

RUSSIA

Russia's War in Chechnya: Victims Speak Out

SUMMARY	2
RECOMMENDATIONS	2
INDISCRIMINATE BOMBING AND SHELLING BY RUSSIAN FORCES	3
Chechnya.....	3
Grozny.....	3
Kirov	4
Shali	4
Melki-Yurt	4
Bamut.....	5
Ingushetiya	5
Arshty.....	5
BACKGROUND	7

SUMMARY

Human Rights Watch/Helsinki and Memorial Human Rights Center researchers are currently on a fact-finding mission in Ingushetiya interviewing refugees who fled from Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, and surrounding regions. This newsletter describes in the victims' own words the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilians. It is the first in a series of bulletins that will document violations of human rights and humanitarian law by all forces in the war in Chechnya.

Russian forces have shown utter contempt for civilian lives in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. Eyewitnesses told our researchers of Russian bombs, shells or mortar fire levelling apartment buildings, entire neighborhoods, and single-family homes in Grozny and hitting civilian areas in outlying villages in Chechnya and in neighboring Ingushetiya. Russian ground forces reportedly opened fire on civilians from a railroad car. Russian forces also destroyed at least two hospitals and part of a third, an orphanage, and several markets areas. They have inflicted hundreds of civilian deaths, gruesome casualties, and caused an estimated 350,000 people to flee.

Russia's consistent pattern of firing on civilians grossly violates its humanitarian law obligations set out in 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Second Protocol, which governs internal armed conflict. The Geneva Conventions strictly forbid indiscriminate fire and targeting civilians, and oblige Russian forces at all times to prevent harm to civilians. Russia has similar obligations under United Nations rules adopted in 1969.

Human Rights Watch/ Helsinki takes no position on Chechnya's claim to independence. Our concern is that all parties obey humanitarian law designed to prevent civilian casualties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Human Rights Watch/Helsinki condemns in the strongest terms the conduct of Russian forces described above. We call on President Boris Yeltsin to end the indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilians and civilian property, to publicly condemn these attacks, and to punish, in a manner consistent with international law, those responsible for carrying them out. We call on Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev and Interior Minister Viktor Yerin to enforce adherence to the Geneva Conventions by Russian Army and Interior Ministry commanders and troops, and to announce publicly that violations of humanitarian law will be punished.

The Clinton Administration lost an opportunity to take an early stand against the slaughter in Chechnya. It first made mild calls for Russian restraint and characterized the conflict as "an internal matter," even though, according to the rules of Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), gross violations of human rights are the concern of all member states. Only after public criticism of its position and after its European partners deplored Russian conduct did the Clinton Administration show appropriate concern. We call on the Clinton Administration to take the lead in organizing and sending an OSCE human rights monitoring mission to Chechnya. Should Russia prove unwilling to receive monitors, the U.S. must actively seek the nine other votes required by OSCE rules to send an uninvited mission. Secretary of State Warren Christopher must make the Chechnya war a top priority in his January 16-17 meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev. We call on him to condemn Russian attacks on civilians publicly and in his private meetings with Mr. Kozyrev and to make clear that Russian violations of the Geneva Conventions are not an "internal matter."

Unlike the Clinton Administration, Western European governments were quick to condemn Russian conduct in Chechnya and to threaten sanctions. We commend their stance. We urge the Council of Europe to suspend Russia's application for admission, which is premised on respect for human rights principles. The European

Commission has recommended to the European Union to suspend its interim trade agreement with Russia. We join their call, and further call on the European Parliament to freeze ratification of the underlying, permanent trade agreement (Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation between the European Communities and their Member states of the one part, and Russia, of the other part"), which states in Article 3 that human rights is "an essential element of the partnership."

INDISCRIMINATE BOMBING AND SHELLING BY RUSSIAN FORCES

Chechnya

Grozny

Zemphila Karakhoeva, a fifty-eight-year-old woman from Grozny, fled the city on December 20, 1994, because of fierce Russian bombing. Mrs. Karakhoeva lived just across the Sunzha river, about 600 meters from the capital's television studio, which the Russian's were targeting. According to Mrs. Karakhoeva,

The entire neighborhood next to us was bombed. They started the bombing on the 19th [of December], and by the 20th, we had to leave. As we were getting in the car, they started bombing our neighborhood. The Ingush got us out on buses; we left in a huge column. . . we don't know what became of our home. I left with my husband, who is ill, and my son. We took nothing with us. We just dropped everything and ran to another neighborhood, where the column of buses was getting organized. We had about twenty minutes to get ready.

