

Chechnya's Choice

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Even Russian human rights activists say an anti-terrorism campaign is justified. But they sharply criticise the indiscriminate bombing and other attacks in Chechnya and propose a limited cessation of fighting to pave the way for talks.

The crisis in Chechnya is a humanitarian catastrophe. Judging by the political and military situation in both Russia and Chechnya, the war this time will be even more cruel and bloody than the bitter fighting of a few years ago.

Memorial, the leading human-rights group in Russia, condemns the war and calls for an immediate pause in the fighting.

Yet unlike the 1994-96 conflict in Chechnya, Memorial - like much of Russian society itself - has found itself conflicted over the campaign, embroiled in serious internal debates over how to help relieve the suffering of Chechen civilians without taking sides.

Reports from recent delegations by Memorial, including a trip last week to Ingushetia in which I participated, confirmed the scale of the crisis. According to official data from Ingushetia authorities, as of November 13, 192,800 people have fled Chechnya for neighbouring Ingushetia. They are not receiving adequate assistance from aid agencies or the Russian government. They lack proper shelter, clothing and food, and inadequate hygiene leaves them at risk of disease.

Russian officials say that there are no reasons for this exodus, and that Chechen militants are chasing people out to create the illusion of a humanitarian disaster.

But the truth is that they have run for their lives, trying to escape missile attacks and shelling, threats of assault and military "clean-ups." They have fled from war.

Memorial has put forward a set of basic demands. Indiscriminate missile attacks must stop immediately. Those who have fled must be granted refugee status, and must be provided with food, shelter and medical supplies.

They must be given the right to travel freely within the federation, and be offered support to resettle. Where appropriate, the federal government must be willing to pay compensation for destroyed property. International relief agencies must become seriously involved.

Memorial also put forward the proposals later taken up by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to create safe corridors in Chechnya to help in assisting refugees, especially in allowing those wishing to escape the republic to do so more safely.

Memorial's findings in Ingushetia show that Russian authorities have as yet not implemented this request. Instead of safe corridors, the Russian army has established a narrow gateway at the border. People escaping air strikes cannot do so safely, and those reaching the gateway must wait, often for long periods, in harsh and dangerous conditions.

After sometimes painful internal debate, most Russian human rights activists have confirmed that they do support the right of the federal government to take steps against Chechen warlords who attacked neighbouring Dagestan in August.

Indeed, the government has not only the right but also the duty to take appropriate measures to guarantee security in the republic and the federation as a whole. Terrorism must be fought.

The question is how.

The problem is that a nuanced position is not easy to maintain, especially in Russia today. The immediate reason for people's support for the war Chechnya was the bombings in Russian cities in September and the Chechen forces' incursion into Dagestan a month earlier. Lawlessness seemed to be spreading to other Russian republics from Chechnya, and people were horrified.

But these are only some of the reasons for the growing anti-Chechen feelings in Russian society. Moreover, fear cannot justify indiscriminate bombing of civilian neighbourhoods in Chechnya and around it. The ends cannot be used to justify any means.

It is sad to see how the ratings of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have improved since the start of the military operation in Chechnya. But it is also understandable. And it marks a substantial change from 1996, when with an impending presidential election, the Chechnya war at that time was not exploited as a vote-winner.

After years of defeats, real or perceived, Russian society is desperately tired of feeling "on the wrong side." From the disintegration of the USSR to the first Chechen war, the expansion of NATO and the Kosovo conflict, Russia has had a bad run. It is sick of feeling like a loser.

Russia is also faced with an identity crisis. In the USSR, for better or worse, people felt that they were part of a superpower, citizens of empire. Now everyone asks, "What is Russia?" The answer is usually uninspiring, especially for people living in the regions where economic conditions have worsened since 1991.

Russians are very satisfied suddenly to be taking what they perceive to be tough measures in Chechnya to defend the "fatherland". They feel they are in the right, that they will prevail, and that they will be vindicated.

Such political and psychological baggage definitely underpins much of people's feelings about the war - even among human rights campaigners.

To be sure, it is simplistic to say that the "Russian monster" is attacking the "poor Chechen nation."

But Russian politicians and security organs have greatly exaggerated the negative image of Chechnya and the Chechens, especially through the media, for their own goals.

More disappointing still is the chance everyone - Moscow, the Chechens, the international community, and human rights groups - missed following the signing of a cease-fire over the republic in 1996. Promised reconstruction funds were not forthcoming, or were misdirected and abused when they did come. Politically and through the assistance of security forces, Moscow did not do enough to help Chechen

President Aslan Maskhadov in the wake of the last Chechen conflict, especially in curbing the horrible practice of kidnapping.

Human rights groups also failed. We paid too little attention to Chechnya, did not carry out enough documentation work, did not assist sufficiently in the establishment of civic institutions and the rule of law. We, too, felt the republic was becoming increasingly closed and dangerous for outsiders.

Now opportunities for a moderate course in Chechnya are, at least for the moment, lost, making it exceedingly difficult to take a stand on the war without taking sides. This is the point over which there has been so much debate among human rights activists.

The leadership of Memorial, well known for its courageous activism over many years, does not call for a halt to the airstrikes and an immediate launching of peace negotiations. The conclusion is that any such cessation would mean a victory for the Chechen warlords, especially Shamil Basayev and whoever else may control the Chechen fighters in the field. These are not defenders of human rights, and it is unclear with whom Russia would have to conduct talks.

Instead, a constructive proposal would be to implement a limited ceasefire - of at least one to two months - in order to assess the possibilities for a negotiated settlement based on the will of the people of Chechnya.

Such a plan, first put forward by Grigory Yavlinsky of the moderate Yabloko party, would enable two processes - in the first place the provision of substantial humanitarian assistance both to those who have already fled Chechnya and to the civilians still stranded there.

It would also give some time for the Chechen people to consider where they stand. The old and the fearful may wish to leave. Others, militants and supporters of Basayev, could at least make their position clear. Those supporting Maskhadov could also elaborate this support, possibly giving a powerful new impetus for meaningful talks.

In many ways Russians as a whole, with one voice, have taken their decision on the matter of Chechnya, and if the means are extreme, there is little debate over the goal. Such a plan out-lined above might at least give the Chechen people the chance to make their own choice, before the humanitarian catastrophe escalates further.

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