty injured.

In a new turn of events, the Ossetian crisis has now caused blood to be shed on Russian soil as well. On June 13 a crowd of about 1,000 South Ossetian sympathizers gathered in the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz, apparently to seize arms and vehicles for transport to the partisan fighters across the border. In a misguided effort to disperse the throng, Russian soldiers reportedly opened fire, killing four and wounding twelve.

State Council Chairman Shevardnadze and Aleksandr Kvasadze, the newly appointed chairman of the Georgian State Committee on Interethnic Relations and Human Rights, visited Tskhinvali on May 13 to meet with the leaders of North and South Ossetia and view the damage. The State Council has accepted full responsibility for resolving the conflict it has inherited from the Gamsakhurdia era.

### **Tbilisi and Western Georgia**

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<sup>6</sup> See Helsinki Watch, "Helsinki Watch Deplores Murder of Refugees in South Ossetia," June 1992.

**The violent conflict over control of South Ossetia has been the backdrop for the bloody power struggle between supporters and opponents of Zviad Gamsakhurdia which has seized the capital, Tbilisi, and parts of western Georgia, the seat of Gamsakhurdia support. Gamsakhurdia, who was brought to power on May 26, 1990, in Georgia's first democratic election since the Communist takeover, was forced from power on January 2, 1992, in a violent coup d'état orchestrated by political opponents and military forces, particularly the Georgian National Guard and the "Mkhedrioni" guardsmen, led by Dzhaba Ioseliani. Gamsakhurdia was held captive in the parliament building in the heart of the capital but fled after two weeks of shelling, which levelled much of the downtown area. At least seventeen people were killed and many more were wounded in the ensuing fighting in January and February.**

**In recent days, the battle for the Georgian leadership has continued on a violent path. On June 13 a remote-control car bomb killed four bystanders in Tbilisi but failed to hit its ostensible target, Dzhaba Ioseliani, Deputy Chairman of the Georgian State Council and a fierce opponent of Gamsakhurdia.**

**Intense group offenses of the type that ousted Gamsakhurdia have not been seen in Georgia for the last four months — nor, for that matter, has Gamsakhurdia himself, although he is still vocal. Sporadic violent conflicts have, however, broken out in western Georgia, particularly Samegrelo, whence Gamsakhurdia hails and where he maintains a zealous following. The curfew and state of emergency introduced when Gamsakhurdia was ousted in early January remains in place a full five months after hostilities first broke out.**

## **Moldova<sup>7</sup>**

**The cease-fire of May 30 and Moscow peace talks on June 2 are the latest in a series of failed diplomatic attempts to bring an end to the hostilities in Moldova which have claimed over 150 lives since March. Debates about the possibility of Moldova reuniting with neighboring Romania have sparked fighting between ethnic Moldovans and Slavs over issues of local autonomy. (Most of present-day Moldova was part of Romania until it was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940.) This latest dispute exacerbates complex territorial conflicts that have existed historically among Moldova, Romania and Ukraine, and may draw Russia into the conflict as well. Thus, when Moldovan President Mircea Snegur threatened on May 25 to declare war on Russia unless Moldova regained control of the embattled Dniester region, he set the stage for a regional conflict of international proportions if diplomatic intervention continues to fail.**

**According to the 1989 census, Russians and Ukrainians constitute approximately 54% of the population of the east bank of the Dniester River, the self-styled "Dniester republic," which was part of Ukraine before World War II. Partisan groups in the Dniester region are seeking independence from Moldova and are forming their own militias to ensure the break. Moldovans, in turn, are demanding the withdrawal of Russian (formerly Soviet) troops from Moldovan territory, accusing them of collaborating with and arming the Dniester irregulars. Currently there seems to be little if any broad-based support for reunification of the former republic with Romania, however.**

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<sup>7</sup> See Helsinki Watch, *USSR: Moldavia*, April 1990.

