

Mission Report

Humanitarian Assessment Mission to South Ossetia

16-20 September, 2008

1. Background and Mission Objectives

1.1. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) led an inter-agency mission to South Ossetia, Georgia to gain an overview of the current humanitarian situation and promote access based on humanitarian principles. The mission included OHCHR, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO. It was timed to facilitate the revision of the Flash Appeal and the provision of assistance and protection in all conflict-affected regions of Georgia by the over 25 agencies (UN, NGOs, and IOM) who have consolidated their planning therein.

1.2. The mission team entered South Ossetia via the Russian Federation as efforts to negotiate regular humanitarian access from within Georgia thus far have been unsuccessful. This was not a concession to the political goals of any party to the conflict, but a first step in ensuring full humanitarian access to the population in need in South Ossetia. Access from the north also allowed consultation with EMERCOM (the emergencies ministry) of the Russian Federation, which coordinated most of the emergency relief in South Ossetia in the first five weeks following the August conflict.

1.3. The mission objectives were:

- Dialogue with all relevant parties, ascertaining the humanitarian situation and identifying priority assistance needs, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups in the conflict-affected areas;
- Review the capacity for delivery of humanitarian assistance and protection, and recommend processes for sustainable implementation of the humanitarian program;
- Document the scope of bilateral humanitarian assistance in South Ossetia, and seek ways for it to be better coordinated with the multilateral humanitarian operation;
- Explore issues related to the protection of civilians and future arrangements for those who have fled or otherwise been displaced; and
- Ascertain the recovery assistance plans of bilateral actors in South Ossetia and explore how the United Nations and its partners can best support these efforts, particularly in terms of responding to early recovery needs.

2. Program of the Mission

2.1. The mission team met on 16 September in Moscow. It proceeded to EMERCOM where it received a briefing from Yuri Brazhnikov, the Head of the International Activities Department, on the just-completed humanitarian-assistance program of the Russian Federation in South Ossetia that EMERCOM coordinated. Mr. Brazhnikov stressed that the emergency operation was over but went on to highlight remaining areas of need. He mentioned particularly:

- public health;

- education and security for children;
- housing reconstruction; and
- the road and logistics infrastructure needed to support the delivery of assistance.

2.2. The mission team next met with Mikhail Lebedev and Alexander Chouplygin, respectively Deputy Director of the Department for Humanitarian Cooperation and Human Rights and Head of the Division for Migration in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Lebedev welcomed the mission as an important step toward meeting the needs in South Ossetia and he offered the support of the Russian MFA in liaising with the *de facto* authorities in South Ossetia.

2.3. On 17 September, the mission members flew to Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia-Alania, the Russian Federation. They consulted with colleagues in the humanitarian agencies based there, and received the necessary UN security briefing. They also arranged for UN colleagues to meet the next day with the Vladikavkaz-based representatives of EMERCOM, the Russian Ministry of Regional Development, and Federal Migration Services to gain their perspectives on the pressing humanitarian needs and their own completed or planned programs of assistance.

2.4. On 18 September, the mission proceeded by road through the Roki tunnel and into South Ossetia. It proceeded straight into Tskhinvali for its first meeting with the acting Prime Minister of the *de facto* authorities of South Ossetia, Boris Chochiev. During the next two days, the mission members held detailed discussions with various ministries, with local officials and citizens, with educators and health professionals, with shopkeepers and market vendors, with ICRC, and with the commander of the Russian peacekeeping force, Major General Kulakhmetov. They traveled throughout Tskhinvali town and to a number of villages, making stops as far west as Kvemo Okona (Znauri) and as far north as Kekhvi. Regrettably, a planned visit to villages east of Tskhinvali (Patara Liakhvi valley) was canceled by the authorities with the explanation that newly discovered UXOs were being demined that day. The mission held a final meeting with the acting Prime Minister before departing South Ossetia the evening of 19 September and departing the Russian Federation the following day.

2.5. While in South Ossetia, in order to maximize coverage of the objectives in two days, the mission team split into two groups for field visits and some meetings with authorities. One group, led by UNHCR, looked at the overall protection situation, human rights, and population displacement. The second group, led by UNDP, evaluated the needs for emergency relief and opportunities for early recovery assistance. The first group tended toward villages where there had been large displacement and complete destruction during and after the August conflict. It also visited villages away from Tskhinvali (ethnically Georgian, Ossetian, and mixed) where the population continues to live peacefully, effectively confirming that some areas of South Ossetia were not directly affected by this conflict. The second group meanwhile visited the main town of Tskhinvali and nearby villages that had witnessed serious fighting and damage during the conflict but in which the population continued to live. It also looked carefully at the capacity in Tskhinvali for delivering social services and for eventual humanitarian and early-recovery assistance, as well as into the food security and livelihoods situation. One group was able to visit the last village before the checkpoint where the Russian authorities have proclaimed a buffer zone

(henceforth just “buffer zone”). Neither group, however, entered the zone, as access from the south had become more frequent concurrent with this mission.

2.6. The mission team drew upon as background, and built upon the findings of EMERCOM and the report of the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, who had visited the region in late August. It also benefited from the advice of ICRC (the only international humanitarian organization with a regular presence in South Ossetia). Few other humanitarians have had ready access to the vulnerable populations within South Ossetia since the conflict erupted in early August. By and large, the mission found the insights of these organizations and Mr. Hammarberg to be a solid foundation for its own assessments.

