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Russian Soldiers at Checkpoints Extorting and Beating Chechens

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Russian soldiers along the newly-opened escape route out of Grozny are forcing displaced persons from Chechnya to pay bribes in order to cross checkpoints, Human Rights Watch said today. Chechen displaced persons, as well as returnees seeking to go back to their homes, have been subjected to extortion, beatings, and insults along the two main exit routes from Chechnya--the northern route toward Russia, opened by Russian forces on December 11, as well as the western route toward Ingushetia.

"Russian forces opened the northern corridor with much fanfare as a protective measure for the civilian population," said Holly Cartner, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia division. "But the beatings, extortion, and threats are a serious obstacle to their safe exit from the war zone."

"Malik" (not the man's true name), a twenty-four-year-old man who left Grozny on December 13, told Human Rights Watch researchers that he decided to use the northern route--which passes through Pervomayskaya-- because he had heard it was a safe route, but was forced to pay border soldiers 1,000 rubles [approximately U.S.\$40] in order to cross: "My neighbor told us that [Minister of Emergency Situations Sergei] Shoigu was promising safe passage, but when we came to the checkpoint there was no Shoigu, so I had to pay a bribe." According to Malik, about fifty people were waiting at the checkpoint when he arrived, and were prevented from crossing because they could not pay the required bribe.

Malik said that border soldiers brought him to the passport verification booth, and told him: "See all those people who can't get through the checkpoint? If you want to go, you have to pay." Malik also told Human Rights Watch that the soldiers insulted and threatened him and his wife: "They wanted to take away my wife, and put a gun to my head and said that if I moved they would shoot me. They insulted me and my wife, because my wife was never touched by anyone else. They were hinting very strongly at what they wanted to do, but I am too ashamed to repeat what they said."

Malik had sought shelter in a cellar in Grozny's Kalinin district for the past two weeks to escape bombing and shelling. He estimated that about thirty people were staying in the shelter on the eve of his departure, mostly the elderly, who were running out of food.

In another border incident, on December 9 Russian soldiers at the Kavkaz-1 checkpoint (about 30 miles west of Grozny near the Ingush border) detained and beat several Chechen men to coerce bribes. The men were driving trucks transporting displaced persons and their belongings from displaced persons camps in Ingushetia to their homes in Sernovodsk, a Chechen town close to the border with Ingushetia.

The column of about fifteen trucks and numerous passenger cars filled with Sernovodsk residents arrived at the checkpoint around 2:00 p.m. Human Rights Watch separately interviewed three women from Sernovodsk who gave consistent accounts that checkpoint soldiers waved through passenger cars, but ordered trucks to pull over. Seeing that the trucks had been stopped, those riding in passenger cars pulled over and got out. The soldiers then fired at the ground to chase the passengers back, but later relented and allowed the passengers to approach.

All three women said that the checkpoint soldiers took truck drivers aside to the command post to coerce bribes. Fifty-year-old "Tamara" (not her real name) told Human Rights Watch that soldiers beat her husband when he said he had no money: "They took my husband over inside their tent and said, 'It's impossible that you don't have any money. Go find some wherever you [can].' He was in there for about forty minutes. [When he came out] his eye was [all beaten], a black eye. His nose was bleeding. He looked out [from the tent] and shouted to me, 'Ask someone for 410 rubles.' He only had 90." After Tamara gathered the money, her husband was released.

The soldiers also detained the son of fifty-year-old "Leyla" (not real name) and at first demanded that he pay a bribe of U.S. \$500; Leyla related to Human Rights Watch what her son had told her: "They went up to my son and said 'Come on, give us \$500 bucks.' That's

exactly what they said, 'bucks' [or]. . . you'll end up waiting here until morning. If you want to pay, pay; if not we'll find some reason to detain you.'" The soldiers later settled on as much money as the women gathered around could collect, about 500 to 600 rubles. A third witness, sixty-year-old "Pata" (not her real name), said that her son Ruslan Arsuyev was detained for two hours until he agreed to pay a bribe. He reportedly told her that other men in the tent had been beaten, although he was not.

All three women told Human Rights Watch that checkpoint soldiers unloaded the trucks containing household articles until the people agreed to pay a bribe. Tamara told Human Rights Watch that the soldiers said, "If you don't want us to toss your things out give us money." Leyla confirmed this: "All of our things were thrown on the ground. They were stamping on them . . ., undoing [all the bundles]. They had to look over everything. If you tried to say anything it was, 'Get out of here or we'll shoot.' And then they start cursing. We paid them and they stopped." According to Pata, after one truck driver, Khajiyev, agreed to pay they were allowed to reload the trucks.

"This kind of conduct doesn't add up to 'safe passage,'" said Cartner. "Many Chechens cannot flee or return to their homes because of the abuse." Cartner called on the Russian command to investigate border police conduct and enforce discipline. She also called on the Russian government to invite the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to establish long-term posts at checkpoints to monitor the conduct of checkpoint police.

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