Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, it is

a pleasure to be here today. And I thank you for your attention to

the deepening crisis in Chechnya.

My name is Peter Bouckaert. And I am the Emergencies Researcher

at Human Rights Watch. I have just returned from three

months in Ingushetia, the Republic neighboring Chechnya, where

I have been documenting war crimes and other abuses in the war

in Chechnya.

Human Rights Watch researchers have been on the ground in

Ingushetia since the beginning of November, and we have interviewed

more than 500 witnesses in great detail about abuses.

Because of our permanent presence in the region, we are able to

collaborate eyewitness accounts through independent and consistent

testimonies.

Our research findings on Chechnya are publicly available in the

form of some 40 press releases and two reports, and provide detailed

information about the abuses summarized in my testimony.

They are available on—on our website, and I have brought copies

with me today.

The evidence we have gathered in Chechnya is disturbing. Russian

forces have committed grave abuses, including war crimes in

their campaign in Chechnya.

In Grozny, the graffiti on the wall reads, ‘‘Welcome to Hell, Part

Two,’’ about as good a summary as any of what Chechen civilians

have been living through in the past five months.

Russia talks about fighting a war against terrorism in Chechnya,

but it is Chechen civilians who have borne the brunt of the Russian

offensive in this war, as in the first Chechen conflict.

Most abuses we have documented have been committed by Russian

forces, but we have also documented serious abuses by

Chechen fighters.

Mr. Chairman, since the beginning of this conflict, Russian forces

have indiscriminately and disproportionately bombed and shelled

civilian objects, causing heavy civilian casualties.

Russian forces have ignored their Geneva Convention obligations

to focus their attacks on combatants, and appear to have taken few

safeguards to protect civilians. It is this carpet-bombing campaign,

which has been responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths

in the conflict in Chechnya.

The Russian forces have used powerful surface-to-surface rockets

on numerous occasions, causing heavy death tolls in the hundreds

in the Central Market bombing in Grozny and in many smaller

towns and villages.

Lately, Russian commanders have threatened to use even more

powerful explosives, including fuel air explosives, which could have

a disastrous casualty count if used against civilian targets.

The bombing campaign has turned many parts of Chechnya to a

wasteland; even the most experienced war reporters I have spoken

to told me they have never seen anything in their careers like the

destruction of the capital, Grozny.

Russian forces have often refused to create safe corridors to allow

civilians to leave areas of active fighting, trapping civilians behind

front lines for months.

The haggard men and women who came out of Grozny after their

perilous journey told me of living for months in dark, cold cellars

with no water, gas or electricity and limited food. The young children

were often in shock, whimpering in the corners of their tents

in Ingushetia and screaming in fright whenever Russian war

planes flew over, reminding them of the terror in Grozny.

Men especially face grave difficulties when attempting to flee

areas of fighting. They are subjected to verbal taunting, extortion,

theft, beatings and arbitrary arrest.

On several occasions, refugee convoys have come under intense

bombardment by Russian forces causing heavy casualties.

Currently, tens of thousands of civilians remain trapped in the

Argun River Gorge of Southern Chechnya, stuck behind Russian

lines, without a way out from the constant bombardment and rapidly

running out of food supplies.

For many Chechens, the constant bombardment was only the beginning

of their horror. Once they came into contact with Russian

forces, they faced even greater dangers.

Human Rights Watch has now documented three large-scale

massacres by Russian forces in Chechnya.

In December, Russian troops killed 17 civilians in the village of

Alkhan-Yurt while going on a looting spree, burning many of the

remaining homes and raping several women.

We have documented at least 50 murders mostly of older men

and women by Russian soldiers in the Staropromyslovski District

of Grozny since Russian forces took control of that district—innocent

civilians shot to death in their homes and their yards. In one

case, three generations of the Zubayev family were shot to death

in the yard of their home.

On February 5th, a few days after Secretary of State Albright

met with President Putin in Moscow, Russian forces went on a killing

spree in the Aldi district of Grozny, shooting at least 62 and

possibly many more civilians who were waiting in the street and

their yards for soldiers to check their documents.

These were entirely preventable deaths, not unavoidable casualties

of war. They were acts of murder, plain and simple.

Refugees are returning to Grozny to find their relatives or neighbors

shot to death in their homes. And most disturbing of all, there

is no evidence that the killing spree has stopped.

In the past month, the Russian forces have begun arresting large

numbers of civilian men throughout Chechnya. These men, numbering

well over 1,000, and some women have been taken to undisclosed

detention facilities, and their relatives are desperately trying

to locate them.

