



CHECHNYA

SUMMARY OF THE
ACCORD-UNHCR
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN
INFORMATION SEMINAR

VIENNA, 18 October 2007

PUBLISHED APRIL 2008

The report is based on the presentations during the Country of Origin Information Seminar on 18 October 2007 in Vienna, as well as on the subsequent Q&A and discussions with the audience. The final report was prepared by ACCORD and cleared with the respective experts from UNHCR.

An electronic version of the country report is available on www.ecoi.net and www.refworld.org.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions stated in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisers of the seminar or UNHCR's official opinion. This paper is not, and does not, purport to be fully exhaustive with regard to conditions in the country surveyed, or conclusive as to the merits of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

The statements in the report do not represent an opinion of the Austrian Red Cross on the political situation in the country.

April 2008

Editor: Ruth Altenhofer (ACCORD)

Co-funded by the European Refugee Fund



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction.....	3
2.	General overview and the situation of Chechen IDPs in Chechnya and the neighbouring republics	3
3.	Security Situation	5
4.	Access by the international organisations.....	5
5.	Situation of NGOs	6
6.	Inter-ethnic Tensions	6
7.	Socio-Economic Situation.....	7
	Housing Reconstruction	7
	Employment	8
	Health Programmes	9
8.	Human Rights Violations.....	9
9.	Religion.....	10
10.	Women.....	10
11.	Returnees	11
12.	Internal Flight Alternative (IFA).....	11
13.	UNHCR activities	13
14.	Chechen asylum seekers in Austria and Poland (presented by the participants from Austria and Poland)	14
15.	Concluding remarks	15



Map provided by ReliefWeb <<http://www.reliefweb.int/>>

Source: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Date: Jan 1995

1. Introduction

The COI seminar was organised by the COI department of the Austrian Red Cross/Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) and the Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for Austria, Czech Republic and Germany. Two staff members of UNHCR in the North Caucasus, namely Jo Hegenauer, Head of UNHCR in the North Caucasus, and Jun Shirato, UNHCR Senior Protection Officer, participated in the seminar and gave their input on the current situation in Chechnya. The seminar directly addressed an auditorium of 40 participants, consisting of first and second instance asylum officers, judges and COI researchers, as well as of lawyers and NGO counsellors from Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

The seminar can be considered a follow-up event to the meeting of EURASIL (European Union Network for asylum practitioners) held in Brussels in 2006, where the idea of distributing up-to-date first-hand information about Chechnya to persons involved in refugee status determination processes in Europe had been raised. In a further aspect, the Vienna COI seminar was also intended to discuss the participants' experiences, impressions and opinions in order to contribute to the common evaluation of the current situation in the post-war North Caucasus and to assess the need for international protection more deliberately. For the fairness and efficiency of asylum procedures, access to precise and up-to-date country background information from various sources concerning the situation, prevailing in the asylum seekers' countries of origin, is essential.

Today, there are about 5,500 persons from the Russian Federation, a large part of which originate from the North Caucasus, with pending status determination procedure in Austria alone. It is generally difficult to get information on the situation in the North Caucasus and to get the entire picture of the developments there. Accounts of the situation in Chechnya given by the Russian government or the Chechen authorities often contradict the claims given by Chechen asylum-seekers and refugees. While the former claim that the general situation has normalised, the latter report on continued human rights violations. It was hoped that the seminar would meet the crucial needs to get information on the situation in the North Caucasus from diverse sources.

The seminar took the form of a presentation by UNHCR North Caucasus with a slide show of photos taken in the region, followed by Q&A and discussions with the audience.

2. General overview and the situation of Chechen IDPs in Chechnya and the neighbouring republics

Due to the successful application of Sochi for holding the Olympic Games in 2014, the North Caucasus has received much attention from the international community. Consequently Russia

has an inherent interest in stabilising the North Caucasus region. Strong efforts are being undertaken to help the region recover from the conflicts in the last 15 years. In particular, Russia does not want to be considered a country in need for humanitarian aid. Another reason for continued efforts to stabilise Chechnya and the neighbouring republics are the upcoming elections - parliamentary elections will be held in December 2007 and presidential elections in March 2008. As a consequence, Chechnya is recovering from the conflicts, e.g. the airport has re-opened, lots of construction is on-going and the administration system has been slowly re-established.

Russia's inherent interest in stabilising the North Caucasus was also confirmed by a statement from President Putin in 2005 in the media, saying that he wanted the IDP problem to be solved. In the following two years, according to the Russian government, the number of IDPs in Ingushetia was reduced to 3,000. However, instead of finding solutions for the masses of IDPs in the region, the Russian Migration Service and other responsible agencies simply de-register them from the governmental assistance list. Today, according to international organisations, there are still about 15,000 people from Chechnya in Ingushetia.

