

Lawlessness hampers aid effort in Georgia

AFP, Tbilisi

Aid is flowing into Georgia to help civilians displaced by fighting, but humanitarian groups said yesterday that lawlessness and banditry make it impossible to distribute it in the worst-hit areas.

An estimated 118,000 refugees have fled conflict around the Georgian separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which now are under rebel and Russian control.

"Access is the number-one priority right now," the United Nations' resident coordinator for Georgia, Robert Watkins, told AFP. "There's no point having all this aid if you can't take it where it needs to be distributed."

Watkins identified the Georgian city of Gori, under the control of

Russian forces, as being of critical importance but said the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also hoped to be able to distribute aid in other towns and in South Ossetia.

"Paramilitary and criminal groups are taking advantage of the uncertainty and the lack of administration and police," he said. "In terms of security it is very similar to what happened after the invasion of Iraq."

On Thursday, a visit to Gori by UN security officials on a mission to assess the security situation ended in disarray when they were held up at gunpoint and had two of their UN-marked vehicles stolen.

Watkins said another attempt to evaluate the situation would take place on Friday, but he stressed the

need for police on the ground to guarantee the safety of aid workers.

An AFP reporter travelling with Russian forces and rebels near Gori on Wednesday saw scores of houses ablaze and reported looting by soldiers and volunteer militiamen.

People fleeing the conflict zone have told AFP of widespread looting, arson and murder, and several journalists in Gori have been robbed at gunpoint.

"We have access to everywhere except the neediest areas," Daniela Cavini, a regional spokeswoman for the European Commission's humanitarian aid department, told AFP.

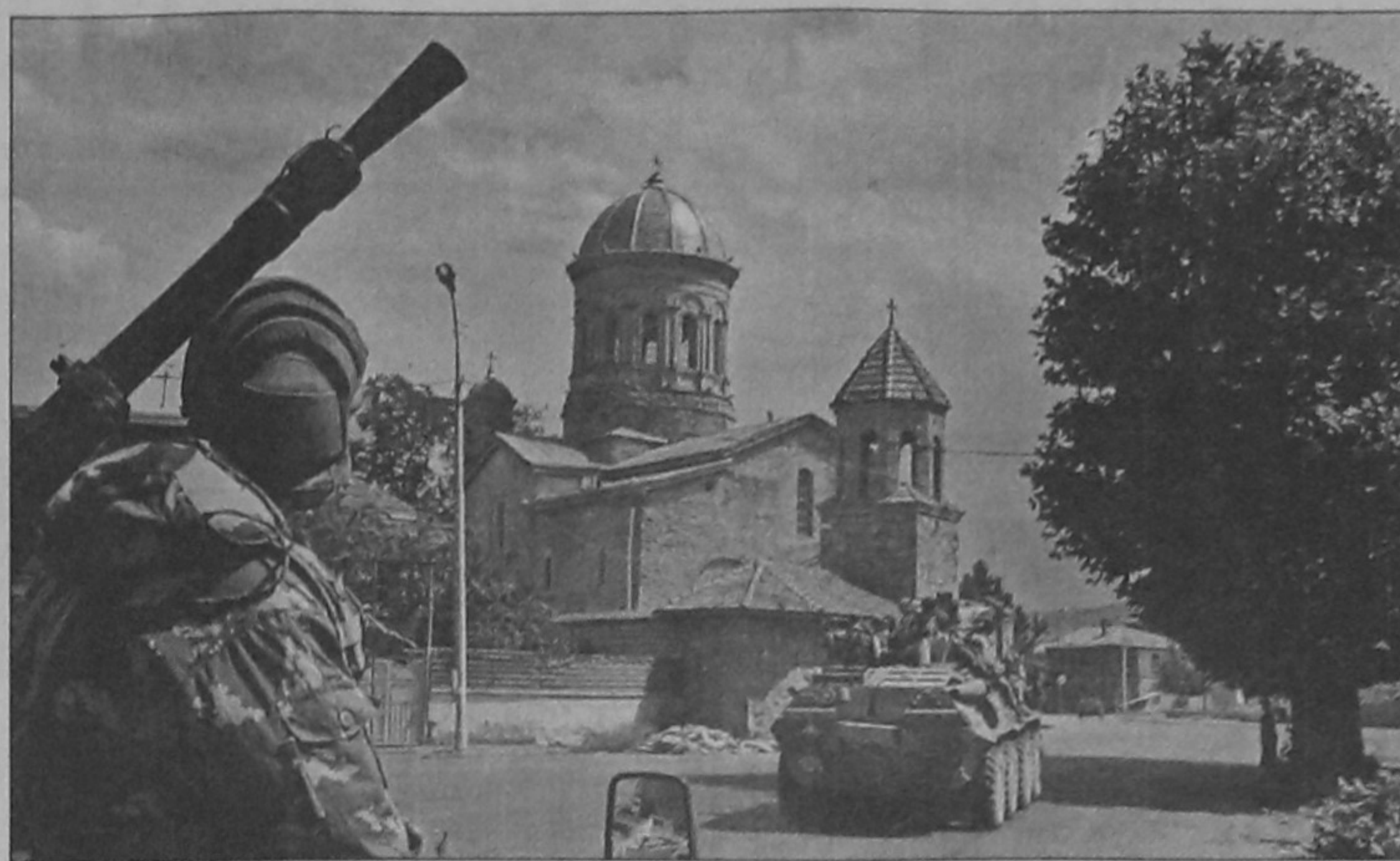
"We don't know how many people are there (in the conflict zone). All those that were able to

