The Year in Disasters 1993

Caucasus: poverty, conflict and disaster

The tightly packed countries of the Caucasus - Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan - experienced a year of growing disaster in 1993, with a combination of new and old emergencies sharply increasing the number of vulnerable people and deepening their crises, and the prospect of far worse to come in 1994 and 1995.

Each of the three countries faced its own complex mixture of large-scale population movements, national and international conflicts, political change, economic decline, and deficits in both food and fuel - and all at a time when each is trying to find its new role in a post-cold war world.

Their disasters are unique - each is different in scale, scope and time - and yet the factors at work in the Caucasus are also having their impact in various ways upon almost every part of the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe, from the shores of the Adriatic to Siberia. If lessons can be learned from the Caucasus, they may be of use in increasing disaster preparedness and improving relief operations for hundreds of millions of people facing poverty, dislocation and conflict in most of the former Soviet republics, including Russia itself.

Emerging from the former Soviet Union, all three republics of the Caucasus are grappling with their sudden political transition to democracy while also coping with the end of political and economic direction from the Soviet Union and the emergence of new political pressures from Russia.

These factors have undermined good government at a time of simultaneous economic transformation, and have taken attention away from the pressing needs of ordinary people, particularly the most vulnerable: as always, the old, the young, orphans, and disabled people but even some new groups, such as intellectuals, artists, scientists and academics who have lost their state sponsors or are trying to live on now-worthless state salaries. And in countries where command economies once ensured near-100% employment, millions are unemployed and face destitution.

The end of the Soviet Union has also allowed decades-old unresolved issues to re-emerge, particularly those of national identity and ethnicity, while the Moscow-led process of incorporating the Caucasus republics into the Russian-dominated Confederation of Independent States has heightened disagreements over sovereignty.

Such political issues have brought conflict throughout the Caucasus, with three outbreaks of civil war in Georgia, international war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and increasing banditry in every country. These conflicts worsened through the year, and forced millions of people to become refugees in another country or displaced persons in their own At the beginning of 1993, the numbers of refugees and displaced people in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were estimated by the Federation, from a range of sources, at 150,000, 350,000 and 500,000 respectively; by the year-end the totals were 250,000, 310,000 and 750,000, a total of 1.31 million people living in public buildings, with relatives or friends, or - for

a few - under canvas. During the year, many more - a reported 600,000 from Armenia alone - left for other countries, particularly Russia.

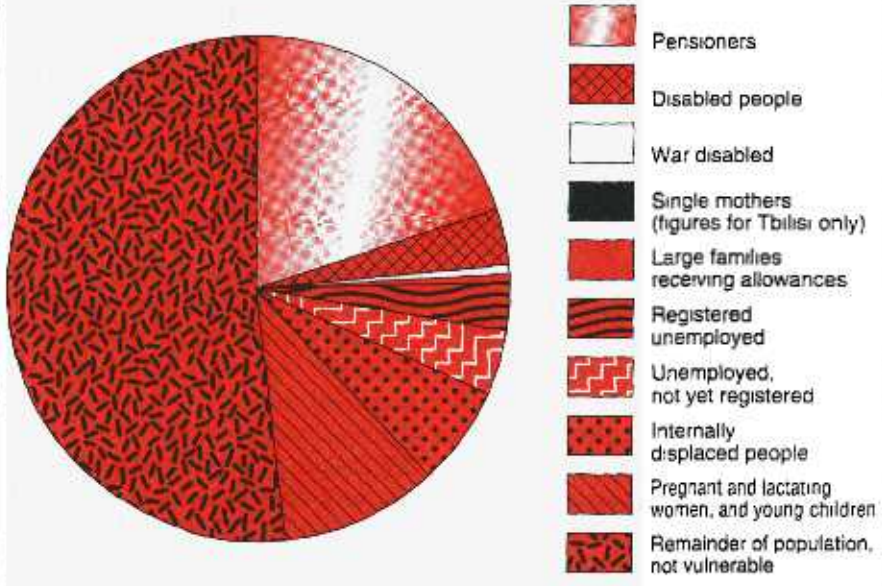
These enormous burdens have been added to sharp economic decline in the Caucasus, as the needs of the captive markets of the former Soviet Union disappear. Only a few years ago, all three republics had the benefits of serving both Soviet economic purposes (industrial production, tourism, energy) and politico-military functions (as the "front line" against the West and Islam)

Today, they are adrift in a global marketplace, and apart from the special case of Azerbaijan's oil fields, unable to find capital or production because of their apparent instability and ongoing conflicts, and are thus unlikely for years to produce sufficient products at the right price and quality to meet the needs of all their peoples.

