

Good morning. Welcome to today's briefing of the Helsinki Commission on the critical human rights and humanitarian situation in war-torn Chechnya. My name is Ron McNamara. I have served on the Commission staff since 1986 and am currently serving as Deputy Chief of Staff.

Before I begin the presentation, however, I would express our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Deputy Sergei Yushenkov, who was murdered last week in Moscow. Mr. Yushenkov had been a visitor to the Commission in the past, and he impressed many as a legislator deeply committed to Russia and the Russian people.

The Commission has closely followed developments in Chechnya since the outbreak of war in 1994. Today's briefing is the latest in a series of hearing, briefing and other Commission initiatives relating to that region of the Russian Federation. Shortly after the first war broke out I asked our analyst on Russia, John Finerty, if there was any meaning to the name Grozny. He relayed the rich history of the name of the Chechen capital and its meaning, terrible.

Terrible – how apt a description of life in that region since the leveling of the Chechen capital and devastation that has followed now for nearly a decade. While the images of the first war may linger for many of us, a concerted campaign by the Putin administration has all but closed large parts of Chechnya off to independent journalists. Even the modest presence of the OSCE's Assistance Group to Chechnya, which had attempted to independently report on developments in the region, was forced to close by Moscow. Such are the realities at a time when the Kremlin would have us believe that life in Chechnya has returned to normal.

While there are many dimensions of the situation in Chechnya, the Helsinki Commission's principal focus is on the human dimension. The violence continues as does a climate of fear for average Chechens. Despite concerted efforts by the Russian leadership to portray the situation in Chechnya as approaching normal, the pattern of clear, gross and uncorrected violations of OSCE commitments by Russian forces continues. From reports of credible and courageous human rights activists such as our panelists, it is clear that the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law anywhere in the OSCE region are occurring in Chechnya today.

The recently released State Department 2002 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices provides detailed documentation of the poor state of human rights in Chechnya. Regrettably, the 59th Session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva – which concludes its annual session tomorrow – failed to adopt a U.S.-supported resolution expressing “deep concern” about reported human rights violation in Chechnya. I would note that two OSCE countries – Armenia and Ukraine – voted with the Russian Federation in opposing the resolution.

On a personal note, I found it quite ironic to hear President Putin admonishing U.S. troops in Iraq for their conduct at a time when Russian forces under his nominal control are conducting special sweep operations, or “zachistka” in Chechnya which typically result in the detention, torture, and in many cases disappearance of the male population from towns and villages. If allowed to live, some victims have been taken into custody and “ransomed” back to their families. Tens of thousands of internally displaced persons are living in temporary quarters or tents.

It is also worth pointing out that the climate of fear for Chechen civilians is not limited to the borders of Chechnya, but extend elsewhere in the Russian Federation where Chechens face harassment, discrimination, and other forms of abuse solely because they are Chechen.

The format for today’s briefing will provide time following the presentations of our panelists for questions from the audience. I ask that you approach the mic, state your name and any affiliation and direct your question to one of our panelists.

An un-official transcript will be available on the Helsinki Commission’s Internet web site at <http://www.csce.gov> within 24 hours of the briefing.

Introduction of panelists:

Eliza Moussaeva, Director of the Ingushetia office, Memorial Human Rights Center. Memorial provides legal consultations to Chechen refugees and is involved in cases before the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

Bela Tsugaeva, Information Manager, World Vision, Nazran, Ingushetia. Ms. Tsugaeva previously worked with internally displaced persons for the International Rescue Committee and the Danish Refugee Council.

Our panelists are accompanied by Maureen Greenwood, Advocacy Director for Europe and Eurasia, Amnesty International, USA.