

# Experience as Chief Military Observer of United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG)



**Lt Gen  
M HARUN-AR-RASHID  
BP (Retd)**

1. It is universally agreed that the creation of the United Nations Organization in 1945 was an extraordinary act of vision and statesmanship. The suffering inflicted on millions upon millions of people during two World Wars had convinced the founding fathers that only a common commitment to a system of collective security, based on freely accepted principles and rules, would preserve the World from similar carnage in the future. The Charter is, to this day, an inspiring document. It contains all the key concepts that continue to be the essential prerequisites for a peaceful and stable World: Peaceful settlement of disputes, economic and social advancement of people, and respect for human rights. Even 65 years after the creation, the security and stability remains to be the core issue for the world body. Former secretary General, Mr Kofi A Annan in one of his report mentioned, "No task is more fundamental to the United Nations than the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict." As an active member of the UN, Bangladesh, is fully committed to the cause of international peace and security and prepared to work constructively with other member states in the promotion of goals as articulated in the UN Charter. Such commitment is also outlined in the Constitution of Bangladesh, which states, "The state shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter". Bangladesh became member of the UN in 1974 and since then played an important role in establishment of peace across the Globe. Bangladesh started its peace support missions in 1988 with a modest contribution of 15 Army officers as Military Observers to United National Peace Keeping Operations in Iran-Iraq (UNIMOG). Since then Bangladesh has participated in 45 Peace Support Operations all over the world in difficult and unknown terrain and extreme weather condition. For about a decade Bangladesh is one of the top troop contributing Country in UN Peace Support Missions. United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) is one such mission where I had the unique opportunity to command the Military component of the Mission from April 1997 to November 1998 as the Chief Military Observer. This was of course a unique opportunity for me to appreciate military operations from different perspective.

2. United Nations Observation Mission in Georgia was established through the



**A UN peacekeeper distributes candy to Abkhazian boys. The UN has maintained a presence in the region since 1994.**

Security Council Resolution 858 of 24 August 1993 with the aim of resolving the disputes between the Republic of Georgia and the breakaway fraction of Abkhazia. Before I elaborate on my experience, I think it would be pertinent to present some basic facts regarding the conflict.

**3. Geography and Climate:** Geopolitical location of Georgia is on the east and north coast of Black Sea bounded by Armenia and Turkey on the south, Russia on the east and north. A two-way metalled highway (M 27) and a railway line runs almost through the heart of the Republic connecting all the important cities and Sochi in Russian Federation. Important rivers like Koddory, Ingur, Gumista, Galitka, Okumi and Psou, etcetera and some other water channels flow from north and north-western part of Georgia to the south and south west. 74% of its territory is covered by mountains and foothills. The area of Kodori Valley remains inaccessible by road for much of the winter. A stretch of lowlands and rolling terrain is found along the southern edge of Abkhazia where majority population is concentrated. The coastal region of Abkhazia was an extremely popular holiday resort area, particularly for the Russians.

**4. Demography:** The total population of Georgia is 5.4 million. Of the total population, Georgians comprise 71.4%. More than 80 other nationalities make up the balance.

**a. Abkhazians:** The Abkhaz is a distinct ethnic group with their own language and culture who have declared Abkhazia as an independent country.

**b. Mingrelians:** Mingrelians or Western Georgians are another distinct ethnic group with their own language. Though they form the majority in the Abkhaz-controlled Gali Region, they are entirely anti-Abkhaz. As a result most of them had to migrate to the Georgian controlled areas.

**c. Svanetians:** The Svanetians are hilly people who occupy mostly the Kodori Valley.

**5. Religions:**

**a. Christianity:** Over 95% of the people practice Christianity. Almost all are Orthodox Christians.

**b. Other Religions:** There are other religions as well like Jewish and Muslims but their numbers are very scanty.

**6. Mil Conflict:** The conflict in Abkhazia began with the social unrest and attempts by the Abkhaz authorities to get independence. It escalated into a series of armed confrontations in the summer of 1992 when the Government of Georgia, deployed 2000 Georgian Troops in Abkhazia with the aim of protecting the railway and other communication links. Fierce Fighting broke out on 14 Aug 1992, as the Georgian Troops entered Abkhazia, resulting in some two hundred dead and one hundred wounded. Georgian troops burned the Abkhaz parliament and bombed Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia. Subsequently, the Georgian Troops took Sukhumi and perpetrated acts of persecution on a large scale against the non-ethnic Georgians. The Abkhaz leadership relocated themselves and started preparing for active resistance against the Georgian Troops. In a strike back, the Abkhaz gained the support of the volunteers from the Confederation of North Caucasian Mountain People and secondly, from the Russian Troops who were deployed to evacuate 12,000 Russians living in the region. On 27 July, 1993 both sides signed a ceasefire agreement under the aegis of Russia. However, subsequently the Abkhaz broke the agreement and launched an offensive. They took capital Sukhumi on 27 September and in three days they pushed the Georgian Forces across the Inguri River.

**7. Background of the United Nations Mission:** The fighting stopped on 30 Sep, 1993, along the line of Inguri River. This

boundary also extends north into the Kodori Valley. The cessation of fighting was later confirmed by a ceasefire agreement which was signed on 14 May, 1994 and is known as Moscow Agreement. As per this agreement, ceasefire line was drawn generally along Inguri River from the coastline to the north.

**8. Establishing Security Zones (SZ) and Restricted Weapon Zones (RWZ):**

Under the Moscow Agreement, it was agreed by all the parties that a Security Zone (SZ) and a Restricted Weapon Zone (RWZ) should be established. Georgians and Abkhaz troops should be withdrawn from the Security Zone and Kodori Valley and all heavy weapons were to be withdrawn to the heavy weapon sites (HWS) outside the Restricted Weapon Zone. It was also agreed that a Commonwealth of Independent States' Peace Keeping Force (CISPKS) would be deployed on both sides of the Inguri River to ensure that the Moscow Agreement was adhered to by both sides and that all troops and heavy weapons were withdrawn as agreed.

**9. Parties involved in Mediation:**

A good number of countries and agencies got involved in the mediation process of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. Amongst them were; United Nations, the Confederation of Independent States (CIS), Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and a group of countries comprising USA, Russia, United Kingdom, France and Germany, who initially used to be called Friends of Georgia and later Friends of the Secretary General.

**10. Forces Operating in the Area:** The forces that have been operating in the area were:

**a. Commonwealth of Independent States' Peacekeeping Force (CISPKF):** A force of nearly three thousand troops of CISPKF was organized in two groups, deployed on both sides of River Inguri with the Headquarters at Sukhumi.

Though by name it was CIS Forces, actually it was only Russian Forces on the ground. No other CIS country contributed to the force. Actually they were the peace-keepers and was armed with Armour, Armoured Personnel Carriers and Artillery.

**b. Georgian Forces:** Georgian forces included

(i) The Georgian Armed Forces comprising two brigade groups supported by the Georgian Air force.

(ii) Ministry of Interior Troops of around 350 militia in the Zugdidi area within the Security Zone.

(iii) 150 to 200 Security forces from the Ministry of Security.

(iv) Thirty Georgian Military Observers in the Security Zone, usually co-located with CISPKF Checkpoints.

**c. Forces of Abkhaz Government in Exile:** The Abkhaz Government in exile had 200 men in Zugdidi Area for acting as police.

**d. Forces of Abkhaz Separatist Group:** Forces of the Abkhaz separatist group

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9