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BRIEFING: THE HUMAN COST OF THE WAR IN GEORGIA

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TO THE U.S., CANADA AND MEXICO**

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DAVID KAKABADZE: Thank you all for coming first of all, and I would like to welcome Anna Neistat and Ambassador Sikharulidze and I have to thank them for the time and for coming, for accepting our invitations.

I would just briefly introduce today's speakers and then give the floor to them. Dr. Neistat is currently working for the Human Rights Watch as a senior emergency researcher. She has been working in countries like Russia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Haiti, Kenya, Zimbabwe – and she has been working in Georgia as well recently. And this is the reason why we decided to invite her and tell us a bit about the situation there. She is – I don't know – her profession – I don't know how to introduce you, are you a philologist, historian or a lawyer – (chuckles) – more than a journalist, but I would like to mention that she has worked for Ekho Moskvyy six years, so she is our colleague-journalist if I may say so.

Ambassador Sikharulidze is physician by profession – he has worked as psychiatrist back in Georgia and then has served for a few years as deputy defense minister in Georgia, then first deputy defense minister. He was a deputy head of the Georgian mission to NATO for a period of time, and since March 2006 he's Georgian ambassador to the United States, Canada and Mexico. So welcome, and I give the floor to Anna Neistat first. And I would think her presentation – I think takes some fifteen, twenty minutes, then we would listen to Ambassador Sikharulidze I guess and then open the floor for questions. Is it ok?

MR. ZVANERS: Thank you, David.

ANNA NEISTAT: Good evening, good morning. First of all, it's a pleasure to be here and thank you for the invitation and I will try to talk to you a little bit about the findings of Human Rights Watch. But before I start, let me just say very briefly that – in this conflict, just like in any other conflict, the job of Human Rights Watch was to document – as the title of this briefing suggests – the human costs, the human rights consequences of the fighting. We do not look into the political pretext of the conflict; we are not trying to determine who started it and who's to blame.

But what we look into is violations of humanitarian law by both sides of the conflict – and the toll that the conflict takes on civilians. We had two teams on the ground right away, right as the conflict started I arrived to Ossetia on August tenth and we had a team in Georgia at the same time and then – after spending a week in South Ossetia I went to Tbilisi – until the end of August to work in the Gori district in the villages that were most affected by attacks from Russia.

Our work continues to date; we are still – we are yet to put together a comprehensive report that puts all our findings together, so to a certain extent what I am going to say today is our preliminary findings. Many of them have been released in some form or another – press releases and media advisories – so what you have today is a summary and our investigation still continues, but most importantly we are definitely hoping that our investigation would not be the only one – not the only independent investigation of what happened in August and what continues to happen to date.

I will try to speak somewhat chronologically about the kind of violations that we documented on the territory of South Ossetia and in the Gori district primarily. And what I would start with is the indiscriminate shelling and disproportionate use of force in Tskhinvali. And I hope the slide show – the presentation works and if so we can move to slide number two. And that is just one of the scenes that were quite typical for Tskhinvali in the first days of the conflict, that's what we saw when we arrived there. Quite a number of civilian objects in Tskhinvali, including apartment buildings, hospitals, schools were affected by the shelling from the Georgian side. We can move to the next slide.

This is one of the streets in the southern part of Tskhinvali that was Telmont Street (sp) that was particularly affected. Here I think it's a good time to say that – obviously we all heard the official statements at the very beginning of the conflict that suggested that Tskhinvali was erased from the face of the earth. I would say that's definitely not what we found on the ground, we do believe that south and southwest and southeastern and central part of the city was significantly affected by the shelling, and, you know, scenes like that were quite typical in these parts of town, but at the same time there were certain parts of Tskhinvali that were largely unaffected.

I also have to say that when we talk about the Georgian shelling of Tskhinvali and the damage it cost, we mainly talk about the night of August 7th, early hours of August 8th. We know that starting from later in the day on August 8 and definitely August 9th, there was an exchange of fire in Tskhinvali by Russian and Georgian forces and from that point on it becomes very difficult to determine which side caused the destruction and the casualties. We can move on to the next slide.

In addition to indiscriminate shelling, we definitely documented instances of disproportionate use of force. And what we're talking about here is that as Georgian tanks and infantry entered Tskhinvali, there was definitely armed opposition from the South Ossetian army and from South Ossetian militias – the status of which is quite questionable. And as – so in some ways the Georgian strikes against these militias were justifiable from the humanitarian law perspective. However, we did document a number of instances where, for instance, Georgian tanks fired at the basements of apartment buildings where civilians were hiding, quite possibly along with South Ossetian militias but from our perspective, from humanitarian law perspective that is a serious violation. Next slide, please.

