

## Georgian science pays price of conflict

Conflict with Russia puts reforms in jeopardy.

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The brief war in Georgia has paralysed research throughout the country, halting a promising resurgence in science there.

Seventy-two research projects have been stopped as a result of the Russian–Georgian conflict that erupted this month, says Natia Jokhadze, director of the Georgia National Science Foundation (GNSF) in Tbilisi. That represents 30% of the foundation's projects.

Some of the suspended projects are disturbingly apposite. One is a study of how ethnic stereotypes fuel conflict between Georgian, Abkhazian, Ossetian and Russian ethnicities, being conducted at Tbilisi State University. An international conference on conflict potential and tourism development, scheduled to take place in early October in the town of Gori, near the border with the disputed region of South Ossetia, is expected to be cancelled.

The crisis has hit Georgia midway into a sweeping reform of its science-funding system. The GNSF, a grant-giving agency set up in 2005 along Western lines, had planned to double its support of national science next year, from US\$8 million to US\$16 million. But given the costs of post-war reconstruction, the budget increase is now unlikely to materialize, says Jokhadze. Grants for young scientists and travel grants may have to be cut, she says.

The capital Tbilisi remains unscathed. But on 12 August, Russian bombing of Gori set the university ablaze. The full extent of damage there and at universities, hospitals and schools in some of the more remote regions of Georgia is still not clear, because roads and communication channels are blocked or destroyed and journalists have been denied access. In a message posted on the Internet, Zaza Tsofniasvili, rector of Gori University, said that the damage was "extensive" and that the university might have to close.

A ceasefire deal brokered by France officially took effect on 12 August, but military operations continued until 17 August.

International conservation charity WWF estimates that 280 hectares of forest have been burnt in the conflict, and warns that key conservation areas are under threat, including a biodiversity research hotspot in western Georgia. "Since last night, Russian helicopters are dropping bombs in the Borjomi Gorge, in the area of Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park," David Tarkhnishvili, a zoologist at the Ilia Chavchavadze State University in Tbilisi, wrote on 16 August in an e-mail to Italian colleagues. "Multiple fire patches are currently spreading over the area."

Most foreign researchers who have been involved in international research projects have now left the country. Palaeontologist Lorenzo Rook of the University of Florence in Italy, who moved to Georgia in July to participate in an international archaeological study at the Plio-Pleistocene site of Dmanisi in southern Georgia, was evacuated by the Italian embassy on 10 August. The rest of the team, comprising students and scientists from Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and the United States, were also safely evacuated from the excavation site before the Russian airforce began bombing a military base between Dmanisi and Tbilisi.

Rook, who has visited Georgia regularly since 2000, says that the number of young, skilled native researchers has grown remarkably quickly in the country over the past few years, part of a more general scientific resurgence. "I hope Georgian science will recover from the current crisis equally fast, and that we can all go back and resume our work there as soon as possible," he says.

"We very much appreciate Western support," says David Lordkipanidze, director-general of the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi, who oversees the now-suspended excavations in Dmanisi. "Unfortunately, there is little else we can do other than wait from one day to the next for the Russian occupation of half of our country to end."

Luckily, he adds, the Dmanisi archaeological site, where the oldest human remains outside Africa have been found, is outside the conflict zones. He is optimistic that the open-air museum being constructed there will open before the year's end as planned, with a big celebration and a science festival.

Russia last week began to withdraw its forces from Georgian territory, but military officials say troops will remain stationed in buffer zones around South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On 26 August, the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, recognized the two breakaway regions as independent states.

**Commenting is now closed.**



Tanks roll on the streets of Gori.

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