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GGA42355.E

Georgia: Treatment of Meskhetian Turks; state protection (2000 - January 2004)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

Originally from the region of Meskhetia, now called Samtskhe-Javakheti in south-west Georgia, Meskhetian Turks (or Akhiska as they are known in Turkish) are of either Georgian or Turk extraction (Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003). Georgia is currently the home to a very small population as the bulk of the original inhabitants were deported to Central Asia in November 1944 and since prevented from returning (ibid.; IPD 2000, Introduction; RFE/RL 15 Aug. 2000; IWPR 9 Oct. 2003; *Newsday* 23 May 2000; OSI 1998, Preface). Their proposed repatriation remains a controversial issue in Georgia (Arminfo 13 Dec. 2002; Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003; IWPR 9 Oct. 2003; ibid. 23 Jan. 2003; COE 19 June 2003, 76) and is discussed in a separate section below.

In 1997, representatives of the *Vatan* diaspora organization in Azerbaijan reported that Georgia was home to 187 Meskhetians (IPD 2000, Sec. II. 1). In 2003, the population of Meskhetians in Georgia was estimated at less than 1,000 persons (IWPR 9 Oct. 2003), of which, between 600 and 700 are returnees (COE 23 Apr. 2002, 14). A 1998 study by the Forced Migration Projects (FMP) of the Open Society Institute (OSI) noted that 'a significant number' of the then-estimated 500 returnees were "housed in a dilapidated complex in the isolated Gldani neighbourhood on the outskirts of Tbilisi" while the rest were living in agricultural areas around Georgia (OSI 1998, Ch. 4). More recent reports refer to Meskhetians living in the western region of Samtredia (IWPR 9 Oct. 2003), in the Akhaksikhe district of Samtskhe-Javakheti (ibid. 23 Jan. 2003; *Newsday* 23 May 2000; Mediamax 14 May 2002) and Tbilisi (*Newsday* 23 May 2000). The Institute of War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) reported in January 2003 that only eight families have returned to the Samtskhe-Javakheti (Meskhetia) region (23 Jan. 2003), although Armenian news agency Mediamax claims that there are 17 families (14 May 2002).

Treatment of Meskhetian Turks

The Research Directorate found very few reports concerning the treatment of Meskhetian Turks already living in Georgia among the sources consulted. The New York-based managing editor for the Central Eurasia Project of the Open Society Institute (OSI) and author of numerous articles on Georgia stated that he was unaware of recent acts of violence against the minority (OSI 30 Jan. 2004). He observed that, in general, Georgians look upon the Meskhetian Turks with a degree of caution, "mostly from an economic sense," and are not in favour of repatriation (ibid.).

However, in discussions with Meskhetian Turks in Georgia, the representative of the CEP was told that that they feel themselves subject to administrative pressures designed to promote their assimilation (ibid.). *Newsday* reported that the Georgian government was not providing much assistance in learning the Georgian language or attempting to cool rising popular hostility toward the group (23 May 2000). Georgian authorities have requested that repatriates take Georgian surnames and to confirm themselves to be ethnic Georgians (Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003; *Newsday* 23 May 2000; OSI 1998, Ch. 4). In 2000, the Georgian head of the Repatriation Service told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) that "without exception, all those Meskhetians who have returned to Georgia have adopted Georgian last names and sent their children to Georgian-language schools" (RFE/RL 15 Aug. 2000).

Newsday reported that some of those repatriated to Georgia had not received citizenship papers, without which one cannot legally register the purchase of his or her new home (ibid.). However, in its 22 June 2001 report on racism in Georgia, the Council of Europe (COE) noted that most repatriates had been able to obtain citizenship, yet noted that integration had been slow as a result of language barriers and issues related to family names (23 Apr. 2002, 14).

With respect to integration, the IWPR's report on the small Meskhetian community called "'Plot 9 in Ianeti'" in Samtredia region noted they live a quiet and isolated existence, avoiding contact with the nearby Georgian-Ianeti community (IWPR 9 Oct. 2003). According to the head of the local administration, the Meskhetians live like other east Georgians and, although they lack gas or electricity, they have fertile land, cattle, a school, a policeman and a doctor (ibid.). Very few of the older generation speak Georgian or Russian, favouring a dialect of Turkish; however, young Meskhetians are known by their Georgian names at school and have recently begun learning the Georgian language (ibid.). In the estimation of the IWPR, the children are assimilating to a greater degree than their parents (ibid.).

