

WCC team sees vengeful violence in Georgian area: A state of lawlessness

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A World Council of Churches team that included two U.S. clergy returned to the WCC's Swiss headquarters from a visit to Georgia and Russia to describe a state of "lawlessness" in areas of South Ossetia and said humanitarian aid is not reaching people caught up in the conflict.

"Threats and violence have driven tens of thousands of people from their homes, and the greatest destruction appears to be the postconflict destruction of communities abandoned during the conflict," Jonathan Frerichs, a WCC program executive who took part in the five-day visit, told a September 9 briefing in Geneva.

Tensions between Russia and Georgia over the Moscow-backed separatist region of South Ossetia erupted August 7 when the Georgian army is said to have launched an assault to regain control of the region. This triggered a counteroffensive by Russian troops into the Georgian heartland.

About two-thirds of the 150,000 people displaced into Georgia by the conflict have returned to their homes, Frerichs said. Of the 50,000 who have not returned, about half probably no longer have homes to go back to because their homes no longer exist, he added.

U.S. Presbyterian Elenora Giddings Ivory, director of the WCC's program on public witness and global advocacy, said the delegation, of which she was a member, urged governments to allow humanitarian aid to be provided to all.

Giddings Ivory, who headed the Washington office of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for nearly two decades, added that the group, at a meeting in Moscow, had "urged the Russian government to protect the people and address the lawlessness that we saw in South Ossetia."

The WCC team said that it had been told by Russian deputy foreign minister Grigory Karasin that the Russian army has strict instructions to stop the looting.

The first sight the delegation saw as it reached South Ossetia by road from North Ossetia was of villages that had been destroyed, probably “by the activities of irregular forces, presumably South Ossetian civilians,” said Frerichs, a Lutheran from the U.S.

“When you drive by Kemerti, you see house-by-house-by-house destroyed, not by rockets or jet fighters but by the action of angry people,” said Frerichs. He said the anger followed “tit-for-tat cycles of violence” that had affected the people of both South Ossetia and Georgia over the past 20 years.

Giddings Ivory said she had been asked by a reporter in Moscow to apportion responsibility for the conflict. Her response was, she said, “It doesn’t matter who started it, they both need to stop what they are doing.”

She recalled that earlier in 2008, she was part of a WCC team that visited Kenya following violence that broke out in that east African country following disputed election results. “There were times when it seemed the same,” she said of her latest trip.

“Whether you call it ethnic or whether you call it tribal, it’s one group of people feeling they need to annihilate, discontinue, attack another group of people,” she added. “It was just like in Kenya. People didn’t expect things to go so far but things just take hold,” said Giddings Ivory, who spoke of the need for a “healing of memories.” -*Ecumenical News International*