As their economies collapse, not one of the three is self-sufficient in agriculture, and only Azerbaijan - at major environmental cost - produces oil sufficient to offer for export. As the head of Armenia's government-run Humanitarian Assistance Commis-

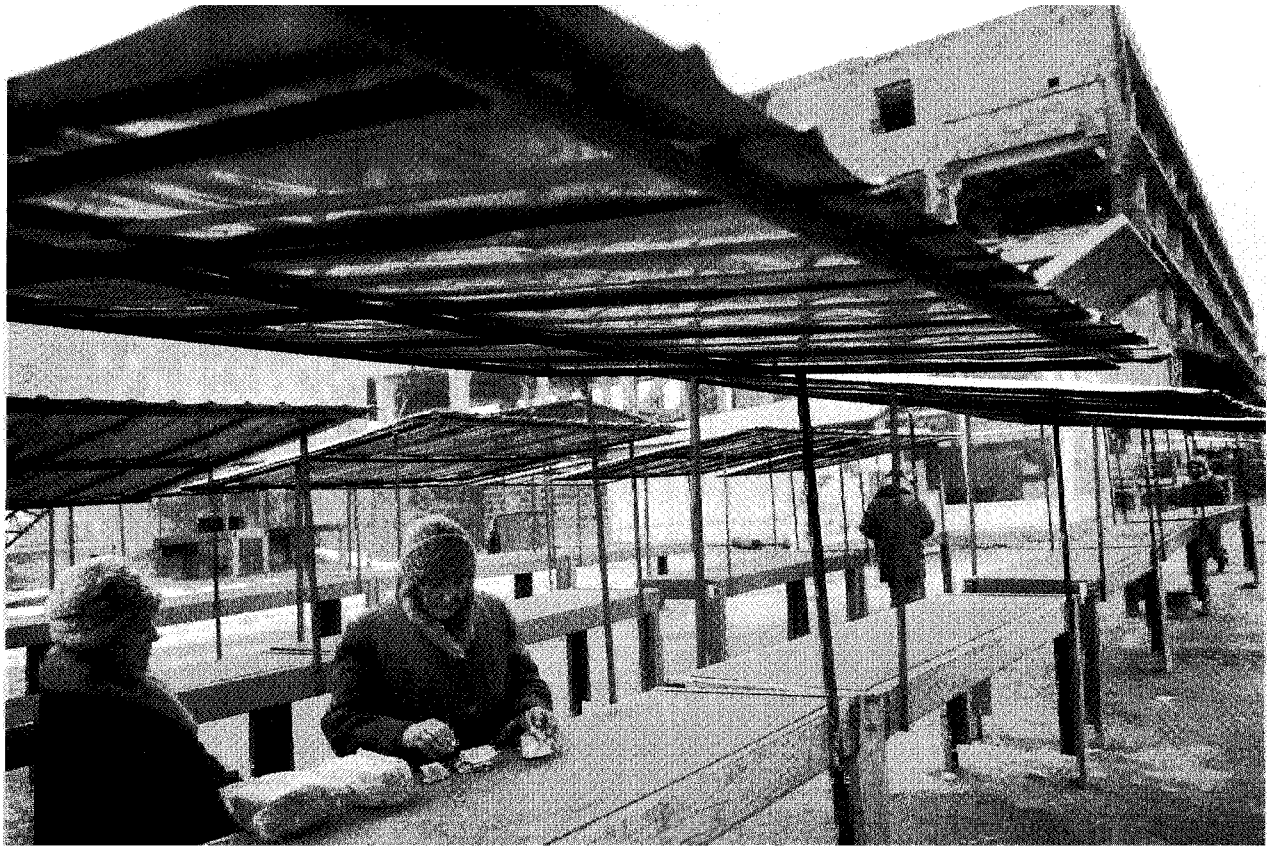
Vulnerable people in Georgia

Vulnerable groups	Numbers of people (as of January 1993)
Pensioners	898,335
Disabled people	163,230
War disabled	19,471
Single mothers (figures for Tbilisi only)	3,496
Large families receiving allowances	22,741
Registered unemployed	140,567
Unemployed, not yet registered	186,305
Internally displaced people	284,000
Pregnant and lactating women, and young children	450,000
Remainder of population, not vulnerable	2,331,855