What you can see here are the remains of Grad rockets that were launched from the Georgian side. These are multiple rocket launchers and the very use of such indiscriminate weapons in civilian areas is an area of serious concern. Many of the apartment buildings in Tskhinvali and in neighboring villages were hit by such weapons. Next slide, please.

This is the hospital in Tskhinvali that was hit by one of the Grad rockets. And next slide: This is the basement of the hospital where, for five days, doctors were trying to save the wounded. Since we're talking about the hospital, let me pause here and say a couple of words on the numbers of people killed and wounded in this conflict. As you know, that has been a subject of enormous controversy. From the first days of the conflict, Russian and South Ossetian authorities announced that 2,000 people, then 1600 people, civilians, were killed in the fighting and, from the very beginning, Human Rights Watch was trying to assess to what extent these figures are true and represent the actual picture.

To be very clear, we, our organization, does not have the capacity to count the dead in any conflict. And it is not – the numbers are not our main concern. What we are looking into is how civilians were killed, what were the circumstances and to what extent these killings constitute war crimes and humanitarian law violations. However, we did believe that it was very important to get some clarity on what actually happened in Tskhinvali and in the neighboring villages.

And the hospital was one of our first stops in Tskhinvali where we got some figures. We received the information of 273 people who were treated, who were wounded in Tskhinvali and neighboring villages and treated from August 7th to August 12th, if I'm not mistaken, and then transferred to other hospitals including mobile hospitals set by the Ministry of Emergencies.

In addition, the hospital personnel told us about 44 bodies that were brought to the hospital. And I would emphasize here that this is exactly the information we got and this is how we always presented it. And any effort by some media and some officials to say that Human Rights Watch claims that 44 people were killed in South Ossetia is simply not true and extremely inaccurate.

We presented this figure as the figure that we got from the hospital, always emphasizing that this figure is incomplete. We also collected the data by doing research on the streets of Tskhinvali and in the villages next to Tskhinvali that were worst-affected by the fighting. We got information about people who were killed and not brought to the hospital but, in any case, that gave us a range of figures that we are operating with right now.

I have to say that, by now, the investigative committee of the Russian prosecutor's office did release their own figures and these figures also have very little to do with the initially announced 2,000 civilian deaths. I do think that it requires very thorough further investigation and maybe some corrections to the statements that were initially made.

Next slide, please. This is one of the cases where the body is being buried in the yard and it is clear that these are the bodies that were not included in the count done by the hospital. This man is burying a woman, a pregnant woman, who was killed by shrapnel during the shelling of Tskhinvali. Next slide, please.

This is the village of Khetagurovo and this is one of the Grad rockets, the crater from the Grad rockets that hit the backyard of a house. Next slide, please. And this is one of the houses in Khetagurovo, the southern part of Khetagurovo, a village next to Tskhinvali was severely affected by the shelling. Next slide, please.

And now we are moving to Gori. This is a photograph from Gori which was severely affected: Gori and a number of villages in the Gori district that were severely affected by the Russian shelling and bombing that followed on August – starting from August 9th and 10th. There we also talk about very similar types of violations, namely, indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force.

In Gori, several apartment buildings were severely hit and you can see one of them and in the villages, the villages north of Gori – and we're talking of the villages of Ruisi, Variani,

Shindisi, Freyavia (ph) and many, many others. We clearly – we documented clear cases of Russian bombing and shelling that was indiscriminate or at least disproportionate to the threat. We do have reports that in certain cases Russians were apparently targeting Georgian forces withdrawing through the villages, but what happened as a result that civilian houses were killed and civilians died as a result of these attack. We can definitely say that they did not exercise sufficient care for civilian lives, and that led to serious casualties in many of these villages. Next slide, please.

This is – I'm sorry, I can't quite see it. This is a boy here; he's in a camp for the displaced near the Tbilisi airport. And of course we – you know one of our concerns was serious displacement that this conflict caused. The conflict as such lasted for not that long, but to this date, there are thousands of people who have been displaced by the conflict. That was definitely happening in Ossetia, but there, as far as we understand by now, most of the people have had a chance to return to their homes, and homes are being restored. But for many of the civilians displaced in Georgia, the conflict continues today. They did not have a chance to return to their homes because many of their homes were burned to the ground or because the security situation does not allow them to come back. Next slide, please.

