

Press Release

The sixth in an ongoing series of dialogue workshops on the Georgia/Abkhazia conflict and peace process took place in Berlin, Germany from 16-21 December 2001.

In the months preceding the workshop relations between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides have undergone a serious worsening. Hostilities in and around the Kodori Gorge have presented a serious challenge to stability. This has made it necessary for the parties to the conflict to reflect upon their approaches to the peace process. Recent political developments in this region have made the situation even more complex. Opportunities for contact across the conflict divide and for dialogue between the parties, let alone preparedness to engage in a negotiations process, have been much reduced.

The workshop offered opportunities for officials, politicians and representatives of civil society from across the conflict divide to:

- share perceptions of recent developments;
- analyse why and how relations between the parties have deteriorated; and
- explore the parties' respective approaches for moving forward.

Participants were able to communicate effectively about sensitive issues and to address the lack of information that each community has about the other. There was concern that misinformation plays a particularly negative role. The different methods of analysis used during the seminar assisted the participants in coming to a deeper understanding of the relationships among the conflicting parties and other actors and in identifying those groups that play constructive and negative roles. The seminar allowed participants to identify obstacles that need to be overcome as well as areas where there might be potential for more constructive engagement.

A frozen negotiations process creates the risk of a cycle of escalation in which hostile acts feed into further distrust, hardening antagonistic positions and thereby generating further frustration that leads to further hostility. In this cycle it becomes increasingly difficult for the parties to identify constructive ways to change the dynamic of the conflict.

The participants addressed a series of questions relating to who should be included in the resolution process, why and in which ways. Three issues that can impact upon conflict transformation were analysed:

- IDPs and refugees
- Security concerns, and
- The role of the international community

These issues were examined in regard to how they could play a more constructive role in the peace process.

Discussions during the workshop had a rigorous and open character with the participants exchanging frank, and at times painful information and analysis in a

respectful way. Participants agreed that the key to resolution lies in their own hands although the intellectual and material resources of the international community need to be brought to bear in a positive fashion. The organisers observed that at the present time neither party can see a way to compromise, which creates the risk that negotiations are not perceived as the best option to achieve their ends. Although it was difficult to speak in specific terms about confidence building measures, a commonly expressed view was that democratization can be a basis for a more constructive approach to the conflict transformation process, and yet the conflict inhibits democratic development.

The participants had the opportunity of meeting with Ambassador Dr Dieter Boden, the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations, and discussing recent developments in the region. Ambassador Boden emphasised that notwithstanding the complexities of the situation the parties still have significant opportunities to move forward to resolution.

The participants in the seminar were, Armaz Akhvlediani, Pikria Chikhradze, Archil Gegeshidze, Georgii Kacharava, Tamaz Khubua, Shalva Pichkhadze and Paata Zakareishvili from Georgia and Astamur Appba, Manana Gurgulia, Arda Inal-Ipa, Ruslan Kishmaria, Leonid Lakerbaia, Aleksander Studeniken and Batal Tabagua, from Abkhazia. Everyone took part in their individual capacity, not representing any organisation or institution.

The seminar was organised by the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management (Berlin) and Conciliation Resources (London), two international non-governmental organisations with experience in facilitating similar processes in the Caucasus and other regions of the world. The seminar was funded by the German Foreign Office (Berlin) and the Development Service of the Protestant Church (Bonn) with support in kind from the United Kingdom Department for International Development.

Press release issued by the Jonathan Cohen (Conciliation Resources) and Norbert Ropers (Berghof Center)