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Defendants in a major political trial alleged that they had been tortured. There were numerous other reports of torture and ill-treatment in detention. In the disputed region of Abkhazia at least six prisoners of conscience were reportedly held for refusing conscription. Tens of ethnic Georgian civilians were alleged to have been arbitrarily detained, and several others to have been deliberately and arbitrarily killed, by Abkhazian security forces. Around 12 people were under sentence of death in Abkhazia. Some 200,000 ethnic Georgians displaced by the conflict continued to face obstacles to their return.

Supporters of former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia were said to have been behind a failed assassination attempt on President Eduard Shevardnadze in February and a short-lived army revolt in October.

May saw the worst fighting in the Gali district of the disputed region of Abkhazia since the end of the war in 1994. Scores of people were reportedly killed and some 30,000 ethnic Georgians fled their homes amid reports that civilians had been attacked by Abkhazian militia or armed Abkhazians operating without the explicit endorsement of the *de facto* Abkhazian authorities but with apparent impunity. Georgian partisan groups continued to claim responsibility for attacks, sometimes fatal, on Abkhazian targets. The Georgian government denied that such groups operated with its tacit support. Members of the peace-keeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States and of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia were also attacked.

A law establishing a civilian alternative to compulsory military service came into force in January, but had not been implemented by the end of the year.

Allegations of torture emerged during a major political trial when defendants, many of whom had been held since 1995, began giving evidence after the start of proceedings in December 1997. Thirteen of the 15 men on trial for a range of offences, including involvement in an assassination attempt on President Shevardnadze in 1995, alleged that they had been beaten or otherwise ill-treated in pre-trial detention to force confessions. Gocha Gelashvili testified that he had suffered two broken ribs and a broken right arm, naming a former Interior Minister and a Tbilisi police chief as being among those who had tortured him. A court-ordered forensic medical examination of five defendants was carried out at the beginning of the year. Although it recorded certain injuries, including Gocha Gelashvili's fractured arm, it claimed it was unable to confirm the circumstances surrounding the injuries owing, among other things, to the passage of time since the injuries were said to have been sustained. All 15 defendants were convicted when the trial ended in

sustained. All 15 defendants were convicted when the trial ended in November and received sentences ranging from 38 months' to 15 years' imprisonment.

Numerous other allegations of torture and ill-treatment were made. In March a senior local official reportedly refused to let police intervene as an angry crowd beat a man to death in the western town of Tsalendjikha. Sergo Kvaratskhelia had reportedly been accused of defiling a grave and stealing money and drugs buried with the deceased. He was severely beaten by those who thought him responsible and spent three days in hospital before being abducted by an angry crowd. The local police called for reinforcements, but the head of the district administration allegedly refused to let them intervene as the crowd beat Sergo Kvaratskhelia to death. The heads of the district and regional police forces were also said to have been present. Four people, none of whom were officials said to have been involved, were arrested in connection with the death.

There were allegations of torture and ill-treatment in police custody. In January Gogi Shiukashvili was detained in the Gldani district of the capital, Tbilisi, on suspicion of stealing vehicle wheels. He alleged that he was beaten initially without explanation and then in an attempt to make him say that another person detained was his brother. Gogi Shiukashvili was then transferred to Tbilisi City Police Administration. He alleged that he was then severely beaten with truncheons over a period of 15 days, until he confessed. He was subsequently transferred to investigation prison No. 1 in Tbilisi. He stated that for the first two weeks there he was virtually unable to move because of the beatings, which left him with a broken nose and severe headaches, as witnessed by 18 cellmates.

An arrest warrant was outstanding for a police officer in hiding alleged to have raped a young woman at Marnueli police station in September 1997 (see *Amnesty International Report 1998*). However, unofficial sources reported that investigations into reports of police ill-treatment rarely resulted in prosecution or imprisonment. It emerged that Gela Kavtelishvili, a senior police officer sentenced to four years' imprisonment in May 1997 on charges that included using electric shocks on suspects (see *Amnesty International Report 1998*), had not been imprisoned at that time. He had been at liberty pending various appeals, and had been arrested in October.