We're still in Gori. This is the photograph of from a house – apartment – of a family where three people were killed when Russians bombed. And this is essentially all that's left is the family pictures. Next slide, please. This is a nursery in Gori. For us, of course, it's a pretty significant evidence of indiscriminate use of force and targeting of civilian objects there. Next slide, please.

One of our greatest concerns in the district was the use of cluster munitions. And I have to say that right now Human Rights Watch is convening this investigation because there are still areas that are not clear to us. We do know that both sides, Russians and Georgians, do have cluster munitions, and apparently, both of them used them. Georgian side so far admitted using cluster munitions in Roki tunnel against Russian troops. We documented the presence of cluster munitions including some unexploded cluster munitions in quite a number of villages in Gori district. If I'm not mistaken, we visited at least three or four villages, and we have information about nine villages altogether where cluster munitions were used.

Cluster munitions is an incredibly dangerous weapon, not just because it's indiscriminate by nature, and by now, I think a hundred – more than hundred countries – across the world signed, joined the treaty that bans the use of this munitions. But most importantly, unexploded cluster munitions turn into landmines. And as we were in Gori district, several people were injured – severely injured or killed by the remains cluster munitions that exploded as they were digging their yards or going, you know, to assist to their crops. It is hard to say what is going on right now, but the most important thing, even before we know who used cluster munitions where, is to make sure that both sides reveal the sites where they were used so that the demining can take place because, again, otherwise they will stay there. Next slide, please.

This is the cluster munition that was used in the village of Shindisi. And here it is not clear which side used it. It's an Israeli made cluster munition. Next slide, please. And this is a different type. As you can see, there's a sign there. In August, demining organization HALO Trust was allowed to enter the area to mark the sites at least that they could find, but they were

not allowed to do the demining. And civilians were still under serious threat from these munitions. Next slide, please.

One of the most worrisome sites that our team saw in South Ossetia was the burning and looting of ethnic Georgian villages on the territory of South Ossetia. This is one of the villages north of Tskhinvali, on the way from Java to Tskhinvali, the village of Java to Tskhinvali. And the sites we witnessed personally in those villages were absolutely horrific. Many of these houses in these villages were burned to the ground which you can see on the next slide. As we drove through these villages, walked through these villages, these are the kind of scene that we saw. Next slide, please. And next one. And next one.

And what you see on this picture is Ossetian militias, or at least Ossetians wearing camouflage uniforms, looting the houses. It was a massive and large scale, and at that point, they were taking out everything they could possibly grab. I think it would be a good time for me to say that everything that was happening in those villages was – most of the violations were perpetrated by South Ossetian militias. However, we definitely think that Russia was responsible for what was going on. Russian troops were clearly in control of the area at that point, and it was best evidenced by the fact that when we immediately reported on this particular situation, and the next day Russian troops closed the road and managed to stop the looting essentially overnight.

Unfortunately, the looting at that point moved to different areas including some areas in the north of the Gori district. However, we do believe that Russia was in control, and it was Russia's full responsibility to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian property. Most of the people fled from these villages; at this point, they're completely deserted. Most of the houses, over 50 percent, as was evidenced by some satellite images done in these villages, were burned to the ground, and at this point, nothing is being done to ensure that people can return to those villages.

Here we did talk about ethnically motivated violence. Human Rights Watch does not use the term "ethnic cleansing" just because it's not a legal term, but we did talk about ethnically motivated attacks largely based on the testimonies of South Ossetian militias themselves, who essentially said that they're burning the villages to the ground to ensure that Georgians cannot come back. Next slide, please.

There were very few remaining residents in these villages, and of course, that's where we heard some of the heartbreaking stories. We talked to this woman in one of the villages, the village of Kekhvi, where she was essentially standing there watching her house being burned to the ground, and obviously, she could not do anything. As far as I understand by now, the civilians are evacuated from these villages, but at that point, nothing has been done to ensure their safety or evacuate them to safety.

We continued our work in the district. We continued to see the scenes of destruction, looting, and burning in the villages, in so called Georgia proper, for lack of a better term, namely, the northern part of the Gori district where numerous villages were initially affected by the Russian shelling and then left at the mercy of South Ossetian looters.

