

Refugees Face Bleak Winter

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Russia's own envoys are warning of impending disaster at the Chechen refugee camps as the cold weather sets in

An independent Russian commission has slammed the "deplorable" conditions in Ingushetia's refugee archipelago, where an estimated 200,000 Chechens are bracing themselves for another winter.

The commission, headed by Pavel Krasheninnikov, found that supplies of food and medicine were irregular whilst educational services provided for the refugee children were sub-standard.

Without proper heating and sanitary facilities, the camps would be breeding grounds for tuberculosis and flu epidemics.

It is the most outspoken criticism of the refugee camps by a Moscow-approved body since fighting broke out last September and droves of Chechen families fled east.

Krasheninnikov, a former justice minister, said 160,000 refugees were officially registered in Ingushetia but the real figure was as high as 200,000. The families were loathe to return to Chechnya because of the lack of work and basic social services as well as the security risk.

The commission's findings were echoed by Vladimir Kalamonov, Russia's special envoy for human rights in Chechnya, who said, "As soon as we can organise work, pension payments, child support and compensation, the people will return and the terrorist attacks will come to an end."

Kalamonov told Moscow journalists that there was insufficient food and heating in the tent camps outside Nazran and urgent action would have to be taken before winter set in.

Meanwhile, Erica Feller, of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), visited Ingushetia last week to review plans for returning the Chechens to their homes in the war-torn republic. She said that the commission in Geneva needed to decide where it was "more dangerous for the refugees to live - in Chechnya or outside its borders".

The UNHCR, which has already delivered \$12 million in aid to the region, is currently building a winter camp for 12,000 people at Severny, in Ingushetia.

At present, the majority of the refugees are living under canvas with only a lucky few staying with relatives or renting rooms in private homes. However, the strain on the local population has begun to show. Earlier this month, 26 people were evicted by their host families while rents are being raised prohibitively high.

Each refugee is entitled to 15 roubles a day from the government and receives at least one humanitarian aid package each month. However, many accuse the Ingush and Russian authorities of appropriating the bulk of the food and clothing sent in from abroad.

General Valery Kuksa, head of the Ingush Minister for Emergency Situations, said, "I'm always being accused of these things. They even wanted to bring a criminal case against me because 20 kilogrammes of butter and 25 kilogrammes of biscuits went missing from one of the warehouses. How could I possibly steal anything under this kind of scrutiny?"

Kuksa went on to say that the Russian government still owed eight million roubles to the Ingush bakery responsible for supplying the refugees with bread. "Now the bakery is refusing to hand over its bread without pre-payment," he said.

In the camps, any attempt at normality is little more than a flimsy charade. On the day I arrived, a wedding ceremony was in progress. The groom's friends had arrived at one of the tents to "abduct" the bride in the traditional manner.

Usually, the relatives put up a token resistance but on this occasion they were demanding \$100 from the young men. "We're refugees, we don't have that kind of money," said the groom's party.

Eventually, they forced their way into the tent, led the bride out to a waiting car and drove her to a caf, in Sleptsovsk where the wedding was due to take place.

The girl's face was covered as she left the camp but, from the way her shoulders were shaking, you could see that she was crying. Out of joy, perhaps. Or maybe because this was hardly how she had pictured her wedding day.

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Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

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