

I would like to thank Co-Chairman Christopher Smith, Co-Chairman Ben Nighthorse Campbell, the Commissioners and staff of the CSCE for holding this briefing and for their important contributions to protecting fundamental rights and freedoms worldwide.

Amnesty International (AI) is a worldwide campaigning movement that works to promote internationally recognized human rights. Amnesty International's vision is of a world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards. Our mission is to undertake research and action focused on preventing and ending grave abuses of the rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom of conscience and expression, and freedom from discrimination, within the context of our work to promote all human rights. Amnesty International has more than a million members and supporters in over 140 countries and territories. Amnesty International is impartial and independent of any government, political persuasion or religious creed. Our work is financed largely by subscriptions and donations from our worldwide membership.

The world has largely forgotten the conflict in Chechnya. Amnesty International appreciated the important letter from the CSCE Commissioners to Secretary of State Colin Powell urging the US delegation to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to push for a strong resolution on the conflict in Chechnya. AI thanks signers Co-Chairmen Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO) and Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ) along with Commissioners Senator Gordon Smith (R-OR), Rep. Steny H. Hoyer (D-MD), Rep. Robert B. Aderholt (R-AL) and Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD).

Despite this letter, Amnesty International deplored the failure of the 58th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to hold Russia's human rights record in Chechnya to account. While AI was glad to see the US delegation vote for the Chechnya resolution in the end, the US decision not to co-sponsor the resolution was harmful and is an indication that US delegation failed to do the sufficient lobbying to gather support for the resolution.

We also appreciate the CSCE letter from February calling for an “accurate assessment” of the situation in Chechnya following the decision by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to send a Technical Needs Assessment mission to the war-torn region.

I would like to speak about Amnesty International’s efforts to bring awareness to violations in Chechnya, draw your attention to key issues regarding the humanitarian and human rights situation in Chechnya, and then speak about policy recommendations.

Despite the lack of world attention, vital issues in the humanitarian and human rights situation remain to be resolved in Chechnya. Amnesty International is in the middle of a one-year campaign to bring attention to the human rights situation in the Russian Federation. The theme of

the campaign is “Justice for All.” All Russian citizens should be able to obtain redress if they suffer human rights violations and impunity should not prevail. Ms. Eliza Moussaeva, head of the Nazran office of Memorial, and Ms. Bela Tsugaeva, Information Manager for World Vision of Ingushetia, are Amnesty’s guests on a two-week tour to bring public attention to the human rights and humanitarian issues in Chechnya. They have been speaking at high schools and colleges up and down the Northeast coast from Maine to Washington, DC. Last Monday, April 14, Group 133 of Amnesty International USA organized an approximately 800-person rally on violations in Chechnya in front of the Russian Consulate in New York through their “Get on the Bus” initiative.

I would like to highlight a few key issues including internally displaced persons, attacks on civilians, impunity, access and discrimination. First, Amnesty International is concerned about the status of the internally displaced persons (IDPs). Approximately 92,000 Chechens are displaced in the neighboring Republic of Ingushetia. In order to return to Chechnya, IDPs need both sufficient infrastructure (water, electricity, housing) as well as security guarantees. Security concerns including the ongoing raids, extra-judicial executions, disappearances, torture and rape. Particularly disturbing is the Russian government's decision to close the Aki-Yurt camp in Ingushetia in late 2002, in the midst of winter, as most of the people evicted had no alternative housing. AI is very concerned now that in springtime the Russian government may want to close the camps force the IDPS to temporary relocation centers, which lack sufficient security guarantees.

Second, Amnesty International is very concerned about the targeting of civilians by both sides of the conflict, in violation of international humanitarian law.

Chechen forces have reportedly committed abuses of international humanitarian law, including hostage-taking, targeting civilian members of the pro-Moscow administration, and executing captured members of Russian armed forces. In the December 2002 bomb attack on a government building in Grozny, 83 people were killed; Chechen rebel forces are also believed to have unlawfully killed seven civil servants, and abducted another nine people, since mid-November 2002.

Russian security forces have reportedly subjected the civilian population to beatings, arbitrary detention, "disappearance," torture, rape and extra-judicial executions. These violations, serious violations of the Geneva Conventions, constitute war crimes. The human rights situation in Chechnya has failed to improve over the past year. During raids by Russian troops on villages, hundreds of Chechen civilians have “disappeared” and many have later been found in mass graves. While such operations now seem to be targeting individuals rather than whole villages, the violations continue. Two measures by the authorities, Decree No. 46 of the Prosecutor General and Order No. 80 of the Commander of the federal forces in Chechnya, were introduced

in 2001 and 2002 to provide greater transparency and protection for civilians during raids. However, they are routinely ignored and Chechen civilians appear to be as unprotected as ever.

