

The war in Chechnya is now in its fourth year. For the fourth year the Russian side claims it combats terrorism, and since September 11, international terrorism. It is well known, however, that in fact the army is not fighting terrorists, but the people of Chechnya. This is why the majority of victims in this war are from the civilian population.

Has the situation improved in Chechnya in the few months preceding the referendum and since the referendum last month on March 23? Indeed, the federal forces have changed the tactics of their “counter-terrorist” operation. Mop-ups, which in essence were punitive raids, decreased, which is good news. However, now targeted night raids have become a major means of combating “terrorism.” These night raids are actually worse than the mop-up operations.

Memorial’s network of monitors are only able to cover about 25-30% of the Chechen territory. According to Memorial’s data, in the first three months of this year, from January -March 2003, the representatives of the federal forces abducted 119 persons, while last year in the same time period this figure amounted to 82 persons. Thus, this year more people in Chechnya were abducted than one year ago in the same period. Paradoxically, it became harder to search for the abducted. During the old-style mop-up cleansing operations, when a village was being blockaded by a military unit, it was approximately known which unit carried out the operation and where to look for the missing relative. In the cases of the current targeted night raids, this is next to impossible. The masked military personnel arrive by military vehicles at night without presenting their identification documents. When they take away a man (most often men are being detained), in the morning the relatives do not have an idea where to look for the traces of the abducted.

Of the 119 persons abducted by Russian forces in Chechnya in the first three months of 2002, according to Memorial’s information, 9 were killed, 19 were released after severe beatings, and the rest have “disappeared,” their whereabouts unknown.

Now you may ask, are some of those detained actually Chechen fighters? Our mothers will tell you, if their sons are detained, they should have the right to a legal process- the right to know where they are held, under what charges, normal access to a lawyer or to medical treatment. The mothers want to know that their sons won’t be tortured to death. The process of arrests should all be done under the law.

According to the official statistics today in Chechnya about 2,800 persons are missing or “disappeared.” However, we suppose that this figure might be even higher. The discovery of mass graves is a normal phenomenon in Chechnya. Frequently the bodies in those graves are unidentifiable. One of the recent developments is a tendency to explode the corpses. Thus, in January 2003 in Pervomajskaja village (not far from Grozny), the remains of 8-9 persons were found. The corpses had been blasted, so it was impossible to make an exact count. The

prosecutor of Chechnya Kravchenko declared that these were the remains of persons kidnapped by Chechen combatants. Nonetheless, by a lucky coincidence two of the corpses had been identified by the fragments of clothing. These were the two civilians earlier detained by the representatives of the federal forces. We are clearly confronted with the desire of prosecution to create cover-ups rather than to find the persons guilty of crimes.

The unidentified bodies are being buried. This means that mothers today in Chechnya must look for their sons among thousands. A mother may continue to look for her child until the end of her life, never to find out the fate of her son. The mothers of the lost sons today form organisations and wander from one mass grave to another, turning around and about dead bodies, trying to find their sons. One mother told me this story after visiting one of the graves, where about 40 corpses were found. For this woman all of the missing, even the dead corpses, have become her own children. After looking at forty dead corpses, she said, "I have checked each of the sons".

Has the promised peace come after the referendum? For an example, let's look at "Memorial's chronicle" just for only one day, April 3, ten days after the referendum:

On April 3, at 6 a. m. in Staropromyslovsky district of Grozny, unknown persons arrived to the flat and took away a pupil of a vocational school. The parents rushed to the local police station where they were told that the police knew nothing about the detainment of their son. By a lucky coincidence the father of the adolescent noticed the car which had taken his son in the yard of the police station. Only then the representatives of ROVD acknowledged that the boy had been there. By 9 a.m., he was released, as the police said he had been detained by mistake. The boy had already been heavily beaten. He was forced to confess to take responsibility for subjecting school N 7 to fire shortly before the referendum.

On the same day on April 3, in Grozny a bus with workers exploded.

On the same day on April 3, a car was detained at the check point near the village Starye Atagi. The driver was let go, but 4 passengers went missing.

This referendum can be called a referendum from Soviet times. Too many "dead souls" voted.

What do the people of Chechnya want? They are tired. They are extremely tired. But no wars don't end without negotiations. The war can't end with only one side imposing its will. There must be negotiations.

Why was the referendum necessary if it has not brought peace and tranquillity to the civilians of Chechnya?