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Chechnya

A martyred people

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In the suburbs of Grozny, not a single building has been spared, although only some of them have been completely demolished. The closer you get to the center of town, the worse the level of destruction. The centre of Grozny is a field of ruins.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/grozny.jpg>]

Grozny in ruins

Before the war, more than 500,000 people lived in the city. There were no more than 80,000 at the beginning of the autumn. There were certainly still less this winter. The inhabitants have no heating worthy of the name, in the glacial winter of the northern Caucasus. Access to running water and gas has still not been restored and the majority of the city's population does not receive food aid.

The battles are far from over. In the city, the military are omnipresent. They are on the roofs. They patrol in tanks or in jeeps, but more rarely on foot. They are at the entrance to all public buildings. They control all movement and have set up large caliber artillery. On the main roads there are checkpoints every 500 metres. According to the mayor of Grozny, who was nominated by the Russian authorities, there are between 15 and 20 people killed in the city every day. You can see that from the behaviour of the soldiers, who are obviously afraid.

All witnesses confirm the exactions of the Russian soldiers. In the eyes of the Russian soldiers the Chechnyan population is suspect. This war is not a war between a regular army and "terrorist" bands as the regime claims. It is essentially a war against the civil population carried out in the name of the struggle against "terrorism". It is the civilians who have been massively displaced and who are the victim of the actions of the Russian army. Thus, at the end of November, Russian soldiers, in the name of the struggle against "terrorism", used bulldozers and tanks to destroy the little market stalls at the centre of Grozny. This market was one of the signs of the return of a less abnormal life, selling things like socks, oil lamps, soap, drinks and some foodstuffs.

This war has as its basis Russia's imperial grandeur, but it would be wrong to reduce it to a simple power quest by a central regime seeking to affirm itself. This region has been of strategic importance to Russia for a very long time. Since the Ukraine became independent the western part of the Caucasus controls Russian access to the Black Sea.

The east of the Caucasus concentrates formidable oil resources, while the port of Novorossisk is now the main point of exit by sea for Russian oil (670,000 barrels a day in 2000, or 60% of total exports by sea). The oil of the Caspian basin is normally carried by the Druzhba (Friendship) pipeline which runs through Dagestan and Chechnya. The Russian company responsible for managing the network of pipelines is constructing a bypass north of Chechnya with the help of the European Bank. Currently a good part of the Baku's oil is going by train, because of the war.

However, the problem of the transport of energy will now in the course of the coming years important developments. Production of Caspian Sea oil and natural gas is projected to rise sharply, in particular by the USA, as is production of natural gas in Turkmenistan. It will, then, be necessary to build new pipelines. Where will they go? A range of projects are being floated. Turkey claims that the Bosphorus is already overburdened with oil tankers and that this poses big ecological problems. Hence it is proposing new pipelines passing through its territory. The problem is that this project could lead to the resumption of the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The US is arguing for an Asian outlet. However, the choice is no longer easy. The pipeline will have to end up in Iran or Pakistan, after having gone through Afghanistan. It's obvious that the war in Chechnya is not without economic consequences. It is not a struggle between Cossacks nostalgic for the grandeur of "all the Russias" and "terrorist" bands more or less manipulated by the mafias. Solid and concrete material interests also determine the movements of the Russian armies.

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The Russian (and for 60 years Soviet) desire to dominate the region has always come up against Chechen resistance. It needed a century of war for the Tsarist armies to conquer this territory half the size of Belgium and for 50 years the Russians have launched big offensives seeking to destroy this million strong people. In 1944, Stalin deported all the Chechens to Kazakhstan.

When Yeltsin wished to weaken the central power in the USSR at the time of its death agony, he encouraged all the local regimes to take as much power as they were capable of. Chechnya proclaimed its independence in 1991, following the defeat of Ianaev's coup. The Red Army withdrew leaving its lavish stocks of arms.

The process of privatisation of the economy in Chechnya had exactly the same consequences as everywhere else in the ex-USSR. Corruption develops. The private appropriation of the means of production created gigantic inequalities. The standard of living of the majority of the population fell by 50% and mafias of every kind prospered.

Dudaev, the Chechnyan president, came to power on the basis of a nationalist and democratic upsurge. He was elected with 80% of votes and was regarded as a sort of "father" of the Chechnyan nation: he had led it to its independence. However, once in power he fell to enriching himself through trafficking in oil and weapons.

