



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Robert B. Aderholt

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Commissioner - Helsinki Commission

Thank you, ladies and gentleman, and Members of the Commission for attending this hearing on recent developments in the war in Chechnya.

The war between Russia and its secessionist Chechnya region, the second in the past ten years, continues with little respite. Much of the region is in ruins, resulting in a humanitarian disaster of enormous proportions. Violence connected with the war has crossed into neighboring regions. The Russian Government claims that "Chechen terrorists" planted the bombs in Russian cities in 1999 that took the lives of hundreds of innocent citizens, although questions have been raised about the reliability of the evidence.

In Chechnya, an estimated 300,000 persons have been displaced by the war, many of whom are living in refugee camps in neighboring regions. Hundreds of people -- suspected insurgents or otherwise -- have been killed or disappeared after being detained by Russian military forces. Human Rights Watch has documented "eight mass graves and eight other makeshift burial sites where corpses of the "disappeared" and others had been found. The largest of these mass graves, with 51 bodies, was discovered near the Russian army headquarters in February of last year. The Human Rights Watch report continues that "most of the bodies found in those graves were last seen in the custody of Russian federal forces, and most bore unmistakable signs of torture. Injuries commonly found on the bodies included broken limbs, scalped body parts, severed fingertips, and knife and gunshot wounds."

Russian soldiers have died in ambush, mine explosions, or skirmishes with guerrillas. Some of have reportedly been killed after capture by Chechen forces.

The Russians assert that the war is an "anti-terrorist operation" and evidence reveals that some elements of the Chechen insurgency have been linked to the lethal plague of international terrorism. I believe we should work with any nation committed to fight against international terrorism, and I also understand that the Russian Government had legitimate concerns about the criminality and lack of governance that characterized Chechnya after the 1994-1996 war. Murder, kidnaping and even mutilation of victims were frequent occurrences, and Chechen authorities were either unable or unwilling to repress the criminal elements on their territory.

However, the "fight against terrorism" cannot be a carte blanche to repress human rights, as we

are currently seeing in some participating states of the OSCE. And it certainly cannot be an excuse to unleash war -- without the slightest regard for the Geneva Conventions or the OSCE Code of Conduct -- against an entire people. Most indications are that the vast majority of the people of Afghanistan were glad to see the allied forces liberate them from the repression of the Taliban regime. Can anyone say the same of the Chechen people and the Russian Army as it is currently operating?

Recently, President Putin stated, "Let us hope that the use of force in Chechnya will soon be a thing of the past. I know that people in Chechnya are tired of the use of force and of special operations." We can only add a heartfelt "amen" to those sentiments, and hope that he will undertake a meaningful and sincere effort to stop the indiscriminate killing and human rights abuses in Chechnya, many of which are perpetrated by Russian forces nominally under his control. At the same time, I would urge the Chechen leadership to heed the call of the United States Government and to disassociate itself from terrorist elements, and to consider any just and reasonable solution that would end the suffering by the people of Chechnya.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and will have some questions following their testimony.