ELECTIONS IN ABKHAZIA AND THE PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

REPORT ON THE VISIT TO GEORGIA/ABKHAZIA
21-28 NOVEMBER 1996

Prepared by Lord Eric Avebury for presentation to the Parliamentary Human Rights Group of the United Kingdom December 1996
I. INTRODUCTION

Lord Eric Avebury and Senator John Nimrod visited Georgia and Abkhazia between 21-28 November 1996, at the request of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization. The opportunity was taken to pass through Tbilisi and spend a day there on the way out, and a day and a half on the way back, and to engage in discussions with the following persons:

Georgian Foreign Minister Mr. Irakli Menagharishvili;
Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security, Mr. Revaz Adamia;
Director of European and American Affairs at the Foreign Ministry, Mr. Konstantin Zhghenti;
The Ambassadors of the USA, Russia, France and the UK, and the First Secretary of the German Embassy;
Representative of the ICRC Mr. Yves Daccord;
Legal Officer of the UNHCR Mr. Bayisa Wak-Woya;
Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, Mr. Tamaz Nadareishvili;
Co-Director of Caucasia, Mr. Teimouraz Rekhviashvili;
Director of the Caucasian Institute for Peace and Democracy, Professor Gia Nodia;
Project Coordinator, Vertic Transcaucasus Office, Mr. Daniel Cousens.

This report comments on the elections, but is mainly concerned with the process of negotiations on the return of the exiles, and the settlement of the political dispute between Georgia and Abkhazia.

My warmest thanks are due to the British Ambassador in Tbilisi, His Excellency Mr. Stephen Nash, the Deputy Head of Mission, Mr. Michael Hancock, and members of the staff at the Embassy, who were enormously helpful in facilitating the meetings in Tbilisi, and with travel arrangements. Their friendly welcome and unstinting assistance was very greatly appreciated.

I was also grateful to the Georgian Embassy in London, who expedited my visa and gave me useful advice prior to the visit.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE VISIT

According to the most recent report of the United Nations Secretary-General, no significant progress has yet been achieved in spite of continuous efforts to seek a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia. The unresolved issues remained the future political status of Abkhazia, and the return of the refugees and displaced persons.

The Abkhazian authorities had announced their intention to hold parliamentary elections in the territory on 23 November 1996. These had been denounced as illegitimate by President Eduard Shevardnadze, and by the international community, and the Georgian authorities decided to hold a plebiscite among the exiles from Abkhazia in Georgia and elsewhere to demonstrate that a large number of qualified voters had been disfranchised by their inability to return to their homes.

In the security zone established on the Abkhazian side of the frontier with Georgia, low-intensity violence continued to be endemic. The Secretary-General’s report mentions cases of murder, armed robbery, kidnapping and assault occurring frequently in the Gali region, together with mine-laying and attacks on the CIS peacekeeping force and Abkhaz militia checkpoints. The Georgians demand that police functions be included in an enlarged mandate for the CIS peacekeeping force.
The official program for repatriation of the exiles came to a halt because the Georgians were not satisfied with the Abkhazians' rate of processing of applications. However, between 40,000 and 60,000 refugees are estimated to have returned to the Gali region informally. These people can move freely backwards and forwards across the frontier.

The war caused immense damage all the way along the coast road, from the Ingur river crossing up to and beyond the capital of Abkhazia, Sukhumi. Most of the houses are uninhabitable, and there is no chance of repairing any of the damage because of the blockade imposed by the CIS. Some goods do enter Abkhazia via Turkey, and smuggling flourishes between the Russian Federation and Abkhazia, tolerated by Russian border guards who are allegedly easily bribed. However, the economic effects of the blockade are affecting not only the existing civilian population, but also the capacity of the territory to accept further returnees.

One hopeful sign had been the 15 November meeting between President Eduard Shevardnadze and Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagharishvili on one side, and Abkhazian Foreign Minister Konstantin Ozgan and an Abkhazian Deputy on the other.

