

Web Portal on Human Rights in Georgia

 humanrights.ge/index.php

An open letter of Georgian civil society organizations to:



-United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet,

-Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Dunja Mijatović,

-EU Special Representative for Human Rights, Mr. Eamon Gilmore,

-EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, Mr. Toivo Klaar,

-Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office for the South Caucasus, Mr. Rudolf Michalka

-United Nations Assistant Secretary-General; United Nations representative to the Geneva International Discussions, Ms. Cihan Sultanoğlu

-Amnesty International Acting Secretary General, Ms. Julie Verhaar,

-Human Rights Watch Executive Director, Mr. Kenneth Roth,

-Freedom House President, Mr. Michael J. Abramowitz

We, the undersigned Georgian civil society organizations, are writing this urgent call for action with grave concern over the unfolding humanitarian crisis in the Akhgori district of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, and in hopes that your immediate action will protect the local population from further harm.

We would like to bring to your attention that in early September, the Russian Federal Security Service and the de facto South Ossetian authorities imposed a complete ban on movement across the Mosabruni-Odzisi crossing point, a lifeline for residents of the Akhgori district, many of whom commute daily to the rest of Georgia to receive medical care, education and social services, as well as to visit their relatives and family members.

The crossing point, which normally used to handle around 400 crossings a day, remains closed until this day, with no indication as to when the restrictions will be lifted, leaving the local population - ethnic Georgians and Ossetians alike - at peril. Many of the residents left the area shortly before the ban took effect, seeking shelter in the Tbilisi-

controlled territory, while those remaining in the district, an estimated 1,000 persons, have faced desperate humanitarian conditions, including food shortages and increased costs of commodities.

The decision came particularly harsh for the elderly, as well as for students and those needing urgent medical treatment. The restriction has already taken its human toll as well; a local source in the area reported that up to ten Akhagori residents have passed away due to absence of proper medical treatment. This includes 70-year-old Margo Martiashvili, native of the village of Ikoti, who died shortly after the de facto authorities refused to allow the critical patient to the Tbilisi-controlled territory.

In December and January, respectively, the de facto authorities relaxed the travel ban for a limited number of people – patients in critical condition and a few dozen pensioners, but these measures have only been temporary and largely insufficient to address the dire humanitarian conditions in the area.

It is also worth noting that the restriction came on top of the already deteriorated human rights situation in and around the Russian-occupied areas of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Residents of Akhagori, just like those in the Georgian-majority district of Gali in Abkhazia, have long been subjected to unfair treatment by the de facto authorities and their sponsors in the Kremlin.

Over the last few years, Gali and Akhagori residents have seen their rights gradually curtailed, including their right to education in native language, right to freedom of movement and other fundamental rights. And those daring to speak against the authorities have found themselves caught in lengthy legal proceedings, as civic activist Tamara Mearakishvili in Akhagori, who fears her open criticism of the de facto government might lead to her eventual expulsion from the region.

Serious human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests and killings, have not been rare as well, as demonstrated in the cases of Davit Basharuli in 2014, Giga Otkhozoria in 2016, Archil Tatumashvili in 2018 and Irakli Kvaratskhelia in 2019.

In the rest of the areas close to the Russian-occupied regions, locals living on the Tbilisi-controlled territories have faced significant threats to their physical safety and economic well-being. The “borderization” – a process led by the Russian forces to fortify the occupation line by erecting barbed wires and fences – have cost the villagers hundreds of hectares of agricultural land, pastures and hayfields. Hundreds more have been detained for crossing the imaginary boundary. A good illustration was the recent case of Vazha Gaprindashvili, a Tbilisi-based doctor, who was apprehended when trying to cross into the occupied territory to visit a patient there.

We, the Georgian civil society organizations, believe all of this amounts to grave violation of international human rights and humanitarian law, and elicits calls for immediate action.

It is therefore, that we call upon the international community to increase pressure on the

Russian Federation, as the power exercising effective control over the areas, to immediately reopen the closed crossing point in Akhagori, to cease arbitrary detention of civilians across the occupation line and to allow international monitoring missions unimpeded access to the occupied territories.

We also call on the international community to use all necessary measures to ensure prompt delivery of humanitarian aid to populations in need, both in the Russian-occupied regions and the areas adjacent to the two territories.

- *International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy*

- *Georgia's Reforms Associates*

- *Transparency International Georgia*

- *Georgian Democracy Initiative*

- *Open Society Georgia Foundation*

- *Union Sapari*

- *Georgian Institute of Politics*

- *Human Rights Center*

- *Media Development Foundation*

- *Atlantic Council of Georgia*

- *Green Alternative*

- *Europe Foundation*

- *Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center*

- *Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies*

- *Georgian Young Lawyers Association*

- *Partnership for Human Rights*

- *Article 42 of the Constitution*