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**IDP Situation in the Russian Federation: ERC's Mission to the Russian
Federation**

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The Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs conducted a mission to the Russian Federation (from 25-29 January) with the principal aim of assessing the overall humanitarian situation in the North Caucasus. Meetings were held with Russian officials at the federal and local levels, the UN Country Team, NGO partners and the donor community.

Several factors suggest that the outlook for a political settlement to the conflict in Chechnya is bleak at best. While the Russian authorities have taken some important measures to improve the situation in Chechnya, including a referendum on the constitution and the holding of presidential elections, "normalisation" remains elusive. The Russian Government maintains that terrorist activity is the source of instability.

The mission had the opportunity to visit a number of sites in Grozny, including a temporary accommodation centre (TAC), a maternity hospital and psychosocial centre for children affected by landmines. He also had frank exchanges with displaced families in Chechnya and Ingushetia. While the overall humanitarian situation cannot be characterised as an acute crisis, it continues to be precarious. The conflict has had a devastating impact on Chechnya's civilian population and its infrastructure. Evidence of reconstruction is scant and basic social services are lacking despite the resources allocated by the Federal Government for this purpose. A temporary shelter visited in Grozny was overcrowded and lacked potable water and appropriate sanitation facilities. The maternity hospital was poorly equipped and the child centre for mine victims, run by a national NGO, was under threat of being closed unless additional resources were secured.

That said, one must acknowledge that the majority of the 250,000 IDPs who fled to Ingushetia during the height of the conflict in 1999 have now returned to Chechnya. But inside Chechnya itself, some 800,000 Chechen civilians remain in need of assistance and protection, including 140,000 persons still displaced from their homes. In Ingushetia, a total of 67,000 IDPs are still housed in camps and other temporary accommodation; most cite insecurity as the main obstacle to their return to Chechnya. The authorities recently announced that they plan to close the three remaining three camps in Ingushetia (in which some 6,000 IDPs reside), by March 2004. This issue was raised with officials at all levels, underscoring the need to uphold the principle of voluntary return and of ensuring a safe haven for IDPs who wish to stay in Ingushetia. Foreign Minister Ivanov and the President of Chechnya, Kadyrov, gave assurances that no deadlines would be placed on camp closures. There are, however, some elements within the Russian Government which hold

the view that the closure of camps would mark an important benchmark in the “normalisation” of the situation in North Caucasus.

Over the years, the humanitarian community has managed to provide increasing amounts of assistance to vulnerable populations in Chechnya, a trend that is expected to continue in the current year. However, the overall operating environment remains extremely difficult. Insecurity poses the single most important obstacle to effective humanitarian operations in Chechnya (Security Phase V). Security incidents occur on a daily basis and have spilled over into the neighbouring republics. Although two-thirds of UN programmes are implemented inside Chechnya, there is still no permanent UN staff presence and missions are, by necessity, infrequent. These restrictions are not only due to the prevailing security environment, but also to UNSECOORD’s limited capacity to guarantee the safety and security of staff. UN agencies will, therefore, continue to operate their programmes in Chechnya largely by “remote control” from bases in neighbouring Ingushetia. In addition to the prevailing insecurity, the operating environment is further complicated by the lack of transparency on administrative issues and the absence of a single coordinating body within the Chechen administration to liaise with OCHA and the other humanitarian organisations operating in Chechnya.

In Ingushetia, the mission visited a tent camp for IDPs from the North Ossetia conflict of 1992. These IDPs have been accommodated in camps for more than 10 years with very little support from the international community and limited opportunities for income generation. The Ingush government is now focusing on this IDP population claiming that the international community should not only assist IDPs from Chechnya, but also other IDPs in the region. In relation to this and other broader issues, a multilateral conference will be organised on 9 February in Moscow involving the UN, NGO partners, the donor community and government officials at the federal and local levels. The aim of the conference is to develop a framework that maps out the challenges and changing needs in the North Caucasus. This would entail reaching a common understanding on future humanitarian action in the region as a whole, including its possible realignment from relief to reconstruction in Chechnya.

In sum, a combination of factors, including lack of security and basic social services and the absence of socio-economic opportunity point to the need for continued provision of protection and international humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable for the foreseeable future. UN and its humanitarian partners need to play active role in advocating for the population affected by the crises.

While some federal resources have been allocated for the reconstruction of the republic, they are still not commensurate with the magnitude of the destruction and external assistance is still required. The UN must remain fully engaged as the aid situation in the North Caucasus and the difficult operating environment necessitates closer dialogue with the Federal Government on humanitarian issues.

Recommendations

- The UN must remain fully engaged in North Caucasus in order to provide protection and humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable.
- The Russian Government should be encouraged to substantially increase resources for the reconstruction of Chechnya.

- Authorisation for the use of VHF communications networks is a precondition for increased UN missions and programming inside Chechnya.
- Close follow-up is required on commitments made by the authorities to uphold the principle of voluntary return for IDPs to Chechnya. Enhanced dialogue is required on the related issue of providing alternative shelter in Ingushetia.
- The UN must continue to advocate on behalf of its partner NGOs for the removal of all restrictions on humanitarian 'space'. The UN must urge the Chechen government to identify a focal point to liaise with OCHA and other humanitarian organisations working in Chechnya.
- Increased efforts should be made to support local NGOs and build their capacity to address the needs of vulnerable populations in Chechnya.
- The UN must continue to emphasise that the abduction of Arjan Erkel, the MSF Head of Mission (18 months ago), has had an adverse impact on our humanitarian operations in the region. We must urge the Russian Government to pursue all efforts to secure his safe release.

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