3. South Ossetia in Perspective

3.1. The recent conflict in and beyond South Ossetia, across Georgia, received substantial media attention around the world. On the other hand, because the population and geographical size of South Ossetia are both rather small, the resulting humanitarian emergency has been limited in scale and proportion. This mission based its assessment of the humanitarian situation on the conditions facing individuals and the society as a whole. No comparison is made with other ongoing emergencies.

3.2. South Ossetia covers an area of 3,900 km² (1,506 sq. mi.) and is located on the south flank of the Caucasus mountains that form the border between Georgia and the Russian Federation. It extends approximately 40 km from north to south and 90 km from east to west. The area is predominantly mountainous with only a small part of its territory below 1,000 m. altitude.

3.3. According to the 1989 census, which was the last to be conducted, South Ossetia had a total population of 99,000, of which 66.2% considered themselves Ossetians, 29% Georgians, with the remaining 4.8% consisting of Russians, Armenians, Jews and others. There are no reliable data on current population, but estimates prior to the latest conflict varied between 50,000 and 90,000. The main (and only) city is the capital Tskhinvali, which had approximately 30,000 inhabitants before the recent conflict. Most of the remaining population is concentrated in the lower areas along the southern administrative boundary, the valley stretching from Tskhinvali to the north and in the Akhagori/Leningori valley in the east.

3.4. The local economy is primarily based on agriculture (mostly cereals and fruits, including grapes), with subsistence farming being the predominant form. Livestock and forestry are also maintained. Only 10% of the land area is cultivated. Private sector activities are limited, and there are no industries of significance. Remittances from migrant labor, mainly in the Russian Federation, are an important source of income, as well as customs duties on freight traffic through the Roki Tunnel, the only road link between South Ossetia and the Russian Federation.

3.5. Most inhabitants of South Ossetia are thought to be living on or just above a subsistence income level, with little by way of reserves to overcome sudden threats to their livelihoods. As a result, overall vulnerability of the population is high. This vulnerability is further aggravated by the generally very poor level of basic infrastructure and social services, particularly in the areas of health, education, water, sanitation, and gas supply. Natural gas is of special concern as the flow of pipeline

gas from Georgia to South Ossetia is frequently disrupted. Bottled, compressed gas is trucked in as a partial substitution, but it is not sufficient and not entirely reliable.

4. Overall Situation Appraisal

4.1. The mission was able to achieve its objectives within the limitations of time and the wider political setting. It found that the most severe needs for emergency relief had been covered already (primarily by EMERCOM), but that gaps remained for the UN and its humanitarian partners to address with assistance and protection projects addressing the most urgent needs. The sectors immediately identified for material assistance largely correspond to those reported by Mr. Brazhnikov of EMERCOM, listed above. It is probable, however, that additional needs would be identified from a more exhaustive assessment or might arise as winter approaches.

4.2. The most worrying humanitarian issues, however, relate to the protection of civilians, and especially to the conditions for return and durable solutions for the most vulnerable displaced persons. Many factors, including a lack of the rule of law, violation of property rights, limited livelihood prospects, and broader political developments affecting reconciliation, render this a complex undertaking. In the near term, perhaps the greatest protection challenge is to control the lawlessness in southern districts bordering the administrative boundary with Georgia as well as in the buffer zone south of it. Although this mission did not enter the buffer zone, it has received reports from reliable humanitarian partners detailing continued cases of looting, intimidation, and forced displacement there. The mission raised specific, reported cases of such activity to the attention of the *de facto* authorities in Tskhinvali and the Russian peacekeeping commander whose troops patrol that zone. The commander acknowledged the problem. He stated he was reinforcing his deployment in the villages mentioned, but also raised the point that his troops were not equipped or trained for policing and expressed the expectation that the EU peace monitoring force due to arrive on 1 October would need to solve the larger problem.

4.3. The mission concluded that the local capacity for social services and recovery needs to be augmented; lines of government accountability and performance of social services appear to have been severely weakened by years of isolation from the Georgian and former-Soviet systems. Vulnerability is high, and immediate remedial and risk-reduction work needs to start as soon as possible. Whatever international agencies deploy to South Ossetia will need to consider the local limitations on capacity when designing their assistance and protection projects.

4.4. International assistance in support of early recovery and development in South Ossetia was welcomed by all interlocutors and is recommended by the mission. Presently, the Russian Federation has plans to assist bilaterally with recovery, and these should be carefully considered in the formulation of a multilateral, international assistance package. The issue for early recovery is not only to help restore essential services interrupted by the recent conflict, but also to help institute best practices in public services and to give recovery a sound foundation in traditionally important segments of the economy such as agriculture.

4.5. Overall, the humanitarian assistance needs identified during this mission could be easily addressed with a small-scale UN and NGO operation in South Ossetia.

The fundamental question now is access. At the time of this mission there was no UN presence on the ground. Previously those UN agencies and NGOs working in South Ossetia depended on the capacity of their offices in Tbilisi to support that work, even if they maintained a small antenna office in Tskhinvali. That capacity is currently not available because of restrictions on access. This point was made to the acting Prime Minister as an appeal for him to ease those restrictions.