Faina Rasknia lived in the heart of Grozny, in the Lenin district, a neighborhood of private, single-family homes, with her daughter, *Asya*, age forty-eight, and granddaughter. Asya described her neighborhood as mixed, with Chechens, Ingush, Russians, and Armenians all living in the area. Russian bombing forced her and her family from their home on the evening of December 24, 1994, destroying their house and most of their neighbors' homes and wounding both women.

According to Asya, the bombing in her vicinity started a couple of days earlier: there had been an attack by SU-25 ground attack fighters on December 22 on the periphery of her neighborhood, and therefore the family slept fully clothed, ready for the worst. Her daughter had been evacuated sometime earlier by Chechens to the village of Novye Asagi. Many others, including Russians, had been evacuated to villages outside of Grozny, including to Chiri-Yurt and Atagi.

According to Faina,

We heard on the television that, starting on December 23, they wouldn't bomb Grozny. We thought things would quiet down, but we were bombed at 2:00 A.M. on the night of the 24th. My daughter was lying in the next room, and we previously had sent my granddaughter to a village nearby. They dropped a bomb between two buildings. It destroyed the entire neighborhood. Two men got me out and carried me to a bomb shelter. I have a broken leg, a brain concussion, and many bodily wounds. I'm sure [the Russian army] did this on purpose, because they knew that all Chechens had already left the city, and only Ingush and Russians were left, because they had nowhere to go.

Asya describes the attack that destroyed her home and smashed her knee in the following words:

There were no military units nearby. . . there can't even be talk of it, no anti-air craft weapons, no mounted weapons, no soldiers, no military action, and we didn't even hear any shooting close by. On

the night of December 24, a bomb fell directly in our yard. Maybe five meters from our home. . . . I didn't even sleep that night. . . suddenly it started to get light, at the beginning there wasn't any noise, then suddenly [a sound] zhzhzhzhzh, and it became light. They bombed when peaceful people were sleeping. . . . It was a miracle we got out of there. Our house began to burn almost instantly.

They lost everything in the fire that devoured their home. Later, Asya was evacuated by Ingush in a column of displaced persons to Nazran, the capitol of neighboring Ingushetiya, a republic of the Russian Federation. Asya reported that her displaced persons column was the last organized group to leave Grozny and that after that people left as best they could, often in passing cars. They sometimes had to pay large amounts of money.

Maria Akimova lived all of her eighty years in Grozny, in a small private home not far from the one of Asya and Faina Rasknia. The bombing in her neighborhood started a couple of days earlier, and on December 19th at about 8:30 P.M. a bomb destroyed her home and wounded her. According to Maria,

Everything fell on me [after the bomb hit]. All that's left of my house is a pile of trash. I don't know exactly where the bomb fell, but all at once it destroyed four neighboring houses. I have nothing left. I have a greenstick fracture in my arm¹ and wounds from flying glass in my eye and face. I spent six days in a hospital in Grozny, where it was cold and I was hungry. They brought me here [to Ingushetiya], where Ingush took me in.

According to her doctor, she also has bleeding in her eye and wounds to her left forearm.

Kirov

Oleg Petrukhin, age 14, lived in the village of Kirov, the Zavodskii region of Chechnya. He was wounded in a mortar attack and is presently in the hospital. He describes the attack as such:

I went to go round up the cattle. A mortar bombardment started, and some shells fell close by. I was wounded by shrapnel. There were troops in Yermolovsky, and they were shelling the town, and so I was wounded. It was the 23rd or 24th of December. . . . There wasn't any military hardware in our village, but there was some in the neighboring one. No one was firing from our village.

Shali

According to witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch/Helsinki and Memorial in Ingushetiya, on January 3, in the town of Shali, south of Grozny, Russian planes bombed a market and a nearby hospital, killing twenty and wounding nearly one hundred.

Melki-Yurt

According to witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch/Helsinki and Memorial, on January 3, during a Russian air attack, rockets killed several people in the village of Melki-Yurt (also known as Bamut-1). Propaganda sheets, purporting to be from the Command of the Unified Group of Russian Forces in the Chechen Republic, were scattered over the area. They threatened mass destruction if all resistance did not cease.

One of the propaganda sheets was given to Human Rights Watch/Helsinki and Memorial researchers in the area, who faxed it to the United States. The following is a translation of all that is legible.

Residents of Bamut

¹A greenstick fracture is one in which the bone protrudes from the skin.

You have been betrayed. The people around Dudayev are already saying that he and his family have fled abroad. Dudayev's closest aides are hauling out of Grozny in Kamaz trucks property looted from the Chechen people. They are calling on you to resist so they can have time to get out as much as possible.

DON'T BELIEVE THEM

Those of you who continue to carry weapons. . .