leave have left, but the ones that stayed behind are the most vulnerable," she said, adding that mostly elderly people had stayed.

In South Ossetia, Russia's emergency situations ministry and health ministry have begun setting up facilities, but an AFP reporter in the bombed-out capital of Tskhinvali said Thursday he had not seen any aid being distributed.

At the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), security concerns are also hampering relief efforts outside the capital Tbilisi.

"In principle we should be able to get access, but the security situation doesn't allow us to go in at the moment," said Jessica Barry, a spokeswoman here. "We are pushing to have that access."



A Russian soldier looks on as armoured troop carriers pass an orthodox cathedral on Thursday in Gori. The Russian checkpoint on the road into Gori from Tbilisi, the country's only major east-west road link, has become a flashpoint between Russian and Georgian troops, raising fears that fighting could break out again.

Leonardo was a matchmaker too?

AP, Rome

Born 500 years too early to put her photo on an online dating site, this young woman tried a different matchmaking approach: a portrait by Leonardo Da Vinci.

Experts say a little-known portrait of a young woman previously attributed to an anonymous German artist, is likely a drawing made by Leonardo. The 13-by-9.4-inch parchment is believed to be a nuptial portrait aimed at attracting a possible groom for the unidentified woman.

The drawing, which could be worth millions if the new attribution is confirmed, was bought in 1998 for \$21,850 by a private collector at an auction in New York, said Alessandro Vezzosi, the director of a museum dedicated to the artist in his hometown of Vinci.

"Every element points to Leonardo," said Vezzosi, one of the experts who examined the drawing. "This work looks extraordinary."



This photo provided by Prof. Alessandro Vezzosi of the 'Museo Ideale Leonardo Da Vinci' on Aug. 4, 2008, is a reproduction of a 15th century portrait of a young woman.

US court rules Saudis not liable for Sept 11 attacks

AFP, New York

A federal appeals court on Thursday ruled Saudi Arabia could not be held liable for the September 11 attacks against the United States despite charitable donations that ended up in the hands of al-Qaeda.

Upholding a 2006 decision by a lower court, the Second Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan ruled inadmissible a lawsuit in which families of victims of the 9/11 attacks charged that Saudi Arabia, four Saudi princes, a Saudi charity and bank had given material support to al-Qaeda.

