Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Only when I got closer did it become clear that these buildings were uninhabitable. There was nothing behind the painted faades: no roofs or floors, no internal walls, just piles of rubble and broken steel supports. A Potemkin village is usually no more than a metaphor. In Grozny, the Potemkin villages are real, but its not clear who theyre meant to impress, apart from the TV cameras.

Officially, the war is over. Russian troops mostly stay inside their heavily fortified bases. Chechen fighters hide in the mountains, occasionally carrying out attacks on police vehicles or military convoys. Russia claims that the situation is under control: more specifically, that it is under the control of Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the republics last president, Akhmad Kadyrov, who was assassinated in 2004. The younger Kadyrov, who has been made a Hero of Russia by Putin, recently became prime minister and has been held back from the presidency only by his age: he is not yet 30. Under his command, the Chechen security forces or Kadyrovtsy made up of various police units, the recently reorganised Anti-Terrorism Centre and the so-called Oil Protection Regiment have been entrusted with restoring and maintaining order. Most of the troops are amnestied rebel fighters.

Chechens, who have survived Russian aerial bombardments, massive sweep operations and the loss of their families and homes, say laconically that the situation now is worse than war. During the Russian bombings they at least knew what to expect and how to try to escape. Now, the threat is constant and unpredictable. Many families live in constant fear that Kadyrovs men in their black uniforms will come and take them or their relatives away. They dont bother locking the door because the Kadyrovtsy would break it down anyway. They dont talk to the neighbours, fearing that the neighbours will inform on them.

During the short period of independence between the wars of 1994-96 and that of 1999 Chechens were worn down by lawlessness and increasing Islamic fundamentalism. They wanted the Russians to come and clear the republic of the wahhabis, but Russias indiscriminate brutality destroyed their trust. Then they hoped that the Chechen officials who took over from the Russians would bring peace to the region. But now, abused and humiliated by their compatriots, they dont know where to turn. They fear that their teenage sons whove grown up knowing nothing but war will join the rebels: not because they support the cause, but because they cant see any other way of recovering their dignity and remedying the injustices done to them. They know how little the world cares about their fate and about the dirty war that is ruining their lives and their hopes for a liveable future.

In this atmosphere of fear, despair and mistrust, Chechens are reluctant to talk about their experiences to visiting human rights researchers or local human rights groups. Those who agree to talk ask us not to mention their names, their villages, or anything that would enable the authorities to identify them. The Kadyrovtsy, they believe, will find them wherever they are. As one elderly Chechen put it, Every word you say will be used against you.

A few months ago, Movlid M.s wife and brother left their home in a small village in central Chechnya, for a short trip to a nearby town. They never returned. Movlid started looking for them. After his brothers burned-out car was found, he petitioned the authorities, requesting an investigation. Eventually he was called in to identify his brothers mutilated body, which had been found in a remote forest. He redoubled his efforts to find his wife and repeatedly visited the prosecutors office and police stations, to no effect.

A few weeks later, as Movlid was watching the evening news, three cars stopped outside his house. Armed men in uniform dragged him away, pushing aside his three children. He was released the next day thrown out of a car in the city centre. His ribs and cheekbones had been broken and his feet burned with electric wires. The security forces had questioned him about his efforts to find his wife and brother and he was convinced that the people interrogating him had been involved in their abduction. But he doesnt dare ask any more about what happened to her. He was warned that if he did he would suffer the same fate as his brother.

Remaining silent is no guarantee against abuse, however. The members of the anti-terrorism unit are eager to prove their industriousness. When I first joined them, a former member of Kadyrovs security service confided to me, I kept asking: How are we going to find the rebels or their caches of ammunition? And they told me it was a chain: we go after someone, and work with him until he gives us names,

and then we follow up, and so on, until someone confesses. Eventually someone always confesses. In villages across Chechnya we found evidence of this strategy in action. Young and old, men and women, healthy and disabled: no one is safe from being made a link in the chain. You dont have to look very far to find a torture victim in Chechnya. I spoke to dozens.

Ruslan R., an elderly construction worker, was shaking as he got into our car. Two weeks earlier, a group of armed, masked men had broken into his house in the middle of the night and taken him away. He spent a day at the local base of the Anti-Terrorism Centre followed by nearly two weeks in hospital. The interrogators accused him of supporting the rebels, kicked him violently, and then used an infernal machine to give him electric shocks. They attached the wires to my toes, and kept cranking the handle to release the current. I couldnt bear it. I was begging: Give me any paper Ill sign it, Ill sign anything; if you want Ill confess I sold the rebels a tank or a MiG, anything.

A refusal to confess often results in even worse treatment. Khasan Kh., who is 19, refused to confess or incriminate others. He was tortured for 13 days in a row. He thinks he was held in the basement of the local commanders house, one of the secret prisons the Kadyrovtsy have established all over Chechnya. In the middle of winter, they kept him in the cellar wearing only his underwear. His captors said they would give him food if he started to talk. Day after day they suspended him by his feet from a tree, and beat him with shovel handles. On the 13th day they told Khasan they were taking him out to execute him, but instead dumped him in the forest, bound and blindfolded. Villagers found him and took him home. His mother fainted when she saw him: he looked like a skeleton, she said. He had an open fracture on his arm and was in the early stages of kidney failure as a result of the beatings. Khasans arm is now permanently disfigured: the family was too frightened to take him to hospital.

Those who are released, in whatever condition, consider themselves lucky. They know it could be worse. It often is, particularly if you have a relative, even a distant one, who has been involved with the rebel movement. Targeting families is considered an essential and effective part of the anti-terrorism operation. Security forces often keep family members in secret detention centres to force a rebels surrender. If the rebel is subsequently killed or captured, the family may still pay for what he has done, often with their lives.

