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Tbilisi Team's RED BRIDGE New Home for Border Guard

Story and photos by Grant Sattler

The recent opening of the Red Bridge Border Station near the Georgian and Azerbaijan border in the strategically located south Caucasus region was a milestone for the U.S. Bureau of Customs and Border Protection program assisting the Georgian Border Guard and Customs departments. Both departments started from scratch when Russian troops left after the Republic of Georgia regained its independence in 1991.

The \$4-million border station construction project, managed by Europe District's International Engineering Center, provides a great improvement in living conditions for border guard troops garrisoned 50 kilometers south of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

The station, constructed under the U.S. Government-funded Georgia Border Security and Law Enforcement (GBSLE) assistance program, coordinated by the U.S.

Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, is the largest Corps of Engineers project in the former Soviet state.

Although the Bureau is Europe District's main customer in Georgia, IEC also has other work there, such as a \$200,000 exercise-related barracks renovation for the U.S. Air Force's 3rd Air Force on the former Soviet Vasiati Air Base near Tbilisi. A four-person project office in Tbilisi handles the varied work with permanent, temporary duty, and local national personnel.

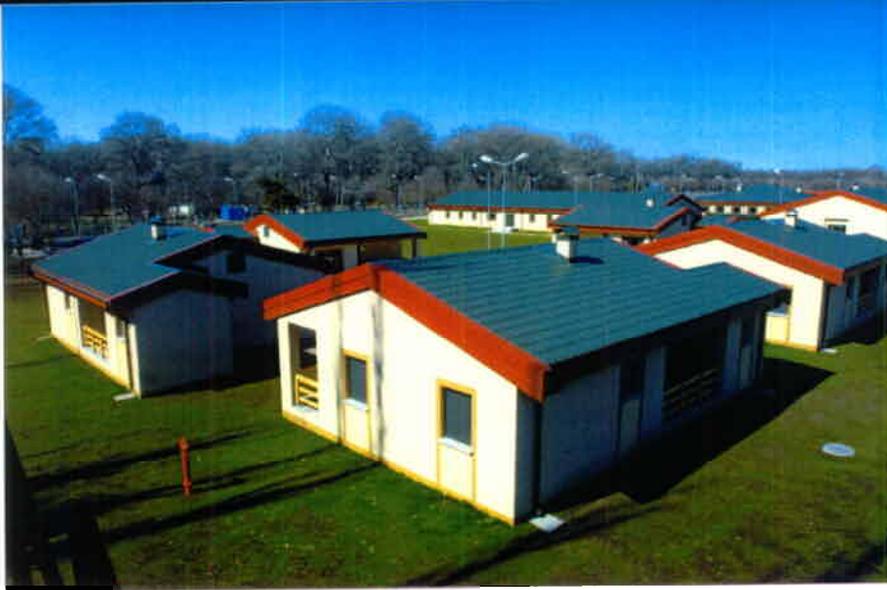
U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard M. Miles said the GBSLE program is one of the largest and most successful that the Bureau's Office of International Affairs has under its jurisdiction. "As part of the program, the U.S.

Bureau of Customs and Border Protection has been able to assist in providing the Government of Georgia with assets such as helicopters and airplanes, radar systems, facilities such as the one we are dedicating today, and also the renovated hangar at the Tbilisi airport and the Coast



Georgian Border Guard troops stand in formation during the opening ceremony of the Red Bridge Border Station in March. The \$4-million border station construction project, managed by Europe District's International Engineering Center, provides a great improvement in living conditions for border guard troops garrisoned 50 kilometers south of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi.

GEORGIA



Left: The \$4-million Red Bridge Border Station includes these single-family houses for officers and their families, as well as 64-person barracks, a dining hall, operations and administration building, vehicle maintenance building, base supply warehouse and an open storage building, and other support facilities.

Below: Charles Samuel (right), compares materials and specifications with Tamaz Chabashvili, foreman with contractor Lindsay Construction, at a barracks renovation project on Vasiani Air Base.

Guard administrative facility at Poti on the Black Sea," the ambassador said. Europe District's Program Manager Kellis Nobles said the Corps' construction of facilities is just part of a very broad assistance program.