### III. MEETING WITH GEORGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER, IRAKLI MENAGHARISHVILI, 21 NOVEMBER

Mr. Menagharishvili said at a meeting on 21 November that there had been contacts at an official level prior to the 15 November 'summit', and that there were ways of getting messages between the parties. The idea of the high level meeting had come from the Georgian side, he said. (President Ardzinba claimed, however, that he had proposed it).

With regard to the Russian participation in the peace process, he said: "*We have to be sure when and how the Russians should be involved, remembering that they took part in the conflict.*" On the role of Federal Councillor Edouard Brunner, he said "*We have no criticism of Mr. Brunner personally, but we are not satisfied with the role of the United Nations, and he is working on their behalf. They have taken a strange position as observers, leaving the process of negotiation to the Russians.*" (Other Georgians were less inhibited in their assessment of Mr. Brunner, which may simply indicate that he is impartial, and they are disappointed that he does not show the same preference for the Georgian side that is displayed by the Security Council, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe.)

Mr. Menagharishvili said that he had first met Mr. Brunner only a month previously. The Minister thought there should be no interruption in the negotiating process, and that the problems demanded systematic and regular work. It was not correct to describe the existing process as negotiation. "*We have to find out how to make the process permanent, otherwise there is no way out.*"

Moscow could not be depended on to accelerate or slow things down. On the other hand, Russia could not be separated from the process, and everybody would have to work on the formula. Mr. Ozgan had accepted, however, that there should be continuous working contacts.

Other factors to be considered were, according to the Minister:

- the role of the international community;
- the place of Russia in the process;
- economic restoration;
- repatriation of the refugees, including non-Georgians.

The objective should be to overcome one main difficulty: the fate of the Abkhazian people should not be subject to political manipulation. Abkhazia is one of the keys to the
Caucasus. Not only is Russia manipulating events in the region, but there are also powerful forces involved, which have their roots in Muslim countries.

On the Abkhazian elections, Mr. Menagharishvili said that they were unacceptable because one part of the population would be unable to vote. (That did not bother the international community in the case of Sierra Leone, where elections were held while there were 154,900 refugees in Guinea, and 120,000 in Liberia, to say nothing of 360,000 people internally displaced).

"The whole population of Abkhazia must vote. This is the point from which we start. We are not expecting anything good from these elections. We told them, 'You will create a structure that has no legitimacy, you will create another gap between your population and the refugees. Better that we sit down together and narrow the gap. For example, that both sections of Parliament continue until there is a chance of allowing everybody to vote. Any step which is unacceptable to the international community, as this is, will make matters worse.'

"Ardzinba could have used the Security Council Resolution to prolong the life of the Parliament. I tried to send him that message. We need to neutralise negative influences and to reach agreement on the internal environment for a peaceful settlement. In the meetings on Ossetia, the OSCE played a useful role, and they could do so here too."

The Minister's suspicions of Russia, and his enthusiasm for bringing in other players, appear to be widely shared. One theory presented, though not by Mr. Menagharishvili, was that the Russians had an interest in keeping low-level conflicts going all over the 'near abroad', to give themselves a plausible excuse for prolonging their military presence in newly independent states, and thus exerting political pressure on them.

IV. MEETING WITH PRESIDENT ARDZINBA OF ABKHAZIA, 23 NOVEMBER

"Georgia and the Friends of Georgia want to involve FOG in the negotiating process, and never to leave the table. When the FOG change their name, so that they are friends of both Georgia and Abkhazia, I would agree to their participation," President Ardzinba said at a meeting on 23 November.

The Ambassadors of FOG reminded me that their full title is Friends of the Secretary-General for Georgia. Since the title is a contentious matter, however, it would be helpful if it could be changed, say to 'Black Sea Group', or to any other form of words that contains neither Abkhazia nor Georgia. This question of the name has impaired the effectiveness of the FOG throughout its whole existence, and it was one of the complaints raised by the Abkhazians when I last visited the region in December 1994. It was, of course, not merely the title which prompted concern, but the title was seen to represent the point of view of the member states.

"As to permanent negotiations, the outcome does not depend on the hours spent at the table or the number of pens worn out. An agreement could be reached in ten minutes if there was the political will. So there is no sense in continuing these negotiations under present conditions.

