



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Honorable Christopher H. Smith

[Print](#)

Co-Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman, fellow Commission members. Today the Helsinki Commission is holding a hearing that I had truly hoped would not need to be held. In 1996, after more than two years of bloody conflict, the Russian Government and representatives of the Chechen Republic signed a treaty which stipulated that the status of Chechnya would be determined “in accordance with generally recognized norms of international law” before December 31, 2001.

Sixteen months have passed, and that treaty has been cast aside in a maelstrom of bloodshed and barbarity.

As is known, the armed invasion of neighboring Dagestan in August 1999 by supposed “Wahabbi” guerrilla forces led to renewed hostilities between Russia and de facto independent Chechnya. Some sources maintain that elements in or near the Russian Government had been waiting, even conspiring, to produce such a provocation. In any event, President Putin initiated his “anti-terrorist operation” and promised to wipe out alleged terrorists “even in the outhouse.”

Brutality and violations of human rights have characterized the war on both sides, especially on the part of the Russian military with its overwhelming firepower.

According to a May 2001 report by the organization Physicians for Human Rights, thousands of civilians have been killed during bombings and artillery shelling. Hundreds more, especially males of military age, have been killed or have disappeared into so-called “detention centers” during military “sweeps.” The army will surround a populated area for the alleged purpose of checking residents’ documents, or seeking out combatants, or identifying sources for weapons and ammunition. These “sweeps” have become synonymous with terrorizing the local population. In addition, an estimated 150,000-200,000 persons have been forced to relocate to refugee camps in neighboring areas.

Domestic human rights activists in Russia have sought a peaceful solution to the conflict and an end to human rights violations. Preliminary contacts between the sides last year did not lead to substantive discussions, and Moscow now appears committed to complete military victory. President Maskhadov of Chechnya, who was elected to his post through internationally-

observed elections sanctioned by the Russian Government, has said that the Chechen side will meet Russian representatives without any pre-conditions.

Moscow contends that the war in Chechnya is an integral part of the war against international terrorism, although President Putin himself has noted the “historical roots” to the conflict, as opposed to the presence of foreign terrorist elements. It must be noted that the U.S. Government has confirmed links between some insurgents in Chechnya and “various terrorist organizations and mujahidin.” In the wake of the September 11th attacks, the U.S. Government has called upon Chechnya’s leadership to “immediately and unconditionally cut all contacts with international terrorist groups, such as Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda organization.” At the same time, we have called for accountability for human rights violations on all sides and a political solution to the conflict.

Let me be clear. I understand completely the concern of the Russian Government, or any government, for the security of its borders, its domestic tranquility, and its territorial integrity. But, this does not give the Russian military a blank check to kill or torture any young man capable of fighting or other citizens young and old, or to rape and steal, or to bomb hospitals and humanitarian convoys. Occasionally, the Russian Government announces that criminal charges have been filed against certain military personnel for egregious human violations in Chechnya. However, the record indicates that most of these cases eventually melt like snow in the noonday sun.

Meanwhile, the consequences of the war have slipped over the Caucasus Mountains into Georgia, where there appears to be a nexus of foreign terrorists linked with the Chechen conflict. The United States Government is sending about 200 military advisors to Georgia to help deal with suspected terrorists in the Pankisi Gorge on the Chechen border. Further afield, there have been press reports of Chechens serving with Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan. However, upon close inspection, these Chechen fighters seem to be few and far between. Maybe we’ll have some elucidation on that subject today.

Our witnesses today are uniquely qualified to inform us about the situation in Chechnya and its reverberations throughout Russia and the world. I look forward to their testimony.