The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Georgia's Strategy for Refugees: Evict Them

By Paul Rimple

August 21, 2011



In Georgia, August is the month Tbilisians abandon the sweltering city for the cool Black Sea. It is also when authorities evict internally displaced persons from their dwellings. Last week, authorities displaced about 300 families from two shelters, emulating the forced evictions of August 2010 that sparked intense criticism from the international community.

The latest evictions occur on the heels of a scathing Amnesty International report claiming that Georgia has broken its international human rights obligations by forcibly removing displaced families without providing them with adequate notice, access to legal remedies and housing.

Roughly 6 percent of Georgia's population are internal refugees. About 221,000 people were displaced during the conflicts in the 1990s, while an additional 26,000 arrived during and after the brief war with Russia in 2008, according to the United Nations Human Rights Council. While Tbilisi met the needs of many of the latter group by rapidly building refugee

settlements near Gori, others have not fared as well, particularly those who fled their homes 18 years ago.

Georgia's policy from the beginning had been to let refugees live where they could while assuring them that they would someday return home. Internally displaced persons, or IDPs, earned the resentment of locals who complained that they received financial assistance while others in need received nothing.

Exploiting the lives of IDPs for political and financial means has prevented thousands of families from establishing sustainable ties to their communities. In 2007, the government finally endorsed a state strategy for IDPs and in 2009 approved an action plan aimed at the social and economic integration of IDPs. Nevertheless, IDPs occupying structures on valuable real estate were forcibly evicted without sufficient warning, which was a strange way to treat people who Georgia continually reminds the world are innocent victims of Russia's aggression.

Many families were sent to impoverished rural areas across the country, far from available jobs. Some were moved in the middle of the winter to dilapidated buildings with no water, gas or windows. Others accepted the government's offer of $10,000 compensation, not enough money to buy property near Tbilisi. Last week's IDPs were offered alternative housing in Rustavi, a Soviet-era industrial town outside the capital. Here, they are expected to reintegrate and try to find work, all over again.

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https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/08/21/georgias-strategy-for-refugees-evict-them-a9035