

NEWS DIGEST ON GEORGIA

March 23-25

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❖ Occupied Regions

1. Foreign Minister Reiterates Pledge to Help Residents of Abkhazia, Tskhinvali

Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani has reiterated the pledge to help the residents in Georgia's Russian-occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali /South Ossetia regions in tackling the pandemic. "We are open and willing to provide aid for our citizens who live beyond the dividing line and we have engaged our international partners in this [process]," stated Zalkaliani at a press briefing of the government task force on the novel coronavirus. According to the Foreign Minister, Sokhumi and Tskhinvali have shut down crossing points [connecting the regions to Georgia proper], further "aggravating the humanitarian situation." "There are single cases when we are able to provide assistance [to our citizens], but most of the time we don't manage to" noted Zalkaliani.

On March 19, a delegation of experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) arrived in Sokhumi to deliver humanitarian aid (individual protective equipment) and assess locals' preparedness in light of the coronavirus pandemic (*MFA.GOV.GE, March 23, 2020*).

2. Aslan Bzhania Becomes New Abkhaz Leader

Aslan Bzhania is now set to become Moscow-backed Abkhazia's fifth leader for a five-year term, winning March 22 repeat 'presidential' election, which was called after local court declared September 2019 leadership runoffs invalid on January 12, that was soon followed by Moscow-facilitated resignation of Raul Khajimba later that day.

Noting that Bzhania garnered 53,741 votes, accounting for 56.5% of all ballots cast, the region's election administration has declared him as the new leader; Bzhania's running mate Badra Gunba is set to become the new 'vice-president.'

Adgur Ardzinba, another leadership hopeful, was the second in the three-men race, garnering 33,686 votes, accounting for 35,42%; Leonid Dzapshba received 2,114 votes accounting for 2,22% (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

3. Int'l Community Denounces Abkhaz Polls, Continued Occupation of Georgia

Georgia and its international partners denounce March 22 repeat "presidential polls" in Moscow-backed region of Abkhazia.

Peter Stano, Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union said in a statement released on March 23, that the EU "does not recognise the constitutional and legal framework" of the March 22 "presidential polls" in Abkhazia.

A number of other countries have also denounced Abkhazia polls, including Azerbaijan, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania.

The OSCE Group of Friends of Georgia, which includes Bulgaria, Canada, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States of America have also released a joint statement yesterday expressing their deep concern over the “continued occupation” of Georgia (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

❖ Foreign Affairs

4. Georgian Speaker, U.S. Congressman Hold Phone Talk

Georgian Parliament Speaker Archil Talakvadze held phone talk with the United States Congressman and House Georgia Caucus Co-Chair Adam Kinzinger (R-IL).

Noting that the U.S.-Georgia “friendship and bond remains as strong as ever,” Congressman Kinzinger said they spoke about Georgia and its fight against the novel coronavirus, “as well as economic challenges we will all face.”

“We discussed efforts made against the COVID-19, public health situation and need for economic stabilization and recovery,” Speaker Talakvadze tweeted (*Civil.ge, March 25, 2020*).

❖ Internal Affairs

5. Government to Shut Down Marneuli, Bolnisi Municipalities

Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announced in a late night press conference that the government is shutting down Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities, south to capital city of Tbilisi, as reportedly the Georgian healthcare authorities could not identify the source for the latest COVID-19 case confirmed in Marneuli (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

6. Police Set up Checkpoints in Municipalities Under Lockdown

Police have set up twelve checkpoints in Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities in order to enforce a lockdown imposed at 00:30 today to prevent the spread of coronavirus from high-risk zones. According to the statement released by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), law enforcement officers will patrol all non-primary roads together with the military forces dispatched due to the emergency situation. The MIA has also installed a field hospital early today to add up space for quarantining potentially infected patients (*Imedi TV, March 23, 2020*).

7. Defense Minister Visits Quarantined Marneuli as Army Joins Efforts in Combating Coronavirus

Georgia’s Defense Minister Irakli Garibashvili has visited military checkpoints installed in Marneuli, which, together Bolnisi, has been put under lockdown since 00:30 today due to the occurrence of community transmission of COVID-19. As stated by Garibashvili, Georgian defense forces have been deployed in the two high-risk municipalities in order to help enforcing preventive measures against the spread of the disease. According to the statement released by the Ministry of Defense, the military personnel of Eastern Command has manned five checkpoints set up together with the servicemen of Ministry of Internal Affairs. Soldiers have also set up field tents where army physicians carry out medical checkup for locals. Along with the Patrol Police, the defense forces control the perimeter to ensure strict observance of the quarantine regime (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

8. CSOs Concerned over Xenophobic Remarks against Ethnic Azerbaijanis in Quarantined Marneuli, Bolnisi

The No to Phobia platform, a coalition uniting eleven Georgian watchdog organizations, expressed concern over “the wave of xenophobia” that erupted after ethnic Azerbaijani majority Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities had been put under lockdown on March 23 due to the occurrence of community transmission of COVID-19.