The plaintiffs in the case cited Saudi donations to Muslim charity groups that were later transferred to the al-Qaeda terror network, arguing the Saudis were responsible for financing the 9/11 attacks.

Japan pressured to oppose US-India nuclear deal

AFP, Tokyo

Anti-nuclear campaigners launched a campaign yesterday to press nuclear energy suppliers to stop an accord between India and the United States, saying it would shatter anti-proliferation efforts.

A loose coalition including activists and scholars focused efforts on Japan, which has been non-committal on the deal that would give India access to nuclear technology without signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

"We urge you to support measures that would avert further damage to the already beleaguered global non-proliferation and disarmament regime," said a letter signed by more than 160 people

and groups from 24 countries.

Japan is a key player in the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which controls the transfer of nuclear material and needs to approve the India-US deal. The group is expected to meet next week in Vienna.

The letter, which will be handed to foreign ministers of all the supplier nations, was signed by the mayors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the two cities that were destroyed by US atomic bombs at the end of World War II in 1945.

"The Japanese foreign ministry must realise that this agreement would be the start of the collapse of the non-proliferation regime," Japanese lawyer Masayoshi Narita told a news conference.

Thai court rules case against Thaksin can proceed

AP, Bangkok

The corruption trial of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his wife can proceed even though the couple fled to Britain earlier this week, a Thai court ruled Friday.

The country's Supreme Court rejected a request from lawyers of Thaksin and his wife, Pojaman, to suspend the trial. The malfeasance and conflict of interest charges stem from Pojaman's 2003 purchase of a plot of land in central Bangkok from a government agency when Thaksin was the country's prime minister.

An anti-corruption law bars prime ministers and their spouses from doing business with government agencies. But there is some dispute over whether the law applies in this case because the agency that sold the land to Pojaman was not technically under the authority of the prime minister.

Sadr calls for followers to sign blood pact against occupiers

AFP, Kufa

Anti-US Shia leader Moqtada Sadr on Friday called on his followers to "sign with their blood" a pledge to resist occupying forces in Iraq and other Muslim countries.

Sadr urged "believers to sign with their blood an oath of allegiance to the imam Mahdi," in a statement read during Friday prayers by Sheikh Assaad al-Nasseri in the Shia holy city of Kufa, south of Baghdad.

The pact commits believers to "take part in resistance in all the Muslim countries and especially Iraq, militarily and ideologically, to the occupiers, colonisers and

secular Western thought," the radical Shia cleric said.

The pact must include a person's name, country and details of where the signing occurred, and to pledge allegiance, a person must cut their thumb and leave a bloody fingerprint on the paper.

"I think of all Muslims, especially in Iraq, as my brothers and I would never do anything to harm their blood, their goods or their dignity," the statement added.

Sadr's powerful Mahdi Army militia has frequently been accused of attacking Sunni Arabs, particularly in Baghdad, in a key factor that led to the creation of single-faith religious districts.

"My only enemies are the occupiers, the infidels, the 'nawasseb' (radical anti-Shia Sunnis), colonisers and invaders. I am not negotiating with them over the signing of a truce and will not sit at the same table as them as long as I live," the statement said.

The Sadr movement's chief spokesman Salah al-Obeidi said the campaign had already begun.

"It is about emphasising the worship of God rather than politics, the fact that the resistance does not have to end as long as there is an occupation, as well as all aspects of resistance to the occupier," he said.

"It is equally a call for unity for all Iraqis," he added.



Muslim protesters stage a rally at the Supreme Court in Manila yesterday, asking for the lifting of an order suspending a draft accord that would create a special "ancestral homeland" for the country's Muslim minority in the southern Philippines.

'Hit squads taking training in Iran'

AP, Washington

Iraqi Shia assassination teams are being trained in at least four locations in Iran by Tehran's elite Quds force and Lebanese Hezbollah and are planning to return to Iraq in the next few months to kill specific Iraqi officials as well as US and Iraqi troops, according to intelligence gleaned from captured militia fighters and other sources in Iraq.