"I am ready to sign an agreement based on the Declaration of 4 April 1994, and on the principle of equality. There was a draft of the main principles-nine or ten points-on which a detailed agreement could be based. I told Mr. Brunner, we have no wish to return to being part of Georgia, taking into consideration what happened in the late war, and we are quite capable of living independently."

I asked Mr. Ardzinba whether he thought it would be helpful to ask an international lawyer to write an agreement, based on the Declaration of 4 April, setting up the institutions that would be necessary to operate the common functions identified in the Declaration, such as foreign affairs, customs and border posts. He agreed that this would be helpful. If the
parties set aside the question of Abkhazia's constitutional status, allowing it to emerge as a by-product of an institutional framework, rather than defining the status first and deducing the institutions from it, I believe that progress could be made. I found it difficult with some on the Georgian side, such as Mr. Konstantin Zhghenti, Director of European and American Affairs at the Foreign Office, to get across the importance of this point as a psychological hurdle to be surmounted. Mr. Ardzinba insists that Abkhazia is de facto independent, while the Georgians-and the international community-continually emphasise "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders,"3 and use pejorative language, referring to 'the Abkhaz separatist authorities.

President Ardzinba, on the other hand, points out: "The main problem is the one-sided support of Georgia by the international community and by Russia. We are not a country that has been conquered; we are looking for an agreement after a war. People here asked me to conduct a referendum on total independence as part of these elections, but I rejected that because I wanted to reach an agreement. There is a minimum we can accept. We are not a part of Georgia and we can only have a treaty-based agreement. Even in Tatarstan their constitution calls the state a subject of international law. As for our position, Abkhazia and Georgia were equal in status when the Soviet Union first came into existence. We were both Republics, with the right to secede from the USSR. Then there was a treaty relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia, which continued up to 1932. At that point Stalin, who was of course a Georgian, altered the relationship and reduced our status to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia. Large scale transfer of the Georgian population into Abkhazia took place, with a view to making us subordinate. But after the downfall of the Soviet Union, it was the Georgians who abrogated their constitution, so that there was a return to the relationship between us which existed prior to the treaty of 1924- Under those circumstances, we had the same right to go back to the status we held at that time, and to formulate a new constitution just as the Georgians had done."

This is at least an arguable case, and Georgian spokespersons did not attempt to rebut it. When it was raised, they asserted that what had happened in the Soviet period was no longer relevant. Whatever the legal merits of the argument, however, it is no more useful, as a starting point for productive negotiations, than the Georgian assertion that Abkhazia is subordinate to Georgia, because that was the position from 1932 onwards, even though the instruments on which that relationship depended had been abrogated. It is surely more sensible to leave those questions aside and to see whether practical matters can be agreed, concentrating first on those which could be of mutual benefit to both parties, and others as well. The reopening of the railway from Georgia to Russia, which passes through Abkhazia, is an obvious example.

For the record, however, on 20 June 1990 when Gamsakhurdia was in charge the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR passed a resolution suspending Soviet laws connected with the leaving of the USSR by a union-republic, on the definition of rights existing between the Union and subjects of the Federation, and on the basis of economic relations and other matters. Since this affected the rights of the Abkhazian ASSR (defined in the 1978 Georgian Constitution) and since at the time autonomous republics within Russia itself were claiming to be full union-republics, the Abkhazians declared 'The State Sovereignty of the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic' on 25 August 1990. The relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia was not spelled out by either party at that time, because the main preoccupation of the authorities in Tbilisi was to free themselves from control by Moscow.
After Gamsakhurdia's flight into exile, the Military Council of Georgia, which had come into power by a military coup, abrogated Georgia's 1978 constitution in February 1992 and reinstated the constitution of 22 February 1921 which had been introduced by the independent Menshevik-led government. Clause 107 of that constitution states that "Abkhasie (district of Soukhoum), Georgia Musulmane (district of Batum), and Zakathala (district of Zakhatala), which are integral parts of the Georgian Republic, enjoy an autonomy in the administration of their affairs."