We will without delay answer with mighty rocket-bombing strikes.

YOUR LIFE AND THE LIVES OF YOUR CHILDREN ARE IN YOUR HANDS!

Command of the Unified Group of Russian Forces in the Chechen Republic

Bamut

According to witnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch/Helsinki and Memorial, sometime around January 3 and 4, Russian planes struck at the crossroads in the settlement of Bamut as well as the neighboring village of Starye Atagi.

Ingushetiya

On January 6, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki and Memorial researchers visited a number of settlements along the Ingush-Chechen border and spoke with displaced persons in Ingushetiya, Chechnya's neighbor to the west. Ingushetiya is a major center for displaced persons; some 80,000 have fled here according to ICRC figures, as well as the site of bombing attacks and misconduct by Russian forces.²

The following accounts are based on that visit and on testimony from villagers who witnessed the attack.

Arshty

In the village of Arshty, on the border with Chechnya, a bombing attack by Russian SU-25 ground attack fighters and an attack by helicopters at the entrance to the village took the lives of six civilians and wounded seven. The *Sultanov* family was extremely hard hit: the mother, daughter, and teenage son were killed, another daughter was critically wounded, and the father and a third daughter had legs amputated. There are two thousand displaced in Arshty.

A doctor at the hospital in Nazran, Ingushetiya's capital, treated patients from Arshty; she confirmed that six people died in the attack.

It was reported that the motive for attack on Arshty was revenge because a unit of volunteers headed for Grozny had slept in the village before the raid. Video and audio tapes made after the attack were confiscated by Russian soldiers.

Akhmed Klematov, born in 1949, lived near Ordzhonikidzevskaya, just over the border from Chechnya. The vehicle in which Mr. Klematov was travelling was deliberately rammed by an armored personnel carrier of the Russian military on December 12, and he was injured and broke his knee. Mr. Klematov explained what happened that day in the following words:

²Before Chechnya declared independence in October 1991, Ingushetiya, together with Chechnya, formed the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. On June 4, 1992, the Russian Supreme Soviet passed a law creating the Ingush republic, with Nazran as the capital. A border between Chechnya still has not been delineated. Chechens and Ingush are closely linked linguistically and ethnically, and in 1944 both Chechens and Ingush were deported to Central Asia. Even before the conflict in Chechnya started, in November 1992, approximately 60,000 Ingush were forcibly displaced by fighting in North Ossetia, Ingushetiya's neighbor to the west, and moved into Ingushetiya.

The Russian invasion left us without bread, because our road. . . was occupied by troops. We took a truck to get bread. My neighbor was in the driver's cab with me, along with three other people. Suddenly a BTR³ jumped out at us and hit our car head-on. I took the full impact of the crash. Our car flew backwards, and the BTR hit us again. I injured my leg. The other passengers weren't harmed. It was about 7:00 P.M. I reported the incident to the investigator [who came], and they opened a criminal case. The next morning they went to the military base to find out why they hit my truck and they offered no help. [The people] at the base told them if they didn't get out immediately, they'd be shot.

Mr. Klematov stated that he is a resident of Ingushetiya, did not participate in any resistance movement against the Russian government, and was in no way connected with the fighting in Chechnya. He reported that the armored personnel carrier that hit him continued travelling in its column on to Chechen Republic territory.

Wounded from the fighting in Chechnya have been brought to the hospital in Nazran because a part of the Republic Hospital in Chechnya has been destroyed, and two city hospitals were totally destroyed.

Tamara Kasieva is the deputy chief doctor of the hospital in Nazran, a major center for displaced persons from Chechnya. According to Mrs. Kasieva, the wounded started to be brought to the hospital on December 11, when 60 injured in the conflict arrived. She stated that the very first patients were two men and two women wounded when soldiers opened fire on a railroad car. After that, the wounded and dying from the Russian offensive poured in. She relates that,

That day we admitted a Mr. Obogachiev, who had been on his way to our hospital to visit his mother. He was driving along the highway, and was wounded in the nape of the neck. By the time he was admitted, we couldn't resuscitate him and he passed away.

The next day, people came from Kazi-Iurt village. This is a village on the road to Nazran. There some sort of explosives were fired from helicopters directly in the courtyards of homes. Two patients of ours, Katsiev, (b. 1902) and his wife (b. 1915) are from there; they had wanted to flee to the basement. The old woman died, and the old man is in the trauma center. All together from the 11th to the 12th, twenty-three people were brought to us from the districts the soldiers had gone through. We badly need medicine and sterile dressings, which are in short supply.