Unfortunately, this continues as we speak. The conflict may be over from a military perspective, but it is definitely not over for residents in those villages. As you probably know, Russia announced the withdrawal of its troops. That has to be completed by October 10th. At the moment, the withdrawal is happening, and the checkpoints are being demolished. However, the European mission, the ESDP, the European security mission that was sent to the region, has very limited access to these areas.

What we saw in August and what seems to be the case today – and I just spoke to the colleagues in Georgia on the phone five minutes before the briefing started to get the latest update – it continues to date. Of course, we are not talking about large-scale looting at this point, but given that there is absolutely no authority to provide security and safety of the population in these villages, South Ossetian militias or ordinary criminals can easily move into these villages and loot. They apparently are now going after some agricultural vehicles, after crops that are being left unattended, and the villages are largely deserted, and the people who are there are just too scared to get out of their homes. Next slide, please.

This is the scene from an attack in the village of Triyevi (ph). And this man's house was destroyed by the shelling. Next slide, please. And this, unfortunately, was quite a typical scene in the villages – in the Georgian villages – in the Gori district. This man was beaten up by South Ossetian militias as they were looting his house.

When we talk about lootings and burnings, I have to say that we also documented, in this particular area, quite a number of cases where civilians were mistreated, beaten, or even killed by the Ossetian militias. And once again, I have to emphasize that these areas, at that point, were under effective Russian control, and it was the responsibility of the Russian side to ensure the safety of civilians in this area.

One last concern that I would like to mention is the fate of the detainees. As you know, quite a number of people were picked up, both as prisoners of war and as civilians, by either side, and eventually the exchange took place, so we're not particularly concerned about their safety right now, however, we did receive reports of mistreatment and torture by – primarily, I have to say – by the Ossetian side, although there were a couple of reports of mistreatment by the Georgian side as well. And this is something that also requires further investigation.

I would stop here, and I'll be happy to answer your questions, but just before I do, I really would like to emphasize probably two concerns that are most pressing right now, two months after the conflict began. One is, of course, the safety of the people in the so-called "buffer zone," where the withdrawal of Russian troops is now happening and the European observers are supposed to start their work. At this moment, it's definitely not satisfactory and we're waiting to see the probable withdrawal of the Russian forces, the entry into these areas of the Georgian police, and the presence – the real presence and the real access – of the European observers, who would hopefully have a mandate to protect the civilians there.

And another concern is the pressing need for an independent international investigation of what happened in the area, because unless it happens, both sides will continue to come up with their versions of events, and for us, for the media and for the world in general, it would be extremely important to know what actually happened and to bring the perpetrators to justice. Thank you very much.

MR. KAKABADZE: Thank you very much, Anna. I would suggest to give the floor to our second speaker, and then we will have, certainly, time for questions. So, Mr. Ambassador, the floor is yours.

AMBASSADOR VASIL SIKHARULIDZE: Thank you. Thank you very much, and I'd like to thank our organizers of this event for inviting me here and I would like to thank Human Rights Watch. I mentioned the courage of this organization, and they were actually the first organization who entered into the occupied areas in South Ossetia and came up with the first findings.

Louder? Okay. Well, as you know already – briefly, a couple of remarks – as you know, on August 7th, the Russian military forces entered Georgia and occupied a large segment of Georgian territory. This occupation resulted in enormous destruction to our country's infrastructure, considerable damage to our economy, ethnic cleansing, and human rights abuses. And the dislocation, also – a major problem now is the dislocation of tens of thousands of Georgian citizens from these areas. And, as you know, we had about 200,000 IDPs and refugees from another Georgian-occupied region, Abkhazia, but it happened about in the early '90s.

Georgian territory was also subject to substantial aerial bombardment from Russian rockets and missiles. The Russian army deliberately targeted the civilian population of Georgia. Human Rights Watch also has reported this, and some other international organizations and we have more disturbing reports from eyewitnesses of the mass destruction of Georgian villages, executions, and hostage-taking took place. Last week, the Council of Europe Parliament passed a resolution expressing particular concerns about credible reports of ethnic cleansing, many of which were reportedly committed after the EU-brokered cease fire agreement on August 12th. And it continues today. And it was also confirmed by satellite images that most of villages – Georgian villages – have been burned down days after the cease-fire agreement was signed.

Actually, Russian forces remain in Georgia, despite Moscow's commitment to withdraw as part of the cease-fire agreement brokered by President Sarkozy. Moscow recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states is a further violation of international law, and yet another step of Russia's effort to unilaterally redraw the map of Georgia and of Europe by force and intimidation. By law, Russian troop withdrawal should have begun on last Wednesday. Russia announced that it intends to keep more than 8,000 troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, even though the two regions are now independent. The troops' presence clearly violates the cease-fire brokered by President Sarkozy, which requires that both sides pull troops back to the positions held before August 7th.