For example, two Chechen women, Aset Yakhiaeva and Milana Betirgirieva, were visiting relatives preparing for a wedding when Russian security forces came to the house where they were staying and detained them on Nov. 9, 2001. Their clothes were found in the street. Their families have never found out what happened to them.

Third, Amnesty International is very concerned about the impunity for violations of humanitarian and human rights law. The continuing lack of a meaningful accountability process to bring to justice those responsible for abuses on both sides of the conflict is a major problem. Failure to investigate adequately allegations of violations by Russian forces, and bring those responsible to justice, has created a climate in which Russian security forces believe that they can continue to violate the fundamental rights of the civilian population in Chechnya with impunity. Hundreds of investigations into allegations of abuse have led to very few prosecutions, and recent official figures show that only 46 military servicemen have been convicted for abuses against civilians in Chechnya during the three-year-long conflict out of more than 27,000 complaints made to the Russian authorities.

Amnesty International's continuing concerns about the failure of accountability come against a background of recent developments in the most famous case of Colonel Yuri Budanov, charged with the murder of a Chechen woman, which is one of the only cases that actually proceeded to prosecution. On the night of March 26, 2000, 18-year-old Kheda Kungaeva was abducted from her home. It has been widely reported that in the course of the investigation Colonel Budanov had admitted killing Kheda Kungaeva, but had stated that he strangled her during interrogation in a state of "temporary insanity". An official post mortem concluded that Kheda Kungaeva had been raped before her death. On Dec. 31, 2002, Colonel Budanov was relieved of criminal responsibility for the abduction and murder of Kungaeva on grounds of "temporary insanity." The re-trial is supposed to begin this week.

Fourth, Amnesty International is concerned about the lack of access to Chechnya for international observers, and lack of transparency about available information on abuses, in particular the Russian government's continued failure to authorize the publication of the reports by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture on its visits to the Russian Federation. Russia closed the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya on Dec. 31, 2002, after refusing to agree to a new mandate that included a human rights monitoring component. Russia has also failed to invite the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on Torture and Extrajudicial Executions.

Fifth, Amnesty International is concerned that Chechens in other parts of the Russian Federation have been subjected to discrimination, harassment and arbitrary detention. Amnesty's new

report, “Dokumenti! Discrimination on the Grounds of Race in the Russian Federation,” discusses a pattern of harassment of certain ethnic groups including Chechens.

Recommendations:

Amnesty International USA is urging the Administration and Congress to:

- Continue to urge the Russian authorities not to close the camps for displaced persons in Ingushetia until adequate security and humanitarian protections are in place in Chechnya. On this issue, a congressional letter highlighting the importance of security issues for the displaced might be useful right now.

- Maintain the current levels of US assistance for Russian human rights and democracy non-governmental organizations through the Freedom Support Act (FSA). According to the Administration’s budget request, Russia is “slated for graduation from FSA assistance over the next several years.” The budget request document continues, “Graduation strategies will seek to leave behind a legacy of sustainable institutions that will continue to promote civil society and economic growth.” The strategies may indeed SEEK a legacy of sustainable institutions, but at this point in time in the human rights sphere this is an aspiration more than an actuality.

One of the successes in Russia over the past 10 years is the development of human rights non-governmental organizations, ranging from anti-domestic violence activities in Barnaul to promoting racial tolerance in Krasnodar. Many of the young leaders of these Russian NGOs, aged 25 to 40, benefited from FSA through their high school or college education as well as through US NGO grants.. Cutting funding for these key human rights NGOs puts their survival at risk, since they do not have indigenous sources of support yet. It is also irresponsible, because the US leadership funding has encouraged them to take on tough and controversial issues and they are now losing US support.

- Press Russia for access for international journalists, non-governmental organizations and international organizations to Chechnya.

- Press Russia to investigate the case of Aset Yakhiaeva and Milana Betirgirieva, who disappeared on Nov. 9, 2001, and the publish the status of the other “disappearance cases.”

- Support the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe’s call for a Tribunal on Chechnya.

Urge the Russian Government to:

- Provide the detailed list of investigations into crimes committed by Russian soldiers during the

Chechnya conflict.

- Agree to a new mandate for the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya that includes human rights monitoring.
- Facilitate the long overdue visits by UN special representatives to Chechnya.
- Publish all reports prepared by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture following its visits to the Russian Federation, including Chechnya.
- End extra-judicial executions, “disappearances,” torture, beatings and rape of civilians.

Urge the Chechen forces to:

- End hostage-taking, stop attacks on municipal authorities, protect civilians and non-combatants, and abide by international humanitarian law.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to discuss Chechnya. I am happy to take your questions.