

BBC describes evidence of Georgian war crimes in South Ossetia

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The British Broadcasting Corporation is the first foreign news agency to be granted unrestricted access to the breakaway Georgian republic of South Ossetia since Georgian forces attacked the capital Tskhinvali. Journalists working for the BBC have unearthed evidence of Georgian war crimes against South Ossetian civilians.

The indiscriminate use of force is a clear and serious violation of the Geneva Convention and can constitute a war crime.

The report is crucial, asserted BBC journalist Tim Whewell, because the South Ossetian version of events "has barely been heard in the west". Such ignorance was created by the deliberately misleading coverage of western media outlets and the anti-Russian bias promoted by western governments, especially those in Washington and London. Consequently many people wrongly believe that Russia precipitated the conflict by invading Georgia.

The stubborn fact remains that it was Georgian military forces, no doubt following consultation with American military "advisers", who bombarded South Ossetia's small town capital Tskhinvali. At the time very few journalists, most notably Thomas de Waal, were prepared to tell the truth about Georgian aggression.

After consulting with Washington, the Saakashvili administration in Tbilisi attempted to take back the region whilst the world's attention was focused upon the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. At approximately 23.30 local time on August 7, the Georgian military mounted an exceptionally heavy artillery attack on Tskhinvali. By the next morning, such was the devastation wrought that one journalist described the town as resembling Swiss cheese.

Moscow responded rapidly by advancing through the Roki Tunnel, which links South Ossetia with North Ossetia in Russia, crushing Georgian forces within a couple of days. Since the outbreak of hostilities,

accusations of war crimes have flown between the two sides. Saakashvili employed an American PR company to amplify his claims of Russian atrocities.

Eyewitness accounts collected by the BBC describe how, upon entering Tshkinvalli, Georgian forces fired directly and repeatedly upon civilians and civilian targets. Those who tried to flee the onslaught were, according to witnesses, fired upon indiscriminately.

"What is striking," said Whewell, "is how much destruction the Georgians inflicted in just a couple of days, and destruction mainly of ordinary homes. For the Ossetians, that constitutes a crime against humanity that the world has closed its eyes to."

The evidence produced by the BBC corroborates initial research conducted by Human Rights Watch (HRW), who also detailed the targeting of civilian targets by the Georgian military.

In addition to gathering first hand accounts of the suffering of South Ossetians, the BBC journalists also gathered evidence of the systematic destruction of ethnic Georgian villages within South Ossetia. Homes within these villages, claimed the BBC, were initially burned down by South Ossetian militia and then later bulldozed. Contrary to accusations from Tbilisi, the BBC did not find evidence of ethnic Georgians being killed by Russian troops.

Taya Sitnik, mother of Georgy Tadtayev, told the BBC how her son, a 21-year-old dental student, was killed by Georgian soldiers. Tadtayev bled to death when he suffered a major laceration to his throat when shrapnel from a Georgian missile struck him. Mrs Sitnik told how a Georgian tank, positioned only yards from her home, fired repeatedly into the block of flats where she lived.

The BBC reported that extensive damage to the five storey block was consistent with Sitnik's account. She recounted how together with her son they had watched television just prior to the Georgian attack. "They started

firing not from rifles, but with heavy weapons. Shells were exploding. We jumped up straight away, switched off the lights and ran down to the cellar. And we sat here on boxes. We thought it would end, but the firing got heavier and heavier."

Sitnik continued, "They went on firing all the next day (August 8) without stopping. At some point there was pause, and we saw Georgian soldiers going along the street in their NATO uniforms. Then they started firing again, even more heavily. The Grad rockets were coming over all the time". (The Grad missile is a notoriously inaccurate multiple rocket launcher and derives from the Russian Katyusha rocket system. The firing of multiple Grad rockets creates huge indiscriminate devastation and an incredible and terrifying din).

Neighbours of Sitnik described how another resident of their block of flats, Khazbi Gagloyev, perished from wounds received during the Georgian onslaught.

A doctor at Tskhinvali's hospital, Marina Kochieva, told the BBC's reporters how she was caught in the crosshairs of a Georgian tank when, together with three relatives, as she tried to escape from the town on August 9. Kochieva claimed a tank fired on their car and two other vehicles, forcing them off the road. The doctor was adamant that the Georgians continued to fire on them even as they fled the scene. She showed the BBC the burnt out shell of her car by the side of the ring road. The wreckage was riddled with bullet holes and there was a large hole in the front passenger door where a tank missile had hit.

Dr Kochieva told how a nurse employed at her hospital was killed when she attempted to flee Tskhinvali under similar circumstances. The doctor claimed a further 18 burnt out vehicles were abandoned by the ring road on August 13.

Whilst the initial claims of 1,500 dead South Ossetians by Moscow has since been discredited, the Russian prosecutors office is investigating approximately 300 possible deaths during the invasion by Georgia. Human Rights Watch estimates are similar, but it says that a number of these might be Ossetian militia. Such numbers represent roughly one percent of the population of Tskhinvali.

Alison Gill, a director at HRW offices in Moscow, stated, "We're very concerned at the use of indiscriminate force by the Georgian military in Tskhinvali."

She described the South Ossetian capital as densely populated and explained how tank shells and Grad rockets would reek havoc. "Grad rockets cannot be used in

densely populated areas because they cannot be precisely targeted, and as such they are inherently indiscriminate."

The barbarism unleashed upon the population of Tskhinvali seems to have been meant either to kill and maim as many South Ossetians as possible and/or to drive them over the border into the Russian North Ossetian region.

Human Rights Watch were on the ground in South Ossetia only a couple of days after Georgian troops were routed by their Russian counterparts. Gill corroborated some of the stories told by residents to the BBC stating that "we gained evidence and witness testimony of Grad rocket attacks and tank attacks on apartment buildings, including tank attacks that shot at the basement level. And basements are typically areas where civilians will hide for their own protection".

As yet HRW refuse to state categorically that the Georgian army deliberately shot Ossetian civilians and instead speak of the "possible" targeting of civilians.

President Mikhail Saakashvili stated, "We strongly deny any accusation of war crimes". At the time of the attack Tbilisi claimed force was required to "restore constitutional order".

But Whewell has followed up his report with an interview with ex-British army officer Ryan Grist, who was the senior Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) representative in Georgia when the war broke out.

Grist made clear, contrary to the media's initial presentation of events, that the OSCE were aware that Georgia was responsible for the war.

"It was clear to me that the [Georgian] attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation," Grist stated.

It was clear on the ground that "something was brewing" Grist said, citing an artillery attack by Georgia seven weeks before its invasion as "a serious escalation" and had reported this "up the line", he said.



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