The Challenge to Insulate Humanitarian Action from Politics

4.6. Not surprisingly only one month after the latest conflict in South Ossetia, and given the tensions of the frozen conflict since 1992, the environment for discussion of humanitarian needs was highly politicized and emotional. The mission noted that the officials and residents of South Ossetia are anxious to be heard and seem certain of the justness of their positions. It was often difficult, particularly in the mission's first briefing and subsequent contacts with the authorities, to keep the attention on the current situation and the future needs rather than on questions of history and culpability. Even in the final meeting with the acting Prime Minister, politics halted the discussion of humanitarian access which was such a crucial part of the mission's terms of reference. The mission leader made a forceful, principled case for unhindered humanitarian access into South Ossetia from all directions. The acting Prime Minister in turn was categorical in insisting that no assistance should come from or pass through Georgia. Much remains to be done in asserting the right to unimpeded humanitarian access to the conflict-affected areas based on humanitarian principles and practicality, and divorced from political considerations.

Cooperation with Authorities

4.7. These concerns notwithstanding, the *de facto* authorities of South Ossetia were cooperative with the mission and welcomed the UN to establish a presence there as soon as possible. They arranged for the mission to meet with officials and social service providers in all key sectors in Tskhinvali. While some contacts were highly politicized, most were technical and helpful in understanding the humanitarian situation. The *de facto* authorities also facilitated the mission's movement within South Ossetia, and by and large the mission was free to travel where it wished and to speak with civilians without interference.

4.8. The mission also benefited from the support of the Governments of Georgia and the Russian Federation through their Permanent Missions and their capitals. Both governments gave feedback on the mission objectives during the planning stage, and facilitated the mission's movement. The Russian Government issued visas on short notice for all mission members travelling through that country. It also assisted in arranging meetings in Moscow and in Tskhinvali, but on the downside the MFA objected to the option of continuing on to Tbilisi. The Georgian Government offered to facilitate the through-movement of some mission members on to Tbilisi should that have been decided by the mission leader. It also showed flexibility and a respect for humanitarian principles in accepting that the mission go ahead even while access from the south is closed. Both governments interfered in the mission composition at the last minute of planning, but ultimately this did not handicap the mission.

Needs Analysis and Recommendations

4.9. Protection is the category of humanitarian activity that addresses the most urgent and life-threatening needs of the civilian population. Material-assistance needs *per se* are not as dire and have been partly met by EMERCOM, ICRC, and the *de facto* authorities. Nevertheless, there are clear points of humanitarian risk associated with many of these needs, risks that if not properly addressed could develop into life-threatening conditions for some, particularly with the onset of winter. The remainder of this report considers in turn: protection issues, outstanding needs for material relief items, opportunities to support early recovery, and a summary of the mission's recommendations.

5. Protection Issues

5.1. The protection of civilians emerged as the most urgent humanitarian concern, which came as no surprise for several reasons. Many people have lived as internally displaced persons in South Ossetia, or from South Ossetia elsewhere, since the first conflict of 1991-92. The capacity of the *de facto* authorities to care for them, however, has been insufficient and has depended upon international assistance which became more problematic in the past several years. Secondly, the conflict in August is reported to have caused many civilian deaths, renewed displacement, and significant damage and destruction of civilian objects. Thirdly, relations between South Ossetian *de facto* authorities and the Georgian government remain highly politically charged, which makes it difficult to count on protection being provided on neutral and impartial terms.

5.2. In all its meetings with local officials and South Ossetian *de facto* authorities, the mission stressed two key messages:

- the right to return for all IDPs who have been displaced elsewhere in Georgia or to the Russian Federation; and
- the need to end, without delay, wanton acts of violence against persons and property, whether they are committed by unidentified criminals or undertaken as acts of revenge.

Mission members repeatedly underlined to the authorities the need to re-establish law and order across the territory of South Ossetia and the adjacent territory outside the control of the Georgian government, and to prevent acts of lawlessness from occurring wherever possible, *inter alia* by bringing perpetrators to justice swiftly. At present, however, there is no mechanism for returns (except through a limited ICRC-facilitated exchange program). Local officials in South Ossetia, on the other hand, told the mission that IDPs who fled to the other side of the administrative boundary have expressed an interest to return. When asked about their prospects, the acting Prime Minister stated that it would only be considered on a case-by-case basis.

5.3. Serious concerns remain as to the actual conduct of all parties in the armed conflict and violent activity that followed. There are indications of intentional destruction of civilian infrastructure (water, electricity, and gas networks, and educational and administrative buildings) in and around Tskhinvali, and the large-scale destruction of civilian homes causing considerable internal and external displacement.

5.4. On a positive note, the mission was impressed with efforts of the Ombudsman of South Ossetia, who, despite extremely limited resources, had been instrumental in setting up a system of exchange of detained civilians and military personnel in cooperation with the Public Defender in Georgia and others. The Ombudsman's office appeared to be a suitable local institution to support with a view to assisting local capacities for the protection and promotion of human rights.