When the tented camps in Ingushetia were closed in 2004-05 and about 150,000 IDPs went back to Chechnya, the main concerns of the returnees were protection and security. In 2007 the main concerns for IDPs who have not returned to Chechnya are the lack of shelter and employment in Chechnya. The number of Chechens outside Chechnya, in particular in Ingushetia, has significantly decreased and those who wanted to go back have returned to Chechnya. The others probably have specific reasons not to do so.

In Ingushetia, there are approximately 14,000 IDPs. Some 25% of them, many of whom are ethnic Ingush, seem to prefer to remain in Ingushetia and integrate into Ingushet society.

In Dagestan, there are approximately 4,000 to 5,000 IDPs.

Inside Chechnya itself it is hard to ascertain the number of IDPs, as none of the NGOs works all over Chechnya and also it is hard to monitor IDPs living in private accommodation. According to government figures, approximately 12,000 people live in temporary accommodations and up to 30,000 still live outside their homes. The government requests these people to return to their home districts, but district administrators have no capacity to resolve the shelter problem of these people.

The responsible state institution for the movement of IDPs back to Chechnya is the Federal Migration Service (FMS).

3. Security Situation

In comparison to the years 2003 to 2006, the security situation in Chechnya has clearly improved. Still not every incident is reported, but it is obvious that the attacks have become quite “surgical” – Russian soldiers and Chechen militants fight each other without targeting civilians. Although the number of violent incidents has decreased, armed clashes with casualties continue.

Armed clashes continue in the Southern mountainous part of Chechnya (namely the districts of Itum-Kale, Shatoy, Nodzhay-Yurt and Veden). This area is said to be a place where the approximately 300 rebel combatants are based. This area is also known as heavily contaminated with landmines. UNICEF has reported the killing of 27 people by landmine accidents in Chechnya in the first three quarters of 2007.

It is difficult to assess if the given improvement will be of permanent nature. One has to wait and observe the developments of the next 6 months - if the situation in Chechnya remains calm during/ after the parliamentary elections in December 2007 and the presidential elections in March 2008, this would be a sign of stability. Another indicator for a lasting peace would be the reduction of the number of federal forces in Chechnya, which is reported by the press to be 35,000 now. However, as a word of caution, one might consider the recent history of conflicts in the region. With major outbreaks of violence and fighting taking place every four to five years, at least such a time-span has to pass until the region can be classified as permanently stable or unstable.

The situation remains volatile and unpredictable in Dagestan and Ingushetia with reported intensification of killings, armed attacks, bombings and murders nearly on a daily basis. Targets have been the members of the government structures or the police. In Ingushetia, however, there were reports on the killing of non-Ingush civilians.

4. Access by the international organisations

The UN office in Ingushetia had to be closed in July 2007 as a result of grenade attacks on the UN compound in March 2007. In the absence of approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the UN has not been able to establish a permanent presence in the Chechen Republic. UNHCR monitors the situation in Chechnya through its staff based in Grozny and missions that take place once a week or less. For missions within Chechnya, UNHCR staff must announce to the authorities the locations in advance and are accompanied by heavily armed escorts provided by the Russian Ministry of Interior. These escorts inhibit persons of concern in speaking openly about any concerns they may have though they stay outside when UNHCR holds meeting indoors. Some IDPs have asked UNHCR not to come and see them any longer. It is reported

that the security forces visit the respective people in advance and question them and their family members about why the humanitarian organisation wants to talk to them.

In principle, there are no restrictions imposed by the authorities on the UN's access to areas within Chechnya. However, the UN virtually has no access to the south of Chechnya, where armed clashes reportedly take place occasionally.

5. Situation of NGOs

The situation of NGOs in Russia, especially in Chechnya, is not very auspicious. Local NGOs have severe financial problems, so their number might diminish to one or two by 2009. International NGOs are usually better funded than local ones, but their activities and movements are restricted mainly by the so-called NGO law.

A federal decree which was passed in 1992 restricts movement of international organisations to certain areas within Russia. The no-go areas are said to be infiltrated with "terrorists". This decree had an amendment in January 2006, adding new dangerous regions which include North Ossetia, where UNHCR has a Sub-Office in the city of Vladikavkaz.

In 2005 President Putin enacted the NGO law, according to which humanitarian organisations have to register in Russia by including every single location they want to go to in their visa application. The security staff in Russia checks the visa, which is put into the passport, and will immediately see on the computers if the person has applied for the respective location or not. In case organizations have not applied for a place, they are sent back. In addition, the Russian government insists that NGOs regularly submit their work schedules for the following 30 days, apply for clearance seven days in advance before moving to a specific place. NGOs also have to accept long detours in order to avoid prohibited zones. In addition, any foreign organisation can recruit staff members who have been cleared by the Federal Security Service (FSB).

Due to these primarily political issues, international NGOs' work in Russia has turned into a permanent struggle for existence. The ICRC reports difficulties in implementing its mandate of detention monitoring. As a consequence, NGOs might gradually leave the region, not only due to lack of donor interest, but also due to the restrictions imposed on them.

