

Issue Date: **October 07, 1993**

## Separatists Seize Most of Georgia's Abkhazia Region

- [Government Forces Expelled](#)
- [Capital City Seized](#)
- [Shevardnadze Goes to Front Line](#)
- [Former Leader Opens Second Front](#)

### Government Forces Expelled

Separatists in Georgia's northwestern Abkhazia region October 1 succeeded in expelling from the territory government forces fighting to put down the insurrection there, the rebels said. A statement from the Abkhazian mission in the Russian capital, Moscow, declared, "The territory of Abkhazia has been completely liberated from Georgian occupiers." The British press reported October 4 that one part of Abkhazia, the Svanetsky area around a segment of the Inguri River, was still in Georgian hands, but looked set to fall within days. [See 1993 [Georgia: Shevardnadze, Yeltsin Set Friendship Pact](#)]

The Abkhazian statement followed the secessionists' capture September 30 of the towns of Ochamchira, on the Black Sea coast, and Gali, about 15 miles (20 km) inland. The rebels' military successes had sent at least 70,000 refugees into flight, some of them into the mountainous interior, where they faced possible starvation and exposure. The United Nations October 1 said that it was preparing to airlift 40 metric tons of clothing, blankets and other relief supplies to the refugees. A second airlift was also planned, but the U.N. needed \$200,000 in additional funds to finance it.

The Abkhazians, most of whom were Turkic-speaking Moslems, claimed ancestral sovereignty over the area they lived in. They had been fighting central Georgian authority to establish that claim since August 1992. Prior to the widespread movement of refugees, Abkhazians comprised about 17% of the population of Abkhazia. Georgians and Russians largely made up the rest.

### Capital City Seized

Rebels captured the Abkhazian capital, Sukhumi, September 27 on the 12th day of an offensive that had begun September 16. Early in the battle for the city, on September 20, government forces defending it had come under air attack by Russian-built SU-25 fighter-bombers. The Abkhazian forces were not known to have such aircraft, and it was believed that the sorties were flown from Russian-controlled bases in northern Abkhazia, or from airfields in southern Russia.

The offensive violated a July 27 Russian-mediated cease-fire between the Abkhazians and the Georgian government. Press reports September 28 said that it was the government's withdrawal of its heavy arms, under the terms of the truce, that had left it vulnerable to the Abkhazian assault.

Large sections of Sukhumi were destroyed by rockets and by the 500-700 artillery shells that had fallen daily on the city during the height of the siege. At least 500 Georgian soldiers were reported killed in the battle for Sukhumi. More than 2,000 were wounded. During the fighting, two civilian airliners had been shot down near the Abkhazian capital, September 21 and September 22, killing 108 people in total. A third airliner was fired on on the tarmac September 23 as it was boarding passengers. The number of deaths in the third attack was not known.

The Georgian embassy in Moscow had said that the Abkhazian victors in Sukhumi had captured and killed Zhiuli Shartava, the head of the Georgian government in the region, it was reported September 28. Shartava's whereabouts were not known. Georgian leader Eduard A. Shevardnadze said September 28 that the Abkhazians entering Sukhumi had murdered scores of government officials, police and civilians. Atrocities and looting were also reported October 4 in other parts of Abkhazia. Abkhazian authorities October 5 imposed a nightly curfew in Sukhumi. That day, the central government also set a curfew on Tbilisi.

### Shevardnadze Goes to Front Line

Shevardnadze had gone to the front line at the start of the fighting for Sukhumi, where he had been seen changing his business suit for combat gear and trying to rally demoralized government troops, pistol in hand. He left the city only at the last moment and took refuge in Gulripshi, a village less than 10 miles (16 km) from Sukhumi.

From Gulripshi, Shevardnadze issued a statement September 27 saying that he had asked Russia to send troops to reinforce the Georgian army, but had not been heeded. Shevardnadze added that he had also offered to have Georgia join the Commonwealth of Independent States in exchange for support from the government in Moscow. That offer reversed the Georgian leader's previous opposition to joining the C.I.S. Shevardnadze returned to Tbilisi September 28.

(Shevardnadze September 16 had appealed to Russia, the U.S. and the U.N. for "urgent intervention" in the crisis. The day before, he had reclaimed his position as head of state after parliament rejected his resignation September 14. Shevardnadze had stepped down in a calculated move to shock parliament into granting him leave to declare a state of emergency in Georgia. The state of emergency went into effect September 19/20.)

In his September 27 statement, Shevardnadze blamed the rout partly on Russian interference and partly on civil strife elsewhere that had divided Georgia's armed forces.

The Russian foreign ministry had responded with a statement in which it "categorically denies all accusations of involvement by the Russian Federation and its armed forces in the last outbreak of bloody clashes in Abkhazia," the New York Times reported in an article datelined September 27. The statement added that Russia had made "persistent efforts" to halt the bloodshed.

### Former Leader Opens Second Front

In addition to the challenge posed by Abkhazia, Shevardnadze's authority was being contested by Zviad K. Gamsakhurdia, a former Georgian president who had been deposed early in 1992. [See 1992 [Georgian President Flees: Rebels Control Former Soviet Republic; Other Developments](#)]

Armed Gamsakhurdia supporters had taken effective control of the Mingrelia region of western Georgia, which bordered Abkhazia, and set up a 60-member assembly there. That body September 2 voted to call Gamsakhurdia back to Mingrelia from his place of exile in Grozny, the capital of the self-declared republic of Chechnya, within Russia's borders.

Gamsakhurdia did return to Mingrelia during the weekend of September 25-26. His supporters October 2 seized the port of Poti, depriving the government in Tbilisi of its last significant outlet to the Black Sea. On October 3, Gamsakhurdia loyalists took control of the towns of Khoni and Vani, about 145 miles (230 km) west of Tbilisi. Their presence there threatened Kutaisi, Georgia's second-largest city, and the railway linking Tbilisi with the Black Sea. Government forces had retaken Khoni from the rebels, an interior ministry spokesman said October 4.

Two people were killed when Gamsakhurdia supporters October 5 attacked unspecified government installations in western Georgia.

**Citation format:**

The title of the article. (Year, Month Day). *Facts On File World News Digest*. Retrieved Month Day, Year, from World News Digest database

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