

NO ESCAPE FROM DESPAIR ON EITHER SIDE OF THE BORDER

Author: IWPR

Russian officials label the humanitarian crisis in Chechnya as a 'well directed play' as thousands of Chechen refugees into Ingushetia - and back - now the border crossing is finally reopened.

"You stupid people!" shouted the Chechen refugee mother, her sleepy two-year-old son in her arms. "Why do you want to go and die in that hell?"

She had just crossed the border into Ingushetia, and was berating the crowds of people waiting at the checkpoint to cross into Chechnya. The gates had been closed for 10 days but finally re-opened on November 8, allowing thousands of Chechen refugees, mostly women and children, to enter Ingushetia.

But conditions are so bad on the other side of the border, with nowhere else to go many refugees are simply heading back home. Yet it was only after a week of sustained pressure from the international representatives, Russian official delegations to the region and reports from the Ingush authorities on the desperate plight of the refugees trapped on the road that the border was re-opened.

Following reports of several people being crushed to death at the border - Russian broadcaster NTV carried pictures of one such incident - the international community issued threats of sanctions and exclusion from the Council of Europe if the Russian government failed to act immediately to relieve the crisis.

Many of the refugees have been waiting on the Chechen side of the frontier for weeks with no access to shelter, food or medical aid. One group of women recounted a story of an old Chechen man who died on the road. "They barred us from leaving the main road," said one. "First there was warning shot, the rest you know. We were not allowed even to gather wood. The old man froze to death.)

To make matters worse there have been reports of attacks on the refugees. Last week a Russian fighter jet allegedly opened fire on a group of refugees along the Rostov-Baku highway. Chechen sources claim 50 people died, eyewitnesses claim around 30 people were killed. The Russian authorities strongly deny any such attack took place.

It is extremely difficult to verify such claims as journalists and independent observers are denied access to the region.

There is much scepticism, especially within the Russian military and government, as to the truth of such claims or the scale of the refugee crisis.

When the border was re-opened, the first vehicle to cross into Ingushetia was a brand new white Mercedes. "Here they come, the refugees", was the sarcastic response of the Russian border guards. There are unconfirmed reports that some vehicles are allowed through the border without customs checks and that expensive, foreign cars are given priority over the buses carrying refugees.

But the genuine anger and desperation of those refugees reaching Ingushetia is all too clear.

"My eight children are still there, in the village", says Aina Dudaeva from Samashki, a relative of the first Chechen president, Djokhar Dudaev. "I have no idea where they are now. When the bombardments started

we just ran in different directions and I lost them. My youngest son is only six. Please, do something for God's sake".

"They kill us, only to push up (Russian Prime Minister Vladimir) Putin's popularity. I wish his family could be bombarded like we are," shouts an angry Sonia Zakrieva. "He is a beast. I wish he could be put through what we have had to go through."

Standing apart from the enraged Chechen refugees we found 82 year old Taisia Mikhailovna, a Russian resident of Grozny. Taisia was waiting at the border for permission to travel back to Grozny to find her daughter. "My daughter is there, but they don't allow me in. I have no place to sleep. They pass me to and fro and I feel I can't stand it anymore. Please, help me somebody to get to the town".

Russian Emergencies Minister Sergei Shoigu, who visited the border area to see the situation for himself, promised that two corridors would be opened - one for people leaving Chechnya, the other for people wishing to return to find their relatives.

Shoigu went on to outline plans for bus routes between Ingushetia and Chechnya and the construction of refugee camps inside Chechnya, near Sernovodsk and Assinovsk. The two towns, close to the border, are under nominal federal Russian army control, but Russian Interior Ministry forces have so far shown a reluctance to carry out mop up operation in the area given the danger of ambush attacks. Unless it is completed refugees from the area can not return to their homes.

On his return to Moscow, however, Shoigu appeared to backpedal on his commitments to improve provision for the refugees. Shoigu claimed the flood of refugees was merely a "well directed play," adding his voice to the chorus of Russian politicians and military officers who insist the refugee crisis is a Chechen pretence, aided and abetted by the Ingush authorities.

Verification of the scale of destruction, the actions of Russian military forces, the numbers of civilian casualties and the true nature of the refugee crisis have been made almost impossible by the strict control exercised by the Russian authorities.

On the one hand federal forces have prevented journalists from visiting areas out of their control as well as those populated areas currently controlled by Russian forces.

Military operations in western Chechnya are proceeding behind closed doors. The only source of information about what is happening inside Chechnya come from the accounts of refugees fleeing the country. But such accounts cannot be accepted without question as they are often exaggerated or second hand.

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Location: [Ingushetia](#)
[Chechnya](#)

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