By last Wednesday, nearly 300 U.N. monitors were to be in place to oversee Russia's promise for troop withdrawal, but Russia announced in the same week that it would bar the monitors from entering South Ossetia and Abkhazia, based on Russia's incorrect contention that these two regions are now independent. This is another violation of the cease-fire.

As a democracy and free-market economy – before the invasion, the strongest among the former Soviet states – we are keen to reverse this devastating and demoralizing experience for the Georgian people. On October 21st, European nations will convene an international donors' conference, which we hope will follow the U.S.'s example in helping Georgia recover from

Russia's aggression. A big part of the immediate response should be taking care of tens of thousands of internally displaced people from the region of South Ossetia. They've been just recently displaced, and this is the biggest challenge for the Georgian government now.

As you know, it was mentioned, the issue of investigation, and the Georgian government, from its side, released very detailed evidences and its detailed timeline on how all of this started and how it developed. Plus, the president of Georgia, in his speech during the U.N. General Assembly demanded and supported the impartial investigation of the events occurring during the occupation of Georgian territory. So the Georgian government is ready to disclose any kind of information to testify in front of an impartial investigative committee and this is the issue, there. The question is whether Russia is ready or not to cooperate with this kind of investigation.

On its turn, Georgian parliament has set up the investigative commission yesterday, which will be tasked to investigate the events that occurred there, and not only starting from the 7th of August, but far, far before, because they know that this war started not on the 7th, but it started earlier – much earlier. So these are the few remarks I wanted to make and I'm ready to answer your questions.

MR. ZVANERS: Very good, thank you very, very much. I'd like to open the floor to questions, please.

Q: Alex Van Oss, Foreign Service Institute. I wanted Ms. Neistat to amplify a little bit. I thought I heard you say that cluster weapons were used in the Roki tunnel. Did I understand you correctly?

MS. NEISTAT: No, they were used – well, that's – we don't have any information on that. This is just the information that we've received from the Georgian government that was the only public admission – the only admission – of the use of cluster munitions by either side. And the Georgian government said that cluster munitions were used against Russian troops at the Roki tunnel. I mean, I don't think they were used – they definitely were not used in the Roki tunnel because we used to travel there, but at the entry to the Roki tunnel, it is possible that they were used. We do not have independent confirmation of that.

Q: Asta Banionis with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. I have a question for Anna Neistat. Two points of clarification: You said you do now have a range of the number of people who were killed within Tskhinvali or South Ossetia, but didn't mention a number. Could you tell us what the range of casualties are? And then, how many total displaced persons are there from the Georgian villages?

MS. NEISTAT: Let me just emphasize once again that no, I don't have a number for you, and the only number I would use right now is the number that was provided by the Russian side at this point. And the investigative committee of the Russian prosecutor's office that has been conducting investigation in South Ossetia and actually counting the dead, said – I think the latest figure they released was 137 civilians killed by the fighting. This figure sounds reasonable to me, definitely much more reasonable than the 2,000 figure announced at the very beginning of the conflict, with one little question mark attached, which is how many of these people were civilians, and how many can actually be qualified as combatants.

Because, what happened during our interviews is that, for instance as we – we essentially didn't just go into the hospital for the figures; we also just walked street-by-street in the most devastated areas of Tskhinvali and asked people about the number of casualties on their street. And what we often heard is that people would talk about civilians killed on their street, but when you started asking further, it turned out that some of these civilians were in fact members of South Ossetian militias, and it is clear that these people are referring to them as civilians because they are not members of any security forces – they're not officially members of the army; they're not officially members of the police or any other security forces, but of course from the humanitarian law perspective, these people are combatants rather than civilians. And so I do hope that the investigative committee will, at some point, clarify who is being included in the numbers that they're talking about.

And, I'm sorry, on the displaced. On the displaced, well, again, we don't have the numbers, we just – we don't have the capacity and it's not part of our mandate to come up with numbers. We do know that most of the Georgian villages in the Gori – especially north of the Gori district, close to the border with South Ossetia – are now deserted. And in Gori and Tbilisi, there are now thousands of refugees – internally displaced, I'm sorry. Again, I cannot come up with their clear figures.