Isa I.s house was raided by the security forces so often that he eventually suggested they pitch a tent in his backyard. They were looking for a distant relative who had joined the rebels several years before. The family had no contact with the man, and had publicly repudiated him in accordance with Chechen tradition. But the Kadyrovtsy were persistent. On 24 February, Isas brother was taken away. The family had no news of him until mid-March, when his body was given to them. He had been shot in the head and chest; the body bore marks of torture.

Shakhman Sh.s son joined the rebels last year, after he had twice been detained and tortured by the Anti-Terrorism Centre. Shakhman, who was disabled, with only one eye and a brain tumour, spent the time between his numerous operations searching desperately for his son; he failed to find him. Last October the Anti-Terrorism Centre came after Shakhman himself. Witnesses who saw him in detention told the family that he had been beaten to death with metal rods shortly after his arrest. The family has still not received official confirmation of his death or been able to retrieve his body.

These killings, disappearances and acts of torture are happening, unabated, in a country that is a member of the newly formed UN Human Rights Council. Russia is the current chair of the Council of Europe and is preparing to host the G8 summit, to be attended by George Bush, Tony Blair and other world leaders, in St Petersburg later this month. This incongruity is hard to fathom, just as it is hard to understand how European governments in spite of their much touted commitment to human rights and the rule of law can continue to refuse to raise the issue of the continuing abuses in the region. It used to be the case that one could at least be certain that Western governments would speak out against human rights abuses in the USSR. There can be no such certainty with respect to Putins Russia.

Russia has done everything in its power to ensure that no accurate information about Chechnya gets out. On the rare occasions Russian TV crews go to Chechnya, they film Kadyrov against a backdrop of freshly painted walls, carefully keeping the rest of the ruined city out of the frame. Foreign journalists can enter the region without authorisation, risking at best their accreditation in Russia and at worst their life, or they can have an official tour, accompanied by Russian security. International human rights organisations do not have permission to enter Chechnya at all: security concerns are the excuse. Russia has methodically expelled international observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe.

The West should stop pretending it knows nothing of the daily reality of the Chechen war. Local human rights activists and a few journalists are risking their lives to report the situation in Chechnya. Organisations such as Human Rights Watch publish regular reports on abuses, briefing embassies and foreign ministries, as well as officials at the UN, EU and Council of Europe. But the international community chooses to accept Russias claims of normalisation, because and these are words we repeatedly hear mentioning Chechnya might make the Russian president angry. An angry Russian president, they fear, might turn off the gas, leaving millions of European homes without heating. Besides, nobody wants to upset such an important ally in the war on terror.

The pact of silence is culpably short-sighted. Russias anti-terrorism operation has been ineffective: many would argue that it has actually fuelled terrorism, and that the threat is spreading. Since 2002, towns across Russia have faced the most brutal attacks in the countrys history. In the last two years, the Chechen conflict has begun to spill over into the neighbouring republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and North Ossetia. Even Russian government analysts warn that it is just a matter of time before a new large-scale crisis breaks out in the North Caucasus. Last June, Dmitry Kozak, a presidential envoy to the Southern Federal District, submitted to Putin a damning analysis of the situation in the region. According to a leaked version of the report, Kozak accused local leaders of corruption and abuse of power and warned that the North Caucasus could turn into a macro-region of sociopolitical and economic instability.

The Russian leadership, meanwhile, appears satisfied with the results of its policy of Chechenisation, according to which the Chechens themselves do the dirty work. The Kremlin refuses to acknowledge the explosive potential of the crisis it has created. The authorities are trying to address the spread of fundamentalism in the Caucasus by persecuting Muslims and closing independent mosques but this helps only to strengthen the radicals and attract more young people into their ranks. On my way to Chechnya I visited the city of Nalchik, where last October Islamic rebels carried out a major assault on police and government buildings. The authorities responded by cracking down on Muslims, a local human rights activist explained. They closed down five mosques in our town. But what have they achieved?

People who used to attend the mosques, some six hundred men, went underground.

In the past year, Europe and the US have started to express tentative concerns about the reversal of democracy in Russia. Recent remarks by Condoleezza Rice and Angela Merkel, as well as official statements by the leadership of the EU, have been critical of Russias attacks on civil society, including the doing away with political opposition, media censorship and the crackdown on NGOs. But the connections between the forgotten war in Chechnya and these worrying developments in Russia are ignored. Russias current repressive policies all have some connection with Chechnya. The first TV reports to be subjected to full-scale censorship were from the Chechen war zone, in 2000. The first groups targeted by Russias anti-NGO policies were the human rights organisations that criticised the war in Chechnya and publicised the abuses there. Thousands of Russian policemen who have served in Chechnya are now applying the brutal practices they learned there across the country. The head of a veterans organisation in Moscow, a policeman himself, once told me that in Chechnya the police get to yell and curse, and brandish their automatic guns; bringing this experience back home, he said, causes a total lawlessness in the police force.

Russia uses its position of power not just to shield itself from accountability in Chechnya but to undermine any Western initiative it doesnt favour: the EU sanctions on Uzbekistan, for example, that followed the Andijan massacre in which several hundred demonstrators were killed; or support for democracy in Georgia or Ukraine both countries faced significant economic consequences after they took a pro-Western stance. The West should stop pretending it does not have a choice. Europe and the United States can continue to admire the painted faades that hide the ruined cities, ruined lives and growing instability of the Caucasus. Or they can start treating Russia as a normal partner, and hold it to account for its brutal and illegal policies.

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