I have spoken to men who have been able to pay their way out

of these detention camps, and they have given me consistent and

detailed testimony about constant beatings, severe torture, and

even cases of rape of both men and women.

One of the men I have interviewed suffered from a back injury

after being hit by a heavy metal hammer.

A second man had several broken ribs and suffered from kidney

problems from the severe beatings.

The constant attacks by Russian forces against the civilian population

have caused more than 200,000 Chechens to flee into neighboring

Ingushetia, overwhelming the local population, which numbers

only some 300,000.

Many more internally displaced persons are trapped inside

Chechnya, especially in the Southern Argun River Gorge, unable to

seek safety because of the refusal of Russian forces to create safe

corridors.

The conditions in the refugee camps are dire, with inadequate

shelter, food, clean water, heating and other essentials. Only a minority

of refugees are housed in crowded tent camps or railway

cars. The majority live in makeshift shelter, in abandoned farms,

empty trucking containers or similar substandard shelter. Many

are forced to pay large sums for private housing.

Because the refugees are forced to rely on their own limited resources

for survival, they are often forced to return to what is still

a very active war zone when they run out of money, putting their

lives at renewed risk.

Russia is not allowing humanitarian organizations to operate

freely in Ingushetia and is virtually blocking any direct assistance

to needy persons inside Chechnya.

Refugee children in Ingushetia are not attending school and medical

needs often go unmet.

The contrast with the international response to last year’s

Kosovo crisis is striking, although the security concerns and Russian

obstruction are certainly relevant factors.

Russian authorities have repeatedly attempted to force refugees

to return to Chechnya by denying them food in the camps or by

rolling their train compartments back to Chechnya.

Russia is attempting to relocate refugee populations to areas of

Northern Chechnya under Russian control, which would place

them beyond the direct reach of international humanitarian agencies

and under more direct Russian control.

The border between Chechnya and Ingushetia is regularly closed,

preventing refugees from fleeing to safety and often splitting up

families stranded on different sides of the border.

Following the destruction of the capital, Grozny, and many other

towns and villages in Chechnya, and the widespread looting and

burning of homes, many refugees simply no longer have homes to

return to. Everything they owned in this world has been destroyed.

As in all conflicts where we work, Human Rights Watch documents

violations by all sides to the conflict in Chechnya. We have

uncovered evidence of serious abuses by Chechen fighters in the

conflict.

Chechen fighters, particularly those among them who consider

themselves Islamic fighters, have shown little regard for the safety

of the civilian population, often placing their military positions in

densely populated areas and refusing to leave civilian areas even

when asked to do so by the local population.

Village elders who tried to stop Chechen fighters from entering

their village have been shot or severely beaten on several occasions.

In short, the Chechen fighters have added to their—to the civilian

casualty count in Chechnya by not taking the necessary precautions

to protect civilian life.

Some Chechen fighters were also responsible for brutal abuses in

the interwar years, including widespread kidnapings and hostage

takings.

And there is convincing evidence that Chechen fighters have executed

captured Russian soldiers in this conflict.

But without minimizing the seriousness of abuses carried out by

Chechen fighters, it is important to state that the primary reason

for civilian suffering in Chechnya today is abuses committed

against the civilian population by Russian forces.

One of the most troubling aspects of the war is that the Russian

authorities have failed to—to act to stop abuses perpetrated by

their troops in Chechnya.

There is simply no indication that the Russian authorities have

taken any steps to prevent these abuses, to investigate them when

they do happen, and to punish those responsible.

As a result, a climate of impunity is rapidly growing in

Chechnya. Russian soldiers know that they can treat civilian—civilian—

Chechen civilians however they like and they will not face

any consequences.

Nowhere is the failure of the military authorities to stop abuses

in Chechnya more obvious than in the widespread looting which

has taken place in Chechnya since the beginning of the war.

Soldiers are systemically looting civilian homes, carting away the

stolen goods on their military trucks and storing them at their barracks

in plain daylight. The looting is visible to everyone, and it

is occurring right under the noses of their commanders. Yet nothing

is being done to stop this and other abuses.

The absolute failure of the Russian military command to stop

war crimes, particularly summary executions, in Chechnya makes

them highly complicit in these abuses. Instead of acting to prevent

abuses, the Russian military has continued to issue blanket denials

about abuses.

In the face of the overwhelming mountain of evidence about

abuses in Chechnya, these blanket denials are unacceptable.

