

# genocide watch: CHECHNYA

The Committee on Conscience has placed Chechnya on its “watch” list.



Chechen woman Aset Musayeva, 70, stands in the ruins of her home in the village of Alleroy, 70 km (about 44 miles) southeast of the Chechen capital of Grozny, Tuesday, August 28, 2001. AP Photo/Musa Sadulayev

The Committee’s concern about Chechnya stems from

- The **PAST PERSECUTION** of Chechens as a people
- The **DEMONIZATION** of Chechens as a group within Russian society
- The level of **VIOLENCE** directed against Chechen civilians by Russian armed forces

A genocide watch means there is a serious potential for genocide and related crimes against humanity.

## OVERVIEW

A massive Russian military force entered Chechnya on September 30, 1999, supported by air and artillery. Russian officials claimed the “anti-terrorist operation” responded to an incursion by Chechen militias into the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan and to apartment bombings in Moscow and elsewhere that they blamed on Chechens. In the ensuing months, Chechnya was devastated, including the almost complete destruction of Grozny, the Chechen capital. Russian artillery and air indiscriminately pounded populated areas. Human Rights Watch also documented several massacres of civilians by Russian units.

Russian president Vladimir Putin proclaimed Chechnya pacified by spring 2000. But peace has been elusive for Chechen civilians, victims of a continuing war of attrition. They are plagued by abuses committed by Russian forces—arbitrary arrest, extortion, torture, and murder. Chechen civilians also suffer because there have been no sustained efforts to rebuild basic social services such as utilities or education. Chechen fighters also commit abuses against civilians, but neither on the same scale nor with the same intensity as Russian forces. According to the *Washington Post’s* Jackson Diehl, “The campaign by the Russian military and police against Chechnya’s separatists has degenerated into a full-fledged dirty war, complete with disappearances, mass graves, systematic torture and summary execution of civilians.”

## BACKGROUND

As the former Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Chechen leaders declared independence. Russian president Boris Yeltsin responded militarily in 1994. Two years of warfare presaged the current conflict, with widespread destruction and violence against civilians—more than 30,000 civilians killed, some 600,000 displaced. That phase of the war ended with a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya at the end of 1996.



[According to the U.S. State Department Human Rights Report 2000: *Arbitrary arrest and detention and police corruption remain problems. Police and other security forces in various parts of the country continued their practice of harassing citizens from the Caucasus, Central Asia, Africa, and darker-skinned persons in general through arbitrary searches, detention, beatings, and extortions on the pretext of fighting crime and enforcing residential registration requirements. In August human rights groups in Moscow complained of increased detentions of persons from the Caucasus.*]

A May 1997 peace agreement signed by Russian president Boris Yeltsin and Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov set aside the determination of Chechnya's legal status for five years. Between 1997 and 1999, the Maskhadov government failed to establish stability or rebuild Chechnya's shattered economy.

## PAST PERSECUTION

The roots of today's crisis extend back several centuries. Russia established a permanent military presence in Chechnya in the late eighteenth century. The Chechens periodically rose up against Russian rule throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. In 1944, Josef Stalin ordered the deportation to Central Asia of the entire Chechen population, along with other nationalities in the region. The deportation exacted a heavy toll—as many as three out of every ten Chechens died during the transport, resettlement, and first years of exile. Not until 1957 were the Chechens allowed to return home.

## DEMONIZATION AND DISCRIMINATION

Chechens in particular, and other "persons of Caucasian nationality" in general, tend to be demonized in Russian society. They often are referred to pejoratively as "blacks" and are assumed by virtue of their ethnicity to be criminals or terrorists. Throughout the Russian Federation, particularly in larger cities, Chechens suffer discrimination in housing and employment and are subject to arbitrary arrests and harassment. Chechens displaced by the war are not accorded the right of freedom of movement and are effectively barred from resettling elsewhere in Russia.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS

As in 1994–1996, the fighting since 1999 has been catastrophic for civilians. The Russian siege of Grozny left that city in ruins, and other built-up areas that were held by rebels, however temporarily, sustained enormous damage when Russian forces indiscriminately used air and artillery bombardment. Both sides fought the war without regard to the safety of civilians, although the vast Russian superiority in numbers and firepower took a much greater toll.

[French journalist Anne Nivat has traveled often to Chechnya and witnessed the aftermath of a Russian “security check” in a Chechen village: *I will never forget this woman, a mother of six, three daughters, three sons, who told me that ... she had lost her three sons, 15, 13, and 11 years old. They just happened to be “in the way,” you know, when the Russians entered her house. They were just playing in front of the house. And she never saw them again. They took them away, and killed them.*]

[Eliza Moussaeva, of the Russian human rights organization Memorial, told the Committee on Conscience: *To live in Chechnya is a risk itself. Because any day, any time the military can enter any house and take out any person, mainly the male population, and take them out in an unknown direction. As a result of this there are more than 2,000 disappeared persons in the Chechen Republic.*]

[Bela Tsungaeva, who works with displaced Chechens in Ingushetia, said in an interview with the Committee on Conscience: *I am a Chechen citizen and IDP [internally displaced person] myself. Today I am not optimistic, unfortunately. I don’t see any light at the end of the tunnel. I don’t know what is waiting for me in the future. The only hope for me is just the support of another country. In Russia I am sure I will not find this support. That is why we are here to say SOS.*]

The end of large-scale fighting has not meant security for civilians in Chechnya. Hundreds of thousands of Chechens who fled their homes for refugee camps in Ingushetia and elsewhere in the region remain displaced. Even though conditions in those camps are poor, the situation is worse where they came from. Those who do remain in Chechnya, especially men between the ages of 15 and 49, face the threat of theft, beatings, arrest, and murder by Russian soldiers during so-called *zachistki*—door-to-door searches for rebels—and at roadblocks. Detainees often get swept into a system of “filtration” camps, where torture is routine, before being ransomed back to their families or killed. Many simply disappear.

Although Russian authorities acknowledge some abuses, the number of admitted abuses is much lower than those calculated by human rights organizations. Accountability is virtually nonexistent because the Russians fail to thoroughly investigate most human rights violations. They also impede access of international monitors, human rights and humanitarian organizations, and the media.

For more information, log on to [www.committeeonconscience.org](http://www.committeeonconscience.org).

**The Committee on Conscience was established to alert the national conscience, influence policymakers, and stimulate worldwide action to confront and work to halt acts of genocide and related crimes against humanity. Join our electronic newsletter at [www.committeeonconscience.org](http://www.committeeonconscience.org).**

