

Opening the Georgian Military

Since the Soviet era the Georgian military has been closed to public scrutiny. This public scrutiny has been particularly circumscribed in the years following independence and the extensive civil strife that followed. With no public oversight, the situation in the Georgian military has resulted in violations of servicemen's rights, unchecked corruption, and a public ignorance of these problems. Georgian citizens, unaware of their rights, are often unlawfully recruited and made to live in harsh, unhygienic conditions with little sustenance.

The Justice and Liberty Association (JLA) set out to change this situation with funding from the Eurasia Foundation, addressing these problems at a national and policy level. The work of JLA has helped make the Georgian armed forces more open and accountable and has increased the public's awareness of the conditions in the armed forces and of their rights vis-à-vis the military.

The organization was founded by a former military officer who believes that the military is in need of reform. Irakli Sesiashvili, the director of JLA, noted that his

organization emerged due to the lack of public control over the military. According to Sesiashvili, "The public sector was simply unable to undertake certain responsibilities of control. In this situation, NGOs had to step in." And step in they did.

JLA visited individual military installations to monitor their conditions. The organization also provided free legal consultation and representation to conscripts, soldiers, and their families. It actively lobbied the Georgian Parliament in an effort to help formulate legislation that improved conditions in the military. It worked vigorously to raise conscripts' and soldiers' awareness of their legal rights. It also provided the public with an accurate view of the woeful state of the armed forces.

Monitoring Military Bases

JLA obtained permission from the Ministry of Defense (MOD) to visit military units, guardhouses, and commissariats throughout Georgia—the first time an

NGO has received permission to directly monitor military installations in any former Soviet country. JLA's aim was to accurately identify the state of affairs on military bases, educate soldiers on their rights, and inform the public of its findings.

In sum, JLA visited over 24 military installations, documenting conditions through detailed site visits and surveys of nearly 900 soldiers. JLA staff found appalling conditions on the bases. Most bases supplied their soldiers with insufficient and oftentimes fetid daily rations. The shortage of foodstuffs at many bases is so severe that families needed to supplement their children's rations. The bases also lacked sufficient uniforms and medical supplies and had inadequate or no plumbing.

Additionally, JLA uncovered corrupt procurement practices that compounded the problems on these bases. These abuses ranged from purchases of inferior foodstuffs at high prices to the illegal sale of food to outsiders.

Following these visits, JLA informed the public of its findings. It provided the media with information and



Soldiers fill out JLA questionnaires in their less-than-comfortable sleeping quarters.

vivid photographic evidence. Using JLA's findings, the independent television station Rustavi 2 broadcast a report on its investigative journalism program '60 Minutes' about corruption in the armed forces. JLA also used its findings to compile a book, *The Georgian Army: Between the Law and Reality*, which also included the organization's recommendations for military reform. "After publishing this book, we expected a negative reaction from the [MOD], but they didn't react, likely because the facts were supported and the book was written in an objective manner," said Sesiashvili. In fact, in addition to alerting the public to the conditions on military bases, the book apparently provoked the President to issue a decree aimed at curbing corruption in the military. Sesiashvili pointed out that large sections of the decree's text were taken directly from the book's recommendations.

JLA's monitoring work has had an impact beyond the borders of Georgia. NGOs in several other former

Soviet Republics have implemented programs to monitor their armed forces, modeled on JLA's example.

Increasing Legal Awareness

Rights violations are widespread in the Georgian armed forces, according to Nodar Epremidze, Assistant Ombudsman for Military and Police Matters. He noted that, "for the most part, military personnel are simply unaware of their rights." Conscripts' ignorance of the law and the government's difficulty filling recruitment quotas are the underlying conditions that lead to rights violations, according to Epremidze. "Enlisted men usually come from socially vulnerable families, especially from the regions [outside of Tbilisi]. Frequently, these men are unlawfully recruited since many have legal cause to postpone their service."

To ameliorate such problems, JLA provides free legal services to conscripts, soldiers and their families. The organization's lawyers deal most commonly with problems concerning the exemption or postponement of military service, but they have also advised soldiers that have deserted, have been wrongly imprisoned, or have been abused, among others. With the support of the Eurasia Foundation, JLA's lawyers have advised over 450 individuals from areas throughout Georgia.

As a preventative component of its work, the organization pursued public awareness campaigns to inform conscript-age youth, conscripts, and soldiers of their rights. During visits to military bases, JLA led seminars for the soldiers to inform them of their rights and to discuss issues of military reform. The organization presented

each participant with a handout detailing their rights as soldiers. JLA created a similar brochure for conscripts. Importantly, JLA was able to convince the national recruitment commission to provide every conscript in Georgia with this information. Mr. Epremidze praised the usefulness of the handouts, stating

that "they clearly explain relevant laws and regulations in language that is easy to understand."

Better Legislation

JLA's first major legislative achievement came in December 2000. JLA staff worked closely with like-minded parliamentarians to help draft legislation offering amnesty to deserters. By the end of 2000, thousands of soldiers had deserted the Georgian military, most fleeing the harsh conditions on bases. Existing legislation allowed deserters to return to their units within two months without facing criminal proceedings. Few deserters, though, were aware of this law. The new legislation allowed all past deserters a two-month window to seek amnesty, but it quickly became apparent that few deserters knew of their new opportunity. At this point, JLA successfully lobbied Parliament for an extension and actively set out to inform deserters of their chance to obtain amnesty. JLA directly helped 2,500 deserters request and receive amnesty, brought many into the capital, and aided many others through its public awareness campaign. In total, over 4,500 deserters were given amnesty thanks in large part to JLA's efforts.

Since then, JLA has lobbied for and against changes to legislation governing the military. Most recently, the organization successfully lobbied against a legislative amendment that would triple the already expensive yearly fee to postpone military service.

To further support its lobbying efforts, JLA founded a consultative committee, comprising several Tbilisi-based civil society partners, to consider and advocate for policy regulating the military sphere. Sesiashvili explained a main goal of this committee: "If, for example, the Parliament is considering legislation that we believe will have a negative impact, we don't simply try to block these proposals. We also try to offer a positive alternative." Currently, the consultative committee partners are drafting new regulations on military discipline that correspond to NATO standards. Based on MOD support, Sesiashvili expects the committee's proposed regulations to be adopted by Parliament once their work is completed.

A More Open Military

Through JLA's efforts, the Georgian armed forces have become more transparent and accountable to the public. Conscripts and soldiers have access to information and legal support that they did not have previously, and the public is more aware of the problems that the military faces. According to Mr. Epremidze, the organization has been effective in its work because it has chosen an appropriate strategy: JLA "works actively in its field and aims its efforts at achievable goals, such as increasing soldiers' awareness of their rights. An example of its success is the high demand for its publications." Today, the organization is continuing its efforts to reform the Georgian armed forces. The Eurasia Foundation is supporting these efforts with a follow-on grant.



The Georgian Military struggles to keep its forces well fed.