Clause 108 states: "The statute concerning the autonomy of the districts mentioned in the previous article will be the object of special legislation." In other words, the nature of the relationship was never specified in the crucial 1921 constitution, and although Abkhazia had been militarily annexed by General Mazniev (Mazniashvili) on behalf of the Menshevik regime in 1918, its status under international law was indeterminate.

Left without any constitutional definition of their relationship with Georgia, the Abkhazians reinstated their own constitution of 1925 on 23 July 1992, under which Abkhazia was a Soviet Socialist Republic, co-equal with Georgia, and linked with Georgia by treaty. At the time this was viewed as a temporary measure until a new legal definition of relations between Abkhazia and Georgia could be agreed. A draft for such relations was published at the end of 6 July but Georgian forces invaded less than a month later.

V. MEETING WITH FOREIGN MINISTER KONSTANTIN OZGAN, 23 NOVEMBER

Mr. Ozgan began by drawing attention to the high turnout in the Abkhazian elections, particularly in the Gali region. He said the average for the territory as a whole was 85%, while in Gali it reached 90%. (According to the Abkhaz Central Electoral Commission Chairman, Vyacheslav Tsugba, in the first round of the elections 26 candidates won over 50% of votes, which entitles each of them to a seat in parliament. The total number of seats is 35, and therefore, around 65% of seats in the Abkhazian parliament have been filled. The turnout was 82%.)

I briefed him on the meeting I had had with Foreign Minister Menagharishvili. Concerning the recent meeting in Tbilisi, he said he had been there to see Mr. Shevardnadze and that Mr. Menagharishvili had been present. There was also an Abkhazian deputy present. The meeting arose from an initiative by President Ardzinba, who asked him to go. On the role of Mr. Brunner, Mr. Ozgan said he was aware that the Georgians were not fully satisfied,

"but we think that he has enough time to devote to the process and is well informed on the conflict. I had a long talk with Mr. Brunner in late September, and I did not notice that he supported one or the other side. I thought he was very wise, and that being a special envoy, he has done more than others, such as the Security Council, the FOG, the OSCE or the European Parliament. The very reason why the Georgians are not satisfied with Mr. Brunner is that he does try to consider both sides' viewpoints. I am convinced that although he is very busy, he does have time to visit and to listen. It is the others I have mentioned who have no time for us. If they came and studied the case objectively, Georgia would not be satisfied with any of those actors either.

"We are always ready for negotiations, any time. It is for the Georgians to decide when they are ready. If Mr. Menagharishvili says the word, we are ready to meet at any place and any time."
"As to the Russians as mediators, I think they do rather well. Russia has paid a lot of attention to the dispute. Strengthening the role of the United Nations, that would not be the way I would formulate the question. The UN has not studied the case since 1992, and we are now in 1996. If they do study the case themselves, their role could be strengthened." [I think he was referring to the members of the Security Council. Visits to Abkhazia by FOG Ambassadors have done something to remove the impression gained by the Abkhazian leadership that nobody except Mr. Brunner was interested in hearing their side of the story, and it is important to expand those channels of communication.]

"On the 'strange position of the UN in leaving the negotiations to Russia', the fact is that they are not equipped to deal with the process. Yes, we did agree that the negotiation process must be continuous, and we agree that leadership meetings should be held, with and without mediators.

"On the refugees, we signed an agreement in April 1994 and we are ready to implement it. The fact that 60,000 have returned to Gali demonstrates our good faith. "The world community has to work with us so that they have an objective understanding of the problems. They have to make an effort, but so far they only listen to Mr. Shevardnadze. I have written to the Security Council, the Secretary-General and the European Parliament, and I hope they will study what we say.

"There is no state-legal relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia. All previously existing arrangements were made by Stalin and Beria. Stalin demoted Abkhazia to the status of an autonomous republic in 1931, but in 1990-91 Georgia declared all the treaties of that period as null and void. So, there has been a political vacuum since then, except for the agreement of 4 April 1994. Georgia demands her territorial integrity and we accept that, within her 1920s boundaries. In the same terms, Abkhazia is now an independent state.