Hostilities have escalated in the past few weeks as twenty-four people were killed and eighty-seven wounded from both sides in several towns over a two day period (May 18-19). Another five were killed during the night of May 21, and six soldiers from the Russian 14th Army were reported killed on May 22-23. According to Russian Major General Yurii Netkachev, some elements of the 14th Army, sent in as peace-keeping enforcements, had gone out of control and joined the partisan fighters against the Moldovans. Local radio's call-up on May 22 for Slavs to enlist in separatist militias proved an invitation to military escalation. The next day, President Snegur called up Moldovan reservists to reinforce the general draft issued on May 6 for all citizens to join the national army.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin's verbal promise of May 27 to remove 14th Army troops from Moldovan territory is a cause for hope, and possibly the only measure capable of preventing war from breaking out between Moldova and Russia. But Yeltsin's ability and prerogative to issue a withdrawal order are questionable and a "Catch-22" situation seems to be unfolding: the troops will not withdraw until the conflict has been defused, but the situation undoubtedly will remain volatile until the troops withdraw.

### **Dushanbe and Kulyab, Tajikistan<sup>8</sup>**

A crisis of leadership that has gone on for the last fifteen months has left more than thirty dead and scores injured in this mountainous Central Asian state. As groundswell dissatisfaction with the government of long-time Communist President Rakhmon Nabiyev drew protest crowds of some 100,000 to the capital's main squares, random hostilities erupted between government supporters and opponents on May 5-7, hitting again on May 10, in the capital, Dushanbe, and in Kulyab, to the southeast.

During the weeks of protest demonstrations that began on March 26, President Nabiyev went underground for several days and a Revolutionary Council briefly took charge of the state. On May 11, a coalition government was formed consisting of both government and opposition figures. Members of the coalition opposition — which includes the "Rastokhez" movement, the Islamic Revival Party and the Democratic Party — now occupy one-third of the government's twenty-four ministry posts and one-half of the seats in the interim legislature. Two regions, Leninabad and Kulyab, which have large Uzbek populations, have refused to recognize the coalition government, however. Elections set for December undoubtedly will decide the future direction and composition of this unusual and fragile political compromise.

The public outcry has focused on two government officials, President Nabiyev and Parliamentary Speaker Safarli Kenjayev. Rakhmon Nabiyev has been a leader in Tajik politics for some three decades, and to many his continued tenure in the post-putsch era is an irksome reminder of past years of communist rule. The protestors hold Kenjayev responsible for imposing repressive restrictions on freedom of speech in the media and in political activity. As a concession to protestors, Kenjayev stepped down as parliamentary speaker on May 12 but, under pressure from government supporters, was not removed from government work but merely reassigned — to the post of head of the National Security Committee, the former KGB. This apparent show of bad faith from the government incited renewed protests

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<sup>8</sup> See Helsinki Watch, *Conflict in the Soviet Union: Tadzhikistan*, July 1991. Helsinki Watch sent a mission to Tajikistan June 6-16, 1992, and will issue a full report on its findings and recommendations.

**and numerous hunger-strikes in the capital's main squares and, along with Nabyev's declaration of a state of emergency and other restrictive measures, ultimately led to increased unrest and bloodshed.**

**Responsibility for the many independent incidents of shooting deaths is still a point of contention in Tajikistan. What is known is that on May 5 four anti-government demonstrators were shot to death by militia as they tried to enter the building in which Nabyev was trapped, and that one pro-government demonstrator was killed by the opposition. Eight more opposition demonstrators were shot and killed on May 10, ostensibly by government forces. Other abuses include the taking of forty-one hostages in the presidential residence by members of the opposition in late April; hostages were released unharmed on May 1 following negotiations between the authorities and the opposition. In the meantime, the Tajik parliament has set a date to adopt a new constitution as a means of satisfying public grievances, and the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan has created a special commission to launch a formal investigation into the tragic events.**

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