
UN Resolution on Abkhazia Shows Who's Who on Ethnic Cleansing

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On May 15 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Georgia-drafted resolution recognizing the right of expellees to return to Georgia's Abkhazia region. The voting was 14 countries in favor, 11 against, and 105 abstaining, with another 63 countries not voting. Adoption of the resolution puts the General Assembly on record as calling for a reversal of ethnic cleansing in the case of Abkhazia and potentially farther afield. The arithmetic of the vote, however, shows only narrow international support for pursuing the issue. Russia and Armenia led the opposition to the resolution.

-Deploing practices of arbitrary forced displacement [such as the] expulsion of hundreds of thousands of persons from Abkhazia, Georgia,- the resolution cites several times -the reports of `ethnic cleansing'- from that region since 1993. The resolution enshrines for the first time a set of principles that Georgia and its supporters had long advocated as a basis for resolving this conflict. First, it -recognizes the right of return of all refugees and internally displaced persons and their descendants, regardless of ethnicity, to Abkhazia, Georgia.- Second, it -emphasizes the importance of preserving the property rights of refugees and internally displaced persons ... and calls upon all member states [read: Russia] to deter persons under their jurisdiction from obtaining property in Abkhazia, Georgia, in violation of the rights of refugees.- And third, it -underlines the urgent need for a rapid development of a timetable to ensure the prompt voluntary return of all refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes.-

Concurrently -emphasizing that the rights of the Abkhaz population have to be protected and guaranteed- -- a point included in Georgia's draft from the outset -- the resolution -requests- the UN Secretary-General to report comprehensively on the implementation of this resolution at next year's session of the General Assembly.

In the debate before the vote, Georgia's UN envoy Irakli Alasania reminded the Assembly of the forced exodus of hundreds of thousands of people of Georgian and other ethnicities from Abkhazia, their growing despair, and the unlawful seizure of the homes and property they had to leave behind. Alluding to Russia's role, he said that the conflict was an -example of how externally generated conflicts have been maintained in a frozen situation to subdue the people of Georgia.- He reaffirmed Georgia's proposals for autonomy and direct talks with the de facto Abkhaz authorities.

The European Union failed to adopt a common position. Nine member countries, including eight new ones and Sweden, joined the United States to vote for the Georgian-proposed resolution. That European group coincides approximately with the New Group of Friends of Georgia (see EDM, September 17, 2007), which has come into its own since last year. Up to 17 EU member countries (all the -old- ones except Sweden) abstained from voting. Speaking for those countries, Germany, France, and Italy claimed that the UN Security Council traditionally deals with this conflict, thus implying that a General Assembly debate was redundant. This argument ignores the Security Council's chronic ineffectiveness on Georgia due to Russia's veto power and the Council's own collaboration with it.

Beyond procedural arguments, however, Germany objected to the resolution's content. It claimed that the document -ignored many other aspects of the situation,- i.e., that it did not reflect Russian views. Germany spoke in its capacity as chair of the UN Secretary-General's Group of Friends of Georgia (Russia, the United States, Britain, France, and Germany). This group operates (when it does at all) based on consensus with Russia, which renders it dysfunctional, while in this case providing Germany with an excuse to take the position it does.

Turkey also abstained, while calling on -all parties to pursue a peaceful resolution- and expressing its readiness -to assist in that effort.- Indeed Turkey, home to significant Abkhaz and related Circassian communities, seems well-placed for a mediating role in Abkhazia. Nevertheless, for many years Turkey has passed up this opportunity to gain regional influence. All of the abstaining countries that spoke in this debate endorsed Georgia's territorial integrity, and some of them paid lip service to the expellees' right of return. But they fell short of even a symbolic vote for the resolution, let alone remedies to the situation.

Azerbaijan and Ukraine strongly supported the resolution. Azerbaijan implicitly drew a parallel between the ethnic cleansing from Abkhazia and from parts of Azerbaijan's own territory. Deploring any acceptance of ethnic cleansing in the South Caucasus, it called for the refugees' return to their homes as an indispensable basis for resolving the conflicts. For its part, Ukraine traced the conflict in Abkhazia to its roots in Soviet policies; -the Russian Federation continued that notorious tradition by inserting separatism into the GUAM region.-

Moldova, the other member of the GUAM group (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) broke ranks in abstaining from the vote. The Moldovan president and government hope to earn Russia's goodwill for a resolution of the Transnistria conflict sometime in 2008, ahead of Moldova's elections. Moldova could have chosen to be absent from the vote, as did for example the U.S.-protected governments of Iraq and Afghanistan in deserting the United States on this vote. But Moldova chose to abstain in an explicit bow to Russia.

Russia criticized the resolution for -destabilizing UN activities in settling the conflict- and -leading to a deterioration of Georgian-Abkhaz relations,- without explaining these assertions. It claimed incorrectly that the resolution ignored ethnic groups in Abkhazia other than the Georgians.

It described the problem as one between Georgia and Abkhazia, not between Georgia and Russia -- a claim that seeks to put an Abkhaz face on the Russian military's 1993 ethnic cleansing operation in Abkhazia. And it made the refugees' return conditional on a comprehensive political solution of the conflict, even as Moscow stonewalls any solution that would not put Russia in control.

Joining with Russia to excuse ethnic cleansing was an unusual constellation of countries: Armenia, Belarus, North Korea, India, Iran, Myanmar, Serbia, Sudan, Syria, and Venezuela. Some of these have themselves been involved in ethnic cleansing operations; some of them side habitually with Russia; and some of them qualify on both counts. From the last group, Armenia had campaigned against inclusion of the resolution on the General Assembly's agenda. Like Russia, it clearly implied that the expellees' return to their homes was contingent on a political solution acceptable to both sides; in other words, it should be left at the discretion of the cleansing side. Armenia had also tried unsuccessfully to block discussion on an Azerbaijani-drafted resolution on the Karabakh conflict, which passed

also narrowly in March of this year in the General Assembly (see EDM, March 18).

Georgia persists in seeking direct contact with Abkhaz authorities parallel to its international activity. On May 12 Georgia's U.N envoy Alasania, who is also a negotiator on the Abkhazia conflict, held talks in Sokhumi to present details of the Georgian government's offer of autonomy to Abkhaz leaders.

(United Nations General Assembly, 62nd session: Plenary Meeting, May 15, 2008; General Assembly, -Protracted Conflicts in the GUAM Area,- May 15; Civil Georgia, May 15).