The international community recognized the 15 union-republics of the former Soviet Union within their 1991 borders. In doing so, they ignored the fact that these entities were artifacts of Soviet imperialism, and also that, within the parameters of the Soviet state-legal system, they were not immutable. If the dissolution of the ties which bound Georgia to other entities within the Soviet system was lawful, this should have been taken into account. There is an unfortunate inclination to substitute state practice for international law in these matters, undermining the rule of law in international affairs.

In the course of the discussions with both Mr. Menagharishvili and President Ardzinba, I asked whether they thought that a resumption of the refugee repatriation program might be coupled with economic incentives for the rehabilitation of damaged houses and infrastructure. Both said this was an idea that could be considered. Later, I found in discussion with the UNHCR Legal Officer, Mr. Bayisa Wak-Woya, that the UNHCR had reached an agreement with Abkhazia, under which the Abkhazian authorities would undertake a village by village survey and following which they would report on the state of repair of each village and the work needing to be done to repair damaged houses or infrastructure. The return program could then be coordinated with the timetable for physical rehabilitation, on which assistance would be needed from the international community. This seems a much more practical approach than specifying a fixed number of returnees per month, and it also has the advantage that refugees can return village by village, so that they would be accompanied by their neighbors.

Mr. Wak-Woya also said that all the refugees who had returned informally to the Gali region continued to be registered in Zugdidi, because they obtained free distributions of aid thereby. This means that the 40,000 or 60,000 informal returnees are being counted on both sides. The Abkhazians say that 60,000 have returned to the Gali region, and that in a recent head-count they enumerated 90,000 Georgians in Abkhazia altogether. There are certainly
Georgians in other regions, since we met some in Pitsunda and in Gagra. Yet the figures quoted by the Georgian authorities assume that nobody has returned. It is unfortunate that the unofficial returnees were never registered, as recommended in the report on my previous visit dated 15 December 1994.

The chairman of the [Tbilisi-based] Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, Tamaz Nadareishvili, said that there were 340,000 exiles altogether, of whom 220,000 were of voting age. He claimed that every single one of these persons had voted in the referendum conducted on the same day as the Abkhazian elections, and that every single one of them called for the reintegration of Abkhazia into Georgia.

The number of refugees who left Abkhazia as a result of the conflict has never been properly determined. The UNHCR gives a figure of 250,000. However, the UNHCR's London office gives a different picture. The UNHCR Office in Tbilisi has informed us that the number of persons the Georgian authorities claim have left Abkhazia as a result of the conflict in Abkhazia is as follows:

- 200,000 Georgians left Abkhazia for Georgia proper:
- 30,000 Georgians left Abkhazia for Russia
- Up to 50,000 Russians and other minorities may have left Abkhazia for Russia
- Some 30,000 Abkhaz left Georgia and went to Abkhazia or Russia, and 25,000 Abkhaz may be displaced in Abkhazia
- The figure of 285,000 represents all internally displaced persons, including Ossetians, in the country. This figure is often used in appeals for humanitarian assistance, but the Georgian government also used 300,000.

Thus, according to the information given to the UNHCR by the Georgian authorities, which has not been independently verified, the maximum number of persons who left Abkhazia for Georgia, Russia or any other country of refuge, was 280,000. However, the last Soviet census of 1989 showed that there were only 240,000 “Georgians” altogether in Abkhazia, and by common consent the statistics were manipulated to increase the number of “Georgians” and diminishing the number belonging to other nationalities. Ethnicity had to be entered in pencil, and all the forms were taken to Tbilisi for processing. Many Mingrelians stated their nationality as such, but they were not so recorded in the official statistics. Even if the official number of “Georgians” was correct, by no means all of them left, and the alleged figure of 230,000 “Georgian” refugees is impossible.

