



Article by the Foreign Affairs Minister
of the Russian Federation Igor Ivanov

TRY TO TAKE AN IMPARTIAL LOOK AT THE NEW SITUATION IN CHECHNYA AND THE RUSSIAN ACTIONS

No normal person can, of course, remain indifferent to the tragic pages of the Chechen crisis. The Russians themselves perceive it still more acutely. For it involves our land and our countrymen.

Yet it is worth asking the question why a number of West European countries have been sharply critical of the actions of the Russian authorities while in Russia itself the majority of the population support the anti-terrorist operation of the federal forces.

There are several reasons for that, but one appears to be obvious. The Western public opinion has only recently "discovered" Chechnya, while Russia has been experiencing this deep drama for a long time. After the disintegration of the USSR, power in the Chechen Republic was violently seized by militant separatists and in effect fell into the hands of criminal clans who established a regime of wanton lawlessness there. It is impossible not to admit today that the federal authorities had made a mistake by giving these forces the time and the opportunity arm themselves and to establish control over the population of the republic. For several years Chechnya was virtually outside not only of the Russian Constitution and laws, but of any principles and norms of civilized society. The 1999/2000 yearbook of the London International Institute for Strategic Studies notes that during those years the economy was destroyed, unemployment became universal and the republic was flooded with "warlords" and their henchmen. Wide-spread taking of hostages, including foreign citizens, slave labor and slave trade, burglaries, murder and public executions have become a common phenomenon. During this time more than half a million people, including 220,000 Russians, had to leave the Chechen Republic.

Nobody knows how long this situation would have persisted if the wave of terrorism had not spilled beyond the boundaries of Chechnya. The armed invasion of the neighboring Dagestan, the explosions of residential houses in Moscow and a number of other cities in the country have overstretched the patience of the Russian people. That is why the resolute line of the federal authorities for putting an end to the bulwark of international terrorism in Chechnya has had an active support of the majority of the country's population.

I do not rule out that all these facts are not, perhaps, well enough known to the broad public in the West, especially since television and the press as typically paint an extremely one-sided picture of the events in Chechnya. However the same cannot be said about those who determine the policy of Western countries. They, of all people, should be well aware of the scale of the challenge presented to the territorial integrity of Russia and the security of its citizens. It may seem odd to some people that the struggle with the terrorists involved the use of aviation, artillery and other heavy weaponry. But the very nature of the threat in Chechnya called for precisely such actions. The federal forces

faced a 20,000-strong army of terrorists, including foreign mercenaries who had gained experience in all the crisis points of recent years, from Afghanistan to Kosovo.

The West also knows well the people who arm and finance the Chechen separatists. The annual report of the US State Department titled "Features of International Terrorism 1999" says in so many words that the Chechen militants and the mercenaries fighting on their side receive support from foreign mujaheddin who have close links with Islamic extremists from the countries of the Middle East, South and Central Asia, including Osama bin Laden. There is little doubt that the West will still have to deal with many of the terrorists who have now fled Chechnya in other trouble spots on the planet.

It would seem that all this should create an impetus for solidarity or at least an understanding of the actions of the Russian leadership. But in fact a very different thing is happening. Russia is being subjected to a torrent of accusations which mislead public opinion, create an artificial irritant in the relations with our country and, most importantly, misrepresent the real problems and challenges to which Russia, Europe and the whole world community will sooner or later have to respond jointly.

One should have blinded oneself to an extreme degree in presenting the Chechen terrorists "as a party to the conflict". For this creates an extremely dangerous precedent when terrorists acting in various countries of Western Europe may claim a similar "status".

Perhaps this is happening because Russia is hiding something from the rest of the world? No, my Western colleagues know full well that we are demonstrating a degree of openness and transparency in the solution of what is, and I must stress it, an exclusively internal problem, that has not been displayed by any state in any international or internal conflict. Russia is closely cooperating with various international and European organizations. They include the specialized UN agencies, notably the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN Development Program, UNICEF, WHO, as well as the International Red Cross, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Union and others. Already some 25 foreign delegations have visited Chechnya and about 500 foreign journalists are working there. We are not trying to gloss over the human rights situation in Chechnya which continues to be difficult complex even in the areas where peace has been established. But in order to improve it, what is needed above all is to put an end to the legacy left by the criminal regime. Suffice it to say that the terrorists are still holding about 900 hostages, including foreigners.

At the same time, the Russian leadership does not absolve itself of responsibility for respect of human rights in Chechnya. As the Russian President Vladimir Putin stressed recently, all the facts of human rights violations and abuses in the course of the anti-terrorist operation, whoever perpetrated them, are being thoroughly investigated and, if confirmed, the culprits will be punished to the full extent of the law. The President has appointed a human rights representative to the Chechen Republic who will be assisted by experts from the Council of Europe. A national independent non-governmental commission has been set up to investigate the offenses and the status of human rights in the North Caucasus. It will deal with the complaints of citizens and non-governmental organizations about all violations, including those committed by servicemen and the staff of the law-enforcement bodies.

We keep informing our West European partners about all such steps. That is why we in

Russia find it hard to understand those who are still trying to discuss Chechnya with us assuming an accusatory tone to the accompaniment of condemnatory resolutions and appeals which are divorced from reality. One gets the impression that some people in the West simply don't want to notice that a qualitative change has taken place in the situation in Chechnya. Large- scale military actions have ended, and the federal troops are only used to repel the attacks of scattered terrorist groups. Of course the terrorists have not at all far from laid down their arms and the problem of security in Chechnya is still relevant. But even now the Russian authorities are increasingly refocusing their efforts toward the restoration of peaceful life and the search for a long-term political settlement in the republic. The infrastructure is being restored, schools and hospitals are reopening and the work of local bodies of government is getting underway. A serious impetus to the political process was given by the March meeting between President Vladimir Putin with the authorized Chechen representatives, the heads of regional administrations in the republic.

Now nobody should have any doubt that the struggle Russia is waging against terrorism in the Chechen Republic will be brought to its logical end. The constitutional system, legality, the human rights and freedoms will be restored there. And we are prepared to continue a constructive dialogue with those foreign partners and international organizations which are truly interested in stabilizing the situation in the North Caucasus. To be sure, we will do it proceeding from our own interests, and not under anyone's pressure.

This is the reality against the backdrop of which many in Russia are asking the question: What is the real aim of certain quarters in the West which continue to speculate on the Chechen theme: to really help the people who have suffered at the hands of terrorists, or are they seeking to exploit the problem to bring political pressure to bear on Russia?

I think the West European countries themselves will have to answer this question. We for our part would like to call on our partners and friends to: try to take an impartial look at the new situation in Chechnya. The most reasonable approach to this problem is an honest and constructive dialogue with Russia and not the moss- grown calls to "punish" our country and even excommunicate it from Europe. To assume such a realistic position means to avoid new splits in Europe to whose unity we have together committed so much energy and effort.