In previous major disasters in Africa and Asia, aid agencies are used to targeting assistance to up to 20% of the affected area's population. In Georgia the figure is 40%. At this level of destitution, emergency aid can never hope to return people to a reasonable standard of living. It can only ever be a stop-gap.

Source. IOM/USAID report. *993



Relying on market forces is of little value when there is nothing to buy in the market and your monthly pension is less than the cost of a kilogramme of potatoes. As the economies of the Caucasus collapse, food relief provided in the form of family parcels is a vital lifeline for those - pensioners, large families, the disabled - whose falling incomes and lack of coping mechanisms leave them vulnerable.
Armenia, 1993. Ian Berry/Magnum

sion, which tries to coordinate international and domestic aid efforts, pointed out: "Even in good years, Armenia imported 80% of its food supply"

Food prices rose through 1993 in all three countries, most markedly in Armenia, where its war with Azerbaijan cut off the fuel supplies from its oil-rich opponent and led to a blockade along its vital southern border with Turkey, forcing all food and fuel to come through Georgia on increasingly-tenuous road and rail links, or the frequently-disrupted gas pipeline from Turkmenistan.

As shortages of energy, raw materials and spare parts deepened, millions were laid-off or sacked throughout the Caucasus, contracting the tax-base governments needed to maintain the broad welfare provisions established under the Soviet system, just at the time when many more citizens were in growing need.

This took place against the backdrop of a rapidly-declining value of the rouble against hard currencies, limiting the ability of Russia to offer credit support, and even harsher currency movements by the Azeri manat, Georgian coupon and the old rouble, which Armenia alone among former Soviet republics retained alongside the new rouble after Russia changed its currency, a move which provoked further inflation by attracting old roubles from throughout the former Soviet Union.

Thus, by the end of 1993, the economic collapse meant that the standard monthly state pension or minimum wage in both Armenia and Georgia would not be enough to buy a kilo of potatoes, and Azeri incomes were fast falling in value, hitting the poorest and those on fixed incomes the most, and drawing into vulnerability many state employees, from teachers to doctors.

For those offering humanitarian assistance, the multi-layer disasters under way in the Caucasus have proved a major challenge, with the prospect of a majority of each country's population in need and dependent on stretched supply lines amid continuing conflict and harsh winter conditions.

Even in some of the worst flood or high wind disasters of Asia, or the harshest famines of Africa, the proportion of these in greatest need rarely exceeded 10% of the total population. Even where all or most of the people of a particular area are affected, such as Bangladesh's coastal zone or the Ethiopian highlands, well-targeted national and international resources to help the people and places in greatest need. As yet it has not been fully recognised that the potential plight of the Caucasus - which in turn is symptomatic of much of the former Soviet Union - resembles some of the world's largest refugee movements, from Afghanistan to Cambodia or Mozambique, affecting entire countries and pushing many millions into poverty in a harsh European context; and few agencies were established when similar conditions existed in Europe following the Second World War.

Of course, the Caucasus countries are not famine-affected Africa or an Asian refugee crisis; their collapse has been from comparatively-sophisticated economies which supported significant health and welfare systems, housing and jobs for almost all, food at guaranteed prices and subsidised fuel. But the nature of the former Soviet economy and state structures contained its own factors to enforce vulnerability, with many people's coping mechanisms in disaster - falling back on savings, conserving fuel and food, increasing income through casual work - being denied or limited by centralised controls and the changes during the Soviet era made to traditional peasant societies.

The race for industrialisation and the usual pressures towards urbanisation created enormously vulnerable cities and urban peoples, living in landless high-rise flats where centralised heating, hot water and lighting systems are breaking down, or barracked on windswept out-of-town estates where the fuel for buses is sold on the black market, while the crumbling state control of agriculture cannot now guarantee the prices or even availability of the subsidised food people came to depend on.