



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

Speech by Ivar Amundsen – CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Seminar “Chechnya: The Forgotten War”, Royal Society of Arts, London, 19th February 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome everyone to this Chechnya Peace Forum event,
Chechnya: The Forgotten War.

Throughout history the peoples of the Caucasus have found themselves in the crossfire of imperialistic ambitions from Iran, Turkey and Russia.

During the last 400 years Russian warfare in the region has been particularly aggressive and after long military campaigns in the 18th and 19th centuries both Southern and Northern Caucasus came under Russian control, later to be incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922, after the Russian revolution.

In the Soviet Union during the Second World War far more people were killed by their own paranoid leader Joseph Stalin than by German troops, and as many of you will know, Monday 23rd February is World Chechnya Day, when the entire Chechen population in 1944 was deported from their native land to Kazakhstan and Siberia.

A few days earlier, on 17th February 1944, Lavrentiy Beria, the notorious chief of the Soviet security and secret police, sent the following telegram to the Kremlin:

“To Comrade Stalin,

Preparations for the operation of the removal of Chechens and Ingush are in final stage. 459.486 persons have been registered for transfer. During the first three days the operation will be effected on lowlands and lower mountain areas, altogether more than 300.000. The following four days transfer will be carried out from mountain areas, altogether 150.000 persons. The mountain area will be closed prior to that operation.

Lavrentiy Berija.”

This chilling reminder of Stalin’s order to deport the entire Chechen and Ingush populations to Central Asia, resulted in their decimation by half. Those who survived were left facing starvation and disease in the harsh winters of Siberia. Within days, an entire population had been ejected from the land of their ancestors, and every reference to Chechnya was removed from official maps and records.

The European Parliament in 2004 adopted a resolution classifying the deportation as: **Genocide.** Today we commemorate the dignity and resilience of a people who, against all odds, refused to be erased from existence.

Stalin died in 1953, and in 1956, at the famous 20th Communist Party Congress, Nikita Khrushchev strongly confronted the crimes against the Soviet people during the Stalin years. He rehabilitated the Chechen-Ingush nation and allowed its people to return from 1957.

However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 disaster came back to the haunted Chechen population.

In 1994 president Yeltsin ordered an all-out attack on Russia's little neighbour: *"To bring about Constitutional order."* About 100.000 Chechens were killed and the towns were bombed to rubble. However, the Russians also took heavy losses and the war became increasingly unpopular in Russia. Before the up-coming presidential election in 1996 Yeltsin decided to pull out and a peace treaty was signed by Yeltsin and the Chechen president Aslan Maskadov in May 1997.

In 1999 Yeltsin's second and last presidential term drew to an end and the power elite looked for his successor. The first choice fell on Sergej Stepashin who was appointed Prime Minister in May. He, however, quickly lost Yeltsin's confidence, and was replaced in August by the head of Russia's secret police, FSB: Vladimir Putin.

In September several bomb explosions in blocks of flats in Moscow and other Russian cities killed almost 300 innocent civilians. The population was struck with panic. Putin immediately put the blame on Chechen separatists and used the terrorist attacks as pretence for the second Russian war on Chechnya.

However, later it has been documented that the bomb explosions were carried out by FSB themselves, obviously in a cynical plan to create a backdrop to have their own presidential candidate, the totally unknown Vladimir Putin, sufficiently well known to win the following year's election. Much to the embarrassment of the Russian leadership, my friend Alexander Litvinenko repeatedly published evidence to this story. Also, Sergej Stepashin has disclosed that the second war on Chechnya had been planned by the FSB as early as in March 1998 – when its leader was – Vladimir Putin!

Upon introducing his new prime minister, president Yeltsin made the statement: *"Vladimir Putin will solve the Chechen problem for good"*, to which Putin replied: *"Yes, and we shall do the last one – even if we have to haul him out of the shithouse."* - Quite a political statement from a new Prime Minister! - But in Russia such rhetoric works. Russia went to war on Chechnya, Yeltsin resigned on New Year's Eve, Putin became acting president – and sufficiently well know to win the presidential election in March, even if the result was heavily rigged. The FSB had their man in place.

Since then another hundred thousand Chechens have been killed and many more displaced, 130.000 of them have fled for refuge in Western Europe.

Today the war is *not* over, Chechnya is run by a Putin- installed puppet president, Ramzan Kadyrov, who is well known for crime and banditry; and an emergency condition prevails. Disappearances, torture, rape, extra-judicial killings and the silencing of independent journalists, human rights defenders and witnesses are commonplace. Under the current regime Chechens are subjected to a climate of fear and oppression, with no avenues to seek justice against the criminal violations committed against them.

