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Chechnya [Russia] (2006)

Overview

Polity:

No polity available

Political Rights:

7

Civil Liberties:

7

Status:

Not Free

Population:

800,000

GNI/Capita:

na

Life Expectancy:

na

Religious Groups:

Muslim [majority],
Russian Orthodox

Ethnic Groups:

Chechen (majority),
other [including
Russian and
Ingush]

Capital:

n/a

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

[Nations in Transit 2004](#)

[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

The civil war continued to devastate Chechnya in 2005 with acts of terrorism, "disappearances," and war crimes perpetrated by various parties to the conflict. Violence spread outside the confines of Chechnya, as rebels and terrorists conducted strikes in neighboring regions, engaging in bombings on trains and raids into the Russian republics of Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkariya. Assassination of the Chechen rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov, regarded by many observers as a moderate in the separatist camp, further reduced the already faint hopes that a peaceful resolution to the crisis could be achieved.

A small, partly mountainous Northern Caucasus republic, Chechnya has been at war with Russia for much of its history since the late 1700s. In February 1944, the Chechens were deported en masse to Kazakhstan under the pretext of their having collaborated with Germany during World War II. Officially rehabilitated in 1957 and allowed to return to their homeland, they remained politically suspect and were excluded from the region's administration.

After being elected Chechnya's president in October 1991, former Soviet air force commander Dzhokhar Dudayev proclaimed Chechnya's independence. Moscow responded with an economic blockade. In 1994, Russia began assisting Chechens opposed to Dudayev, whose rule was marked by growing corruption and the rise of powerful clans and criminal gangs. Russian president Boris Yeltsin sent 40,000 troops into

Chechnya by mid-December and attacked the capital, Grozny, widening the conflict. As casualties mounted, Russian public opposition to the war increased, fueled by criticism from much of the country's then-independent media. In April 1996, Dudayev was killed by a Russian missile.

A peace deal that was signed in August 1996 resulted in the withdrawal of most Russian forces from Chechnya. However, a final settlement on the republic's status was put off until 2001. In May 1997, Russia and Chechnya reached an accord recognizing the elected president, Aslan Maskhadov, as Chechnya's legitimate leader.

Following incursions into neighboring Dagestan by renegade Chechen rebels and deadly apartment bombings in Russia that the Kremlin blamed on Chechen militants, then Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin launched a second military offensive in Chechnya in September 1999. Russian troops conquered the flat terrain in the north of the republic, but progress slowed considerably as they

neared heavily defended Grozny. During the hostilities, Moscow withdrew its recognition of Maskhadov as president.

Russia's indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets caused some 200,000 people to flee Chechnya, most to the tiny neighboring Russian republic of Ingushetia. After federal troops finally captured Grozny in February 2000, the Russian military focused on rebel strongholds in the southern mountainous region. Russian security sweeps led to atrocities in which civilians were regularly beaten, raped, or killed, while Russian forces were subject to almost daily bombings and sniper attacks by rebels. The renewed campaign enjoyed broad popular support in Russia fueled by the media's now one-sided reporting favoring the official government position.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Moscow defended its actions in Chechnya as part of the broader war on global terrorism. Russia asserted a connection between Chechen separatists and terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden, leader of al-Qaeda, the terrorist network, allegations that were never credibly proven. As the war persisted and atrocities mounted, some Chechen fighters engaged in terrorist acts. In an ordeal covered live by Russian television, a group of Chechen rebels stormed a Moscow theater on October 23, 2002, taking 750 people hostage. More than 120 hostages died, most from the effects of a sedative gas that Russian troops used to incapacitate the rebels. Russian authorities reported that all 41 of the rebels had been killed.

On September 1, 2004, anti-Russian guerrillas carried out a military assault in the neighboring republic of North Ossetia, taking over a school in the town of Beslan. Some 400 people-half of them children-died in the shootout that began after local citizens moved to rescue their relatives. Putin, now president of Russia, used the attack to justify the further consolidation of authoritarian control in Russia proper. Meanwhile, some families of the victims criticized the government in Moscow for its inability to prevent terrorist attacks and for covering up the negligence and corruption that led to the attack.

As part of a largely unsuccessful Russian campaign to build up the authority of pro-Moscow Chechen factions, a March 23, 2003, referendum on a new Chechen constitution took place in the absence of free media and public debate. Chechnya's Moscow-appointed administration claimed a voter turnout of 85 percent, with 96 percent of voters in favor of the Kremlin-backed constitution. However, an independent survey of voter sentiments by the Russian rights group Memorial found that 80 percent of the indigenous population opposed the referendum. After the referendum, presidential and legislative elections, which were held on October 5, 2003, saw the victory of Kremlin-backed candidate Akhmad Kadyrov as president. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe criticized the elections for not offering voters significant choice, and the U.S. government judged them as "seriously flawed."

