

Russia "Forcing" Camp Closures

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Chechen refugees in Ingushetia's tent camps are coming under intense pressure to go home.

Ingushetia's refugee camps are disappearing. The long rows of tents that used to be pressed up against one another have thinned. Now dark spots and big empty spaces on the raw ground are reminders that the place was home to displaced Chechens for more than four years.

With the gradual closure of Satsita, Sputnik and Bart camps, Moscow still seems to be set on the declared target of shutting down all Ingushetia's makeshift refugee centres by March 1 – despite repeated statements of concern from the United Nations and rights groups that the internally displaced persons are being intimidated into leaving.

In the early morning of February 21, the Chechen Datsayev family in the Bart camp in the Ingush town of Karabulak were hard at work, packing up their humble belongings, wrapping blankets and mattresses in bundles and their pots and pans and other household goods in cardboard boxes.

Like many other families from the camp, they had decided to head back to Chechnya – but with great trepidation.

The Datsayevs have three daughters, the eldest of whom has just turned 13-years-old. The parents said it was because of their safety and health that they had spent four long years in this tent camp.

"As soon as the first bombing of Grozny began in the autumn of 1999 I immediately took the children and left for Ingushetia," said 39-year-old Larisa Datsayeva.

"My husband stayed in Grozny, to protect the house from looters and robbers. He did manage to save it from bandits, but not from the Russian artillery. Our house was completely destroyed by shelling and now we have nowhere to live.

"At first it was very hard. With three children, the youngest of whom was seriously ill, I lived with some friends of friends and then got a place in this tent camp. Then it got a bit easier, although we had no gas for several days in the winter and they turned off the water or the power sometimes. We had all kinds of problems."

Datsayeva said they had been promised a "box house" and compensation for returning to Chechnya – but they are still very anxious about going back. However, after the authorities told them that the Bart camp would be closed on March 1, they felt they had little choice in the matter.

Ramzan Datsayev, the head of the family, explained, "Everyone from the president right down to the last bureaucrat in Ingushetia's migration service constantly tells us that there will be no forced return of Chechen refugees to the homeland, but in actual fact it's not like that at all.

"Forced migrants are being threatened, blackmailed and such unbearable conditions are being created that they are basically being forced to leave."

Of 318 tents put up in Bart camp at the start of the second Chechen conflict in 1999, only a few dozen remain, housing little more than 100 families. Many of these will try to be re-housed in Ingushetia rather than go back to Chechnya.

Estimates differ as to the number of displaced still in the region. The Ingush authorities say there are still some 45,000 Chechen refugees in Ingushetia, local human rights groups claim the true figure is double that, while international agencies put the number at around 67,000. The majority live in makeshift temporary accommodation, with only a few thousand left in tents.

One Ingush official told IWPR that there were now only 3,540 Chechens living in tents and that many were returning home voluntarily. This compares with figures of more than 300,000 people who left Chechnya four years ago. The authorities say the refugees have simply had enough of living in tents.

“For some reason people are always talking about pressure and threats,” said Zelimkhan Bokov, deputy head of Bart camp. “But put yourself in the place of those refugees who have been living under canvas for more than four years. They are simply tired. No one is expelling them.”

“In our camp there are around 60 families who have said they want to stay on the territory of Ingushetia and have put in applications for panelled houses, and we are solving this problem. But the majority of the refugees are determined to go home.”

But Usam Baisayev of the human rights organisation Memorial said the refugees were being pressured to go back before a date - March 1 - that had been arbitrarily decided in Moscow. “Practically every day refugees come to us complaining about the brutal behaviour of security officials from different agencies,” he claimed.

“The March 1 date is no coincidence. The authorities are determined to liquidate all the tent camps by March 14, the date of the upcoming Russian presidential election. The issue of Chechen refugees has stopped being a social problem and become a political one.”

The non-returnees give various reasons for not wanting to go back - there is no accommodation fit for them to return to; there is no work in Chechnya, which has 176,000 unemployed, and above all they are worried about security. “In my view the right conditions still have to be created for people,” said Adlan Daudov, head of the Public Council of Refugees.

“I’m not talking about temporary resettlement units or humanitarian aid or compensation and all those things the bureaucrats talk about. People need to be provided with security and given work so they can feed their families and then many questions will fall away by themselves. Refugees don’t need to be persuaded to return home. They want to do it themselves, without being forced to.”

Ella Pamfilova, Russia’s outgoing presidential human rights commissioner, visited the camps earlier this month and reported that many refugees were now willing to go home. But she said that many displaced were also still receiving threats which compelled them to go back to Chechnya.

Jan Egeland, United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, also delivered a mixed message earlier this month after visiting Chechnya.

Egeland said “the suffering was by no means over” in Chechnya and that 2004 would be a “decisive year”.

He said he had received assurances that all return of refugees to Chechnya would be voluntary and that the March 1 deadline no longer applied.

He also pointed out a much-overlooked problem - that there are still some 200,000 displaced people inside Chechnya itself, and described conditions inside one temporary accommodation centre there as “overcrowded and insecure”.

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