In a statement released on March 25, the CSOs said that following the shutting down of Marneuli and Bolnisi municipalities, “statements promoting discrimination and containing hate speech [targeting local ethnic Azerbaijanis] were disseminated in the society, especially in social media.” (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*)

9. Gov’t Suspends Intercity Transportation Effective March 24

All forms of intercity transportation of passengers, including rail transport, will be suspended after midnight (March 24) in a bid to stymie the spread of the disease, Irakli Chikovani, Prime Minister’s spokesperson, stated at a press briefing of government’s task force on Coronavirus. Cargo transportation is exempt from the ban. Municipal transport (buses, minibuses and etc.) is also halted in Bolnisi and Marneuli municipalities that have been under lockdown since yesterday (*Civil.ge March 24, 2020*).

10. Georgia to Start Rapid Testing for Coronavirus from March 25

With five more infected patients now testing negative for the novel coronavirus, the total number of recoveries rose to eight, Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze stated at a midday briefing after a meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council on Coronavirus. Discharged patients will now go into two-week self-isolation under physicians’ observation, as it is prescribed by the World Health Organization guidelines. Three more patients are on the mend and may be discharged tomorrow if repeat PCR tests are negative, Tikaradze added (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

11. First Batch of Rapid Test Kits Arrived from China

1,000 rapid COVID-19 test kits have arrived from China today, Health Minister Ekaterine Tikaradze has told reporters while visiting quarantined Marneuli municipality. Rapid test kits will enable health professionals to diagnose the novel coronavirus in less than an hour and a half, Tikaradze has noted, down from six hours needed for PCR methodology.

According to the Health Minister, Georgia has signed a contract to purchase up to 200,000 test kits in total, which will be delivered gradually, 3,000 kits arriving by the end of this week. Rapid tests will be first used to carry out screening of high-risk areas like Marneuli and Bolnisi currently under strict lockdown, Tikaradze has added (*Civil.ge, March 25, 2020*).

12. Schools and Universities to Remain Closed Until April 21

All educational institutions (primary, secondary and higher) in Georgia will remain closed until April 21 according to the ordinance issued by the Georgian government today. Face-to-face teaching is suspended while the ordinance requires the institutions to transfer to remote instruction if possible. The government has banned conducting in-person seminars, conferences and other educational activities as well. Schools have been shut down since March 2 in an effort to contain the novel coronavirus (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

13. Georgia's Public Broadcaster to Air Lessons for Students Due to School Shutdown

Georgian Public Broadcaster's Channel 2 will start airing lessons for students from March 30 as school shutdown carries on in light of the coronavirus pandemic. "It is possible that suspension of in-class instruction at Georgian schools may be extended [after April 21], hence the Ministry of Education is taking measures to distance education capacity," Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has stated at the meeting of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council today. He has stressed that not every pupil had an access to the Internet and pledged to take charge of the problem (*1TV, March 24, 2020*).

14. Gov't Announces Lockdown Measures, Exempts Essential Services

The government has announced a raft of new measures in a bid to reduce the spread of COVID-19. At a daily briefing of the Inter-Agency Coordination Council, Irakli Chikovani, Prime Minister's spokesperson, has presented at length restrictions on businesses and public life imposed by the government's decree on preventive measures against the novel coronavirus.

The decree bans gathering of more than ten people in public space (both indoor and outdoor) except for private residential premises. Restrictions apply to weddings, funerals, sporting and cultural events and other forms of social gathering. A long list of exemptions includes government facilities, medical facilities, military bases, prisons, construction sites as well as public transport (not suspended due to the emergency regulations). Private industrial facilities (authorized to operate by the emergency regulations) are also free from the ban provided that all workers wear personal protective equipment and observe public health recommendations (keeping a two-meter distance, among others) (*Civil.ge, March 24, 2020*).