We also – Human Rights Watch – in the initial days of the conflict, put a question mark next to the number of displaced in Ossetia, because as much as we know that thousands of people fled Tskhinvali and neighboring villages and moved to North Ossetia, we also got the information that many of them returned, you know, the day after they crossed the border. What was happening there is that families were fleeing – the men were taking their families out of the fighting area and then coming back. And for that, we have official documents that show how those figures developed. So, again, it's all a matter of just being accurate. One main plea from Human Rights Watch throughout the conflict has been, please give us facts and figures; don't give us, you know, empty statements and declarations.

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: From my information, there are about 35,000 official internally displaced people from regions of South Ossetia, but this number is not regular or correct: It still has to be sorted out. Initially, the number of internally displaced people was twice as big, because the occupied areas included not only the administrative borders of South Ossetia, but they went beyond. As they started to pull back, a part of the IDPs returned to their villages. That does not mean that all of them have proper shelter, because certain villages and certain buildings have been burned down, and therefore now some of them – even those who returned to their villages and those who are not under occupation now – must still need some assistance to be settled.

Q: John Mackedon, Elliot School of International Affairs. Thank you, everyone, for setting up this very important conference. I have a question for both of the speakers. First, Dr. Neistat: How is your organization addressing the so-called new buffer zones in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the introduction of 3800 Russian soldiers in both of those areas? And, Ambassador Sikharulidze, who will head up this parliamentary investigation into the events that occurred in August, and will it include members from several parties – members from the opposition? Thank you.

MS. NEISTAT: I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understood the question. How do we address buffer zones in the Gori district?

Q: Well, in both – the buffer zones that the Russians are talking about – expanding the previous zones. They're talking about expanding the zones. From a legal perspective or from an organization perspective?

MS. NEISTAT: Yeah, okay. Well, I mean I guess a big part of your question I cannot address because it's not a part of our mandate and is largely a political issue. Our greatest concern has been that what we've seen so far – in the buffer zone under Russia's control, civilians were denied protection and were left – at least were left at the mercy of South Ossetian militias, although we do have reports of violations by Russian troops there as well. So from everything we've seen so far, we do not believe that Russia can protect – can or made any decent effort to protect civilians in these areas, and that has been our greatest concern.

We are somewhat hopeful about the presence of European observers in these areas, but again, the question is what kind of mandate they're going to have, and to what extent that mandate would include protection of civilian population, and to what extent they would be allowed to protect civilians in these areas. Otherwise, we do believe that, you know, any kind of authority is desperately needed in these areas, and of course the issue of expanding them creates more problems of this kind – or could create more problems of this kind.

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: Well, the parliamentary commission – the investigative commission – is chaired by a member of our opposition and a member of the minority, Mr. Gia Tortladze, and it includes also a lot of members of the opposition. And the minority announced today its intention to testify a number of Georgian high officials – including the top officials.

MR. KAKABADZE: Martins, we have a couple of questions here in Prague. Could we ask them now?

MR. ZVANERS: Absolutely, that would be very appropriate, and then we'll come back with questions at this end as well.

MR. KAKABADZE: Okay. Thank you.

Q: Irina Lagunina, Russian Service. I know that you don't use the term ethnic cleansing, but let me ask you this question: From the very beginning the conflict in Abkhazia was different from the conflict in Ossetia, because in Abkhazia, there was ethnic cleansing and more than 2,000 – 200,000 – Georgians were left IDPs and still are. In South Ossetia, Georgians were able to live together with South Ossetians. Now, you noticed signs of ethnic violence in South Ossetia. To what extent is South Ossetia now cleared of Georgian population? And if, politically, the situation continues to develop as it is now, will Russia preserve the status quo of this cleared territory?

MS. NEISTAT: Well, factually, yes, unfortunately at least in the villages that we were able to reach in South Ossetia, they're largely cleared of Georgian population. The question of how people left is slightly different, and this is something we're still looking into – trying to determine – because, you know in all of this – in lots of villages – at least five villages between

Java and Tskhinvali, and there are several other villages such as Erevia and Erkneti very close to the border that are essentially burned to the ground. The question is, what happened to the civilians there? How did they – we know that at least some of them fled as the conflict started. The question is, how many of them were actually forced to flee by threats or violence. And I'm sure it – well, we do have fact that it's there. The question of, you know, at what scale?