Mr. Chairman, equally worrying is a lack of a strong Western response

to the abuses in Chechnya. Instead of using its relationship

with Russia to bring an end to the abuses in Chechnya, the Clinton

Administration has focused on cementing its relationship with Acting

President Putin, the prime architect of the abusive campaign

in Chechnya.

Secretary of State Madeline Albright traveled to Moscow while

bombs were raining down on Grozny, and chose to focus her remarks

on Acting President Putin’s qualities as the new leader of

Russia, rather than on the brutal war in Chechnya.

U.S. officials continue to understate the level of atrocities in

Chechnya, talking about abuses in the war rather than calling

those abuses by their proper name, war crimes.

The administration is understating the amount of influence and

power it has over Moscow, because the administration wants to

continue with business as usual and mend its ties with Moscow in

the wake of the NATO bombing campaign in the former Yugoslavia.

To date, the international community has given the Russian government

no reason to fear any repercussions for its actions in

Chechnya.

The United States and its Western allies could be doing a lot

more to stop the brutal abuses in Chechnya.

Starting Friday at the trilateral EU-U.S.-Russia meeting in Lisbon,

they must call the abuses in Chechnya by their proper name,

war crimes, and must insist that there will be no ‘‘business as

usual’’ with Russia while these violations continue.

The West must insist on accountability for the crimes committed

in Chechnya, and an end to the rapidly growing climate of impunity

developing in Chechnya.

An immediate international monitoring presence should be established

to document war crimes and other abuses in Chechnya and

to provide the international community with accurate and reliable

information about abuses in Chechnya.

The U.S. should push the World Bank and the IMF to explicitly

suspend pending loan payments until the Russian Federation takes

steps to rein in its troops, beginning a—and begin a meaningful

process of accountability for abuses, and fully cooperates with the

deployment of an international monitoring presence in the North Caucasus.

The IMF and the World Bank should not be financing a government

bent on a policy that is so destructive and contrary to their

institutional mandates as the Russian military operation in Chechnya.

The U.S. should encourage its European allies to bring a case to

the European Court of Human Rights, charging Russia with the

blatant violations of its International Treaty obligations in the conduct

of the Chechen war.

The conduct of the Chechen war and the creation of a Commission

of Inquiry should be a prominent item for discussion at the upcoming

U.N. Human Rights Commission meeting, and the U.S.

should—must insist on a discussion of the Chechen conflict at the

U.N. Security Council, because the conflict in Chechnya has major

implications for international peace and security.

Mr. Chairman, please allow me to end my testimony with an expression

of thanks and a plea. I will be returning to Ingushetia

soon. And I want to bring a message of hope to the victims of this

war, the Chechen civilians who had nothing to do with why this

war started, yet who are suffering the greatest.

I want to be able to tell them that the West cares about their

suffering, and that they have not been forgotten.

I will take copies of the Senate resolution adopted last week.

Thank you for that expression of concern. But my plea is that your

engagement not begin and end there, but that you exercise sustained

leadership towards establishing U.S. policy towards Russia

that insists on accountability and an end to violations. Thank you.

Well, I am not as familiar with specific actions

that the U.S. government took in the case of Mr. Babitsky, but I

do think that in terms of the more general abuses in Chechnya the

administration should know that the Russian media pays a lot of

attention to what the U.S. says, and when Ms. Albright was in

Moscow, and when Clinton spoke out here about the abuses in

Chechnya, about their general relationship with the Russian government,

it would certainly seem as an endorsement for the Russian

government, or for Mr. Putin in particular.

The administration has to be careful about what it says, because

oftentimes their comments get interpreted as support, not just for

Mr. Putin, but also for this war in Chechnya, and the fact that they

have not spoken out stronger makes that an easy message to pass on.

That is an easy question. No, I do not think

they have. They mince their words oftentimes when they talk about

abuses, they talk about abuses by both sides, suggesting that this

is kind of a very cruel conflict, but the fact is that the vast amount

of abuses in this war have been committed by Russian forces.

The U.S. government has not spoken out strongly enough about

the abuses in this war, and it certainly has not taken the actions

needed, the actions it can afford to take to stop these abuses.

Well, that is a very difficult question to answer,

because the human rights watch is not allowed to go into

Chechnya, and neither are international journalists.

We know that the Russian government has understated the

number of civilians as well as the number of Russian soldiers

killed, but it is certain that the number of Russian soldiers killed

is somewhere in the region of 3,000, and I would imagine that the

number of civilians killed is at least— I think that the number of Chechen fighters

killed is probably smaller. We have not documented any large-scale

killings by the Chechen fighters, but we have documented many

other abuses committed by them.