Extent of Internal and External Displacement

5.5. As widely reported in situation reports during and immediately after the August conflict, relatively large numbers of civilians were displaced from their homes and in many cases sought refuge outside of South Ossetia. Large numbers of the ethnic Georgian civilian population in South Ossetia and the surrounding buffer zone left their homes and moved elsewhere in Georgia. Some 36,000 civilians, or nearly half of the population of South Ossetia, left for the north and sought refuge in North Ossetia-Alania, the Russian Federation. Of the total number of those who had sought refuge in North Ossetia-Alania, all but approximately 2,000 are reported to have returned (although this official figure is disputed by some). Those who left for other places in Georgia, on the other hand, are largely thought to have remained outside of South Ossetia for the time being and are unlikely to be able to return in large numbers in the near future.

5.6. While the *de facto* authorities were not in a position to provide accurate statistics of the current extent of displacement in Tskhinvali and its outlying districts, it would appear that the estimates provided by independent observers in Georgia of some 22,000 IDPs within South Ossetia are probably exaggerated. A safer planning figure would be 10,000-15,000 IDPs currently accommodated with host families and a number of newly established collective centers in and around Tskhinvali. According to the *de facto* authorities in Tskhinvali, some 40 per cent of the 1,786 houses (re)constructed by UNHCR for IDPs over the past eight years or so have been destroyed. This total figure could not be independently verified, although at one site visited by the mission 12 out of 20 such houses had been heavily damaged or destroyed. For planning purposes, it is reasonable to assume that at least 400 returnee or IDP settlement homes have been destroyed during the recent conflict.

5.7. Of concern to mission members were multiple and credible accounts by civilian victims of the widespread targeting of civilians, both ethnic Ossetian and ethnic Georgian, during the immediate armed confrontation and its aftermath. This caused the widespread displacement of civilians in the capital, Tskhinvali, and surrounding villages in the Didi Liakhvi and Frone valleys. According to Georgia's MFA, the total population in some 21 majority-ethnic Georgian villages in these areas—i.e., those under the Government of Georgia's control prior to August 2008—comprised 14,500 persons, of whom some 13,260 had been registered as IDPs in Georgia by 8 September. The mission visited at least six of those villages in the conflict zone in and around the capital, and noted that they appeared to be empty and void of all population.

5.8. According to reports received from UN and NGO colleagues with access to the buffer zone outside the administrative boundaries of South Ossetia, a pattern of intimidation leading to displacement, and of destruction of properties, continues in certain targeted villages in that zone. The mission raised the problem with the

commander of the Russian peacekeeping force currently located in this zone, and he was well aware of these problems. He recently dispatched extra personnel to the villages from which problems had most recently been reported. The commander also stated he is ready to facilitate access of humanitarian staff to this area. However, he also has orders to prepare for a withdrawal to the administrative boundary ten days after EU monitors are scheduled to deploy on 1 October.

Destruction of Civilian Property

5.9. The mission noted the extensive destruction of property both within Tskhinvali as well as in some villages nearby. Within Tskhinvali it observed damage to mostly civilian buildings, as well as to the base of the Russian peacekeepers deployed under the 1992 Sochi Agreement. It appeared that public claims of up to 80 per cent destruction of the housing stock in Tskhinvali were exaggerated, but neither is the destruction light. Apartment blocks and civilian neighbourhoods, schools, the historic Jewish quarter, a home for the elderly, and a psychiatric hospital, all of which were visited by the mission, were among the civilian objects badly damaged by military forces. Likewise, as mentioned, an IDP settlement built in 2001 on the outskirts of the town had been attacked by tanks in the first days of the conflict, and most of the houses were damaged beyond use.

5.10. In a number of villages north and west of Tskhinvali, those already mentioned in the Didi Liakhvi and Frone valleys, the mission team was struck by the thoroughness of the destruction. In these particular villages, the mission could not locate a single house which had only been partially destroyed and would be considered as fit for habitation. According to the information provided to the mission, these villages had previously been inhabited by ethnic Georgians and controlled by Georgian forces. The UNOSAT images of the villages north of Tskhinvali taken on 19 August appear now to be only a partial reflection of the current extent of property damage there. The village of Avnevi in the Frone valley to the west of Tskhinvali also showed little sign of life, as all buildings appeared to have been burned. In Avnevi, the mission observed smoke rising from one ruin on 18 September, making it unlikely that it had been burned during the August conflict.

5.11. In its discussions with the local authorities, the mission urged them to protect the property of IDPs from further destruction or from being illegally occupied or looted, in order to protect the IDPs' right of return.

5.12. The mission also visited some villages west of Tskhinvali which had been left either totally or almost completely untouched by the recent conflict. In Arkneti, a village of 70 households approx. 15 km west of Tskhinvali, Georgians and Ossetians were living peacefully together in a village untouched by the violence. Therefore, and especially since this mission did not achieve full geographical coverage of South Ossetia, it is important to be cautious about drawing broad inferences as to the total level of destruction.

