

Waiting for Peace: Humanitarian Impasse in the Caucasus

**A Review of Humanitarianism and War Project Strategy Sessions
in the Caucasus September/October 1998
by Greg Hansen and Larry Minear**

I. Executive Summary

Cease-fires have created space for peace negotiations in the Caucasus but conflict resolution and normalization have been elusive. Although the “freezing” of conflicts has prevented new large-scale emergencies, the humanitarian imperative has been obscured: the return of IDPs and refugees and reconstruction and rehabilitation work cannot proceed as needed without peace agreements and greater accountability from governments and authorities. Negligible impetus from humanitarian quarters for greater progress in peace talks reflects a lack of humanitarian vision, itself an unforeseen casualty of frozen conflicts and a resulting routinization of the humanitarian response. Despite the replication of conditions under which animosity and criminality flourish, these threats to peace processes and to prospects for reconciliation in the region have not lent added urgency to the political resolution of any of the conflicts.

Although there is ample potential for greater synergy between diplomatic and humanitarian actors, this has yet to be exploited and tensions between the two communities have undercut progress on both agendas. Meanwhile, some donors have indicated both that they would like to see more assertiveness on the part of UN humanitarian interests and that they are not prepared indefinitely to underwrite aid programs on behalf of war-affected people in the Caucasus, perpetuating the status quo when there is little progress on the political front to secure conditions for normalization. Also ominous, the passage of time is allowing for the entrenchment of ethnic cleansing in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and Prigorodnyi Raion. In Chechnya, deepening radicalization and instability is being abetted by the absence of international assistance commensurate with need.

II. Background

The Humanitarianism and War Project recently completed more than three years of research in the Caucasus. Since 1996 the Project has produced four monographs designed to assist practitioners and policy-makers in the region. In September and October 1998 the Project conducted a series of 7 strategy sessions and roundtables dealing with humanitarian action in the Caucasus. Over 200 persons from UN agencies, international and local NGOs, the ICRC, the diplomatic corps, national governments, local authorities, and others participated in the gatherings. Venues included Barda and Baku in Azerbaijan, Yerevan in Armenia (including agencies currently active inside Nagorno-Karabakh), Tbilisi, Zugdidi, and Tskhinvali (South Ossetia) in Georgia, and Moscow. Sessions hoped for in Abkhazia and the North Caucasus did not proceed due to security conditions. The seven meetings were hosted by UN OCHA, UNDP, UNHCR, and the Public Interest Protection League in Georgia, Save the Children (US)

in Armenia, Oxfam (UK) and UN OCHA in Azerbaijan, and UNHCR in Moscow. Research and publication activities in the region were underwritten by SIDA, U.S. Department of State Bureau for Population Refugees and Migration, and the regional OCHA office in Tbilisi.

For each of the meetings the recent H&W / LCPP publication, *Humanitarian Action in the Caucasus: A Guide for Practitioners*¹ served as a point of departure for discussions. Greg Hansen, author of the Guide and co-author of the Chechnya monograph, was joined for some of the sessions by H&W Project Director Larry Minear, LCPP head Dr. Mary B. Anderson, and Dr. S. Neil MacFarlane, Oxford University. Topics in each session were tailored to the needs, interests, and priorities identified by aid actors in each setting. MacFarlane and Hansen also brought the research to bear at an international conference in Copenhagen, organized by the Danish Refugee Council, on displacement and refugee situations in the Caucasus.

This report is a brief synopsis of the discussions, highlighting common themes and making specific reference to the Northern Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh, and surrounding areas. The main challenges addressed in the sessions included:

- Looting of building material from homes in depopulated, occupied areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh, implications for aid agencies (Yerevan);
- Contingency planning for the eventual return of displaced persons (Barda and Baku);
- Security for aid operations and personnel, contingency planning for stepped-up aid activity in the Northern Caucasus (Moscow);
- Sources of tension / frustration in Western Georgia (Zugdidi);
- Roles and capacities of the 3rd sector / local NGOs (Tskhinvali);
- Synergies between humanitarian action and politics (Tbilisi).

This overview, along with the summary record of proceedings of the Tbilisi Symposium on Conflict and Humanitarian Politics, will be circulated by the convenors of the seven meetings to the respective participants.