In Abkhazia there was no civilian alternative to compulsory military service. At least six prisoners of conscience were reportedly imprisoned for refusing conscription or completion of military service on grounds of conscience. Five, all Jehovah's Witnesses, were detained in April and released in June, although the cases against them continued. The sixth, Adgura Ashuba, was said to have deserted from the Abkhazian armed forces and then, having become a Jehovah's Witness, refused to complete his military service on religious grounds. He was arrested in March and sentenced in May to five years' imprisonment for desertion.

Allegations of arbitrary detention continued, mainly of ethnic Georgians returning to the tense Gali district of Abkhazia. They frequently complained that they were detained after document checks and only released after paying what the Abkhazians regarded as fines, but which the returnees regarded as bribes. There were reportedly no judicial proceedings or receipts. In other incidents in the district, civilians were reportedly held hostage for ransom. In July, for example, eight Abkhazian soldiers were said to have seized four ethnic Georgians – Guram Beselia, Eter Khuperia, Rezo Kvaraia and Oler Sakheishvili – and a Russian from the village of Orsantia in the Zugdidi district, on the Georgian side of the Inguri river border. They were reportedly taken to the village of Otobaia on the Abkhazian-held side of the Inguri river and held hostage for ransom. Oler Sakheishvili was reportedly killed and his body sent back with the other men when the money was handed over.

Detention without charge or trial was also alleged by Jehovah's

Detention without charge or trial was also alleged by Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia, often accompanied by verbal and physical abuse by Abkhazian police, in conjunction with the break-up of their meetings, or house searches without a warrant. In March Arsen Topchyan, who had arrived from the Russian Federation to visit his parents in the village of Alakhadzy in Abkhazia, was reportedly detained without charge for three days by State Security officers and severely beaten in a cell in the city of Gagra. His parents reportedly obtained his release after paying the large sum of money demanded.

Abkhazia retained the death penalty, although the *de facto* moratorium on executions, in place since 1993, continued. In May officials reported that there were 12 people awaiting execution, including one woman convicted of murder. At least one prisoner was pardoned during the year. Ethnic Georgian Ruzgen Gogokhiya, who had been sentenced to death in 1995 for "terrorist acts" against civilians (see *Amnesty International Report 1996*), was reportedly handed over to Georgian government representatives in July.

Allegations of deliberate and arbitrary killings of ethnic Georgians by Abkhazian forces continued. In June, six residents of Chuburkhi who had returned to tend their crops were reportedly led at gunpoint by Abkhazian forces to the Inguri river, forced into the water, then fired on. Two men named as Dzandzava and Ubilava were reportedly killed; three others were wounded.

Many of the estimated 200,000 ethnic Georgians displaced by the conflict in Abkhazia continued to face obstacles to their return, apparently on grounds of their ethnicity. After the May fighting, some 1,400 homes were reportedly set on fire, in what was described as widespread and systematic destruction of civilian housing in the Gali district. Houses and villages were also said to have been systematically looted before being burned. As most residents affected fled the swift onset of fighting with few personal effects, the loss of their possessions and crops further hampered their return. In July the UN Security Council demanded that the *de facto* Abkhazian authorities allow the unconditional and immediate return of all those displaced since the resumption of hostilities in May, and condemned "the deliberate destruction of houses by Abkhaz forces, with the apparent motive of expelling people from their home areas".

Amnesty International continued to call for a judicial review of all political cases in which confessions had reportedly been obtained under duress, and for a full, prompt and impartial investigation into all allegations of torture and ill-treatment in custody, with the results made public and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Amnesty International urged the *de facto* Abkhazian authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all those imprisoned solely for refusing military service on grounds of conscience, and to enact legislation creating an alternative civilian service of non-punitive length together with a fair procedure in law for implementing it.

The organization urged the *de facto* Abkhazian authorities to ensure the safety of all residents, regardless of their ethnic origin, by, among other things, ensuring that no one was detained outside legitimate administrative and criminal proceedings, and by instigating prompt, impartial and comprehensive investigations into all instances in which Abkhazian forces were alleged to have deliberately and arbitrarily killed civilians. Amnesty International also urged the *de facto* authorities to take appropriate and timely measures to ensure the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons under conditions in which their safety, and the safety of those already returned, could be guaranteed.

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