



Georgia 2013 Crime and Safety Report

Extortion; Assault; Theft; Stolen items; Transportation Security; Elections; Rebellions; IEDs; Separatist violence; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Drug Trafficking; Travel Health and Safety

Europe > Georgia > Tbilisi

8/22/2013

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

For the past several years, overall crime in Georgia has been on a steady decline due to the establishment of a professional law enforcement presence and an overall increase in the standard of living. However, despite this progress, crimes against U.S. citizens and other Westerners still occur. A general increase in reported crimes was noted in 2012, particularly during and after the parliamentary elections.

Crime Threats

There continues to be reports of nuisance street children who are known to badger, hassle, and behave aggressively toward foreigners.

There are periodic reports of violence and intimidation against foreigners in bars, nightclubs, and similar venues and on the streets nearby. Locals routinely imbibe large amounts of alcohol in these venues and can be aggressive in their attempts to cajole foreigners to join in.

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Refusing an offered drink may be considered an insult, so tact and graciousness are important in preventing conflict.

Low level organized crime in the form of street gangs and drug dealers is a trend. There was an increase in reporting of robberies, petty crimes, and assaults in 2012, compared to 2011.

In general, Georgian men are respectful toward women; however, foreign women may be verbally harassed, stared at, or followed, particularly outside of Tbilisi. Often, a man's insistent advances are the result of cultural misinterpretations of behavior.

Overall Road Safety Situation

Driving can be extremely hazardous. Local drivers pay little attention to speed limits and lane discipline and regularly encroach into oncoming traffic. Despite a zero tolerance law in regard to drinking and driving, intoxicated drivers are a problem, especially in the evenings and on holidays. It is strongly advised that drivers maintain an acute level of situational awareness and that seatbelts be worn by all occupants at all times (Law requires use of seat belts in the front seats).

Travel between cities after sundown is not recommended due to insufficient lighting and poor road conditions. Use of seatbelts is highly recommended. There is little access to emergency medical services outside Tbilisi. There is also a heightened vulnerability to crime during vehicle malfunctions or stops.

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The Regional Security Office (RSO) of U.S. Embassy Tbilisi advises caution in the use of the Tbilisi underground Metro, marshrutka mini-buses, and any other form of public transportation. The majority of taxis are private individuals who own a car and use it as an unofficial cab as a source of income. Since these taxis are not regulated, it is advised to use an official taxi cab company. Several established taxi cab companies exist: Red/Silver Taxi Cab Service (2511 111 from landline or 032 511 111 from a cell phone) and the Pelican (Blue) Taxi Service (2939 939 from landline or 032 293 9939 from a cell phone). Both companies have English speaking dispatchers. Passengers should instruct taxi drivers to slow down if they do not feel comfortable with the operating speed.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

There is no known threat of political violence directed specifically against U.S. citizens. However, there is a substantial threat to U.S. citizens in regard to being in the wrong place at the wrong time or being caught up in flash demonstrations or civil unrest.

Leading up to and following the 2012 parliamentary elections, there was an increase in protests and demonstrations. The 2012 parliamentary elections also led to a significant shift in political power within the government and a complete restructuring of multiple ministries and departments.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

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Most regional terrorism, or extremism, emanates from areas along the administrative boundaries of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and it takes the form of attacks and explosions. Related incidents involving improvised explosive devices (IEDs) began in late 2010 and continued through 2012. Law enforcement entities conducted investigations into these incidents, and several suspects were arrested, while others remain at large. The investigations are ongoing.

On September 22, 2010, an IED detonated approximately 100 meters from the U.S. Embassy compound in Tbilisi. Police destroyed another IED that was located in the same area. No one was injured. Suspects arrested in connection with the bombing told authorities that the U.S. Embassy was the intended target.

On October 7, 2010, an IED was discovered on a railway bridge near the Chaladidi village in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region in western Georgia. The IED failed to detonate, and no one was injured. Later that month, two IEDs exploded near the Borjomi train station in Tbilisi. No one was injured. On November 28, 2010, one IED exploded in front of the opposition Labor Party office, leading to the death of one woman. On the same day, another device exploded in front of a building that housed a grocery store and apartments in the Mukhiani district in Tbilisi.

