

# Gangster-soldiers reap profit from Georgian civil war

**Eyewitness**  
Alex Rowell  
in Senaki

Georgian gangsters, posing as government soldiers, are just as likely to ride to war against rebels in the west of the former Soviet republic in a Mercedes as in a tank.

'We go forward, the Zviadists run away, and the Mkhedrioni steal whatever they can and go home'

Horsemen, has been looting the homes of civilians who have fled the advancing government forces. "The Mkhedrioni are simply here to steal," said Archil Avestisvili, a 40-year-old "businessman" turned government soldier. "We (the real soldiers) go forward, the Zviadists run away, and the Mkhedrioni steal whatever they can and go home. One of them even stole our commander's Kalashnikov, which was lying on the ground by his feet while he was looking at a plane in the sky." Chichiko Jamatskhi, aged 70, was on his way to complain to the local Mkhedrioni commander because his house has been plundered. "They shouldn't have done it. I'm a close friend of Eduard Amrosiavili (Shevardnadze, the Georgian leader)," he declared, on the grounds that the two men once spent an evening together. "It's always the same," he added, "every time our village changes hands, the robbers and gangsters move in." Artillery had done for the widows and chickens roamed freely around the bedroom, but the contents of one house near the front line were surprisingly intact. A thin, nervous looking young man emerged from behind the house. Gensadi Asiani, aged 29, and his grandmother, had stayed behind to guard the family home.

## Hundreds drown fleeing latest Armenian push in Azerbaijan

HUNDREDS of Azeri civilians, including children, probably drowned in the River Aras fleeing the latest Armenian advance in south-west Azerbaijan, according to the head of the United Nations mission in Baku, Mamoud el-Said. "Twenty thousand people escaped in Iran, but three times as many are still in danger," he said last night. In the last few days the Armenians have broken a ceasefire agreement and advanced south from the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, reaching Azerbaijan's border with Iran. They have cut off a huge swath of south-west Azerbaijan and now control about a fifth of the country. A source close to the Azeri leadership claimed yesterday that the Armenians were advancing on the Zanguraz region where, according to Dr el-Said, up to 40,000 Azeris from the Armenian Republic and Karabakh are trapped. That is possible. In April, Armenian fighters advanced in a pioneer movement from Armenia and Karabakh to the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan. The Azeri president, Geydar Aliev, has appealed to the UN Security Council to hold an emergency session to condemn the Armenian attack. The Karabakh Armenians claim that it was the Azeris who broke the latest ceasefire. There is no evidence to support that. "Those who make it across the Aras River are being shuttled about 150 kilometres [93 miles] from Iran to Imishli in southern Azerbaijan," Dr el-Said said. There is an Iranian refugee camp in Imishli, east of the new front line at Borzuz. UN and other agencies have been sending blankets, food and other emergency aid to Imishli.

What about his wife, children and parents? He gestured vaguely into the woods at the rear of the house. "I'm hoping the police will come and re-establish order," he said. "What police?" asked Gensadi shrugging his shoulders hopelessly. The Georgian armed forces are a rag-bag of private militias of questionable military ability. A senior Red Cross official commented: "I was in Lebanon during the civil war, in Somalia at its worst, but I've never seen anything so disorganised as the Georgian army."

Fortunately for Mr Shevardnadze, the Gamsakhurdia supporters are no better disciplined. The Black Sea port of Poti was abandoned by the rebels on Monday. There was no fighting in the town. According to locals, the rebels just ran away.

In the harbour there were ships full of Georgian refugees who had escaped last month's fighting for control of Abkhazia, further up the coast. They are victims of Georgia's return to a form of chaotic feudalism. It is not clear how the railway line has been blocked by fighting, they cannot sail down the coast to the conflict-free autonomous Georgian region of Adjara because the local leader there, Aslan Abashidze, feels he has dispensed enough mercy to several thousand refugees already in his hands.

About a mile out of Poti port, on the road towards the rebel stronghold of Senaki, which government troops retook yesterday, we ran into a group of heavily armed and highly strung young Georgians. They tried to explain to us how the fascist Zviadists around the corner were burning children. One of the wild-eyed youths tore open a carton of ammunition, spilling bullets on the road under my car. There was no time to pick them up before a burst of rebel machine-gun fire had us all scurrying for cover.