Chechen fighters assassinated Kadyrov and a dozen others in May 2004 in an explosion that ripped through a stadium. After Kadyrov's death, authorities carried out a new election on August 29. Alu Alkanov, a graduate of the USSR's Academy of the Interior Ministry and Chechnya's interior minister since 2003,

won with a reported 74 percent of the vote amid a claimed 85 percent voter turnout. Journalists observing the process pronounced the voter-turnout figure wildly inflated.

Pro-Russian Chechen officials admitted that more than 200,000 have died since war broke out in Chechnya in 1994, and hundreds of thousands have been wounded and displaced. Rights groups estimate that more than 1,000 people are believed to have been kidnapped in Chechnya in 2004. Increasingly women, children, and adolescents from pro-rebel families are targeted. Russian security forces stated in 2005 that family members of the separatist leader Maskhadov had been taken hostage by the Kadyrov's militia.

On March 8, 2005, Maskhadov was killed in an operation conducted by the Russian Federal Security Service. His death came weeks after rebels unsuccessfully tried to convince the Russian government to enter into peace negotiations by declaring a unilateral ceasefire in February; in response to the ceasefire, President Putin ordered an expansion of the conflict. The assassination of Maskhadov, who had been elected in a relatively fair ballot, struck a blow to the more moderate faction in the separatist leadership, as most of its remaining representatives have fled abroad. Maskhadov's replacement as rebel leader was the little-known Abdul-Karim Sadulaev, a former head of a religious court. Observers suggest his elevation marks a shift among Chechen leaders toward younger, battle-hardened men infused with strong religious beliefs. Sadulaev promised restraint from engaging in kidnappings and attacks on civilians but vowed to continue fighting against the Russian armed forces.

Separatist forces launched a two-day attack on the south Russian city of Nalchik, capital of the republic of Kabardino-Balkariya, on October 13-14, 2005. According to official estimates, 33 police officers and 12 civilians were killed in fighting, along with 92 terrorists. Critics of the government alleged that corruption among the military and security forces might have contributed to the outcome of the attacks. However, officials tried to defend their actions by claiming that they averted a September 11-style attack planned by the rebels.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Residents of Chechnya cannot change their government democratically. While the 1997 presidential elections-conducted by the region's separatist authorities-were characterized by international observers as reasonably free and fair, the resumption of war in the republic in 1999 led to the total evisceration of the political rights of Chechens. President Aslan Maskhadov fled the capital city in December 1999, and the parliament elected in 1997 ceased to function. In June 2000, Russian president Vladimir Putin enacted a decree establishing direct presidential rule over Chechnya. Claims by the Russian government that they were returning the region to democratic rule by means of a March 2003 referendum lacked credibility. The referendum was orchestrated by the Kremlin, with no opportunity for debate, widespread vote rigging, and official results that indicated a voter turnout of 85 percent and nearly unanimous support for a new constitution.

In the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections of October 5, 2003, candidates representing a genuine alternative were not on the ballot and real debate was stifled in an atmosphere of repression and censorship. After the assassination of the newly elected president, Akhmad Kadyrov, in May 2004, a new election was conducted under similarly undemocratic circumstances. Under the authoritarian rule of President Alu Alkhanov, as under Kadyrov, there is no party pluralism and politicians who advocate Chechen state independence are unable to work openly and freely. The current regime, which includes Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the assassinated president, is linked to a network of criminal Chechen groups and is denounced by separatist Chechens as traitorous. Putin proclaimed Kadyrov a Hero of Russia in January 2005, an act that shocked the human rights community.

The disruptive effects of the war continue to severely hinder news production and the free flow of information. Russian state-run television and radio continue to broadcast in Chechnya, although much of the population remains without electricity. Alkhanov's administration effectively controls all other broadcast and most print media, which predominantly reflect official viewpoints. There are three licensed television broadcasters, whose content is pro-regime. The Chechen rebel government operates a website with reports about the conflict and other news from its perspective. The editors of an independent weekly, *Groznensky Rabochy*, left Chechnya in 1999. The paper is now edited in Moscow and has limited distribution in Chechnya owing to increased government restrictions on media coverage of the conflict.

The Russian military imposes severe restrictions on journalists' access to the widening Chechen war zone, issuing accreditation primarily to those of proven loyalty to the Russian government. Few foreign reporters are allowed into the breakaway republic, and when they are allowed entry, journalists covering the war must be accompanied at all times by military officials. Russian authorities renounced accreditation of the ABC television bureau in Moscow in July 2005 after the network aired an interview with the notorious warlord Shamil Basayev. Due to the devastating effects of the war, including damaged infrastructure, internet usage is negligible.

Most Chechens are Muslims who practice Sufism, a mystical form of Islam. The Wahhabi sect, with roots in Saudi Arabia and characterized by a strict observance of Islam, has been banned by the Russian government, although adherents to its radical fundamentalist Islamic teachings form an important core of those engaged in terrorism against civilians. Since the start of the last war in 1994, many of the republic's schools have been damaged or destroyed, and education in Chechnya has been sporadic. Most schools have not been renovated and continue to lack such basic amenities as textbooks, electricity, and running water.