Although he did not make this point in the course of our discussion, he had said at a news conference held at the office of the Georgian Federation of Journalists that, “by holding the elections, the separatists have themselves put an end to a peaceful settlement of the conflict.” This was not true, since the Georgian government, whilst condemning the elections, had not said they would break off negotiations if they were held, and indeed they continued to emphasise the importance of more intensive talks. President Shevardnadze himself said that the talks would continue, two days after the poll. He said:

"As far as the visit to Tbilisi by Konstantin Ozgan and [Abkhaz parliamentary deputy] Daur Barganjia is concerned, there was an agreement that the meeting would remain confidential. Later, the Sukhumi authorities decided that it was not necessary to comply with the agreement on the confidentiality of the meeting, and neither do I view it as a tragedy that they had publicly divulged it. In itself, the meeting is significant because in a
way it initiated a dialogue between Georgians and the Abkhaz. You may recall my visit to Gudauta [in Abkhazia last spring]. One of the aims of that visit was also to start a dialogue but unfortunately that meeting proved to be a one-sided dialogue and up until now, there has been no serious continuation of the dialogue. Now we have an initiative by the current leaders of Abkhazia, the Sukhumi leaders, who decided to hold a dialogue in Tbilisi. The dialogue will continue in future. At least this is what we agreed on. Meetings may be held in Moscow, Abkhazia or Tbilisi. These will mainly be bilateral meetings and talks. I regard a detailed review of the [Tbilisi] meeting as a little premature. What we agreed on needs elaboration, additional coordination and it is inexpedient to publicly divulge the contents of the talks. The next meetings will show how useful the Tbilisi dialogue has been. I would like to indicate that representatives of Russia were informed about the meeting in Tbilisi and only tactics of support can be expected from them ...

So President Shevardnadze himself refuted Mr. Nadareishvili's alarmist prediction. The perception of these matters, and what people say about them, is often influenced by their strongly-held viewpoints. I experienced this in a minor way with Mr. Nadareishvili personally. During the course of my interview with him, he asked me whether I had represented the UK officially as an observer at the Abkhazian elections. I told him that I was there in my personal capacity, and that the UK government did not recognize the elections. I also said that he could repeat this to the media. This was reported as follows: "From the very start, Lord Avebury expressed concern over reports in the Russian media claiming that he had been sent to Abkhazia as an official observer at the elections ..."

VI. THE ELECTIONS IN ABKHAZIA

In assessing any election, it is necessary to consider not just the polling day arrangements, but also the registration of voters, selection of candidates, access to the media, freedom of assembly and expression, etc. Because we only arrived in Abkhazia on the eve of the poll it was not possible to form an opinion on most of these questions. There was no sign of electioneering in the form of posters or public meetings, but it has to be remembered that the population of Abkhazia is comparable with that of a London Borough, and we were told that everybody knew who the candidates were and what they stood for.

At the polling stations, there were lists of eligible voters on large sheets, also recording their addresses and identity card numbers. As a voter arrived, his or her identity card was checked against the register, and the voter would then sign against the name, following which a ballot paper would be issued. The papers listed the names of the candidates, and the voter was required to delete all the names except that of his or her preferred candidate.

If an unregistered voter turned up, with an identity card, the presiding officer would normally register that person on the spot.

Some voters turned up with more than one identity card, asking to record the vote of a relative. This was allowed, against the rules, in two of the polling stations we visited. It is not likely that this irregularity led to any distortion of the result, since presumably the relative had given the holder of his/her card the authority to act on his/her behalf.

According to the final report of the Central Electoral Commission of Abkhazia on Elections to the Popular Assembly (the Republic's parliament) 81% of the electorate turned out to vote and 30 MPs were elected out of a field of 83. Five seats in parliament remain vacant (because no candidate gained more than 50% of the poll), so there would be repeat elections in five constituencies in two weeks time. Of the 30 elected MPs, there are 19 Abkhaz, four Russians, three Armenians, two Georgians, one Greek and one Kabardin.

The Commission reported that observers issued complaints concerning some minor technical difficulties in the elections, but considered that everything else was fine. The
elections have been declared democratic. And, the entire Georgian population of Abkhazia voted, they said.12

There were no acts of violence on election day itself, but two terrorist attacks occurred on the eve of poll. An armoured personnel carrier belonging to the [Russian] peacekeeping forces blew up on a mine, and it was reported that a Russian serviceman in the vehicle was severely injured. A bomb also exploded at the administrative building in Gali, destroying an office on the ground floor which had been occupied only two minutes earlier. As usual with these incidents, there was no evidence of the identity of the culprits, though it was believed by the Abkhazian authorities that the sabotage was perpetrated in order to disrupt the elections and intimidate voters.