As we retreated a Georgian government soldier was wounded. He was one of the few. This is a half-hearted conflict compared to the one in Abkhazia. There has been little hand-to-hand fighting between Georgian and Georgian over the last month. The "Zviadists" may put up more resistance now that they are being forced back into their last few strongholds, but the odds are that this civil war will be over in a matter of days.

## Russia rejects Nato status for former East bloc allies

RUSSIA is determined to prevent the admission of its former Warsaw Pact allies to the Nato alliance, the Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, said in London yesterday. Completing his two-day official visit to Britain with a speech at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Mr Kozyrev said east European countries were wrong to seek Nato membership and would be better advised to join Russia in transforming the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe into a fully-fledged regional organisation for ensuring peace and stability in Europe. Nato, Mr Kozyrev said, had no appetite for addressing ethnic and nationalist conflict in Europe and was therefore unlikely to satisfy their security needs. Besides, Nato's enlargement might provoke "a return to the destructive logic of blocks and counter-blocks". It was essential that Europe was transformed into a continent of co-operating states. Mr Kozyrev made a six-point proposal for a new strategy that would have to encompass: a greater capacity for peacekeeping; closer co-operation between the institutions involved in European security, including the United Nations, Nato and the CIS states; assistance — mainly from Russia — to the CIS states for peacekeeping in the "near-abroad" (the former Soviet republics); the strengthening of the CSCS; the prevention of the emergence of new nuclear states in Europe; and the economic reunification of Europe. Mr Kozyrev met John Major, the foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd and the UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, during his stay. Britain has made available £500 million to fund the British Programme for Democracy in Russia and dispatch a team of experts to advise President Yeltsin on the December elections.



Home front... Two women struggle in a bread queue in the Georgian capital Tbilisi. The war with rebels in the west of the country is causing shortages. PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDER ZEMLIANOV FOR THE GUARDIAN

## Holdings limited but critics fear large private estates

# Yeltsin land reform forges new market

Jonathan Steele in Moscow

PRESIDENT Boris Yeltsin signed a decree yesterday giving Russians — but not foreigners — the right to buy and sell farm land. The decree, bitterly debated in the government over the last three weeks, does not go as far as radical reformers such as Yegor Gaidar, the deputy prime minister, would like. But it does move towards creating a land market for the first time since Stalin's collectivisation 60 years ago.

Laws passed in the last two years allow Russians to buy flats, country cottages and small allotments. But there was a 10-year moratorium on the sale of farm land. Mr Yeltsin's decree lifts this. But, according to Viktor Khlystun, the agriculture minister, regions will be allowed to limit the maximum amount of land an individual can own.

is not confined to Russian communists, but dates back to before the revolution in 1917 when much land was communally owned and private landlords were seen as exploiters. Mr Khlystun told the Inter-Tass news agency that the decree bans the use of hired farm labour, meaning that owners must work the land themselves, individually or co-operatively. Anyone wanting to buy land will have to show some farming knowledge and experience, and if it is left uncultivated or used "irrationally" the local authorities will have the right to take it back. It was not clear what compensation will be paid.

Foreigners will be allowed to rent land, but not own it. The full text of the decree has not yet been published. If Mr Khlystun's version is accurate, it will be a disappointment to Mr Gaidar, who said on Tuesday that there would be no limits on land sales. The radical reformers have won one victory. The right to land will be given to all existing members of collective and state farms, including pensioners

and children, on the basis of a certificate specifying their share of the farm's buildings and equipment. The shares will be defined according to their job and length of service. The certificates will be similar to the vouchers which Russians received last year for shares in privatised factories. They will have a face value in hectares and can be sold at auction. The scheme has been strongly promoted by the International Financial Corporation, the private arm of the World Bank. The first certificates were distributed on Saturday. Many farms have turned themselves into "stock companies" over the last two years, a form of privatisation which the reformers consider fraudulent. In many places, farm chairman and a few of their friends ended up as owners of most of the land. Pyotr Filippov, chairman of the Analytical Centre for Economic and Social Reform, said that the new decree should declare these deals invalid.

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