A senior US military intelligence officer in Baghdad described the information Thursday in an interview with The Associated Press. He spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive intelligence.

The officer on Wednesday provided Iraq's national security adviser with several lists of the assassination teams' expected targets. He said the targets include many judges but would not otherwise identify them. Iraq's intelligence service is preparing operations to determine where and when the special group fighters will enter the country and is to provide an assessment to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The US official acknowledged disclosing the information in an attempt to pressure Iran to suspend the training and prevent the militia fighters from returning to Iraq. The US military also wants the Iraqi government to take steps to protect the targets. "Wanted" posters picturing men believed to be heading the special groups are being posted around Baghdad, the military officer said.

The US also is encouraging the Iraqi government to confront Iran with the information in diplomatic channels, and it wants Iraq to continue pumping money into its own reconstruction. By building stability and Iraqis' confidence in their government, internal support for militia groups should decline, making it more difficult for them to operate.

The fighters are expected to return to Iraq between now and October, but the officer said there's no intelligence suggesting they are actually in Iraq yet. The information came from militia fighters captured in Iraq and other sources in the country that the officer would not describe.

11 drown in India

AFP, New Delhi

At least 11 people including seven children drowned when a school bus skidded off a bridge and careened into a river Thursday in southern India, the Press Trust of India reported.

Twenty-five others, including an unspecified number of children, were rescued from the bus, which fell into the rain-swollen Palguni river near Mangalore city in Karnataka state, the agency said.

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NEWS ANALYSIS

War shows Putin running things in Russia

AP, Moscow

When the fighting broke out in Georgia, it was Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and not Russia's new young president who stepped up to lead the country's tough response.

The ongoing conflict has confirmed what has become increasingly obvious in recent weeks: Putin is still the one in charge.

President Dmitry Medvedev has been the Kremlin's voice in recent days, but Putin set the tone from the beginning. And when Medvedev suddenly made an uncharacteristically blunt statement, he seemed to be imitating the mannerisms and language of his powerful mentor.

After Georgia opened fire on the Russian-backed separatist region of South Ossetia, Putin was the first to speak to the nation on television. He also was the first to confer with world leaders, including President Bush, in Beijing for the opening of the Olympics.

Putin promised a strong Russian retaliation, which was not long in coming. Russia rolled hundreds of tanks into Georgia and bombed from the air.

On his way home from China last weekend, Putin stopped in

southern Russia to see South Ossetians who had fled the fighting. He was shown repeatedly on television bounding down the steps from the aircraft, sending the clear message that he was ready to take charge.

Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili had little doubt who was behind the Russian attack. Speaking on a conference call with foreign journalists Wednesday, he said he had tried to reach "President Putin, or Prime Minister Putin," but was unable to get through.

Even Putin's critics were impressed with his performance in the first days of the conflict. "For the first time in my life I was amazed by the mastery with which Putin is able to hold onto power," political commentator Yulia Latynina wrote in the online Yezhnevny Zhurnal.

In contrast, Medvedev chaired a meeting of his Security Council over the weekend and made a statement worthy of the former law professor he is: "In accordance with the constitution and federal law, I, as president of Russia, am obliged to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are located. We won't allow the deaths of our compatriots

go unpunished."

Russia has given passports to residents of South Ossetia, which broke from Georgia in the early 1990s.

By Tuesday, the Kremlin image makers seemed to understand that Medvedev as commander-in-chief had to put in a better performance. And as president, he was the one who needed to meet with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was in Moscow on a EU-sponsored peace mission.

But when their joint news conference was delayed, the word circulated among reporters in the Kremlin that the two presidents were waiting for Putin. As if in confirmation of this, the prime minister's motorcade was seen zooming through central Moscow toward the Kremlin.

This created the impression that Putin could not really trust Medvedev or Medvedev needed reinforcement, said Masha Lipman, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Centre. "In any case I think this too is an indirect indication of who is more important in this ruling tandem," she said.

When Medvedev walked out with Sarkozy for their televised news conference, he spoke like Putin.