15. Georgian Orthodox Church Calls on Sick Parishioners to Stay Home, Permits Holding Open-Air Services

The Georgia Orthodox Church (GOC), a dominant religious denomination in Georgia, has issued a statement in response to public concerns over Church's decision not to change the shared spoon Communion practice and not to suspend church services in order to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The GOC deplored "certain media outlets's attempt to scapegoat the Church" were the epidemiological situation to exacerbate. "We call on our parishioners who feel unwell to remain at home until full recovery," reads the statement released today. The GOC maintained that congregants were obliged to stay 1.5 meters away from each other inside the church house and keep at least 2-meter distance outside of it. "In order to avoid mass gatherings, priests are allowed to conduct church services and the rite of Holy Unction on different days of the Holy Week (before Easter Day)," stated the GOC. It also permitted holding open-air church services when possible (*Civil.ge, March 25, 2020*).

16. Total number of infected – 77, 10 recovered

According to the latest data total number of infected increased to 77. Last two are soldiers who reportedly have been participating in the shutdown process of Marneuli for three days. In total 5 soldiers were transferred to hospital. 10 patients have been recovered. Two patients conditions are critical, one 80 and 62 years old women (*1TV, March 26, 2020*).

17. Court Rules Bail for June 20 Tbilisi Protest Activist

On March 23, Tbilisi City Court ruled that Besik Tamliani, an activist detained during June 20-21 protests, who had rejected a plea bargain and pleaded not guilty in the case, has to pay a GEL 4,000 bail. He, reportedly, will be released from custody later today (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

18. CSOs Say Adjara TV 'Persecutes' Critical Journalists

On March 24, the Media Advocacy Coalition, uniting over ten local watchdog and media organizations, released a statement calling attention to the recent decisions made by Giorgi Kokhreidze, the director of Adjara TV and Radio Company, a Batumi-based public broadcaster, which "raise doubts that journalists holding different views [from the management] are being persecuted and oppressed." This, the statement reads, confirms that the broadcaster avoids fulfill its functions prescribed by the Law on Broadcasting (*Civil.ge, March 24, 2020*).

❖ Economy and Social Affairs

19. Central Bank Suspends Licensing and Registration of Financial Institutions Due to Pandemic

In response to growing concerns over coronavirus pandemic, the National Bank of Georgia (NBG) has suspended licensing and registration procedures for financial institutions for a two-month period. "The President of the NBG has decreed to withhold licensing and registration of microfinance organizations, currency exchange services, stock exchanges, credit unions, brokerage firms, central depositaries and bond registrars," reads the statement issued by the Central Bank today. Those institutions who have already submitted requisite documentation are exempt from the (suspension) decree (*Civil.ge, March 23, 2020*).

20. Central Bank Steps up Currency Intervention as Lari Plummets

The National Bank of Georgia has announced it will sell USD 40 million at the foreign exchange (FX) auction tomorrow to stem a sharp depreciation of the national currency amid coronavirus fallout. The Central Bank has already carried out two consecutive currency interventions worth USD 60 million from its foreign exchange reserves. As of now, Georgia's national currency is at a historic low trading at GEL 3,48 per U.S. dollar on Bloomberg's platform (*Civil.ge, March 24, 2020*).

21. Wizz Air Suspends All Georgia Flights Until May 1

The Hungarian low-cost airline Wizz Air suspends all of its Georgia flights until May 1, 2020 in a bid to prevent further spread of the COVID-19, Kutaisi International Airport reports (*Civil.ge, March 24, 2020*).

22. Gov't: GEL 6 Mln Raised for Coronavirus Relief Fund by Private Sector

Over GEL 6 mln (USD 1,7 mln) has been raised for StopCov, a coronavirus relief fund, after its launching two days ago, Irakli Chikovani, Prime Minister's spokesperson has stated at a daily press briefing today. The StopCov Fund has been established by the government asking for a helping hand from the private sector in order to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout. Collected funds will be allocated to prevent further spread of the infection (*Civil.ge, March 25, 2020*).








Additional Information

March 26, 2020

OFFICIAL EXCHANGE RATES

1 USD - 3.4576 GEL 1 GBP - 4.1190 GEL 100 RUB - 4.4135 GEL
1 EUR - 3.7370 GEL 1 TRY - 0.5389 GEL 100 JPY - 3.1082 GEL

Thursday 26 March	Friday 27 March	Saturday 28 March	Sunday 29 March	Monday 30 March
				
5° 16°	5° 16°	8° 15°	8° 14°	8° 17°

-  **Movie Events - English Sessions - [Tickets](#)**
-  **Friends of Museum (Membership to access Georgian National Museums For free of charge after one payment) - [Membership](#)**
-  **Marjanishvili Theatre – [Events and Tickets](#)**
-  **Rustaveli Theatre - [Events and Tickets](#)**
-  **Opera and Ballet – [Events and Tickets](#)**
-  **Concerts – [Events and Tickets](#)**
-  **Sports – [Events and Tickets](#)**