

Clifford J. Levy, Moscow bureau chief, and James Traub, a contributing writer for the New York Times Magazine and part-time director of policy at the Global Centre on the Responsibility to Protect, answered questions from readers about the Russian-Georgian conflict.

Q. How reliable are reports of atrocities committed by Georgian troops in the South Ossetia capital? The Russians are saying that several thousand civilians have been killed, including women and children being run over by tanks.

-Hudson

A. Hudson: The Russians and the Ossetians have been floating a series of appalling claims since the hostilities began. But are they true? This is a region in which virtually all military acts are denounced as "ethnic cleansing," if not "genocide." Russia has even sought to invoke the doctrine known as **"Responsibility to protect,"** arguing that troops invaded Georgia in order to prevent atrocities against Ossetians. Since it seems that Georgia had already withdrawn its troops from Ossetia, this was probably a specious claim.

But the fact that the reports cannot be taken at face value doesn't mean that they're without foundation. Independent eyewitnesses have confirmed that major damage was done in the Ossetian capital of Tshkanvili, perhaps by Georgian artillery. Many civilians may have died. But it will be some while yet before these claims can be confirmed or, for that matter, before we have an entirely clear idea of how the fighting started.

-James Traub (...)

Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/14/world/europe/12georgiaqanda.html?hp>