A renowned Chechen surgeon, Khassan Baiev, has written a book about his experiences during the first Russian war on Chechnya from 94 to 96, *"The Oath."* In the chapter *"Young Soldiers"* he describes one particularly terrible Russian massacre on a Chechen village, Samashki. This is a graphic illustration of the Russian warfare against the Chechen civil population in all its cruelty. You

will wonder how human beings can descend to such behaviour. Two hundred civilians were killed in that massacre. Two hundred *thousand* Chechens have been killed during the two wars, so we can multiply Samashki by one thousand to get an impression of this Russian crime against humanity – the greatest war crime in Europe since World War Two.

The famous Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Elie Wiesel says the following on his website:

- Sometimes we must interfere,
- When human lives are endangered,
- When human dignity is in jeopardy,
- National borders and sensitivities become irrelevant,
- Whenever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion or political views,
- That place must – at that moment
- Become the centre of the Universe.

Elie Wiesel is also known for the following:

“The opposite of love is not hate – but indifference.”

As a human rights campaigner I am appalled about the indifference by the so-called “International Community” in world crisis. It goes for war atrocities, crime against humanity and even genocide, and it concerns individuals, nations and international organizations. It is not for the lack of instruments. - We have the United Nations, the Council of Europe, G 20, International Courts, International Human Rights Conventions – and we have well developed civilized minds that know so well the difference between right and wrong.

Yet, determined and resolute action to save victims and put perpetrators to justice is in shortage when crisis occur. The lack of address is often explained as “Realpolitik.” I would call it: “Immorality, Irresponsibility and Cowardice.”

The mission of Chechnya Peace Forum is to restore liberty – human rights – democracy – and the rule of law to the people of Chechnya, but we realize that this cannot be viewed in isolation and must be seen in the context of what else is happening in Russia and the Caucasus. That is why we also seek to bring to attention the weak position of democracy in Russia. The Russians call it “Sovereign Democracy.” A more accurate term would be “So-called Democracy.” Some Russia experts refer to it as a “*police state*” or even a “*gangster state*.” What characterizes the Russian society today is a profound absence of justice and rule of law: Massive corruption, the murders of journalists, dissidents and human rights campaigners, suppression of political opposition, effective press censorship and elements of extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Nor is it coincidental that the Kremlin has developed a youth organization “Nashi” of 100.000 members that are used for support rallies for the president, or harassment of political opposition. All these elements, including terrorism and the war in Chechnya represent an image of threat and an emergency situation that serves to justify strong state control.

The Russian society today is in fundamental and deliberate imbalance. This is a target in itself, because it allows a suppression of democracy and civil liberties, the absence of which are essential for the number one political end for the Kremlin – to retain control for itself.

From this it also follows that a balanced and open society with civil liberties, the rule of law, a true democracy with press freedom and a diversified political environ represent a threat to the Kremlin and the FSB: Their power base and control could not survive with these virtues.

The West should pay careful attention to this and start addressing the task of implementing democracy in Russia. A good starting point is to insist on freedom and self determination for the Chechen people.

I conclude that Russia in their brutal warfare in Chechnya:

1. Violates the UN Charter and Human Rights Convention
2. Violates the Charter and Human Rights Convention of the Council of Europe
3. Violates international law – because Chechnya should have had its rightful independence and Sovereignty with all other previous Union republics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It therefore also violates the Supreme Soviet resolutions of April 1990, preceding the dissolution of the Union.
4. Violates the Peace Treaty signed by presidents Yeltsin and Maskadov 12th May 1997.
5. Russia should be tried at an international Court for their war crimes in Chechnya.

We will take these matters up with the Council of Europe in the spring and appreciate all support in our efforts for the human rights situation in Northern Caucasus.

Finally, I would like to show you a short four minute excerpt from the film “Crying Sun”, produced by the human rights organizations Memorial and Witness. It is a stark reminder to us all that the displacement of the Chechens continues to this day. This is why we must keep Chechnya on the agenda and ensure it is not forgotten.

I hope that one day Russia will be led by someone who sees the road to peace in Chechnya – and not war and degradation. President Dimitry Medvedev said to CNN shortly after his inauguration to office last year: **“Every people have the right to self determination.”**

I sincerely hope that he will decide to be guided by his own statement in his future approach for Chechnya. Then both Chechnya and Russia will have real foundations to achieve the lasting peace and freedom they so much need.

Thank you.