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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE NEW INDEPENDENT STATES OF THE  
FORMER SOVIET UNION

ISSUE

Democratization in many of the new independent states (NIS) of the former Soviet Union is threatened by ethnic and clan conflict and resurgent traditional power structures.

BACKGROUND

The collapse of Communism and the dissolution of the USSR initially gave the impetus for major advances in establishing pluralistic political systems and legislating human rights. Each of the NIS is developing its own laws and regulations, often borrowing heavily from international human rights instruments and Western models.

Implementation has been frustrated, however, in the more stable NIS by a paralysis of executive power stemming from disagreements over the division of powers, and elsewhere by the outbreak of civil and ethnic strife.

In all of these states, greater efforts must be made to restore public trust in the honesty and effectiveness of judicial and government institutions. Minorities are an increasing concern, particularly the 25 million Russians living in the other NIS.

Despite the pressures of a difficult transition, Russia has maintained its commitment to a free and open society. The increasingly independent media has fostered vigorous political debate. The Russian Constitutional Court has rendered balanced decisions tempering President Yeltsin's decrees.

Russian citizens can now freely obtain passports for travel abroad and internal restrictions are being abolished. The rights of indigenous peoples were a factor in drawing up the new Federation Treaty. Plans call for a new democratic constitution to be submitted to a referendum April 11, 1993.

The independence-minded and predominantly Muslim republics of Tatarstan and Chechnia have refused to sign the Federation Treaty. Territorial conflicts between minority nationalities in the North Caucasus have led to the imposition of martial law in affected areas.

Economic hardship is feeding social discontent throughout Russia. Nationalist extremists are capitalizing on this to spread xenophobia and anti-Semitism.