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Commissioner for Human Rights concludes visit to Georgia and conflict zones

Strasbourg, 21.02.2007 - Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, has returned from a visit to Georgia. The Commissioner focused his attention on the human rights situation in the frozen conflicts related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He will now prepare a report to the authorities in Georgia, with specific recommendations about how to improve the human rights situation.

During his mission, the Commissioner visited accommodation centres for internally displaced persons (IDPs), prisons, hospitals and schools, and discussed a wide range of issues including the protection of minorities, the availability of education, and the treatment of arrested and detained people.

"I endeavored to listen to the representatives of all sides and wanted to send the signal that respect for human rights is under scrutiny in all areas," Commissioner Hammarberg said. "I am glad this was understood and respected by all parties. I met a number of people in position of authority, as well as non-governmental representatives and ordinary people in detention places, refugee centres, schools, hospitals and other institutions."

In Abkhazia, the Commissioner met with the *de facto* President Sergey Bagapsh, *de facto* Minister of Interior Otar Khetsia, *de facto* Vice Foreign Minister Maxim Gunjia as well as representatives of NGOs. Later, in South Ossetia, he met with Boris Chochiev, the *de facto* First Deputy Head of Government and Co-Chair of Joint Control Commission, as well as Merab Chigoev, the *de facto* Minister of Justice, Alla Djioeva, the *de facto* Minister of Education, and finally David Sanakoev, the *de facto* Ombudsman. On a separate occasion, the Commissioner met Dimitri Sanakoev, leader of the Tbilisi-supported alternative government in South Ossetia.

In Abkhazia, the Commissioner welcomed the release of Levan Mamasakhlisi who had been held in the Abkhaz prison of Dranda for five years. Mamasakhlisi was handed over to the Commissioner on departure from Abkhazia and taken to his family in Tbilisi. "I am confident that the decision by the Abkhaz leader Sergey Bagapsh to release Mr. Mamasakhlisi will demonstrate that positive steps taken in defense of human rights contribute to confidence building, which is needed for a peaceful resolution of the conflict," the Commissioner commented.

During his visit, the Commissioner also met Georgia's highest authorities in Tbilisi, including President Mikheil Saakashvili, Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli, as well as the 1st Vice-Speaker of the Parliament, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of Justice, the Minister for Internally Displaced People and Accommodation, and the Public Defender (Ombudsman). The Commissioner also met parliamentarians, human rights activists, and representatives of international organisations.

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