

Congressman Smith, members of the commission, ladies and gentleman, first of all allow me to thank you for the invitation to speak in this briefing in the U.S. Congress.

I joined the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in 1995 after my son was taken prisoner in Chechnya and I had personally to go there to spring him. During the first Chechen war, it was still possible the Chechnyans themselves notified the parents that their son had been taken prisoner and they agreed to release their sons to the mothers.

Today it is much more difficult because access to the zone of conflict has been cut off.

I'd like to inform you about the activities of the Nizhny Novgorod Committee, where I'm chairman. This is one of 300 committees in various Russian cities. Our committee includes 10 branches throughout the Nizhny Novgorod region. All in all, we have 25 to 30 people.

All of us are volunteers. None of us is paid. We have a reception room only in Nizhny Novgorod. These are two rooms staffed by three persons, who on a daily basis work with the population. Besides, we have seven volunteers who come after work in their free time. In the regional branches, there is no office and reception. No activities are done in private homes.

Annually, we handle about 2,000 requests from people who ask to help them either in connection with the conscription of their children or in connection with problems arising in the military units.

A large part of our work is to inform the young people and their parents about their legal rights through talks, through issuing fliers, through meetings.

The problem is that most of the population has simply no idea of what's going on in their army -- above all, because television is censored.

Annually, we help about 700 soldiers who deserted from their units. Their parents live thousands of kilometers away on the other end of the country and they have nowhere else to go. Sometimes they come in large groups.

The reasons for desertion are beatings, harsh hazing officers and other soldiers, criminal environment in the unit, lack of medical assistance, cases of extortion of money, use of soldiers for slave labor when officers rent soldiers out. And there are even cases when officers forced the soldiers to beg.

Sometimes the military authorities come over and try to take the deserters by force and we never surrender them. And so, when such cases occur, physical confrontation with the military. Usually such situations are resolved through the military prosecutor's office.

What do we do? How do we help the deserters?

First of all, we record their complaints and take their cases for monitoring. Then we render mediating services in negotiations with the military authorities.

In many cases it ends up in honorable discharge or transfer of the soldier to a different unit.

In many cases, when there are obvious traces of crime, for example, traces of beatings, torture, handcuffs, we pass on the case to the military prosecutor's office and lend legal support to the soldier.

In some cases, we represent the soldier in court, the soldier or his family in court on the basis of power of attorney.

Whenever attorney services are needed, we cooperate with the Foundation for Civil Liberties, which pays for the services of soldiers' attorneys.

The court cases in which we participate in this or that forum run the gambit from beatings and the mutilation of soldiers to civil lawsuits from the parents of soldiers who died in Chechnya.

We also deal with the social protection of veterans and those wounded in the Chechen war. The fact is that federal disability allowances are so low, less than \$50 a month, that they're way below subsistence level under any circumstances.

The situation of the veterans depends, in a large measure, on the position of local authorities. For example, our previous governor paid an extra allowance on top of federal allowances for the parents of the soldiers who died in Chechnya. Then a new government came to power and canceled these allowances.

Then we, in cooperation with veteran groups, staged a demonstration with the participation of several hundred parents of dead soldiers, and our demonstration made the national news. As a result, the canceled allowances were restored.

I want to stress once again that we don't receive a red cent from our clients, the soldiers and their parents. These people don't have any money. On the contrary, very often we try to raise funds for them.

The budget, the minimum budget of our organization Nizhny Novgorod is about 20,000 rubles per month, which is equivalent to about \$10,000 per year. This money is needed to pay for the rent, telephone and transportation expenses.

Our central office in Nizhny Novgorod and three of our original branches have computers.

The military obviously doesn't like us, but I can't say that we sustain a direct persecution from them. But after the criticism made by the Minister of Defense and after the state of the nation address by President Putin, we believe that we have to expect financial pressure.

And we are really feeling this financial pressure. For example, we are renting our office from a regional authority at a discount. However, today, now obviously after Putin's state of the nation address, which is viewed by the local authorities as an order, the governor is planning to take away this discount. In other words, our rent will be increased by 10 times.

And finally, as regards to financing from abroad, from the speech by President Putin, myself and other human rights activists found out that we ostensibly take the orders from foreign funds, that we represent their interests.

In reality, we get no substantial financing from abroad.

We never had any U.S. government grants. Over 10 years, we have received just two grants from private foundations in the total amount of \$8,000.

As for the Russian sources of financing, the local businessmen, first of all, get no tax breaks for charitable activities. Besides, the local businessmen have been so intimidated by the criticism of us by the Ministry of Defense and by President Putin that we cannot expect anything from them.

For two years we survived, thanks to the Berezovsky foundation, which also helped pay the services of 250 attorneys for the soldiers, but now this source has been exhausted.

The statements by President Putin that we serve the foreign interests are contrary to the fact. We serve the interests of millions of Russian soldiers and their parents, defending them from arbitrary rule and lawlessness of the authorities.