

Translation B

Georgia after the war

Nervous interval

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When still under part occupation, it's wiser not to play at politics

WORKMEN are busy, hammering away at the Gori apartment blocks smashed by Russian rockets, unloading roofing materials from lorries and installing windows. But making good the physical damage is a small part of Georgia's problems. On the outskirts of town a small tent city has been thrown up by the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) and its miserable inhabitants have no idea when, or even if, they are going home.

Two weeks ago Gori was a ghost town, occupied by Russian troops. Then the Russians pulled out and now most of its people have returned. But the Russians have not gone far. They have withdrawn only 4km (2½ miles) up the road to the village of Karaleti where a small base has been built behind earthwork ramparts. About half of Karaleti's people have come back, says a local, but farther north, in the Russian-controlled zone stretching 23km to the border of Georgia's breakaway province of South Ossetia, almost the entire population is believed to have fled or been ethnically cleansed.

The UNHCR says that of the 4,200 displaced people in Gori, some 600 come from the destroyed flats. The rest come either from former Georgian-held villages in South Ossetia or from the Russian "security zone", where paramilitaries and thugs have been looting and burning houses. Some of the refugees say that they have ventured north to check on their houses but did not feel safe enough to stay.

On September 1st hundreds of thousands of Georgians joined together in anti-Russian protests. They formed a human chain in Gori and marched towards Karaleti. A Russian soldier at the checkpoint told Tsisana Tabadtadze, a Georgian refugee from South Ossetia who was haranguing him, that he came from Yaroslavl, 250km north-east of Moscow. "You flattened Chechnya and now you want to do the same to Georgia," she shrieked. He replied that he would be happy enough to go home.

Russia's president, Dmitry Medvedev, may have thought that by calling Mikheil Saakashvili "a political corpse" this week he would hasten the Georgian president's downfall. In fact, his attack has had the opposite effect. "The phobia of being accused of serving Russian interests in this country is pretty strong," says Tina Khidasheli, a leader of the opposition Republican Party. She agrees that Mr Saakashvili has much to answer for, but says, as do other opposition figures, that "now is not the best time to ask questions." So, for the moment, she says, there will be no calls for his resignation. But the country is volatile and that could change soon, especially if Georgia faces a tough winter plagued by power cuts and a post-war economic crisis.

Alex Rondeli, a veteran foreign-policy analyst, believes that when the time is right the Russians may well unearth someone more amenable to lead Georgia. "They are going around like snakes," he says of certain Georgian politicians he will not name. "Their enemy is weakened and a weakened enemy is a good target." Still, he adds, most Georgian leaders understand that it is not in the country's interests to discuss replacing Mr Saakashvili right now. After all he says: "We are still under occupation and the war has not ended, except maybe for the Western media."