Child Protection Concerns

5.13. Throughout the mission, it was obvious that the large scale and swiftness of the August military operations in South Ossetia, and the level of damage attending them had shocked the population in and around Tskhinvali. Mission members with

experience in psychosocial needs assessment and programming noted that many people are thinking more about this immediate past than they are looking ahead to and securing what they need for the coming winter. The *de facto* authorities, health professionals, educators, and common people interviewed consistently raised the need to urgently address the trauma and stress of the population directly affected by the conflict, and particularly among children. Psychologists from the Russian Federation have undertaken short missions to South Ossetia since the conflict, but their methods and approaches to this problem have not been well coordinated. It is very important to ensure that individual and group therapy for those affected, with a particular focus on women as the caregivers and children, is supported to the full extent possible. Recreation opportunities for children must also be restored.

5.14. Officials interviewed by the mission team did not report a problem with unaccompanied children. Nonetheless, a more systematic assessment should be made to ensure that all children are properly registered and accounted for.

5.15. Although not a concern limited entirely to children, urgent mine risk education is very important in South Ossetia, since typically most mine/UXO-related casualties occur during or immediately following a conflict. ICRC is undertaking work in this area. They have printed and distributed 10,000 mine awareness leaflets and 2,000 posters. They have also provided the Russian peacekeeping force with 500 marking signs and 5 km of marking tape. To minimize the impact of landmines, unexploded ordnance, and other remnants of war as people return home and resume their normal activities, it is crucial to act as quickly as possible in conjunction with ICRC, local NGOs, and authorities to review the risk assessment and develop a comprehensive mine risk education program.

6. Emergency Assistance Needs

6.1. Looking strictly at the current need for material emergency relief by the UN and its humanitarian partners, the mission concluded that the urgent gaps are limited in scope. The tally on EMERCOM's assistance to South Ossetia from August through mid-September is 10,541.9 tons of aid delivered, including almost 5,000 tons of construction materials, more than 3,000 tons of food, and 115 tons of medicines, as well as potable water, medical equipment, and school supplies. EMERCOM also has helped restore the supplies of electricity, water, and gas, although the mission heard concerns expressed as to the reliability of these utilities.

6.2. ICRC also has a well-established assistance and protection operation, with 32 staff on the ground in South Ossetia (including eight international delegates). Its assistance is greatly appreciated by the *de facto* authorities and local communities.

6.3. EMERCOM completed its emergency-response mission in South Ossetia on 15 September. The lead for coordination of Russian bilateral aid to South Ossetia now has shifted to the Ministry of Regional Development. The nature of the aid will increasingly be in the form of reconstruction assistance and capacity building of South Ossetian institutions by the corresponding Russian ministries—e.g., the Russian Interior Ministry will help build local police departments.

6.4. The situation on the ground is fluid in terms of supply and demand of essential goods. There is considerable movement of persons and goods between the

Russian Federation and South Ossetia; most individuals the mission met with reported having strong family connections in North Ossetia-Alania. Business procedures appear to be the same as they were prior to the August conflict, with the commercial sector using the same suppliers in the Russian Federation, access route, etc. Officially, there is no movement of people and goods across the South Ossetian boundary toward Gori and Tbilisi, but it should be expected that informal links will soon be reestablished.

6.5. There is a very limited government capacity for coordinating and distributing humanitarian assistance, following the departure of EMERCOM, so this needs to be monitored closely.

Emergency Shelter

6.6. The repair of damaged housing before winter is a major concern of individuals in the conflict-affected towns and villages, and an issue given high priority by the *de facto* authorities. The mission agrees that repair of damaged housing and provision of adequate options for winter is an urgent priority. It observed large numbers of individual and collective residences damaged beyond use or destroyed. The United Nations and its NGO partners are well equipped to, and should be seen to assist the IDP population in Tskhinvali and its environs with immediate winterized shelter assistance. In particular, repairs and upgrading could quickly begin on the 20 or so collective centers in and around Tskhinvali—a similar but less extensive intervention was undertaken by UNHCR in 2007 with the support of a limited CERF grant and using local implementing partners. The provision of limited amounts of NFIs to complement what the IDPs have already received from EMERCOM and others should also be considered urgently. The current supply of winter clothing bears further assessment.

6.7. Beyond March 2009, the period covered by the inter-agency Flash Appeal, a more thorough review should be undertaken as to the extent of damage to the housing stock, and in particular in terms of reconstruction and repair of IDP housing (re)constructed over the past years and now destroyed.

Food Supply

6.8. There has been a considerable relief effort extended by the Russian Federation, through EMERCOM, to cover the needs of the conflict-affected population. In total, EMERCOM supplied 3,000 MT of food within South Ossetia and an additional 2,500 MT to the displaced population while in North Ossetia-Alania. Complementary to Russia's bilateral effort, WFP distributed food packages to 4,000 displaced persons returning from North Ossetia. Further in-depth assessments are required to determine developments in the food security situation in all areas of South Ossetia. Special attention must be placed on areas outside Tskhinvali district, and in particular among economically marginal groups such as pensioners receiving Ossetian and Georgian pensions, female-headed households, and persons displaced from the previous conflict.

6.9. The future of bilateral food aid remains unclear, and multilateral assistance inside South Ossetia may be needed. Traditionally, households in South Ossetia spend

much of the summer preparing food stocks for the winter. All households and key informants interviewed stated that such preparations had not been possible this year, given the evacuation of civilians and the loss of storage space and food containers due to the fighting. Livestock has reportedly been decimated by 40 percent as a result of hostilities. The harvest of wheat and barley appears to be less than usual for the same reasons. Some residents expressed fear to enter agricultural areas for harvesting due to the risk of mines and UXO. The few households who had some supplies from their gardens and orchards are consuming them now. As a result, most households in conflict-affected parts of South Ossetia will therefore start the winter without their usual food stocks.

