

**Inter-Agency Standing Committee Working Group
50th MEETING**

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Conference Room 9, United Nations Headquarters New York

**Background information on Northern Caucasus
(Russian Federation)**

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Background

Hostilities in Chechnya have intensified considerably over the past two months, particularly in the mountainous southern areas close to the border with Georgia. Casualties, especially amongst the Russian federal troops, have reverted to the levels seen in Spring 2000. Hit-and-run acts of violence, most likely perpetrated by militants, continue unabated throughout the republic. There are very few signs that a political resolution or accommodation is likely in the next 12-18 months. Nevertheless, Moscow and the Chechen administration have proceeded to draft a new constitution (on which a referendum is to be held in October), while presidential elections are planned for "some time next year". These two measures, if implemented before a political accommodation has been reached, could well exacerbate the already critical situation in Chechnya. Crime - often associated with the kidnapping of officials or with groups enriching themselves illegally by taking advantage of the republic's oil reserves - is rife.

Meanwhile, over 780,000 people continue to reside in Chechnya (140,000 of them are registered as IDPs), while 115,000 people who fled from the republic are still living as IDPs in the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia. The plight of these two groups is central to the humanitarian action of the UN, which began its inter-agency operation in the region in November 1999. Since then, the CAP has been used as the main tool to outline needs, define strategies and raise contributions (about US \$100 million so far). Donor support, both in political and financial terms, has been very strong.

Main Issues

The outstanding challenge remains the quest for a peaceful and sustainable solution to the conflict in Chechnya, for which the Russian authorities carry the primary responsibility. In the absence of a political solution to the crisis - for which the UN, in close partnership with all international actors, should continue to advocate - we are confronted with the prospect of a long-term humanitarian presence in the region. Over the last few months the complexity of the crisis in the North Caucasus has undergone a significant acceleration, due to developments affecting, in particular, the situation of IDPs and the safety of humanitarian workers.

Protection for IDPs

There are currently about 115,000 IDPs in Ingushetia, mostly from Grozny or mountainous regions in Chechnya. Some 23,000 of them live in tented camps, 27,000 in spontaneous settlements and some 64,000 with local host families. These IDPs are extremely concerned about the security situation inside Chechnya and claim that they have very little - if any - shelter to which to return. Therefore, their preferred option is to continue to be provided with a "safe haven" in Ingushetia. During the first half of this year the United Nations - most recently the Secretary-General, his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict and the ERC - received from the Russian authorities repeated assurances that the return of IDPs to Chechnya will be voluntary and will take place in safety and with dignity.

On the other hand, on 29 May 2002 the federal, Chechen and Ingush authorities signed an Action Plan for the return of these IDPs to Chechnya "by October 2002". Since then, pressure of various types, including electricity cuts and withholding of government food aid, as well as misleading information about conditions in Chechnya, has been exerted on IDPs so that they return. In early July, the authorities dismantled two camps hosting 2,200 people in Znamenskoye (Chechnya) and forcibly moved the IDPs back to temporary accommodation centres (TACs) in Grozny. UN missions reported that the returnees remained extremely concerned about the persisting insecurity, and that living conditions in the TACs were inadequate. Under these circumstances, the UN decided not to provide assistance to these centres.

A recent meeting with the federal minister for Chechnya suggested that the international community's advocacy efforts to uphold the principle of voluntary return might be bearing fruits. Federal authorities seem to recognise that conditions for the return of IDPs are not yet in place (albeit mostly for logistical reasons), thus no longer expecting a return "by October". The situation, however, needs to be watched closely, so that the "safe haven" for IDPs in Ingushetia is preserved. Advocacy should continue to be pursued at all levels, including to encourage the Russian authorities to provide the internally displaced with the assistance they are entitled to. Our monitoring and protection presence is being strengthened, but further efforts are needed. The ongoing winterisation of IDP camps should also proceed swiftly. At the same time, consideration should be given to the need to heighten preparedness measures for all possible scenarios.

Meeting the Needs of Civilians inside Chechnya

The current focus on the situation of IDPs should not undermine the need to provide assistance and protection to the civilians caught in the midst of the crisis inside Chechnya, in particular 140,000 IDPs and 40,000 people who have been moving between Chechnya and Ingushetia over the past two years. The UN has progressively expanded the provision of assistance to civilians in Chechnya (WFP, for example, distributed food to 170,000 people in July 2002) and is planning to further increase it, security situation permitting. NGOs and ICRC also share this trend. By increasing its action in Chechnya, in fact, the UN will work more effectively with the governmental counterparts engaged in providing assistance and, above all, will be in a better position to advocate on protection issues.

Security and Staff Safety

The operating environment in the North Caucasus remains extremely challenging. Liaison with the Russian security authorities has been constant since 2000 and almost all aid agencies, including ICRC, use armed protection. The principal threat remains kidnapping, as recently illustrated (on 23 July and 12 August) by the abductions - in Chechnya and Dagestan respectively - of two NGO aid workers. On 29 July, the UN suspended its operations in the republic, with the full support of NGO partners and key donors. On 9 September 2002, the United Nations agencies resumed their humanitarian programme in the Republic of Chechnya. The decision to resume operations followed extensive consultations with the Russian government, the donor community, non-governmental organisations, and civilians in need in the republic. Rising humanitarian need amongst the civilian population in Chechnya is the main reason for re-engaging in the region.

The Russian authorities continue to provide - although at a cost - armed guards and escorts to the UN and its partners in the region. However, over the past month, the Ingush government requested that aid agencies increase their contributions for this service and withdrew some guards from the premises of an NGO in Nazran. The UN is currently leading negotiations on this issue, highlighting that humanitarian actors should not be paying at all. On a related note, the government has yet to authorise the establishment of a VHF communications network, thus further hampering the extent to which the UN and its partners can operate safely. The Russian authorities should be engaged again, and at the highest levels, to solve this problem, as well as to address the still pending issue of the 20% VAT on goods and services that UN agencies continue to pay.

Proposed Action /Decision by the IASC-WG:

1. Endorse the proposed approach to the IDP issue, which includes continued advocacy with federal and local authorities on voluntary return, improved monitoring and protection of IDPs, and discreet contingency planning;
2. Support UN Country Team's effort in strengthening advocacy, protection/assistance for civilians in armed conflict, i.e. for the people inside Chechnya;
3. Agree on the need to engage the authorities on the safety of aid workers (i.e. VHF network and security guards), and addressing the still pending issue of the 20% VAT on goods and services.