I have interviewed many people who informed

the Russian generals of ongoing abuses, including ongoing killings,

and we have no evidence that those Russian generals took any

steps to stop those killings. At the very least, their failure to act

in the face of these vast abuses in Chechnya makes them complicit in the abuses.

In terms of the bombings that are taking place, the indiscriminate

and disproportionate bombings, that certainly is a decision

made by the military command.

Well, we have to be very careful about our security.

We are not allowed to go into Chechnya itself. We are denied

access to Chechnya by the Ministry of Defense, and in the face of

what happened to Babitsky, we have to be very careful.

My Russian colleague has repeatedly been interrogated by the

FSB, the intelligence service of the Russian government.

No, we have not been granted access. I interviewed

a significant number of people independently from each

other about the filtration camps, and we know that there is well

over a thousand men in those filtration camps now that have suffered

severe beatings, torture, and we have documented several

cases of rape from independent witnesses who have given us the

identify of the people who were raped in those camps.

There was a visit arranged a few days ago for journalists to one

of the filtration camps. We have strong evidence to suggest that

that filtration camp was cleaned up for the visit, and it was newly

repainted, and just a few carefully selected prisoners were paraded

in front of these journalists, and clearly told what to say.

It is very unclear what has happened to prisoners

of war. We have evidence that Chechen fighters have executed

Russian soldiers during this campaign, but there certainly

are a large number of men, both prisoners of war, as well as civilians,

who are unaccounted for to date.

Well, there are two NGOs which we work closely

with, the one is Memor Yau, who is a Russian human rights

NGO; the other one is the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, and

they have both spoken very strongly about these abuses in

Chechnya, and about the conduct of the war in general.

Unfortunately, most of the Russian media has given a very slanted

presentation of this war. They have barely documented the kind

of abuses that are taking place in the war, and they only contact

us when we talk about abuses by Chechen fighters. There is a lot

of public support in Russia for this war, partly because the abuses are not being discussed.

I have been in Ingushetia for the last three

months, so I have had limited access to the media there. I will pass that question on.

I think that we should realize that there are

stretchers in place in the Russian government who are supposed to

address these abuses, such as the military procurator. They have

taken no action to investigate the war crimes committed in

Chechnya, so we are quite skeptical about this new appointment.

Regardless of what the new appointment does, I think it is important

that an independent international monitoring presence is

established, and that these abuses are investigated at the international

level. The international community must monitor what

the Russian authorities are doing, in terms of investigating these

abuses, but they also have to establish the body of evidence to

make sure that these people are held accountable for their abuses

in Chechnya. Thank you.

Yes. We have documented several attacks on

hospitals. I remember driving through one town in Chechnya, and

the two buildings that were the most destroyed, were the school

and the mosque in the one town. There has been a tremendous destruction

of the infrastructure in general, but it seems that schools,

mosques, and hospitals were specifically targeted on numerous occasions

Certainly, we are concerned that evidence of

war crimes in Grozny is being destroyed at the moment. The city

has been completely shut off from the local residents, as well as

from the international community.

We have been told by witnesses that they have been specifically

told not to talk to the international community about war crimes,

and because of our lack of access, evidence has been destroyed just

because it deteriorates, and it is buried in many cases.

If I could just add to that. It has been a consistent

policy strategy by the Russian government to suggest that

this war will soon be over, because they are trying to limit international

criticism of their mopping-up operation.

After they announced again that they killed the rebel commander

Raduyev, there was a headline in the Russian newspaper saying,

‘‘Russia Kills Raduyev Again,’’ because they have claimed three

times now that they have killed him. I think that is just one more

example of you laugh or you cry. We are laughing, but—.

I think it is important to understand that the brutal campaign

of the Russian government in Chechnya has led to a radicalization

of the opposition. It is much more difficult to bring people back to

the table, and there certainly are enough fighters left to continue

this war for a long time.

The international community needs to keep its attention. We

cannot just say this war is going to be over soon, let us just wait

a few more months.

Well, I think there is some anti-Islamic element

to this war, but I think there is a lot more about the new willingness

by Russia to use abusive powerful military options. I am concerned

about the rights of this new nationalism in Russia, which

has come along with Putin in this war.

Russia feels like a small world power now that wants to regain

its role in the world stage, and I hear a lot of people saying in Moscow

when I am there that we need a strong leader like Putin to

regain our place on the world stage, and suddenly it is not just

Chechnya, and Ingushetia, and the other Islamic republics in the

region who are concerned about this, but Georgia, a Christian

country, which is certainly as much concerned about the new assertiveness

and militarism in Russia.