6.10. The bilateral Russian food aid has reached many schools and institutions (including the hospital and the home for the elderly), with a school feeding program underway for the first time in 18 years in the Tskhinvali town. Again, it remains to be seen as to how far the food supply can be sustained regularly during the winter months.

6.11. It was suggested to the mission that bilateral food aid will cover the needs of the population for an additional two months. Nevertheless, if stocks were to deplete before the onset of winter the food security situation would likely deteriorate. This would be further aggravated if the route to North Ossetia-Alania were closed during the winter, thereby interrupting vital market links. Tensions then could rise and multilateral food aid would play an important role in ensuring stability. Hence, pre-positioning a contingency food stock before December, to cover the needs of the most vulnerable population during the post-conflict winter period, should be considered.

6.12. Cooking will remain difficult in Tskhinvali city if natural gas supplies are disrupted long-term, and particularly if the supply of bottled gas from the Russian Federation is interrupted. Cooking in the villages is dependent on firewood or bottled gas; the availability of firewood is affected by the mines and UXO situation.

Health Conditions

6.13. There are no signs of outbreak, and no reports of any major increase in cases of disease or related deaths in South Ossetia. However, disease surveillance and health information in general seem very weak, and the mission's preliminary findings need to be verified by more comprehensive assessments. The Central Republican Hospital, including a maternity unit, is operational and being restored by the Russian Ministry of Health. EMERCOM reported to the mission that the stock of medicines in South Ossetia is sufficient.

6.14. Of great concern is the fact that the vaccine supply in South Ossetia has been irregular for a long time, and there has been no supply for the past two months. This and the damage to the cold chain network pose a high risk for the outbreak of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles. Additionally, physical damage to the housing stock, health infrastructure, and water supply systems, combined with the approaching winter, puts the population, especially children, at high risk of water-borne diseases, respiratory infections, and other diseases.

6.15. EPI and measles immunization can and must be delivered immediately. Psychosocial needs have already been reported in the section on Protection, but they

warrant being flagged once more. With due caution about the scarcity of information available, other humanitarian needs in the health sector appear to be less urgent, albeit equally important.

6.16. One area identified as a priority by ICRC was personal hygiene, particularly given the poor living conditions of many households in Tskhinvali and surrounding conflict-affected villages. While commercial products are available on the market, many vulnerable households reported not being able to afford them. However since this sector has been identified and the ICRC is currently distributing hygiene packs to those in need, the needs are not included in this report.

Education

6.17. The conflict obviously has changed the face of the education sector in South Ossetia. A large number of children and teachers have left their villages, leaving rural schools half empty. In Khitagurov village, out of 300 students and 32 teachers, for example, only 45 students and 20 teachers remain in the school after the conflict. Most of the 56 schools and 12 kindergartens have been partially or totally destroyed; educational equipment and supplies are basic.

7. Early Recovery Opportunities

7.1. The mission requested of the acting Prime Minister information on all bilateral assistance being provided, together with the authorities' plan for emergency and early recovery assistance through the winter. He promised to deliver it at a later date, as the information was not available before the mission left Tskhinvali.

7.2. The Regional Development Ministry of the Russian Federation has just taken over the coordination of bilateral assistance provided by Russia to South Ossetia, and is conducting damage assessments in order to build a comprehensive recovery and development-assistance plan. The main goal of its plan will be to bring the living standards in South Ossetia to the average level of Russia's Southern Federal District. Among other things, the plan would envisage priority measures in the sectors of health, housing, education, logistics, transportation, communications, and utilities. It may include under the rubric of transport infrastructure the construction of an airport, a railway, and a second road connecting South Ossetia with the Russian Federation. A special department to work on South Ossetia is likely to be established in the Ministry.

Limited Evidence of Recovery from the Conflict

7.3. Moving around Tskhinvali, the mission noted that the majority of retail institutions have restarted since the conflict, and that the market and shops appear well stocked with basic and complementary foods. Prices remain similar to the pre-conflict situation for most commodities, except some imported fresh produce which used to come from Georgia. State salaries and both Russian and Ossetian pensions (approx. equivalent to \$135 and \$20 per month respectively) continue to be paid, though many people employed in the private sector have lost their jobs. The South Ossetian *de facto* authorities indicated that the payment of Georgian pensions in Leningori district may terminate soon. Disability and child benefits are also paid but minimal, at approximately \$3 per person/child per month.

7.4. In Tskhinvali, many households live in less than optimal shelters (official estimate is 80% of the town's population), while access to tap water is not universal. In the rural areas visited, sanitation seemed very poor. Unemployment is high, and youth lack adequate opportunities for recreation.

7.5. Notwithstanding the first steps taken, mostly by EMERCOM, to restore infrastructure, even discounting the damages suffered in August 2008 many public services are under-equipped and show the signs of a long lack of investment. Capacities to deliver preventive and curative health care seem quite low, and public health strategies and care delivery protocols are outdated and underperforming.

