

By Olgha Tsikarisvili-Soselia

Since Aug. 8, 2008, the country of Georgia has been under attack by Russian military troops, violating the human rights of its citizens and rocking the core of this developing democracy.

Considering the devastating recent events that are absorbing so much of the world's attention, it is easy for many to forget that Georgia was one of the first developing countries to mount a serious attempt to rid its government of corruption. Now, though, the country will have to rebuild, almost from the very start — including its work on preventing corruption. The following is a snapshot of Georgia's corruption-fighting efforts prior to this conflict.

Before the Battle

"My brother was arrested while going through customs for document falsification," Malkhaz Chankvetadze said. His family hopes that after a plea bargain and paying bail that may range from 14,060 lari (US\$10,000) to 21,090 lari (US\$15,000), he will be set free, though he will never be able to work for the government. (Since the Russian invasion, his court date has been postponed.)

The fight against corruption is one of the Georgian government's highest priorities. A 2007 survey of the Public Registration Agency covering the last 12 years found that there is little corruption in the agency; at least 98.2 percent of 544 employees who were surveyed agreed.

The U.S. State Department deems the country's ongoing efforts to combat corruption successful, according to its 2008 Advancing Freedom and Democracy Report. However, the fight to root out corruption remains a constant challenge.

Ferreting Out Corruption

Customs is one area where the fight against corruption meets its greatest challenge. On July 2, 2008, Zaza Koplatadze, deputy head of the medical regulation board at the Ministry of Health, Labor and Social Affairs, was arrested by the Constitutional Security Department (CSD) for allegedly accepting bribes. Malkaz Kokichashvili, founder of the company C&L and manager of the private Ophthalmology and Neurology Center, reportedly gave Koplatadze an initial bribe of 2,109 lari (US\$1,500) and further promised 4,077 lari (US\$2,900) per month for quick

and permanent licenses for medicines imported by the company. Both men are imprisoned and face sentences of seven to 11 years each for bribery.

A representative of the CSD told ITN journalist Khatuna Gagnidze that Koplatadze also helped Kokichashvili's company clear pharmaceutical drugs through customs. "This is very bad news and I hope it won't be repeated," said Alexander Kvitalashvili, a minister of Health, Labor and Social Affairs.

Gia Tvalavadze, head of the Medical Activity Regulation Agency, was shocked by this development; he hopes the accusations will turn out to be unwarranted. Koplatadze had been in his position just three months, Tvalavadze said, and his knowledge and skills in the position were improving every day.

Other areas of the Georgian government also face the challenge of corruption. On July 26, a police officer, George Kvenetadze, was arrested for taking a bribe of 1,400 lari (US\$1,000) for allegedly allowing a suspect to skip a drug test. The Ministry of Internal Affairs General Inspection office is investigating the case, and Kvenetadze could receive a nine-year prison sentence if convicted.

Deputy Minister of Economic Development Beka Okroshtvaridze and Lasha Moistsrapishvili, the head of the privatization department within that department, were arrested on July 30, 2008, for allegedly accepting a 490,070 lari (US\$350,000) bribe. Tamaz Machaladze reportedly paid the bribe in exchange for the opportunity to buy state-owned property on the Rustavi-Tbilisi Highway at a very low price. This case is currently under investigation. Minister of Foreign Affairs Catherine Sharashidze commented: "All kinds of misconduct at the state level, including bribe schemes, have been abolished."

In June 2008, the Anti-Corruption Network for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ACN) held its seventh general meeting in Tbilisi. ACN's mission is to support member countries in their work against corruption via public promotion of anti-corruption activities, the exchange of information and the establishment of a framework for best practices. Founded in 1998, membership includes about 20 developing countries. Georgian Prime Minister Lado Gurgenidze participated in this meeting, along with more than 100 others.

Seeing Results

Georgia's ranking in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) — which analyzes the degree to which corruption is perceived to exist among public officials and politicians — has steadily improved in recent years. In 2005, the country ranked 130 out of 159 countries in its level of corruption. By 2008, Georgia's CPI rank shot up to 67 out of 180 countries. Its CPI score — which gauges the degree of corruption as seen by business people and other analysts — rose from 2.3 out of a possible 10 to 3.9, which shows growing confidence in the country's climate regarding corruption.

Even with these improvements, Transparency International reports that corruption at senior levels of government "remains a persistent concern, and a common assessment is that the official anti-corruption campaign is too heavily focused on prosecution as opposed to prevention, and that it is rather ad hoc and not systemic or participatory."

The US Chamber of Commerce, with the support of investment, transportation and trade groups, conducted a survey in February 2008 of 990 companies in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The majority of respondents to the survey were optimistic about the investment surroundings. A full 57 percent considered the environment to be "good," while 60 percent said it could improve. The most important problem reported by the companies was corruption.

Of the respondents, 75 percent said that new staff should be employed at customs service points. Also, 64 percent said they found it necessary to pay additional fees — bribes — in order to speed up the lengthy customs process.

The surveyed participants reported three factors that positively influenced their businesses: successful anti-corruption activity, simplification of national customs legislation and better transportation infrastructure.

In a February 2007 national survey of Georgian voters by the International Republican Institute, 95 percent of respondents said they did not have to pay a bribe to receive a service or receive a decision in their favor.

Work to Be Done

Though there has been a concerted effort to fight corruption, more work remains in Georgia. Nika Gilauri,

Georgia's finance minister, said the high level of corruption in customs procedures is a result of smuggling — particularly from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali in South Ossetia. He also attributed the problem to unqualified, untrained customs staff. Georgia's anti-corruption plan includes replacing the complete customs checks with a more selective risk-management system that balances enforcement with speed.

Gilauri named other improvements, including building and equipping new customs offices at every terminal and increasing staff salaries. When implemented in similar countries, these steps have reduced corruption, he said.

However, in the wake after of the 2008 military conflict in Georgia, officials are unsure about how to continue to implement their plans for the battle against corruption.