

# Press Release

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## **"Increased efforts must be made to ensure human rights protection in the areas affected by the South Ossetia conflict", says Commissioner Hammarberg in his report**

Strasbourg, 22.10.2008 – Publishing a [report](#) after his second special mission to the areas affected by the South Ossetia conflict, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, stated that "the human rights and humanitarian situation remain critical. All relevant actors must promptly alleviate the human suffering of thousands of people."

The Commissioner reports that by mid-October, more than 95,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been able to return to their homes out of an estimated 131,000. "This is a positive signal" he said. "Decision-makers must effectively implement the principle of the right to voluntary return and guarantee safety and reconstruction of houses."

"There has been progress in ensuring care and support to IDPs, including some 20,000 people who are not likely to be able to return to their homes in the near future" he continued. "Work is underway to build 2,100 single-family housing units, which would provide a good provisional solution for a large number of IDPs. With winter approaching, it is crucial to address their needs with urgency."

Commissioner Hammarberg also stressed that similar efforts are needed for the more than 220,000 IDPs from previous displacements, underlining that "the strides taken to improve the situation of IDPs cannot be a substitute for the right to a safe return."

De-mining still remains an acute need as "large quantities of unexploded ordnance and bombs still pose a real danger to people, including sub-munition 'duds' from cluster bombs. Systematic de-mining is needed, both in the 'buffer zone' and in the areas under Georgian control. This requires full cooperation and information sharing between both sides."

Another serious problem is the safety of individuals, in particular in the northern part of the 'buffer zone'. "It is imperative to bring a complete end to looting and violence, but it is also important to address longer-term concerns, in particular as regards the level of professionalism and respect for human rights among the law enforcement officers. The authorities and the international community must monitor closely the situation on the ground to detect and defuse any resurgence of violence or ethnic targeting."

Resuming the exchanges of prisoners which have taken place so far, Commissioner Hammarberg said that 179 people and 43 dead bodies were handed over by the de facto authorities of South Ossetia to the Georgian authorities, who in turn handed over 41 people and 2 dead persons. "Ten more corpses shall soon be delivered from Tskhinvali to Tbilisi" said the Commissioner. "It is of greatest importance to take every possible step to find missing persons and to clarify what has happened in each case. Turning every stone in the cases of missing persons is also important to stop the criminal hostage-takings perpetrated to pressure the other side for information or releases."

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Finally, the Commissioner calls upon international actors to enhance their coordination and ensure that monitors are capable to handle human rights crisis. Moreover, he urged the relevant authorities to guarantee as a matter of urgency that “all humanitarian organisations have access to all relevant areas, from all directions, all the time.”

The report is based on the Commissioner’s visit carried out from 25 to 27 September 2008 in the areas affected by the South Ossetia conflict to assess the implementation of the six principles for urgent human rights and humanitarian protection which he formulated in August. The full text is available on the Commissioner’s website.

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The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent, non-judicial institution within the Council of Europe, mandated to promote awareness of, and respect for, human rights in the 47 member States of the Organisation. Elected by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the present Commissioner, Mr Thomas Hammarberg, took up his function on 1 April 2006.