Early Recovery to Help End the Crisis Environment

7.6. In order to help establish the foundations for longer-term recovery and development and ensure a smooth transition from the emergency phase, there is a need to support early recovery activities in the areas mentioned below.

7.7. Livelihoods: The mission was informed that salaries for state employees and pensions continue to be paid and a modest compensation scheme for damage and losses incurred as a result of the recent events has been put in place. The extent to which these compensations are paid could not be verified. The private and household farming sectors seem to have been most affected by the conflict. In Tskhinvali, a considerable number of shops are damaged or destroyed and employees (mostly women) have lost their jobs. In rural areas visited, people reported a loss of their livestock and crops. Although trade and commerce are visibly picking up, there is a need to support shopkeepers and other small enterprise owners to recover their businesses and hire back employees. A voucher scheme for livestock, seeds, fertilizer, and other agricultural inputs could be considered for affected rural households.

7.8. Access to basic social services and infrastructure: While basic services have been provisionally restored to meet immediate needs, overall conditions of basic services in the areas visited were seen to be extremely poor due to many years of neglect. Critical needs include water and gas supply in Tskhinvali. This would require large-scale investment. However, support to small-scale community services and infrastructure could be undertaken in the short- and medium-term.

7.9. Social cohesion and conflict prevention: In parts of South Ossetia, ethnic Ossetians and Georgians continue to live side by side. Confidence-building measures, for example through schools and inclusive small-scale, community-based projects, are urgently required to prevent such communities from destabilizing and to strengthen social cohesion.

7.10. Community security and access to justice: Clearance of mines and UXOs is taking place and the authorities are planning a small weapons-control program. However, law and order needs strengthening and citizens need to be able to report harassment, abuse, and loss of assets in a systematic way. This could include police training and support to the offices of the Prosecutor General and Ombudsman. Access to consultations and justice for possible victims of gender-based violence requires particular attention.

7.11. Capacity building for planning, implementation, and management: Successful intervention in the above-mentioned areas requires extensive capacity building of local institutions and communities in participatory planning, design and implementation of priority activities, as well as the sustainable management of the resulting structures and services. Maximizing involvement of beneficiaries/users and all segments of society is crucial.

8. Logistics

8.1. A premise to all discussions about logistics should be that the shortest and best-equipped route for reaching South Ossetia is from the south. The capital of Georgia, Tbilisi, is some 80 kms south of Tskhinvali and the Soviet-era infrastructure was built around this axis. However, the current political standoff between the Government of Georgia and the *de facto* authorities in South Ossetia makes this route generally inaccessible. Whereas negotiations for open humanitarian access from the south will continue, this mission undertook a quick assessment of the logistical considerations involved in the option of accessing South Ossetia from the north.

8.2. Tskhinvali is approximately 185 kms south-west of Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia-Alania in the Russian Federation. There is only one route, a federal road which crosses the Caucasus mountain range. The road is all asphalt and mainly of good quality. It passes through 8 tunnels (the longest of which, Roki Tunnel, is 5kms long) as well as three avalanche shelters on the South Ossetian side. This is a well established transport route with regular commercial transport from North Ossetia-Alania and Stavropol-Krai among other regions of Russia. There should therefore be easy availability of sufficient, experienced transport for the delivery of humanitarian commodities.

8.3. The road through the Caucasus mountain range is prone to temporary closure following landslides throughout the year and can be officially closed due to avalanche risk during the winter months. There are also problems with ice on the road during winter months, especially on the steep, winding sections in South Ossetia which face south. The Russian Federation plans to provide additional vehicles to clean up the road this coming winter.

8.4. There is currently no rail or scheduled commercial air access to South Ossetia. There is, however, a small airfield in Tskhinvali which was not inspected during the mission.

8.5. The principal roads for local transportation within South Ossetia are asphalt but in a fairly poor state of repair. Access to smaller villages is on gravel roads which have often not been maintained. Access to the more remote villages can be cut during winter, even for four-wheel drive vehicles. Construction is underway of a road connecting Tskhinvali with Akhagori/Leningori in the east, but reportedly the road is still unsurfaced and the trip requires at least four hours.

8.6. The local transport capacity was not assessed during this mission, but it is likely that most local trucks will be involved in the reconstruction activities even though the authorities are currently bringing in additional trucking capacity from the

Russian Federation. Local transport might therefore have to be contracted from outside.

8.7. There appears to be limited availability of good-quality warehousing of reasonable size, although small warehouses are available—e.g., the authorities could allocate a small warehouse (estimated capacity 300-400 MT) for food and other humanitarian supplies. Such warehousing that is available is often in the old industrial areas which appear to have been the scene of intense fighting. A dedicated area has apparently been set aside by the authorities for reconstruction materials but was not visited on this mission.

8.8. All goods coming from the Russian Federation into South Ossetia will have to pass through customs and import controls, including duties. This has proven to be troublesome thus far and would present an ever greater problem if the quantity of humanitarian assistance were to increase.

8.9. In conclusion, while the main access road is of good quality, given the need to cross the mountains and the avalanche/landslide risk it is likely that there would be short-term road closures affecting any transit into South Ossetia from the north. Transport within South Ossetia, especially during the winter months, is likely to be difficult. There certainly would be a shortage of quality warehousing to store large quantities in South Ossetia, without rehabilitation of existing structures or the installation of temporary storage facilities.