The Georgian Ministry of State Security, however, said that the allegations made by the Abkhazians were "merely yet another political pre-election farce". The Georgians claimed that the worsened situation ahead of the "illegal elections" was "caused in fact by the extremely tense confrontation between the Gudauta and Ochamchire clans which turned into an armed conflict long ago." The Ministry said that it was "practically impossible to hold elections in Gali District, where there is complete chaos and impunity reigns. The population feels in a state of panic and is seeking shelter in forests as well as territories controlled by the legal Georgian authorities."13 The turnout was, in fact, higher in the Gali District than in the rest of Abkhazia.

According to President Eduard Shevardnadze, over 99% of the refugees from Abkhazia voted in a plebiscite held in connection with the parliamentary elections in Abkhazia. "Out of a total of 238,000 refugees who were eligible to vote," said the President, "224,800 people took part in the plebiscite. This makes 93.8% of the refugees over 18 years of age. In Georgia, over 186,000 citizens took part in the plebiscite. Almost all the participants, that is, over 99% of the refugees, said no to the separatist elections in Abkhazia, that is, they deplored the elections."14 Other figures quoted by Mr. Shevardnadze were that some 16,000 people turned up at polling stations in Moscow, 5,200 in St. Petersburg, 1,800 in Podolsk [Russia], 2,700 in Kiev, 7,080 in Sochi, 530 in Trabzon [Turkey], 550 in Yerevan, 900 in Minsk, several hundred in Greece, and many, mostly Jews forced to leave Abkhazia, in Israel. Among the participants in the plebiscite were ethnic Georgians, Abkhaz Armenians Russians Greeks, Jews and others. Although it was claimed that the plebiscite was officially monitored by western observers, nothing was said to me about this by any of the FOG Ambassadors, and the nature of the claimed observation needs to be elucidated.

He also cast doubt on the statistics announced for the Abkhazian elections, saying that they "seem to be taken from outer space." He claimed that according to the United Nations, the current population of Abkhazia was no more than one-third of the pre-war population, making it a maximum of 175,000. The Abkhazians say that the figure is about 300,000. Part of the difference may be accounted for by the 60,000 returnees in the Gali region mentioned earlier, who are still treated by the Georgian authorities as living in Zugdidi, where they register for aid. There is still a substantial discrepancy between the statistics used be either side, and it would be useful if the parties could agree to commission an impartial joint study, so that reasonably accurate information could be made available to aid agencies and others on which to base their policies.
VII. CONCLUSION

The opening of conversations at the Foreign Minister level, and their probable continuation in Sukhumi in early December, are hopeful signs of a better atmosphere in which the twin problems (of the return of the exiles and the constitutional status of Abkhazia) could be progressed.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Friends of Georgia should change their name, to, say, "The Black Sea Group".
2. Informal returnees should be registered.
3. It would be helpful if, as a sign of good will, the CIS blockade were lifted, and travel by Abkhazians facilitated, so that improved contacts could be achieved between Abkhazians and the rest of the world.
4. Other confidence-building measures ought to be adopted at the same time, including the opening of the railway line and Sukhumi airport.
5. The Abkhazians should actively undertake the village survey agreed with the UNHCR, so that the return of the exiles can proceed in an orderly manner.
6. The international community should be asked to commit resources to the rehabilitation of housing, water, sanitation, schools, clinics and the rest of the infrastructure of Abkhazia, so as to facilitate the return of the exiles.
7. The parties should commission, jointly, a survey of the population of Abkhazia, and of the exiles living abroad, so that accurate figures are available to aid agencies, the UNHCR, and the authorities of Georgia and Abkhazia.
8. The parties should concentrate on the methodology of establishing joint institutions to perform the functions listed in the Declaration of 4 April 1994 leaving the question of Abkhazia's constitutional status to be considered at a later date.