The Russian regime and its generals had never accepted the independence of Chechnya. Yeltsin waged an initial war against Chechnya in December 1994. It was a crushing defeat for the remains of the Soviet army. Grozny and Chechnya were seriously destroyed. But Russia was obliged to negotiate and officially recognize the country's independence, following which Aslan Maskhadov was elected president of the Chechnyan republic.

On the economic level the period after the first war was marked by the absence of any policy of reconstruction. The sole economic development was parasitic: trafficking in oil and arms. It is estimated that only 10% of the population enjoys legal employment. Wages and pensions of government employees were no longer paid.

Direct levies from oil in the pipelines were exacted in an increasingly arbitrary manner. Criminality and kidnapping spread. There were up to 2,000 people held illegally in Chechnya. At the same time NGOs workers became the target of choice for the hostage takers. Six members of the Red Cross were assassinated in 1996, and four British telecommunication technicians were decapitated in December 1998.

This period was also marked by the appearance of the Wahhabite current. It proclaims a fundamentalist version of Islam. It established itself in the beginning of the 1990s through pilgrims returning from Mecca. This form of Islam is very different from the very tolerant version of the religion (in relation to alcohol in particular), which had prevailed in Chechnya up to that time.

The Wahhabites experienced a certain success: they had money. Some accused them of being financed and manipulated by the Russian secret services. But they benefit also, undoubtedly, from petrodollars. And in the chaos of Chechnya in the years 1995-99, money is something rare. The Wahhabites recruited all the better because they could pay wages to those who joined them. They threw themselves into political combat and succeeded in imposing the legal recognition of the Sharia (Muslim religious law) on the government.

Independence began, then, to turn sour for the Chechnyan people. It was supposed to bring more freedom and ended up with the imposition of reactionary laws contrary to Chechen traditions of tolerance.

In summer 1999, Yeltsin dismissed his third prime minister of the year. He appointed Putin and the latter announced a merciless struggle against the Chechnyan bandits.

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Having learnt its lessons from the first war and NATO's strikes against Serbia, the Kremlin ordered a deluge of bombs on Grozny. The city, where 40,000 people still lived, fell after four months of intensive bombardments.

The majority of the population of Chechnya fled the combats and took shelter in Ingushya. There were as many as 600,000 refugees. Despite the return of some of them, there are still around 160,000 refugees in Ingushya and 170,000 in Chechnya itself or 35% of the total Chechen population.

Since the beginning of the war, the big powers have not ceased to affirm their support to Putin's bellicose enterprise. Despite some verbal condemnations of Russian army excesses, the Western powers have let the Russian government wage this war as it wished. The EU-Russia summit held in Paris at the beginning of November allowed the normalization of relations between France and Russia.

All this happened as if the division of Europe remained. The frontier between East and West has certainly changed but each camp remains master in its own house.

Before yesterday the Soviet tanks could enter Budapest or Prague, without the "democratic" governments lifting a finger. Yesterday NATO took on the right to bomb Serbia, without the Russian protests changing in any manner the course of the "strikes". Today the Russian army can bomb Chechnya without any of the governments of the NATO countries doing anything. One imagines what the Western reaction would have been if Milosevic had used such methods against Kosovo.

All the "sincere democrats" from Blair, to Chirac, to Clinton have on the contrary mounted a charm offensive towards Putin, saluting his modernity, his sense of humour, his youth. The head of the French employers' organization found "a very direct man, very athletic in appearance, young, who appears in the best of health, full of dynamism and very accessible." For Russia is also becoming a kind of Eldorado for international investors. The regime is proving its strength, restoring the confidence of capital while preparing a reform of the labour code which will suppress most of the rights of Russian workers.

From the Russian point of view, the war in Chechnya is at an impasse. The methods of total war push the majority of Chechnyan men towards resistance. All men from 14 to 65 are considered as potential combatants by the Russian army. To survive, the majority of these men have no choice other than joining the refugee camps or the combatants. If Russian military superiority is established, it remains incapable of stabilizing the situation, even in the short term.

The conclusion is that only a political solution can put an end to the war and that such a solution can only emerge through the recognition of the legitimacy of the democratically elected Chechnyan president, Aslan Maskhadov. The opening of negotiations with him is the sole means of envisaging a peace process. Peace can only be established through recognizing the right of the Chechnyans to self-determination.

