
Armenia Offers Safe Haven For Fleeing Georgians

By Naira Melkumian in Yerevan and Bavra
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Thousands cross border, as opposition blames president for delay in returning from Olympics.

Armenia, the closest country to the Georgian-Russian fighting, has opened its borders to thousands fleeing the conflict - but its political leadership has kept virtually silent throughout the crisis.

Since the conflict in South Ossetia broke out last week, the customs checkpoint at Bavra at the Armenian-Georgian border has been the only safe crossing point for people wishing to leave Georgia. Most were Armenian tourists fleeing, but others were Georgians deciding to leave for a place of safety.

"There is something terrible happening there, we saw burnt tanks on our way here...A bomb fell just a few metres away from us near the Suram Pass and the shrapnel damaged the door of my car," Alik, who was traveling with his wife and baby, told IWPR.

"We left on August 8, the day the war started because we didn't think our visit to Georgia would be so dangerous," said Anna, who was with her husband and child. "We went to [the Black Sea resort of] Kobuleti, everything was calm there but the general atmosphere was very tense; what we feared most was the road, of course."

The Armenian foreign ministry said that more than 10,000 people had crossed the Bavra crossing since the war began.

Most came in their own cars, others in Georgian tourist buses and traveled on in buses sent to the border to bring them back to Yerevan for free.

More than two thousand foreign citizens, staff and relatives of those working for embassies or international organisations also crossed into Armenia, heading for the nearest safe international airport in Yerevan.

Thousands of Armenian tourists holidaying on the Black Sea were taken by surprise by the conflict.

"On the night of August 8-9 we were woken by strange noises outside the building we were renting an apartment in," said Rita Karapetian, an IWPR contributor who was in Kobuleti.

"The electricity went off in the whole city, television broadcasting had stopped before that. The neighbours in the yard said that a war has started, and the Russian air forces had attacked strategic targets in different cities of Georgia."

Along with others, she cut short her holidays and headed for the border.

That was not the case, however, with Armenian president Serzh Sarkisian who continued his vacation in China, where he has been attending the Olympic Games. Sarkisian finally returned home on August 14, almost a week after the crisis began.

Armenia has tried to keep a low profile in the crisis. All statements on the crisis were made by Armenia's deputy foreign minister. "Armenia is very concerned about the situation in South Ossetia and expresses hopes that the parties will make efforts to settle the issues under dispute peacefully as soon as possible," read an official statement from the foreign ministry on August 8.

Armenian and Georgian officials denied a report that Georgia had been attacked by planes from the Russian military base in Gyumri in northern Armenia.

When President Mikheil Saakashvili called on other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States to quit the organisation in solidarity with Georgia, the Armenian foreign ministry declared publicly it would not do so, saying that staying in the CIS was Armenia's "long-term political choice".

Sarkisian telephoned Russian president Dmitry Medvedev on August 13 and offered his sympathies. He then called Saakashvili on August 14 and offered condolences and humanitarian aid.

Sarkisian's long silence drew sharp criticism from the Armenian opposition. The Armenian National Congress, led by former president Levon Ter-Petrosian, criticised what it called the president's "inadequate and dubious behaviour" and called on him to fly home.

Opposition member of parliament Stepan Safarian said, "By offering condolences only to the president of the Russian Federation, Serzh Sarkisian violated a balance because condolences should have been sent to three sides, Russia, Georgia and South Ossetia."

Armenians are watching nervously to see how the Georgian-Russian clash will continue. The landlocked country's economy is very reliant on both countries and experts believe the conflict will hurt trade, when the economy is already in a downturn.

On August 7, the Georgian Oil and Gas Corporation cut supplies of Russian gas to Armenia by 30 per cent without prior warning, but prime minister Tigran Sarkisian later said that full supplies of 4.7 million cubic metres of natural gas had been restored.

Armenia is heavily dependent on Georgia's Black Sea ports for its trade and is also suffering because of the Russian blockade of the port of Poti.

Businessman Hmayak Mnatsakanian said his freight consignment of fruit he had been planning to send out of Poti for five days ago had been stranded and he had only just managed to get it returned to Armenia, although he feared it was now all spoiled.

"Each truck costs about 50 thousand dollars, and if the goods are damaged I'll face a huge debt, leaving aside the fact it cost two thousand dollars to send it to Georgia.

"But the most important thing is I came home safe and sound. I can't believe I'm on home soil."

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