9. Recommendations from this Mission

9.1. The following are recommendations from this mission team of steps that could improve the humanitarian situation in South Ossetia. The order of presentation does not necessarily reflect perceived importance, although the more urgent recommendations tend to appear at the top of the list.

9.2. The indication of agencies in brackets is a suggestion as to who (among the participating agencies) might take up the responsibility for follow through on each recommendation, subject to further inter-agency agreement. In most instances, a cluster is indicated in order to benefit from the consolidated inter-agency expertise, capacity, and coordination that represents.

9.3. Several policy considerations arise in light of the current status of humanitarian access described in this report. First, the establishment of a UN presence in South Ossetia requires a system-wide consensus on practical modalities, timing, etc., not the least for reasons of staff safety and security. Second, the UN system and its partners need to further evaluate against humanitarian principles the conditions under which they would be able to operate in South Ossetia. These considerations are reflected in the first three recommendations.

- Recommendation 1: Explore the options for establishing a UN presence in South Ossetia. [OCHA with the ERC and IASC Principals]
- Recommendation 2: Identify a focal point for the humanitarian system to negotiate open access to South Ossetia. Access to provide humanitarian

assistance and protection should be principled and based on need; all options for access should be pursued. Recovery and development activities, on the other hand, should proceed only on the basis of access being granted from both the south and north. [OCHA with the ERC]

- Recommendation 3: Review the security phase and operational procedures in effect for UN staff in South Ossetia, with the aim of facilitating follow-up assessments of need and the delivery of assistance and protection without compromise to the safety of aid workers. [OCHA with UNDSS]
- Recommendation 4: Immediately procure and deliver vaccines, cold-chain equipment, and relevant supplies to South Ossetia to support mass vaccination campaigns for polio and measles. Work out quick solutions to improve the analysis of health needs and the reporting systems. [UNICEF and WHO with the Health cluster]
- Recommendation 5: Build an effective dialogue between the humanitarian agencies in Tbilisi and the Russian commander of peacekeeping forces to facilitate increased humanitarian access and cooperation to stop looting, violence, and intimidation in the buffer zone. Do the same with the future EU peace monitoring mission. [OCHA with the HC in Tbilisi]
- Recommendation 6: Support the recommendation of Council of Europe Commissioner Hammarberg that human rights monitors be deployed as soon as possible in areas affected by the conflict to help protect civilians and their property. [OHCHR with the Protection cluster]
- Recommendation 7: Deploy technical advisors to advise agencies and the authorities concerned on human rights obligations and liaise with other international organizations in the context of humanitarian operations related to South Ossetia. [OHCHR with the Protection cluster]
- Recommendation 8: Develop projects to support basic rehabilitation of schools and kindergartens (windows, doors, water, sanitation, and hygiene, as well as delivery of education supplies and pedagogical material) before winter. [UNICEF with the Education cluster]
- Recommendation 9: Deliver, with partners (esp. ICRC and local NGOs), a comprehensive mine risk awareness program and promote peace and tolerance in the schools. [UNICEF with the Education cluster]
- Recommendation 10: Develop projects that give immediate psychosocial relief to those affected by the conflict in South Ossetia and that build the capacity of local psychologists. [UNICEF and WHO with the Education and Health clusters]
- Recommendation 11: Complete a pre-winter reassessment of food security by the end of October, and if required pre-position by December 2008 a contingency food stock (for approx. 40,000 people for four months) in South Ossetia. [WFP with the Food cluster]

- Recommendation 12: Negotiate special arrangements with both the Russian Federation and Georgia for customs and import clearance of humanitarian goods entering South Ossetia, Georgia via the Russian Federation. [WFP with the Logistics cluster]
- Recommendation 13: On a contingency planning basis, develop a logistics-support plan for the implementation of a modest-sized humanitarian operation in South Ossetia. [WFP with the Logistics cluster]
- Recommendation 14: Develop projects to repair and upgrade collective centers for IDPs, including NFIs and winter clothing as required, for this winter. [UNHCR with the Shelter cluster]
- Recommendation 15: Design an integrated area-based, local-level early recovery program for South Ossetia. As a first step, and as soon as security and access allow, field a team of consultants for one month to undertake together with local stakeholders a detailed assessment of priority needs and capacity gaps. [UNDP with the Early Recovery cluster]
- Recommendation 16: Liaise with *de facto* health authorities in South Ossetia to identify priorities for revision of primary health care delivery, to bring it up to date in terms of strategies, tools, and protocols on blood safety, reproductive health, IMCI, STI and HIV/AIDS, TB control, mental health, nutrition, and other non-communicable conditions/diseases. [WHO with the Health cluster]
- Recommendation 17: Conduct a thorough needs assessment in schools and kindergartens related to educational supplies, pedagogical materials, and teacher training. [UNICEF with the Education cluster]
- Recommendation 18: Consult with the *de facto* authorities regarding their housing reconstruction and repair plans, and propose to assist in areas where the UN and its NGO partners have a comparative advantage in experience and resources. [UNHCR with the Shelter cluster]

ANNEX

Participants in the Inter-Agency Humanitarian Assessment Mission to South Ossetia 16-20 September, 2008

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