It was in this context that French trades unionists decided to set up a trade union convoy for Chechnya so as to bring 22 tons of flour to the refugees. This operation was an extension of identical operations carried out in Bosnia and Kosovo. It was based on two trade unions (Sud PTT and the CGT of the ONIC), an association (Secours Ouvrier for Bosnia) and activists in the Chechnya committee.

The journey was long (more than a month in total), littered with problems (11 days held up in customs for example) and police harassment (more than 17,000 roubles paid in various fines), but the flour reached its destination. It was distributed in Chechnya, by NGOs independent of the Russian authorities, to refugees who had received no food aid for three months.

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This convoy did not simply aim to bring trade union aid to the refugees. It had also for ambition of making contact with the trade unions of the federation of Russia who opposed the war and monitoring the situation of abandonment of the refugees.

At the time of the passage of the convoy through Moscow, we were able to have a discussion of several hours with some members of small radical unions (Zachtchita, Sotsprof, Soviet worker). The exchanges concerned the trade union situation in Russia as well as their position on the war. For them, in Russia, the workers' movement is not a single bloc. There is, certainly, much chauvinism, but the most radical and independent unions are clearly against the war in Chechnya, although, unhappily, Russian workers have no means of communicating with their Chechnyan equivalents.

The radical unionists analyse the war as a conflict of interests between the Russian nouveaux riches and the barons of Chechnya. They believe that the inter-communal wars which are common in Russia are organized by the state to divert attention from everyday problems. It is not a war of peoples, it is the war of Capital, or, as it happens, of oil.

They say that 10 or 15 years ago in Moscow Caucasian hospitality was celebrated. Now people from the Caucasus are spoken of as if they were criminals or bandits. But the outlook of ordinary people is changing. The people have had enough of this war. Mothers no longer want their sons to be used as cannon fodder. Now public opinion demands that Russian troops are brought home and the Chechnyans left to sort out their own affairs. The current federal troops are not only composed of mercenaries. They also include the conscripts who live in very harsh conditions for minimal wages.

Despite their opposition to the war, these radical trades unionists think that the independence of Chechnya will bring nothing good to the Chechen people. Chechnya, they think, does not have sufficient resources to survive. It will only be a puppet in the hands of the great powers. However, they also think that Chechnya is profitable for Russia's imperialist policy, if not it would have been abandoned a long time ago.

In Russia, the legal guarantees and rights of trade unions are threatened by a revision of the labour code. The code currently in force is inherited from the Soviet era. The governmental draft extends the working day from 8 to 12 hours and encourages flexibility. It legalizes the non-payment of wages, removes any guarantee of employment for trades unionists and reduces dismissal to a simple formality. The FNPR (former official trade union) have developed an alternative draft that could serve as a trampoline to the adoption of a lightly reworked version of the government proposals. The alternative unions are all committed, in various degrees, to a fight against the new code. Some support a third alternative draft strengthening the rights and guarantees of workers, the so-called "Avaliani-Shein" draft.

The alternative unions have led numerous protest actions, including two national mobilizations (May 17 and December 1 2000) but employees are generally not very conscious of the legal aspects and mobilized weakly in most enterprises, with the FNPR asking them to wait patiently while the issue was settled by negotiations at the top level.

Whatever the union, they are all experiencing great difficulty, caught between the tentacles of the regime and the distrust of employees. Some trades unionists have managed, nonetheless, to create a dynamic of regional significance. Cases like this exist in for example Astrakhan, with Zachtchita (defence industry), Nijni-Novgorod, with the Committee of Workers of Russia, Togliatti, with the "Edinstvo" (Unity, affiliated to Sotsprof) union, the car factory GAZ (Lada), or in the Siberian mines, around the Confederation of Labour of Siberia.

Another objective of the trade union convoy was to observe the situation of the refugees in Ingushya. We visited several camps. The Sputnik camp outside Slepsovskaya is near the frontier with Chechnya; 8,954 people live there,

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under military tents in very bad condition. Two nights before our visit, four tents caught fire after a gas leak. Some people were wounded. We are welcomed by several women from the camp who despair at the silence of Westerners. However, when they learn we are French, they thank us warmly for being here with them. Thanks to those who demonstrate outside the Russian embassy in Paris, and who support the Chechnyan people, they say.