III. Common Themes

1. No War, No Peace: The Ambiguity of the Humanitarian Imperative

All of the conflicts in the Caucasus are frozen: cease-fires are in place but, with the exception of South Ossetia, none have been resolved to the extent that normalization can begin. Emergencies have wound down, but prospects for the early returns of displaced

¹ *Humanitarian Action in the Caucasus: A Guide for Practitioners*, Occasional Paper #32, by Greg Hansen. Providence, Watson Institute, 1998. (97 pp.). A Russian translation of the Guide will be available in early 1999 and will be distributed in the region by convenors of each of the seven meetings. This and other publications of the Humanitarianism and War Project are available from the address shown on the letterhead. The Guide and the other three monographs on the region may also be downloaded from the Project's website at: www.brown.edu/Departments/Watson_Institute/H_W

persons remain slim. Post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation activity has not been able to proceed on a scale commensurate with need. Close to one million displaced persons and refugees remain in limbo, in most cases several years after the cessation of open warfare. Many people affected by conflict in Prigorodnyi Raion and Abkhazia remain vulnerable to continued low-level violence. War damage and needs resulting from economic collapse remain unassessed in Chechnya due to insecurity, and in the occupied areas surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Preliminary needs assessment for reconstruction and rehabilitation has taken place in Abkhazia in hopes that economic incentives would lubricate the peace process. However, the downturn in the political environment and the violence in May of 1998 has so far precluded the commencement of work.

The frozen state of conflicts in the Caucasus has obscured the humanitarian imperative for donors and operational agencies alike. Waning donor support for humanitarian programming is closely tied to this ambiguity. Many aid agencies feel caught between an increasingly unacceptable status quo and the limitations imposed on strategic planning for humanitarian activity by the lack of tangible progress in peace processes. As a result, the humanitarian response has become routinized, losing much of its urgency and vision. Efforts to assist IDPs, for example, are focused on promoting self-sufficiency in displacement and on providing opportunities for their self-integration. Implicit in this approach is that some degree of integration represents a form of durable solution -- and an exit strategy for aid agencies -- albeit an imperfect one. However, serious shortcomings in the conduct and accountability of host authorities throughout the region suggest that premature disengagement will be extremely costly.

2. Impunity

Widespread impunity has continued to be a serious impediment to normalization in all conflict areas in the Caucasus. The following incidents were mentioned at one or more of the seven meetings:

- Systematic looting of homes in occupied areas around Nagorno-Karabakh (e.g., Agdam) continues unabated. Building materials are salvaged from damaged or destroyed homes by Karabakh Armenian soldiers and civilians, then trucked to Stepanakert, Armenia, and reportedly also to northern Iran, for sale. It is possible for some Azeri displaced to watch this happen from the other side of the conflict line, with predictable results for their attitudes toward reconciliation;
- Similarly, the Kelbajar region is being deforested for firewood which is transported to Armenia for sale. Prior to the war this area was inhabited by ethnic Kurds who relied on the forest ecosystem for their way of life. No effective pressure has so far been brought to bear on Karabakh Armenian or Armenian authorities to stop these activities despite the likelihood that their continuation undermines prospects for reconciliation and renders an eventual return more difficult and expensive;
- Georgian and Abkhaz authorities have failed effectively to control armed militia and partisan groups operating in and around Abkhazia, particularly in Gali region. Cyclical attacks and reprisals have continued for several years, threatening civilians and the presence of the UNOMIG mission and CIS Peacekeeping Force. Violence in May of 1998 cost more than 100 lives and sparked renewed displacement of an estimated 35,000 people who had resettled from western Georgia into Abkhazia;
- Russian and Chechen authorities have failed to bring to justice those who have mounted attacks on aid agencies. The killers of Matti Aho, a Finnish employee of IOM, have remained at large in Chechnya for three years despite their identity being known to authorities. Likewise, those responsible for the murder of 6 ICRC

delegates have not been held to account more than two years after the crime was committed.

3. Terms of Engagement and Disengagement

Against the backdrop of increasing donor reticence and growing frustration with the lack of progress in peace processes, sessions in the South Caucasus aired dissatisfaction with the status quo and questions concerning the timing and appropriateness of engagement and disengagement decisions. In Moscow, similar questions were raised out of concern for the impunity with which attacks on aid operations were continuing in the North Caucasus and the failure of authorities to bring those identified with such attacks to justice. In all sessions the questions led to more nuanced discussions about terms of engagement, conditionality of aid, and the opportunity costs of disengagement. The discussions expanded and gave additional concreteness to the analysis provided by the *Caucasus Guide*. Opportunity costs of disengagement included the following:

- Since international presence has a positive effect on the amelioration of conflict, withdrawal or curtailment of international aid would likely increase the isolation of war-affected people and groups, reinforcing existing notions of themselves as victimized and threatened. Isolation would fuel chauvinistic ethnic nationalism and militant, us-against-the-world attitudes, especially in insurgent regions;
- Disengagement would sacrifice much of what has been invested in engaging governments and local authorities on humanitarian issues. The standing of moderate elements who have been sensitized to humanitarian concerns would be undercut;
- Withdrawal of aid would punish local NGOs more than local authorities. Efforts to build moderate constituencies in civil society would be damaged or destroyed;
- Militant elements would enjoy more impunity due to weaker local NGOs and the absence of the deterrent effect of international aid agencies;
- Re-establishing a presence in some areas, especially in the North Caucasus, at some future point would be costly and difficult.

Participants in the Moscow session suggested that engagement / disengagement questions could be organized along a continuum ranging from contraction, which would not necessarily be punitive, through status quo, to expansion, which might serve as an incentive.

Participants in each of the seven sessions gave considerable thought to indicators that might signal an appropriate time for agencies to disengage. Suggestions varied widely reflecting differences in agency mandates, guiding principles, and experiences. Distinctions were made between "first echelon" and "second echelon" indicators (see Table below.) While considerations of both sorts may produce a decision to disengage in a particular set of circumstances, first echelon indicators were generally viewed as more legitimate, second echelon indicators as more punitive. Although lines were not as neatly drawn as the Table suggests, contrasting views gave rise to rich discussions about the weight that various indicators should be given and the issues that the terms of engagement for the continuation of aid activities ought to address.

Disengagement Indicators	
"First Echelon" Indicators for Disengagement	"Second Echelon" Indicators for Disengagement
Absence of critical need for further assistance.	
Degree of tangible progress in political peace processes and normalization is sufficiently high to merit disengagement.	Degree of tangible progress in political peace processes and normalization is sufficiently low to merit disengagement (i.e., due to donor fatigue or adoption of a punitive approach).
Government / local authorities take responsibility and are accountable.	Government / local authorities do not take responsibility and act with impunity, so they should be punished by the withdrawal of aid. "Force the state to take responsibility, even if conditions get worse for people."
Solutions to displacement problems are sustainable and morally acceptable.	Solutions to displacement problems are unsustainable or morally unacceptable.
Level of interest, cooperation and competence among host authorities on humanitarian concerns is sufficiently high to merit disengagement. ("Authorities demonstrate with their deeds that they are willing to help us help them").	Level of interest, cooperation and competence among host authorities on humanitarian concerns is sufficiently low to merit disengagement. ("Authorities are not willing enough to help us help them").
Technical capacity of local actors has reached a level sufficient to meet basic needs of population (assistance is redundant, or fosters dependency).	
Local NGOs have sufficient technical and organizational capacity, independence, and political space to take on increased responsibilities for delivering services, holding authorities accountable, performing protection tasks, etc., in ways which mitigate rather than exacerbate conflict.	Cost-ineffectiveness due to the lack of competent local partners is serious enough to merit disengagement.
Local staff will not be placed at undue risk when they lose the protection afforded by affiliation with an international agency.	
Untenable security conditions and attacks on aid workers and programs merit disengagement on grounds of staff safety. Risks taken are not justified by humanitarian impacts.	Untenable security conditions and attacks on aid workers and programs merit disengagement on punitive grounds. Withdrawal of aid will force authorities to undermine the impunity of attacks on aid agencies.
The degree to which outside aid allows host governments and authorities to abrogate their own responsibilities to secure peace and provide for welfare of population merits disengagement.	

IV. Synergies Between Humanitarian and Diplomatic Constituencies

The Tbilisi Symposium on Conflict and Humanitarian Politics provided a venue for discussions among diplomatic, peacekeeping, and humanitarian actors about improving the synergies between them. On the humanitarian side of the equation, there was recognition that while the lack of tangible progress toward conflict resolution has meant the prolongation of the humanitarian impasse, humanitarian interests themselves need to be more creative and assertive. They will fail to realize their potential to the extent that they acquiesce in the reality of frozen conflicts -- which they admittedly have limited ability to unfreeze. If humanitarian actors accept the likelihood of lower aid levels, knowing what they do of the impacts of inadequate assistance levels on the willingness of participants to consider negotiated settlements, they will also disappoint. Diplomatic and peacekeeping actors, meanwhile, saw possibilities for doing more to increase the space for humanitarian action, elevate the status of humanitarian issues relative to political questions, and to undermine impunity.

