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The human rights situation in Russia is superior to that in the former USSR. But, important problems remain, especially in the areas of pre-trial detention, the status of minorities, and the situation in Chechnya. Recent economic difficulties have increased hardships for all underprivileged groups and have diverted government and public attention away from human rights issues.

BACKGROUND

In the realm of civil and political rights, the entrenchment of the practice and principle of democratic elections, evidenced by two rounds of national legislative elections, the 1996 presidential election, and subsequent regional and local elections, stands as a seminal achievement of the post-Soviet era. Unfortunately, exceptions to this trend have been noted in several regions. Tatarstan President Shaimiev, who brooks no opposition, won elections unopposed in 1991 and 1996. Controversy continues to surround the June re-election of Bashkortostan president Rakhimov, whose principal challengers were barred from the ballot. While the Supreme Court ruled against this action, Rakhimov has rejected the court's decision.

Pre-trial detention periods of up to 3 or 4 years are not uncommon and prison facilities are overcrowded at 150% of capacity. Efforts to reduce this period run up against the deep deficiencies of the court system: lack of capacity to bring people to trial expeditiously; and lack of due process. The pre-trial process is stacked against the defendant in the prosecutor's favour: the detention period can be extended and re-extended with ease as the prosecutor builds his case, and witnesses for the defense can be called only with the prosecutor's consent. Judges remain poorly trained, poorly paid, and vulnerable to corruption. The continuing tactic of state security officials using espionage charges and closed trials against environmentalists and other activists has been demonstrated in several high profile cases (eg. Aleksander Nikitin, Grigory Pasko).

Russia continues to observe its 1996 moratorium on capital punishment in keeping with its Council of Europe obligations, but the law remains on the books. With parliamentary elections on the horizon (December 1999) it is unlikely that the Duma will oppose widespread public support for capital punishment and support a permanent ban. An estimated 1000 prisoners are held on death row. Several public executions were carried out under Sharia law in the breakaway republic of Chechnya during 1998, actions which Moscow condemned as "barbaric".

Two years after the war in Chechnya formally ended, conditions in the republic and broader North Caucasus region remain deplorable. Security of the person is virtually non-existent, with kidnapping and murder commonplace across the region. Sharia law is enforced throughout the Chechen republic.

Compulsory army service is still enforced throughout Russia, though the prominent NGO "Soldiers' Mothers' Committee" reports modest gains since the passage last April of a federal law to implement the constitutional guarantee of alternative service. Service conditions remain harsh, with brutal hazing and suicides accounting for non-combat deaths virtually every day.