

CHECHNYA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in Chechnya remains a cause for serious concern. The absence of accountable institutions of governance in Chechnya; the recent assassinations of civilians and six representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), including one Canadian; and the resultant departure of all international humanitarian NGOs threaten the fragile peace agreement reached in August 1996 between the Russian government and Chechen separatists. The failure of both sides to accept responsibility for violations of humanitarian law during the conflict could undermine any progress in stability following Presidential elections, scheduled to be held on January 27, 1997.

BACKGROUND

The August 31, 1996 Khasavyurt agreements, which brought a fragile peace to Russia's breakaway republic of Chechnya, have put at least a temporary end to the most blatant violations of human rights and humanitarian law committed during the armed conflict that began in December 1994.

The conflict was decidedly a military, public relations, and human rights disaster, dragging on for over 18 months at a cost of tens of thousands of lives and billions of dollars (estimated at US\$ 3.6 billion). Retired Russian General, Alexandr Lebed, who brokered the peace agreements, estimated the total fatalities during the Chechen conflict at between 80,000 and 100,000, the majority being civilian non-combatants. Current estimates of externally displaced Chechens, including Russian minorities previously living in Chechnya, range from between 300,000 and 450,000. With approximately 70% of the capital Grozny destroyed, and reports by NGOs of indiscriminate destruction of villages during the conflict, it is unlikely that refugees will be able to return in the near term.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Chechnya has remained in Grozny and continues to support the peace process. The OSCE acted as an observer at Conciliation Commission meetings, a body constituting representatives from both sides, mandated to focus on all aspects of the withdrawal of federal forces, as well as the general law-and-order situation in Chechnya. At the beginning of January 1997, all federal forces had been withdrawn from Chechnya. Responsibility for the republic's internal security has been handed over to the Chechen Ministry of the Interior.

Since the end of the conflict, incidents of terrorism, criminality and other acts in disregard of even the basic principles of humanitarian law, have exposed the Interior Ministry's inability to police Grozny and maintain security in the republic. On December 17, six medical workers of the ICRC, including Canadian Nancy Malloy, were murdered by unknown assailants. Also in December, six elderly Russians were killed in Grozny, followed by the killing of four more shortly thereafter; and what was reported as a deliberate land mine explosion killed five boys in a Chechen village. Reports of hostage taking and summary executions of "collaborators" are widespread.

Following the killing of the ICRC workers, all ICRC international personnel were evacuated from Chechnya. All other international aid organizations, including the World Food Programme, suspended operations at that time and do not plan to return until an assessment is completed following the January 27 elections.