In March 2011, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) reported finding three bombs planted outside government buildings in the western city of Kutaisi. In June 2011, the MoIA reported they had uncovered a plot to bomb the NATO liaison office in Tbilisi. The MoIA's arrests and investigation into these incidents concluded that both instances originated and were organized

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in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

A bomb exploded in a car in September 2011 in central Sukhumi, in the breakaway Abkhazia region. The driver was killed, and a passenger was seriously injured. It is believed the driver was targeted due to his alleged involvement in organized crime. In December 2011, a former Abkhaz de facto security official rumored to be involved in smuggling and his bodyguard were found shot to death in the Gali district of Abkhazia. These two deaths were also believed to be criminally motivated.

On February 13, 2012 a bomb was discovered underneath the vehicle of an Israeli Embassy driver in Tbilisi. The bomb was disarmed without any casualties or injuries. This thwarted attack coincided with several other attacks in New Delhi, India, and Bangkok, Thailand.

On February 15, 2012 a suspect was detained for an unspecified plot against a Zugdidi marketplace. The suspect had illegally crossed from Russian-controlled Abkhazia. One week later, on February 22, there was an assassination attempt on Abkhazia's de facto president, targeting his motorcade. The assassination attempt killed two security personnel and left one car destroyed. An attack on a police post on the Abkhazian border was reported on March 4, 2012.

Police disrupted a bomb attack on the Zugdidi prosecutor's office on May 5, 2012. Similar to the February 15 plot, the suspect of this disrupted bomb attack had crossed illegally from Abkhazia.

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On August 30, 2012 Georgian forces intercepted 17 guerrillas attempting to cross the Russia (Dagestan) – Georgian border. Some 11 fighters and three soldiers were killed in the ensuing battle.

Many of Georgia's neighboring states -- Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Russia's North Caucasus Republics -- have seen some measure of terrorist-related activity in recent years. While Georgia has made great strides with respect to border control and integrity, its geographic location makes it a natural transit area for individuals from these regions, and transnational terrorism is a moderate concern. The incidents citing U.S. targets are the only known recent terrorist activity directed toward U.S. interests in Georgia. The U.S. Embassy enjoys an excellent, cooperative relationship with the government, through which it stays abreast of any issues of terrorist concern.

Organized crime has been on the wane since 2005 after the adoption of the "Anti-Thief-In-Law" legislation. As a result, most organized crime growth now transpires outside of Georgia.

Civil Unrest

Political demonstrations take place from time to time in Tbilisi and frequently take place in front of Parliament on Rustaveli Avenue. While these demonstrations are generally peaceful, some confrontations have occurred.

The civil unrest in November 2007 included one day of violent clashes with police. In spring/summer 2009, public dissatisfaction with the administration spurred several months of

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demonstrations, street closures, and in some instances minor street violence in Tbilisi. Aside from creating logistical hardships and difficulties for businesses operating in the area of the protests, it had no demonstrable effect on the safety and security of U.S. citizens in Tbilisi.

In May 2011, an opposition protest against the Saakashvili government moved in front of Parliament in order to disrupt the Independence Day parade scheduled for May 26. When the group's permit to assemble in that location expired at midnight, the protest was ordered to move and was offered an alternate location as to not interrupt the parade. The protestors refused to vacate the area, and police dispersed them. Excessive use of force by some police injured dozens of protestors. A motorcade of opposition politicians fleeing the dispersal struck and killed one police officer and one protestor.

In the months before and since the 2012 parliamentary elections, Georgia experienced an increase in protests and demonstrations. The majority concluded without major incidents and were relatively peaceful, with crowds ranging from less than a dozen individuals to several thousand.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Georgia is situated in an earthquake zone. Since 1800, more than 350 earthquakes of a 6.0 or less (Richter Scale) have occurred. The biggest earthquakes took place in 1918 and 1920, and they were believed to be of the magnitude of eight to nine points. In Armenia, in 1988, a

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7.1 magnitude earthquake struck, resulting in 25,000 deaths. The most recent seismic activity was a minor tremor on December 23, 2012, off the coast of Georgia in the Black Sea. The U.S. Geological Survey reported that the quake measured 5.7 points and that its epicenter was 47 kilometers (29.2 miles) northwest of the Georgian port city of Poti. Laws have been implemented to ensure that new buildings are safer and built to seismic standards. Still, many existing buildings were built to lower or inadequate anti-seismic standards during the Soviet era.