Interactions between these constituencies have been neither uniformly negative nor uniformly positive in the region. In South Ossetia experience has shown that significant benefits accrue to the peace process and to humanitarian efforts alike when diplomatic and aid constituencies work cooperatively and transparently. Recognizing aid's role in supporting the consolidation of peace, the OSCE mission is instructed to cooperate with the aid community by sharing information, serving as a facilitator of humanitarian efforts, and providing political backstopping when this is needed.

By contrast, the UN's diplomatic efforts in Abkhazia have consistently worked with a degree of secrecy and exclusiveness which has no apparent justification. For several years this has undermined both the effectiveness and the safety of aid operations and personnel. The SRSG's marginalization of the UN's own humanitarian efforts has stifled creativity and has resulted in a deepening subordination of humanitarian concerns to intractable questions of territorial status. This has done little to increase the accountability of protagonists in the Abkhaz / Georgia conflict for the welfare of populations under their jurisdictions.

The need for more effective protection of civilian populations, extending to assertive advocacy on their behalf, was a major theme of the discussions in Tbilisi and Zugdidi. Protection needs are likely to increase should resettlement of refugees and IDPs become more possible. Experience demonstrates that while hot wars in the region tend to be short-lived, protection crises are for their part protracted. Considerably more creativity needs to be brought by international actors to the protection challenge. Again, experience suggests the possibility of building on and maximizing potential synergies between humanitarian and diplomatic actors.

V. The North Caucasus (Russian Federation)

The session in Moscow covering humanitarian responses in the North Caucasus dealt with security, assistance by remote control, and assistance strategies in the event of renewed crisis. The focus was on the relative merits of 1) disengagement, 2) maintenance of the status quo, and 3) terms of engagement for future responses by international aid agencies in the event of renewed crisis.

The humanitarian presence in the North Caucasus has been drastically scaled back since the end of the war in Chechnya in response to growing insecurity for aid operations and personnel. With the release in December of UNHCR's Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR is poised to close operations in North Ossetia, perhaps maintaining a token presence in Stavropol and Moscow.

Although there was no clear consensus among the Moscow participants, some parameters for future strategic directions emerged from discussions:

1) There has been no comprehensive assessment of need in Chechnya since before the war. As a result, the humanitarian situation remains largely unsurveyed, not to say unmet. The absence of assistance commensurate with need, especially inside Chechnya, has fed into destabilization and a replication of the conditions under which the political and security environment worsens.

2) A window of opportunity opened for stepped-up assistance with the election of Maskhadov as Chechen leader, which was followed by a momentary improvement in the security environment for aid operations. This opportunity was short-lived and was eventually lost. UN OCHA was asked by the Russian Federation to compile a Consolidated Appeal for the North Caucasus in early 1998. This did not proceed due to a further downturn in the security environment marked by Vincent Cochetel's kidnapping. On the political front, the Russian Foreign Ministry has issued demarches requesting UN humanitarian assistance with some consistency. The growing involvement of the UN in such assistance should strengthen its position as regards a humanitarian agenda in the North Caucasus.

3) The anticipated response to a Consolidated Appeal for the North Caucasus was contrasted to that issued for Kosovo. In the view of some participants, the key variable was political will: that is, Kosovo was in the spotlight but the Caucasus was not. The Russian Federation's seat on the UN Security Council and its role in foreign policy issues of key interest to western governments led to reticence in pressing the humanitarian agenda. Others participants felt that a Consolidated Appeal would be important for setting a humanitarian agenda for Russian Federation strategy in the North Caucasus;

4) The notable lack of international political will to engage in the North Caucasus is set against the backdrop of the untenable security environment for aid operations and personnel and complicated by it. However, donor and aid agency attitudes toward assistance in the North Caucasus, especially inside Chechnya itself, range widely from punitive (suspension or curtailment of current assistance), to strengthening current activities through increased assistance by remote control, to contingency planning for renewed humanitarian crisis, particularly since Daghestan and Chechnya are in acute danger of further destabilization;

5) In the experience of the ICRC and the Centre for Peacemaking and Community Development (CPCD), assistance by remote control is a viable option for agencies with pre-existing knowledge of the region. Donors have proved flexible and tolerant of the special circumstances and accountabilities surrounding such assistance. In fact, several donor governments represented in the discussions were critical of the UN for not finding ways of reaching people in need, even granting the insecure circumstances;

