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Georgia

Response to Information Request Number:	GEO01002.IAO
Date:	February 22, 2001
Subject:	Georgia: Information on the Political and Human Rights Situation - Update
From:	INS Resource Information Center
Keywords:	Georgia / Political situation / Torture / Freedom of expression / Freedom of association / Arbitrary detention / Freedom of religion / Extrajudicial executions / Prison conditions / Kidnapping / Separatism

Query:

What is the current political and human rights situation in Georgia?

Response:

Michael Ochs, RIC Consultant and US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe Professional Staff Advisor, prepared this report.

Georgia [population: 5+ million] is making a difficult transition from communism. Eduard Shevardnadze, former Soviet Foreign Minister, returned to his homeland in March 1992, after nationalist President Zviad Gamsakhurdia was ousted in a coup. Shevardnadze, the country's former Communist Party leader, turned himself into a nationalist president; he led Georgia on a pro-Western course, launched economic reforms and largely restored stability. He also began consolidating power. By the mid-1990s, Shevardnadze had removed or neutralized the men who had brought him back to Tbilisi. In November 1995, his party -- the Citizens Union of Georgia (CUG) -- won a majority in parliament and

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Shevardnadze was elected president. His writ, however, is limited: Georgian defeats in national-territorial conflicts in the early 1990s have left Abkhazia and South Ossetia beyond Tbilisi's control. Adjara, on the Black Sea, is run by Aslan Abashidze, a regional boss who has been a thorn in Shevardnadze's side and his rival. Russia has helped the leaders of these regions, in order to weaken Georgia and influence its foreign and economic policies

Political System: Shevardnadze has balanced among various political forces. While promoting young, pro-Western politicians, Shevardnadze has maintained his old cozy relations with former Communist Party and Komsomol figures, as well as "businessmen," who have supported him. Corruption is rampant and is a key cause of the country's energy crisis.

Democratization: Shevardnadze has permitted the emergence of a strong Parliament Speaker -- the outspokenly pro-Western Zurab Zhvania -- and parliament seriously debates issues. But while there are numerous political parties, the CUG has taken on the trappings of a post-Soviet ruling party; its victory in the October 1999 election reflected its control of the process more than its popularity. In April 2000, Shevardnadze was reelected by a falsified and an implausibly large margin. Nobody could outpoll Shevardnadze, but his inflated tallies discredited Georgia's democratization.

Independent NGO's publicize and criticize official abuses and try to defend the rights of individual citizens and religious groups. Independent media do the same but are subject to harassment and intimidation. Judicial reforms have removed some incompetent and venal judges but the judiciary remains susceptible to pressure from officials and well-connected individuals and groups.

Human Rights: The main problems are:

.TORTURE -- Systemic corruption and brutality of law enforcement organs which beat, torture and otherwise abuse detainees (including political prisoners), force confessions, and fabricate or plant evidence. Torture of detainees by members of the security forces is widespread, in some cases leading to death (AI Feb. 2000, DOS Feb. 2001, HRW Oct. 2000).

.PRISON CONDITIONS -- Facilities lack adequate cell space, medicine, and food. Conditions are reported to be inhuman and life threatening (DOS Feb 2001).

.FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY -- Restricted freedom of assembly, especially for backers of former President Gamsakhurdia (Ochs Feb. 2001).

.FREEDOM OF RELIGION -- Security forces interfere with the practice of non-orthodox

religious groups, beat their members, and allow members of the orthodox church to harass and beat members of other religious groups, including: ·Baptist Church ·Hare Krishna ·Roman Catholic Church ·Armenian Apostolic Church ·Jehovah's Witnesses -- Jehovah's Witnesses appear to be at particular risk (AI Sept. 2000, p. 42; DOS Feb. 2001). Since 1998, the authorities have tolerated attacks by mobs, sometimes with the involvement of police, on Jehovah's Witnesses. There is an organized campaign of intimidation and persecution against them which the government, despite knowing of growing Western concern, has been unable or unwilling to stop. Nor have any law enforcement officials been punished for complicity or for not protecting citizens who are Jehovah's Witnesses (Ochs 22 Feb. 2001). On February 22, 2001, Georgia's Supreme Court rejected requests by the Jehovah's Witnesses Watchtower Society to be officially recognized in the country (AFP 22 Feb. 2001).

·ARBITRARY DETENTION -- Police frequently detain persons without warrants. At the end of 2000, there were 8,676 persons in custody, including both prisoners serving sentences and suspects held in pretrial detention (DOS Feb. 2001).

·FREEDOM OF SPEECH -- Although the press was generally free, security and other authorities on occasion have attempted to intimidate the press through public comments, private admonitions and, in some cases, violence. Members of the media who report on wrongdoing by government or security forces appear to be at risk of retaliation (AI, Sept. 2000, p. 43; DOS Feb. 2001).

·SEPARATIST CONFLICT IN ABKHAZIA -- Extrajudicial executions and kidnappings by partisan groups and by Abkhaz separatists have been reported. Many kidnappings are believed to be criminal or economic, not political (DOS Feb. 2001).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC within time constraints. This response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

References:

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US Department of State. "Georgia," COUNTRY REPORTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS PRACTICES FOR 2000 (Washington, DC: February 2001) - <http://www.state.gov> - accessed on 28 Feb. 2001.

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