Regional Travel Concerns and Restricted Travel Areas/Zones

As a result of civil wars in the 1980s and early 1990s, two separatist regions in Georgia remain beyond the control of the government: the South Ossetia region in north-central Georgia and the Abkhazia region in northwest Georgia. Tensions are high between the separatist regions and the central government, and fighting broke out in August 2008 between Georgian, Russian and South Ossetian de facto forces.

In August 2008, an exchange of gunfire and artillery between Georgian and separatist forces in South Ossetia escalated into a full-blown war between Georgia and Russia. Russian forces systematically attacked Georgian military targets around the country and occupied key locations in Georgia, most notably the city of Gori, which is an hour from Tbilisi by car. Russian military actions virtually severed movement and access between eastern and western Georgia. Russian forces eventually pulled most of their forces back into the separatist-controlled territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but the areas in and contiguous to these separatist regions have seen periodic shootings, kidnappings, remotely-detonated car bombings, booby-traps, and other acts of violence. These acts have primarily targeted Georgian police or other officials, but civilians and international observers have been targeted. Russian forces are stationed in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including the Akhalkalaki region of South Ossetia (which was occupied only in

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2008 and was not previously part of the conflict zone), as well as the Kodori Gorge area of Abkhazia, which was controlled by the Georgian government before the 2008 war. Russian forces withdrew from the town of Perevi, near the administrative boundary line with South Ossetia, in November 2010.

The situation remains tense, with Russian troops and border guards stationed in both separatist regions. Due to the volatility of the political situation, reported high levels of crime, and inability of Embassy personnel to travel regularly to Abkhazia or South Ossetia, the U.S. Embassy advises U.S. citizens not to travel to these separatist-controlled regions. The restricted access of U.S. officials to Abkhazia and South Ossetia significantly limits the ability of the U.S. government to assist U.S. citizens in these regions, even in emergencies. All travelers to these regions should register with the U.S. Embassy. The U.S. Embassy recommends that any travel to Abkhazia or South Ossetia be conducted in accordance with applicable Georgian laws and that U.S. citizens regularly monitor emergency messages on the Embassy website for the latest information on the security situation throughout Georgia.

U.S. citizens are advised to exercise caution when traveling in the northern mountainous areas bordering the Russian Federation. According to Russian policy, the only legal, land border crossing between Russia and Georgia is at Larsi-Kazbegi. In 2011, Russian authorities opened the crossing to citizens of countries other than the Commonwealth of Independent States, and U.S. citizens have been able to cross this border into Russia with a valid Russian visa. Georgian authorities have also allowed U.S. citizens to enter Georgia at this border crossing, although Georgia does not require visas for U.S. citizens staying for 360 days or less. Also in 2011, flights resumed between Georgia and the Russian Federation.

Drug-related Crimes

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Georgia has been assessed as a transit point and end user destination for various forms of illicit drugs. In 2007, the government adopted a national anti-drug strategy, increased penalties for drug offenses, and adopted new anti-drug legislation. The government is also continuing efforts to increase border security with the support of the U.S. government, the European Union, and other international donors.

Kidnapping Threats

The threat to U.S. citizens of kidnapping exists both within and outside of Tbilisi. Fortunately, in recent years instances of kidnappings have reduced with only a few reported instances of bridal or parental abductions involving U.S. citizens.

Police Response

In general terms, police are attentive and responsive to requests and calls for assistance from foreigners, U.S. citizens in particular. However, much of their effectiveness is based on resources, or lack thereof, and the level of training amongst officers often varies. Police response in Tbilisi can range from several minutes to an hour in some cases. Police response outside of Tbilisi can be considerably longer in the more remote areas. Although there has been much progress in the government's efforts to reform the police organizations and fight internal corruption, serious concerns remain regarding the police's ability to deter criminal activity and conduct effective post-incident investigations.

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How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

U.S. citizens who have been detained or harassed by the police should contact the U.S. Embassy's American Citizen Services unit in the Consular Section at the following numbers:

Embassy Main Number: (995) (32) 227-70-00 {0900 to 1800 hours, Mon-Fri}

American Citizen Services: (995) (32) 227-77-24

Embassy Emergency Number: (995) (32) 227-71-33 {24/7}

The Consular Section has information available to assist victims of crime seeking assistance from local police, medical attention, finding a local attorney, contacting family or relatives in the United States, and contacting airlines regarding travel arrangements.