BACKGROUND

The Chechens, closely related to the Ingush, are an indigenous Caucasian people. After a long series of bloody wars lasting from 1817-1864, the Tsarist government managed to bring Chechnya under some type of control. In 1934, seventeen years after the Bolsheviks took power, the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was formed. Ten years later, Stalin abolished the republic and brutally deported all Chechens and Ingush, then approximately 800,000 people, to Central Asia; an estimated 240,000 died. The republic was abolished. In 1957, both peoples were allowed to return, and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was reestablished, albeit within slightly different borders. The area was an important oil-producing region and became heavily industrialized under Soviet rule.

³Russian armored personnel carrier

In October 1991, Chechnya declared independence from Russia under the leadership of a former Air Force General, Dzhokar Dudayev.⁴ Earlier, forces loyal to Dudayev overthrew a temporary government that had in turn toppled the old-line Communist Party leadership supportive of the August 1991 attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev. Dudayev later won Chechnya's first presidential election. The Russian government condemned the elections and refused to recognize Chechen independence. In November 1991, President Yeltsin ordered Interior Ministry troops to restore order in Chechnya, but a determined Chechen response, and public outcry in Russia, forced their withdrawal. In the summer of 1992, President Dudayev closed the Chechen Parliament.

In the spring of 1994, Russian and Chechen officials reportedly agreed to negotiations to work out Chechen-Russian differences. By the summer of 1994, after a series of bloody hijackings originating from bands in Chechnya struck southern Russia, Moscow announced that it would no longer "tolerate" Dudayev. On July 29, 1994, the Russian government issued a statement calling the situation in Chechnya "out of control" and branding Dudayev a destabilizing factor. In August the Russian government began openly and covertly to support an anti-Dudayev umbrella group called The Temporary Council, under the leadership of Umar Avturkhanov, in the Nadterechni region, fifty miles north of Grozny. Moscow poured funds and weapons into the region controlled by the Chechen opposition.

Heavy fighting exploded between the opposition and Dudayev's forces in September and October, with the opposition suffering serious setbacks in spite of reported unofficial Russian military support, including helicopter attacks. On September 16, Dudayev declared martial law in Chechnya. On October 4, President Yeltsin said he would not use force "under any circumstances," and Defense Minister Grachev said his forces would keep the fighting localized. On November 26, the Chechen opposition — backed by active duty Russian forces reportedly recruited by the Russian FSK (the former KGB) — suffered a serious defeat in an attack on Grozny, and over seventy Russians were taken prisoner. Four days later President Yeltsin gave Dudayev's forces forty-eight hours to disband all units, disarm, and release all prisoners, or Russia would impose a state of emergency. On December 1, Yeltsin vowed to help the Russian prisoners, the first indirect acknowledgement of Russian involvement.

December brought some hope of peace, but ultimately ended in bloody, heavy fighting between Russian and pro-Dudayev forces with grievous results for civilians. In early December continued air raids--for which Russia denied responsibility--struck at Grozny, hitting the airport and other areas. On December 6, however, Defense Minister Grachev and President Dudayev met, the first meeting between a senior Russian official and Dudayev since 1991.

Grachev promised that, "there would not be a military solution to the question." On December 11, however, 40,000 Russian army and interior ministry troops moved against Grozny from the north, east, and west, and Russian planes commenced withering air attacks against Grozny and the surrounding area, including neighboring Ingushetiya. Hundreds of civilians were killed in the attacks. Approximately 300,000 displaced fled the bombing, according to ICRC estimates. On December 26, President Yeltsin ordered a halt to the ground assault, but on New Year's Eve a failed Russian attempt to take Grozny left hundreds of Russian soldiers dead. Heavy fighting has continued since then, and a two-day cease-fire announced by the Russian government at 8:00 A.M. Moscow time on January 10 appears to have been broken by both sides.

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Human Rights Watch/Helsinki (formerly Helsinki Watch)

⁴The Ingush part of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was not included in this declaration. It became a republic of the Russian Federation in 1992.

Before the fighting started, Chechnya had a mixed population of about one million.

Human Rights Watch is a nongovernmental organization established in 1978 to monitor and promote the observance of internationally recognized human rights in Africa, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East and among the signatories of the Helsinki accords. It is supported by contributions from private individuals and foundations worldwide. It accepts no government funds, directly or indirectly. Kenneth Roth is the executive director; Robert L. Bernstein is the chair of the board. Its Helsinki division was established in 1978 to monitor and promote domestic and international compliance with the human rights provisions of the 1975 Helsinki Accords. It is affiliated with the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, which is based in Vienna, Austria. Jeri Laber is the executive director; Jonathan Fanton is chair of the advisory committee and Alice Henkin is vice chair.