6) Stepped-up aid activity in the N. Caucasus -- whether in response to current needs for reconstruction and rehabilitation or to the eventuality of renewed humanitarian crisis emerging from new hostilities -- should proceed only in a closely coordinated fashion which would minimize the vulnerability of the aid community. This would entail:

a) arriving at community-wide "Terms of Engagement" stipulating agency responsibilities for cooperating with coordinating mechanisms and especially for abiding by a community-wide protocol on security matters. Agreed terms would also clearly stipulate host-authority responsibilities for undermining the impunity for attacks on aid

agency operations and personnel. The cooperation of aid agencies could be enforced by donor sanctions on those agencies which fail to sign on to or comply with such protocols. The cooperation of authorities could be encouraged by more effective political backstopping for aid efforts through assertive humanitarian advocacy and diplomacy;

b) collective refinement of strategies for assistance by remote control (as currently practiced inside Chechnya by the ICRC and CPCD) and for increasing the sense of community ownership over aid activity, through public education and advocacy, leading to reduced vulnerability and better protection for aid operations and personnel;

c) capitalizing on experienced local staff and making the most of local organizations, building their capacities to implement major assistance programs in partnership with international aid organizations;

d) discouraging or minimizing engagement by newcomer agencies who lack local knowledge and institutional memory and are thus acutely vulnerable to the security environment and to complicating the challenges faced by more seasoned organizations.

7) At present there are no forums for discussing developments in the North Caucasus or for coordinating future aid responses there. Participants made the specific suggestion of convening a high-level interagency meeting in Moscow on the North Caucasus, involving donors, heads of agencies, and government, to revisit the situation and to formulate strategy. One participant from a western embassy in Moscow termed the humanitarian response of the international community to Chechnya "a failure", and called for a "new instrument". The same participant indicated a readiness among some donors to fund increased activity, given the right assistance strategy;

8) There is a need for a more assertive presence of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs both in Moscow and the North Caucasus region to monitor the humanitarian situation more closely than in the past, to act as focal point on security, and to function as advocate for increased international aid activity in the region when and as conditions permit.

VI. Nagorno-Karabakh and Surrounding Occupied Areas

The OSCE Minsk process suffered a serious setback with the change of leadership in Armenia in early 1998. Although the process has been re-activated, it remains preoccupied with the determination of Nagorno-Karabakh's political status. Humanitarian issues, notably the return of displaced persons and refugees, have been absent from the agenda. The eventual return of at least some displaced to Karabakh and to occupied areas surrounding it will be complex and expensive. There is a risk that political events will overtake preparations for returns and that an eventual political agreement will overlook important return issues.

Measures to prepare for a return prior to a definitive peace agreement were identified in both the Barda and Baku groups and included:

- continue and enhance activity which helps to equip potential returnees with the skills, training, and attitudes that will be useful upon return;
- improve access to information among IDPs (e.g., about availability of government and aid community resources). In the event of stepped-up return activity this mechanism could be employed to provide information about conditions in areas of return and about the return process;

- activate measures such as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) which engages community involvement in needs assessment, prioritization of needs, identification of community capacities for self-help;
- augment existing psycho-social support and training in conflict-resolution;

Taking into account the need to avoid creating false expectations about the imminence or likelihood of return, the usefulness of a preliminary needs assessment in presently occupied areas was discussed. The explicit goal would be to identify priorities for a comprehensive needs assessment in the event of progress in political negotiations. An implicit goal would be to elevate the status of humanitarian concerns by putting the right-to-return and return issues generally onto the Minsk agenda. A preliminary needs assessment should:

- identify areas of potential return most in need of de-mining;
- survey extent of destruction from district to district;
- identify possibly resource or infrastructure conflicts (e.g., diversion of water resources from areas of potential return);
- identify ongoing violations of international humanitarian law which may undermine the return process (e.g., looting and deforestation of depopulated areas);
- identify areas of potential return where ethnic Azeris and Armenians would come into close contact, assess likely protection needs and implications for assistance (i.e., issues of competition over resources, shared infrastructure);
- conduct demographic and attitudinal surveys to assess willingness to return, expectations about areas of potential return, present capacities in displacement, etc.;
- clarify division of labor re: who will be doing what in the event of stepped-up return activity (i.e., national and local government, communities, local NGOs, international aid agencies, OSCE, etc.).

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