Please consult the Consular Information website <http://travel.state.gov> and click the international travel section and search for the country of Georgia for more information.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if you Become a Victim of Crime

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Also be aware that the local police emergency phone number is 122, but you may contact police services through the general emergency phone number 112 (equivalent of 911 in the U.S.).

Medical Emergencies

Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics

The local phone number for medical emergencies is 113, but you may contact medical services through the general emergency phone number 112 (equivalent of 911 in the U.S.).

For medical emergencies, the Embassy health unit advises U.S. citizens to consider MediClub (995) (32) 225-1991 (address: 22a Tashkenti St, Saburtalo) or the emergency and general physicians at IMSS (995) (32) 2920-928 / 2921-670.

It is highly recommended for both short term and long term travelers to purchase overseas medical insurance and medical evacuation insurance. Two overseas medical insurers used by U.S. citizens in the past are International SOS, www.internationalsos.com (1-215-942-8000), and MEDEX Assist, www.medexassist.com (1-800-732-5309).

Recommended Air Ambulance Services

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The above mentioned insurance providers offer 24/7 air ambulance service and emergency medical assistance if deemed required by local medical professionals.

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

The CDC provides recommendations for vaccinations and medications for vaccine-preventable diseases and other diseases you might be at risk for in Georgia. To have the most benefit, the CDC recommends travelers to see a health-care provider at least four to six weeks before your trip. For further information visit the CDC's website at: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/georgia.htm>.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

In light of the security environment, all U.S. citizens are strongly advised to maintain keen situational awareness and exercise basic security precautions. They should vary routes and times, especially when traveling between residence and work locations. They should maintain a low profile by not carrying large amounts of cash or displaying jewelry. Additionally, U.S. citizens should be aware of their surroundings, travel in pairs or groups, and stay on main streets where possible. Some Georgian men might understand smiling or friendliness as an invitation, so it is best for women to keep interactions with unfamiliar men as formal as possible and to avoid eye contact with men on the street. It is also recommended that those traveling throughout the country do so only in daylight hours and provide travel itinerary and

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contact information to friends or colleagues.

It is best to ignore and avoid these nuisance street children since engaging them can further fuel their aggressiveness.

The driving culture is very dangerous, and automobile travelers should wear seatbelts and drive defensively at all times.

The taxi cab industry is poorly regulated; foreigners are often charged rates higher than those of local residents. It is advised to negotiate a fare before utilizing a local taxi. It is further advised that visitors only utilize reputable and established taxi services that are run by companies and not private individuals.

Although low level organized crime does not specifically targeting foreigners, all are encouraged to constantly remain vigilant. The Embassy wishes to remind all U.S. citizens that even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can escalate into violence. U.S. citizens are encouraged to avoid large public gatherings when possible, as seemingly peaceful scenarios can often escalate quickly into dangerous situations.

Regardless of the region in Georgia one is planning to visit, U.S. citizens are urged to review their personal security precautions, increase their levels of awareness, register with the consular section, and, as appropriate, take increased security measures.

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U.S. Embassy/Consulate Location and Contact Information

Embassy/Consulate Address and Hours of Operation

11 George Balanchine Street, Didi Dighomi, Tbilisi 0131

U.S. Embassy hours of operation are Monday-Friday 9:00am – 6:00pm, and Consular Services hours of operation are Monday- Friday 8:30am – 5:30pm. Excluding holidays.

Embassy/Consulate Contact Numbers

Embassy Main Number: (995) (32) 227-70-00 {0900 to 1800 hours, Mon-Fri}

American Citizen Services: (995) (32) 227-77-24

Embassy Emergency Number: (995) (32) 227-71-33 {24/7}

For further information visit U.S. Embassy in Georgia's website:

<http://georgia.usembassy.gov/>

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For the latest security information, U.S. citizens traveling abroad should regularly monitor the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs' website, which contains current the Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts as well as the Worldwide Caution. The Department of State urges U.S. citizens to take responsibility for their own personal security while traveling overseas. For general information about appropriate measures travelers can take to protect themselves in an overseas environment, see the Department of State's extensive tips and advice on traveling safely abroad.

OSAC Country Council Information

Georgia's OSAC Country Council was formed in September 2009. The point of contact is U.S. Embassy Regional Security Officer Mathieu Souliere, who can be reached at (995) (32) 227-70-00 or via email at TbilisiOSAC@state.gov.

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