Some charitable nongovernmental organizations working on humanitarian, cultural, and social issues are allowed to operate, but they are under increasing Russian government criticism and pressure. Human rights groups, particularly those that deal with sensitive issues such as torture and other forms of abuse by police and the security services, have been subjected to increasing scrutiny

by the authorities. In April, the authorities initiated proceedings to close down the Nizhniy Novgorod-based Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, a humanitarian organization involved in increasing mutual understanding between Russians and Chechens and monitoring human rights abuses in the republic. In the past, the society had been subjected to harassment by the authorities, including break-ins, confiscation of equipment, and the beating of activists. Union activity is almost non-existent due to the devastation of the republic's economy and widespread unemployment.

As a result of the widespread conflict, the rule of law is virtually nonexistent. Civilians are subjected to harassment and violence, including torture, rape, and extrajudicial executions, at the hands of Russian soldiers, while senior Russian military authorities have shown disregard for such abuses. Human rights groups report the ongoing operation of illegal filtration camps by Russian authorities and Alkhanov's security forces. The camps detain and "filter" out Chechens suspected of ties to rebel groups, with "filtration" often used as a euphemism for "murder." Pro-Moscow Chechen authorities admitted in 2005 that up to 60,000 people had lost a relative or friend in so-called disappearances since the start of the second Chechen war in 1999. Although Alkhanov's regime reported that disappearances became much less frequent in 2005, human rights groups questioned his assertion. Chechen rebels frequently capture Russian soldiers during combat, enslaving them, trading them among themselves, and ultimately selling them back to their families.

Russian troops engage in so-called mopping-up operations in which they seal off entire towns and conduct house-to-house searches for suspected rebels. During these security sweeps, soldiers have been accused of beating and torturing civilians, looting, and extorting money. Thousands of Chechens have gone missing or been found dead after such operations. Russian authorities strongly condemned a sweep operation conducted by pro-Russian Chechen militias in the village of Borozdinovskaya in northeastern Chechnya on June 4 that triggered an exodus to neighboring Dagestan of several hundred local families. The condemnation, however, lacked credibility, as it appeared to be a move to neutralize Chechen fighting forces that in the past had crossed swords with Kadyrov's militias.

The new police and security structures-some of them created by recruitment from private armies and militarized gangs loyal to Alkhanov's regime-are engaged in criminal activities and rights violations. Particularly notorious is the former Presidential Security Service-renamed the Akhmad Kadyrov Special Purpose Regiment in 2004-which is reportedly involved in extortion, abductions, trading in contraband, and the maintenance of unsanctioned prisons and torture chambers. Occasional protests are held by family members pressing for action on the abduction and murder of their relatives.

Extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and other war crimes are rarely investigated and even more rarely prosecuted. In an unprecedented development, on July 25, 2003, a military court in Rostov-on-Don, Russia, found Russian colonel Yuri Budanov guilty of kidnapping and murdering a Chechen woman and sentenced him to 10 years in a maximum-security prison.

In December 2003, a Russian military court initiated the trial of four soldiers for murders alleged to have been committed in the Shattoi region of Chechnya in January 2002. A jury in a Russian military court found the soldiers not guilty in May 2005. The defendants admitted carrying out the killings but denied responsibility, claiming that they were acting under orders. Human rights activists feared that the decision would encourage further abuses in Chechnya. While many external refugee camps have been closed and Chechens who fled the violence have been pressured to return to their homes, tens of thousands of refugees still remain outside of Chechnya. Many refugees who return live in appalling conditions in tent camps, abandoned buildings, or cramped quarters with friends or relatives. There are tens of thousands of additional internally displaced persons inside the region and well over 100,000 long-term homeless, many of them orphaned children and teens.

Travel to and from the republic and inside its borders is severely restricted. After the resumption of the war, the Russian military failed to provide safe exit routes from the conflict zones for noncombatants.

Widespread corruption and the economic devastation caused by the war severely limit equality of opportunity. Ransoms obtained from kidnapping and the lucrative illegal oil trade provide money for Chechens and members of the Russian military. Much of the republic's infrastructure and housing remain damaged or destroyed after years of war, with reconstruction funds widely believed to have been substantially misappropriated by corrupt local authorities. In the capital city of Grozny, the long-term conflict has devastated civilian life, with more than 60 percent of all buildings completely destroyed. Much of the population ekes out a living selling produce or other goods at local markets. Residents who have found work are employed mostly by the local police, the Chechen administration, the oil and construction sectors, or at small enterprises.

While women continue to face discrimination in this traditional, male-dominated culture, the war has resulted in many women becoming the primary breadwinners for their families. Russian soldiers reportedly rape Chechen women in areas controlled by federal forces. Increasing numbers of women were reported to have been abducted and have disappeared. The war has taken a heavy toll on children, many of whom suffer from various psychological traumas. Children, who accounted for up to 40 percent of casualties during the war, continue to suffer from inadequate living conditions, including lack of access to education and health care.