

Chechnya, Russia unable, unwilling to compromise
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The Chechens have given the Russians another black eye at the cost of 50 freedom fighters/terrorists and more than 100 Russian civilians and tourists dead. This situation is very different from the external terrorism threat that we in America face and more serious in terms of the number of people who will die before it is resolved.

In 1998, I was on a team of the University of Missouri's International Center for Psychosocial Trauma and met members of both sides of the conflict. Later, a number of professionals from Chechnya spent some time with us here in Columbia. Our team has been invited to conduct programs for Chechen teachers and mental health workers in the neighboring republic of Ingushetia.

Sources of conflict

Because of its oil resources and its position controlling access to the Black Sea, the province of Chechnya is critical to Russia's economy. When times are peaceful, the area has operating oil refineries, natural gas and pipeline transit. An independent Chechnya would be damaging not only to Russia, but also to the people who live there.

Chechens are a Caucasian people who have been abused by Russian governments since the first half of the 19th century. Frequent attempts have been made during the last 200 years to repress Chechens, culminating in Josef Stalin dissolving the republic in 1944 and ruthlessly deporting hundreds of thousands of its leading citizens to Kazakhstan. Unprepared for the move, many died during the first winter.

Thirteen years later, Nikita Khrushchev allowed those who lived to return home. This kind of treatment added to the anger in the hearts of the Chechen people.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the resistance to Russian control again broke into the open, and there was the war of 1994-96. Similar to the situation the Russians faced in Afghanistan, warlords fought for control. The war devastated the republic, and more than 80,000 people died, a considerable part of a population of about 1 million. More sinister, however, is the fact that, with the Russians driven out, it became a major training ground for the Russian Mafia, which is now run by Chechens.

Chechen Mafia

When I was in Moscow with the International Center for Psychosocial Trauma in 1998, I met with the faculty of the police academy in Moscow. They admitted organized crime was a major problem in Russia. The police felt there was no way they could do much about the leading criminals because the protection of so many people in high places had been bought. If cooperation couldn't be bought, the resisters were killed. It appeared to

be common knowledge that Chechens were in control of organized crime, having done away with the competition.

Through the years, the Russians had either kept competent Chechens out of power or had deposed those who came to power. The only way for an intelligent Chechen to get power was outside the system. Their brightest men seemed to take naturally to the skills required for successful organized crime. The corruption hit a growth spurt during the period of peace after the outbreak of resistance in the mid-1990s. The Chechen Mafia spread its power out over the country. Many moved to Moscow and bought the services of influential people in Moscow. Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, became a center for criminal activity.

Law and order were nonexistent in the republic, so smuggling became a prime income producer. The Moscow police told me this actually benefited the larger economy because without Chechen organized crime, the economy would have been totally under the control of corrupt government officials and would have ground to a halt. Besides commercial goods like cars, the Mafia also trafficked in narcotics and kidnapped foreigners for ransom.

Kidnapping

Although there was money to be made in oil and the transportation of products to the Black Sea, the Russians had not allowed these industries to be open to young entrepreneurs who were Chechen. Hostage-taking became a source of income and could almost be considered a cottage industry in Chechnya.

A young mental health worker from Chechnya whom I met in Moscow had been in an apartment with a group that included agency workers from outside the country. The door suddenly slammed open, and masked men with guns rushed in. Her first thought was that this was a training exercise, and it took a few minutes before she appreciated the seriousness of the situation. The men took several of the outsiders to hold for ransom. At the time I talked to her, they had not been returned and she was suffering from a post-traumatic reaction.

The taking of hostages at the theater in Moscow to put pressure for freedom on the government is a continuation of this kind of guerrilla warfare. Our trauma team has been invited to train Chechnya mental health workers and teachers, but because of the danger of hostage-taking we would not be allowed into the republic. Instead the trainees would come to us in Ingushetia.

The failure of the Russian army

During the war in the mid-1990s, the Russians sent in troops who were poorly trained, poorly led and in many cases not as well armed as the Chechens. When the Communists pulled out after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, they left a significant number of weapons. When the warlords and the Mafia took over, they were able to arm their troops

well. Some weapons such as anti-tank rockets were sophisticated and devastated parts of the Russian army. They bought some of their arms from the Russian soldiers fighting them, who used the money to buy vodka.

The military tactics used by the Chechens, like those in Afghanistan, bewildered the Russians. Out of frustration, some of the Russian troops engaged in atrocities that turned Chechens who would have supported the government against them.

A Chechen psychiatrist we worked with reported that many of his clients had been victims of Russian torture. This failure of the Russian army also had a negative effect on the troops. One of the problems our informants in Moscow talked about was the number of post-traumatic stress reactions the returning Russian soldiers were suffering.

On Oct. 1, 1999, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of Russia officially declared war on Chechnya. Russia wants to re-establish its control over the Caucasus even if it has to kill every Chechen. A large part of the population, 200,000 people, have fled the fighting and gone to Ingushetia.

The ordinary Chechen citizen is caught between two forces that show little evidence of backing off. Both sides are blind to the needs of the other, with Russia being blinder than the Chechens. As a result, freedom fighters/terrorists are likely to plague Russia for some time to come.