So at this point, yes, we're talking about all of these ethnically Georgian villages that existed – (inaudible) – South Ossetia are now essentially gone. And as I mentioned before, from the interviews with some of the members of South Ossetian militias, the intention was clearly there. It wasn't just ethnic violence; it was ethically motivated violence. They were absolutely clear that they are burning the villages down to ensure that there is no more Georgian enclaves in the area.

It's hard to say to what extent, with the reflection of a high-level policy rather than just opportunistic violence from South Ossetian militias, but at least it was allowed to happen, and this is absolutely unacceptable. And, of course, now the question is whether the people would ever be able to return. At this point, conditions are clearly not there and we have not seen any effort to make even a single step to address the situation, to start restoring houses or to create any kind of security conditions so that people could return.

Q: My name is Kenan Aliyev. I'm the director of Azerbaijani service of RFERL. I have two questions, one to Dr. Neistat and another one for the ambassador. First question to Anna: You know, you worked under enormous pressure, I can imagine, because this is a war zone and it's not easy to collect information. So did you – the question is, did you have any let's say bad experience there – while collecting this information, was there any attempt from both sides – from Russian side, from Georgia side or from militia – to kind of interfere with your activity there or to present things in a different way?

And so just could you please give us some ideas how – under what conditions you are operating there? And were there any attempts to kind of present things in a way which will suit the interest of both sides?

Second question to ambassador: It's more a political question, not connected to this issue. Are you satisfied with the reaction of Azerbaijani government to what happened in Georgia in recent let's say months? Are you satisfied with the support you are receiving from Baku on political level, on economic level, because there is some observations that Baku's reaction was very muted and very careful and the fact that Ilham Aliyev hasn't visited Tbilisi since the events started also tells a lot to observers. That's a question to the ambassador. Thank you.

MS. NEISTAT: Well, I think there are two parts of your question. One is whether we're satisfied with how the conflict was covered: absolutely not. And one of the first statements released by Human Rights Watch was exactly the concern expressed about extremely one-sided and biased coverage, especially in the Russian media but also in some Western media, of what was going on and, of course, as coverage was directly linked to the official statements. To this day, we are extremely concerned that, on one hand, both sides are trying to use sometimes information presented by Human Rights Watch to their political benefit and, of course, from the very beginning, we were extremely concerned about the information war that accompanied the

conflict because, in certain ways, it was not just the information provided, it was not just untrue or not exactly reliable, but it was essentially fanning the flames of the conflict. And that was one of our greatest concerns and that's why we believed it was so important for us to start working there right away and try to provide the information to the media and to the officials as we collected it.

In terms of whether it was easy or not to work there, no, it was not easy and we did not face any problems from the Georgian side. However, you know, both in Georgia and in South Ossetia, it was very challenging when it came to operating in the areas controlled by the Russian or South Ossetian troops.

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: Well, Azerbaijan is a very important partner for Georgia and a very close friend. And we have, I would say, excellent bilateral relations; we are cooperating on a number of issues and I would say shortly answering your question is yes. And we will continue to cooperate. We are working together on a number of issues and we always felt that Azerbaijani government was very supportive during this crisis regardless of what it may look like – maybe some analysts said that I would say that Azerbaijani is very close friend and very important partner for Georgia.

MR. ZVANERS: Very good. Let's bring it back here to Washington for two more questions and then I think we've probably come to the end of our time.

Q: My name is Frank Smyth. I'm with the Committee to Protect Journalists. First, briefly, for Anna, you mentioned the information war. There's "Russia Today," the English-language website and TV station that's I believe backed by the Russian government has an article up that tries to juxtapose or juxtaposes findings by Human Rights Watch, which I know has been around nearly 30 years, based in New York, takes no government money, with something that's described as an alternative human rights movement called "Opposition." And I'm just wondering, it's the first I've ever heard of it, if you know anything about this group?

MS. NEISTAT: The short answer is no. The fact itself does not surprise me at all because, obviously, you know, Russian government, Russian authorities were very unhappy with the information that was released by Human Rights Watch which, to a certain extent, I find surprising. There was, you know, the conflict where we were fortunately able to work on both sides from the very beginning and I do think that we were able to provide information on violations by both sides and try to do it in every single statement we made.

So, in a way, I think it was – the Russian government should have been more careful about how it addressed our statements and not just work in this sort of classical paradigm of every international human rights organization is bad and tries to undermine Russia because it was not clearly the case.

But I'm not sure about this particular organization, again, wouldn't surprise me at all if it happened, but I'm not aware of the findings so I cannot quite comment on that.

