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On Russia's Military Campaign in the Chechen Republic

Russia's two military campaigns in the Chechen Republic in 1994-1996 and the present one that began in 1999 are tragedies for both the Chechen people and the whole of Russia. In his time President Yeltsin called the war in Chechnya "his biggest mistake." Unfortunately the new Russian leadership is repeating and worsening it. It has been trapped by some illusions or inadequate information on the situation in Chechnya.

The Russian army has no chance of victory in this war. It has already dragged on more than a year, and according to official statistics the monthly losses of the Russian troops are greater than in the first campaign. It is likely that the losses among the civilians are higher as well.

Even in a purely military sense, there is little probability of a victory for Moscow, but this is especially true regarding the utopian idea of winning an "economic victory" in Chechnya. It means turning the Chechen population to the Russian side through the economic restoration of Chechnya. How is it possible to restore industry in Chechnya if more than 80% of it was concentrated in peaceful times in Grozny, which is now completely destroyed? Even by official Russian statistics one third of all rebels are concentrated in this city and it is namely here that Russian troops constantly suffer the most losses.

The army cannot be located for long in a hostile occupied territory. It will begin to demoralize. Demoralization of 100 thousand Russian troops in Chechnya is already displaying itself. With every month of the war a larger part of the home country population becomes dissatisfied with it. And sociological opinion polls show that this change is taking place. If in the beginning of 2001 more than 60% of respondents supported the continuation of the war until final victory, in May less than 40% still did. The longer the war goes on, the more the government demonstrates its weakness, which in turn weakens the governing of the country as a whole. Sooner or later the Russian leadership will have to enter into negotiations with the leaders of the Chechen resistance, but the continuation of the war worsens the conditions for such negotiations.

Continuation of military operations leads to a greater involvement of civilians in the fighting. The casualties grow and the savagery of both sides grows as well. In this type of conflict it is incorrect to talk of the guilt of only one side. One cannot demonize Russia and idealize the Chechen rebels. Among them are people who bear a great part of the responsibility for this war; there are people among them that are without question properly called international terrorists. But that is the problem: the longer the war lasts, the greater is the influence of radicals in the rebel camp.

The Russian leadership still has a chance to begin a dialogue with the moderate forces in the Chechen armed resistance grouped around President Maskhadov.

The continuation of military operations and the growth of violations of the rules of war will unavoidably increase the attention of the international community and international institutions to the "Chechen problem". In my opinion international organizations must, above all else, help the Russian government understand that continual reliance on force to solve the Chechen problem is self-defeating. The examples of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Israel and many other countries that have similar problems may not be ideal, but they do show that even in places where the political solution to ethnic conflict has not been reached, the cessation of military operations is still necessary to achieve a political solution to the problem of self determination of peoples.

International organizations can influence Russia only if it is included in their work. Any attempts of political isolation of Russia are counterproductive.

A useful initiative from international organizations to solve the Chechen problem will be the creation of international expert groups, that will of course include Russian and Chechen experts, to develop mutually acceptable formulas for escaping the present conflict.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.