

5. In its bilateral meeting with the Friends, the Georgian side acknowledged the need to pursue a long-term approach to conflict settlement and to create trust before any discussions on the core political issue, the future political status of Abkhazia, could take place. It expressed readiness to focus meanwhile on practical matters, including in the economic area, such as the establishment of small scale joint ventures. At the same time, it stressed the fundamental right of refugees and internally displaced persons to return and called for international involvement to assure human rights and security in the predominantly Georgian-populated Gali district on the Abkhaz-controlled side of the conflict line. This is the key issue for Georgia. It is clear that without visible progress in this area, it is difficult to move in a significant way on economic cooperation.

6. The Abkhaz side, for its part, emphasised economic cooperation as key to progress in confidence-building, mentioning in particular the reopening of the railway communication through Abkhazia. It urged Georgia to demonstrate through action its commitment to resolve the conflict peacefully, in particular by lifting the restrictions imposed by the CIS in 1996. With regard to improving the situation of the returnees to the Gali district, the Abkhaz side expressed readiness to give positive consideration to establishment of a United Nations human rights office, while showing less willingness to move forward on the deployment of the UNOMIG civilian police component.

7. Both parties reacted positively to proposals outlined at the meeting by the Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, on possible practical steps, including the verification of the number of internally displaced persons having returned to the Gali district and developing mechanisms for protection and addressing basic needs of returnees. To implement the programme, UNHCR stressed the need to ensure security and freedom of movement for its personnel as well as the need for additional financial support.

8. On their part, the Friends underlined to the two sides that the conflict must be settled by peaceful means and in the framework of Security Council resolutions. They

encouraged progress toward a re-commitment to the non-use of force which could take the form of a joint declaration by the sides. The Friends also welcomed a proposal from Germany to host a conference on economic confidence-building and cooperation, which could provide an opportunity for the parties to explore ways to promote mutually beneficial economic projects. It was agreed that Germany and the United Nations would work together to prepare the conference.

9. As an outcome of the meeting, the two sides agreed to resume discussion in the relevant task forces and working groups. In principle, they would hold a meeting on security guarantees; a meeting on return of refugees and internally displaced persons in the framework of the respective Sochi working group; and a UNOMIG-facilitated expert meeting on confidence-building measures. All of these should permit progress before the next review by the Friends planned for early fall.

Mr. President,

10. The discussions in Geneva revealed how far we need to go before approaching a solution. They showed clearly the distance between the two sides on issues of substance and in terms of mutual trust; negotiations on the core political issues remain out of reach at this time.

11. On the other hand, while the dynamic during the "formal" talks was at times tense, the discussions in the margins of the meeting suggested the potential for the sides to develop useful personal relationships. And, as I mentioned earlier, the meeting paved the ground for renewed contacts through a series of substantive meetings which should offer opportunities for further progress.

12. We will be following the next steps closely and will provide, within our means, every possible support. In closing, I would like to express appreciation for the support of the Group of Friends and underline the importance of their continued collaborative engagement for any future progress, including and in particular, on political issues.

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