Some mourn the loss of their families, their sons and husbands, forcibly taken by the federal army. They have seen their daughters raped, their children traumatized. "Only the Russians can kill or torture children" they tell us. Some men arrive. They tell us that they are ready to return to Chechnya to fight, to avenge. One of them tells us: "Look in what conditions we live. I am sure that in France, the dogs are better treated than us!" Very near here, we hear bombs falling at regular intervals. The women tell us: "They want us to return to our homes, but how? The Russians are still bombing what remains of our country".

Khazan Timiyeva and Zaina Idigova invite us into their tent. It is shared by seventeen people. One a little girl of 22 days, called Mecqua (Mecca) as a sign of hope. In this tent measuring approximately 20 square meters there are six beds of which two are stacked above each other. The floor is wooden. Four children are there who eat crusts of hard bread. A little later, a little girl arrives saying she is hungry. Despite her tears, nothing will change the situation. Three NGOs are working at Sputnik: Islamic Relief for food aid, PHO (a Polish NGO), which runs the kindergarten and Médecins de Monde, which has opened a little medical centre.

The camp at Bart is nearer to Nazran. In each tent about 30 refugees live, women, men and children mixed. In the bigger tents, there are up to 50 people. A school has been built where children from 7 to 12 are taken or around 600 children. A new school was to have been constructed for older children by January 1, 2001. The Hilfswerk (Austrian) organization is responsible for the building work and has received financing from the humanitarian body of the European Union. Overall the education situation of the refugees is as follows. Some 32,000 refugee children are between 7 and 12. Only 12,000 can go to school. The others receive no instruction because of lack of international aid. Things are still worse for children over 12. The situation of children of pre-school age is also bad - of 20 kindergartens existing in Ingushya before the war, 14 are partially or totally occupied by refugees.

As for food aid, only two NGOs the Danish Refugees Council and Hifswerk work in the Bart camp. They distribute 3.5 kg of rice, 4.5 kg of sugar, 1 litre of oil and 13.5 kg of flour, per month and per person. No meat or milk. Vegetables and fruits are only distributed to children of 1 to 7 and irregularly at that. The 1,370 children of less than 6 years receive also receive small pots of food. The Red Cross distributes bread (260 grammes per day and per person). Collective kitchens no longer function, but Emercom considers that they are in working condition and refuses to repair them. The inhabitants of the camp are tired of this situation.

The tents are heated by more or less effective stoves. The Austrian association has promised to construct a town gas heating system. The hygiene situation is disastrous: the Red Cross brings drinkable water every day and Emercom has built a water line through the camp with several taps. In summer the refugees lacked drinkable water. The other obvious problem seems to be washing clothes.

There are two cabins each with 12 showers, or 24 showers for 6,318 people. There are not enough toilets for the population of the camp and the few that there are, are in an appalling state. Ironically, we were told that as the kitchens do not work, there is no need for toilets. The refugees also complain of lack of dustbins.

The state of health of the refugees both physical as well as mental is alarming. There is an infirmary with an Ingush doctor and one nurse. The distribution of medicines is very arbitrary. There is an epidemic of hepatitis and another of tuberculosis. To separate the tubercolic from the other refugees, they are kept in reserved tents. Scabies is raging and the refugees suffer from anaemia because of lack of vitamins.

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The approach of a new winter without adequate heating and food could be catastrophic. "Without urgent assistance, some people will die," Ruslan told us.

International aid for the Chechnyan refugees is tragically weak. Comparisons with the aid (quite justifiably) given to Kosovo shows the level of western cynicism. At Pristina, in November 1999, 326 international organizations were operating.

The situation of the people in Chechnya itself is still worse. Whereas the UN estimates that 190,000 people are "vulnerable", only 130,000 receive food aid. All the others receive nothing. In Grozny, the situation is particularly delicate. The population has very little or no work. It has no possibility of living from garden produce and as the town is bristling with mines, the simple search for wood for heating (indispensable for survival in the glacial Caucasian winter) is a very high risk activity.

The international organizations cite the dangerous conditions as justification for their absence from the region. However, the Red Cross, which has had six of its members assassinated in Chechnya, has resumed activities in Grozny with an office composed essentially of Chechens. Several NGOs are capable of playing a role in Chechnya. In addition, the representatives of the trade union convoy were able to get to Grozny without any special protection.

The alleged dangers have become an elegant pretext for doing nothing which will in any way annoy the Russian government. If the refugees and the inhabitants of Chechnya are alone it is because of Western complicity with this dirty war and not because of a perfectly manageable level of risk.