Ambassador Miles explained the importance of the program, "Improving the ability of Georgia to exercise control over its borders ... will assist in reducing the threat of the smuggling of weapons of mass destruction, dual use materials and other forms of contraband" He said enabling the Georgian Border Guard, Ministry of Defense, and Georgia's Customs Department to exercise greater control over the movement of people and goods will also reduce the opportunity for terrorists to move undetected through the region.

At the ribbon cutting for the new station, Chairman of the Georgian Border Guard Lt. Gen. Valeri Chkheidze thanked the Bureau, the State Department, and the Corps of Engineers for this "huge assistance to Georgian Border Guards."

The border station facility includes five single-family houses for officers and their families, a 64-person barracks, a dining hall, operations and administration building, vehicle maintenance



building, base supply warehouse and an open storage building, munitions storage, utility buildings, gate security building, a dog kennel, two fire water storage pump buildings, and two guard towers. The station also includes two helipads, an electrical substation, waste-water treatment plant, sports field, soccer field, parade ground, perimeter fences, and paved roads and parking

areas. Construction on the station by contractor Zafer Taahhut Elektrik Insaat ve Tic A.S. began in May 2002.

Zafer, a Turkish firm, is also undertaking a nearly \$2-million project for the design and refurbishing of a helipad and aircraft parking apron at Tbilisi, adjacent to a hangar rebuilt in 2002, and the construction of a 700-square-meter communications service building at Lilo, Nobles said.



This hangar, renovated in 2002, is the first of several planned projects to update border guard facilities at the Tbilisi airport.



Nobles said contracts stipulate western design standards for construction and a competitive bidding process, both of which are new to the Georgians. "We do give the contractor the option, if they have a hard time finding the western specified product, or if he has a comparable Russian-standard item or material, ... [to] present it to us and tell us why this material is comparable or better, or what benefit the government has for allowing them to use it," Nobles said. The District now has a Multiple Award Task Order Contract in place for Georgia, and two Georgian firms currently doing work under that contract, including major renovations to Georgian Border Guard facilities.



James Kelly, Bureau program manager for the Border Security Program, said the Red Bridge Border Station project demonstrates the ability to plan and construct a facility ideally suited to border guards.



"The installation was designed with the needs of the Georgians in mind," Kelly said. "Although it is modeled after a lot of other facilities, it is unique to them."

GBSLE Chief of Party George Levitsky said the Georgians "were unable to commit the money to build a suitable facility [at Red Bridge]. They've lived in these miserable tents in what is effectively a flood plain." The new station will give them a fine base of operations from which to work in an important area, he said.

"One of the principal reasons that both the Georgian Border Guard and the Coast Guard, as an adjunct to the border guard, are important to us is because Georgia is a transit nation. It is in a very key southern flank location in the neighborhood of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Russia," Levitsky said. "There is tremendous potential for the transit of weapons of mass destruction components, dual-use technology, drugs, and trafficked or dangerous people to go through the Caucasus, as well as potential terrorist activity. Good border security, good border integrity here ... is very important."

Levitsky said program funding is approved by Congress from year to year. "We have to present a program and plan annually, and it must be approved every year. We can certainly plan, but we cannot promise anything for next year. The obvious practical assumption is that the program will keep going at least at a certain reasonable level that approximates this year and years past," he said of the program entering its sixth year.

The design-build approach works well in this fiscal environment, Nobles said, and is being employed for the upcoming upgrade of utilities and the construction of a barracks and dining hall at the Tbilisi Georgian Border Guard Aviation Facility.

Nobles said a design-build bid solicitation package is under development for improving the Red Bridge Customs Crossing Station, approximately half a kilometer from the new border station. Additional projects for Georgia's Customs Department are anticipated under the GBSLE assistance program for crossing stations on the borders of Turkey, Russia, and Armenia.



Col. Lee A. Staab, Commander, Europe District, tours the Red Bridge Border Station March 21, with U.S. Ambassador to Georgia Richard M. Miles (center), and Lt. Gen. Valeri Chkheidze.