MR. ZVANERS: And if I may ask a question for Mr. Ambassador. Today there's an article in the New York Times. It talks about the restrictions that Georgia has imposed on press freedom. In addition, failures in terms of the promises made after the change of government

earlier in the decade. The Committee to Protect Journalists has reached similar findings and we've also noted that Georgia has restricted Russian media broadcasts into the country during this crisis. Is there anything you can say about Georgia's own press freedom record?

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: Yes, I have to say that, first of all, Georgia, more than ever, is committed to strengthening the Georgian democracy's – democratic institutions and to its way to NATO, to Euro-Atlantic integration. Unfortunately, I have not had the chance to read it this morning and I will look on this maybe later today, but, on the restrictions, for my information that was during the wartime that was the decision of Georgian cable operators to seize our boat – (inaudible) – for certain time. I mean, it was I think not more than 10 days to see the broadcast for the – for Georgia of Russian TVs because, I mean, it was really a very critical situation and it was our decision independent providers of cable, cable operators.

But, I mean, others may watch it using the satellite antennas. Of course, media freedom remains the most important thing for Georgian government and I think that this has been proven again when Georgian president came up right after a ceasefire with its proposal which proposed to his address in the parliament and then he repeated it in his address in U.N. during the General Assembly that there will be the new wave of democratic reforms in Georgia which will include also the special attention toward the judiciary branch of power and then the media, the more access to public broadcaster by opposition.

That were only two points, but also there are some other set of issues, other set of issues to be worked by Georgian government and it is what he called – what is frequently referred to as the new wave of democratic reforms right after this conflict.

MR. ZVANERS: Okay. And we'll take one more question.

Q: Good afternoon. My name is –

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: Can we have one here from Prague or – we have one question here and maybe one there? Could we agree on that?

MR. ZVANERS: Yeah, absolutely. Let's get the question here and then we'll kick it back to Prague.

Q: Good afternoon. My name is Nader Sadighi from Radio Free Europe, Radio Farda. I'd like to – a couple of questions, actually, one of which is that, did you get any public opinion feeling from Georgians themselves? Are they finger-pointing to anybody? Are they accusing anybody, any government of this situation?

And second point is that this war has been a very costly war. Do you believe that Russia has got the financial muscle to repeat the same scenario in Central Asia or even in Ukraine? Thank you.

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: Well, I'd like to say that the last public opinion polls conducted by the Washington-based firm, Greenberg Rosner, showed that president job approval went up since the war and it's at 76 percent now, which means that – which is higher than him or the ruling party – higher than the people voted for him or the ruling party. And it's – it speaks of

itself because, I mean, people feel that they have to be united now and they have to resist this segregation and occupation. And I think that, of course, this is very important for Georgia.

I don't know that the second part of your question is largely hypothetical, whether Russia has or not enough resources to repeat the same in Central Asia or not, or in other places. And it's difficult for me to talk about it now.

MR. ZVANERS: Okay. And let's get that final question from Prague and then wrap up.

Q: Thank you. Tyntch Tchorev from the Kyrgyz Service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. I would like to ask Mr. Ambassador, first of all, on the 10th of October, there will be a CIS summit in Bishkek at – given the fact that nobody except from Russia, nobody from the CIS countries recognizes independence of separatists regions of Georgia. Do you think that this was pretty much a departure of Georgia from the CIS's – (inaudible) – do you – this field of diplomatic battle?

MR. SIKHARLIDZE: This is a hypothetical question, but I think that we have a – we are – (inaudible) – from CIS. But we have excellent bilateral relations with most of – all of CIS countries except Russia. And I think that Russia's step is not about bilateral relations but the Russian step to recognize the breakaway region. It goes – contradicts the main principles of international law and I don't think that any other country – (inaudible) – these procedures. But I don't think that any other country of CIS will follow that. That's my opinion.

MR. ZVANERS: Thank you very much. I'd like to thank all of our colleagues in Prague who stayed on into the early evening to participate in this event. I'd like to very much thank Anna Neistat of Human Rights Watch for sharing with us some of her time during her visit in Prague to provide this very, very important information to us. And I'd also like to extend our deepest thanks to Ambassador Sikharulidze for being able to join us here to discuss this issue. We look forward to seeing all of you here in Washington and in Prague at one of our future events. Thank you for coming.

(Applause.)

AMB. SIKHARULIDZE: Thank you very much.

MR. ZVANERS: Thank you.

MR. KAKABADZE: Thank you.

(END)