Reports from 2000 and 2003 indicate that the Armenian and Georgian communities of Samtskhe-Javakheti are opposed to the resettlement of deported populations in that region (IWPR 23 Jan. 2003; Arminfo 13 Dec. 2002; Prime-News 11 Nov. 2000; OSI 30 Jan. 2004). In one example of this opposition, the IWPR quoted a Georgian inhabitant of the municipality of Akhaltsikhe in January 2003 as stating that Meskhetian returns would induce Georgian and Armenian populations to "take up [their] axes" (IWPR 23 Jan. 2003). In the opinion of the Central Eurasian Project editor, "if the government actually tried to promote return to [Samtskhe-Javakheti], then violence could result" (ibid.).

Repatriation

The vast majority of Meskhetians live in diaspora communities spread across the former Soviet Union, Central Asia and the Caucasus, with populations in Russia (particularly Krasnodar), Azerbaijan, Turkey and Ukraine (Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003). The estimated size of the diaspora community is 270,000 to 400,000 persons (Interfax 9 July 2003; IPD 2000, Sec. II.1).

In 1999, as a condition of its entry into the Council of Europe, the Georgian government adopted a 12-year plan to repatriate Meskhetian Turks; however, by 2003, Tbilisi had not yet implemented the plan (Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003). The COE noted that the "'Law on Repatriation of Persons Deported from Georgia During the 1940s under the Soviet Regime,'" was undergoing its third draft revision in 2003 (19 June 2003, 76). Meanwhile, some estimates have 200,000 Meskhetian deportees and descendents eligible to return to Georgia (IWPR 23 Jan. 2003). Arif Yunusov, an Azerbaijani historian of the Meskhetian Turks noted, however, that many of the diaspora's younger generation are likely less willing to return to Georgia, so the actual number of those interested in returning is much lower (ibid.). In May 2000, *Newsday* reported that approximately 600 persons had repatriated to Georgia (23 May 2000) and as of late January 2003, 649 persons had returned (IWPR 23 Jan. 2003).

Georgian authorities argue that the return plan has not been initiated because returns would risk further destabilizing the country, that there was a lack of free land to resettle Meskhetians without uprooting other populations, that Georgia is already burdened by 200,000 internal refugees from its civil wars and that they feared demands of regional autonomy from returned populations (IWPR 23 Jan. 2003; see also Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003; *Newsline* 23 May 2000). According to Azerbaijani historian Yunusov and Marat Baratashvili, head of the Meskhetian NGO, Union of Georgian Returnees, many of Georgia's reasons are exaggerated (Eurasianet.org 25 Mar. 2003). Diaspora leader Bekir Mamoyev of the Azerbaijan-based group *Vatan* also claimed racism was an underlying cause, arguing that Georgian authorities have been using scare tactics to build opposition to the resettlement plan among the Georgian population (ibid.).

According to a 3 October 2003 statement by the Georgian Minister of State Security, the return process may begin in 2004 or 2005 (Anatolia 3 Oct. 2003); however, since his speech, the Georgian government of President Eduard Shevardnadze has fallen (an event discussed in GGA 42294.E of 26 January 2004). The Research Directorate was unable to find reports indicating how this change in government will affect the repatriation issue among the sources consulted. A 5 January 2004 report from the Tbilisi news agency Kavkasia Press noted that the issue was not among the election policies of incumbent president Mikhail Saakashvili. When queried on this matter, the managing editor of CEP stated that,

while the new president advocates tolerance and a fully democratic society, his track record as an opposition politician is marked by nationalist sentiment. I would say that it remains an open question as to whether he would support mass Meskhetian Turk repatriation. And given the desperate state of Georgia's finances, I tend to doubt whether the new government would make any substantial increase in aid to assist the relatively few Meskhetian Turks who have already returned (OSI 30 Jan. 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate 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. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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ECOI

Horizonti

Human Rights in Georgia Monthly Bulletin

Open Society - Georgia Foundation

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

USAID Caucasus

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