6. Inter-ethnic Tensions

The North Caucasus is a place where different ethnic groups live side by side, but this does not mean that they live in peaceful coexistence. Grozny used to be a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural city where ethnic Russian, ethnic Dagestani, ethnic Ingush and others lived. Today, ethnic Chechens compose the vast majority of the population of the Chechen Republic. Many

former non-Chechen inhabitants of Chechnya, in particular Russians, are afraid of returning to Chechnya.

In Ingushetia, there is an alarming trend of ethnic tensions. In 2007, five non-Ingush families were murdered and migrant workers from CIS and other parts of the Russian Federation (mostly ethnic Russians) were attacked. There is an unconfirmed report that 30 Russian families fled Ingushetia in the summer/ autumn of 2007.

7. Socio-Economic Situation

The infrastructure is still a problem in Chechnya, especially for vulnerable people. While there is telephone, mobile phones and internet, electricity is cut off frequently, and water is not available everywhere. Usually there is a central spout near buildings, but for some places water is distributed by trucks. At the countryside the infrastructure is even worse than inside Greater Grozny.

Housing Reconstruction

When the presidency changed from Alu Alkhanov to Ramzan Kadyrov, it was the beginning of impressive construction programmes in Chechnya. Not only President Kadyrov himself, but also private businessmen and the Russian government raised a lot of money for the region, which is being used for the reconstruction of roads (e.g. from Nazran in Ingushetia to Grozny), houses, schools, hospitals, streets, streetlights, power lines etc. As often mentioned, what was reconstructed first of all in Chechnya were the mere facades in the centre of Grozny with nothing behind. But in the last years the renovation of the city centre has been finished, and by now the building activities have achieved a decent quality.

The primary objective of the government is to get people out of the temporary accommodations and back to their home districts. In July 2003, the government introduced compensation programmes through Decree # 404 of the Russian Federation. Under this programme, persons who have totally destroyed property and choose to continue to reside in Chechnya are entitled to 350,000 roubles. According to the Federal government, some 39,000 persons have received compensation by the end of 2004. The payment of compensation, as well as the processing of applications, has been on hold since 2005, affecting approximately 50% of those eligible for this programme. There has often been contested ownership over destroyed properties and there are reports of corruption.

As the price of building materials continue to rise in the North Caucasus, these amounts are not sufficient to build a house or purchase an apartment.

Thereafter, a shelter programme was introduced and in the current construction programmes the main concern now is the reconstruction of public apartment buildings for the population.

In Chechnya, 20,000 houses have been built or re-built, most of them in Grozny and in villages within 50 km from Grozny, and along the main roads, which have been repaired as well. In the centre of Grozny the housing standard is rapidly changing for the better, while in the outer areas it is still bad, with more destroyed houses, no garbage disposals and no proper sewer systems. At the country side, however, houses are generally still damaged, roads are mere tracks with potholes and war damages, and there are no power lines or gas lines.

The beneficiary criteria for these newly built apartments are not entirely clear while there are legal regulations on the beneficiary selection of the governmental shelter programme. However, roughly speaking the beneficiary will be selected on the degree of damage to accommodation, on vulnerability and on regional provenance. For example, people from remote, still damaged districts, who have not received compensation payments from the government, are likely to get access to temporary shelter.

A big problem for the authorities is so-called 'newly created families'. Young people who were living with their families at the wake of war and have never had property now have their own families and urgently need shelter.

The above mentioned construction programmes together with the building operations going on in Sochi as a preparation for the Winter Olympics 2014 have resulted in a severe shortage of construction material in the North Caucasus. Until 2006 the building material used to be produced in Stavropol, which is located at a distance of 2 hours from Grozny. Now almost all construction material is produced in Chechnya itself, or, if the great demand exceeds its capacities, in the surrounding republics. The former head of the administration of the Southern Federal District, D. N. Kozak, seemed to pursue a policy of activating economy in the region instead of involving international companies. The usual procedure is that the building material is bought by administrators who hand it out to the people, but if someone has his own connections, he or she can buy the material himself.

The humanitarian organisations in the North Caucasus run huge shelter programmes which work in addition to governmental rebuilding programmes. Since 2000, about 20,000 homes in Chechnya, about 700 in Ingushetia and about 1000 homes in Ossetia have been repaired with the support of humanitarian organisations.

Employment

According to WHO, WFP and UNICEF, the republics of the North Caucasus are still rather poor, with unemployment rates of 50- 60%. Recently a lot of inhabitants of Chechnya have

started to work for the construction programmes, and the government claims they are paid 12 dollars a day. One of the reasons why IDPs come back from Ingushetia is that there are now job opportunities in Chechnya, at least in Greater Grozny.

Health Programmes

The Public Health Sector in the Chechen Republic lacks technical, administrative and managerial skills among the staff as well as specialised and basic medical equipment and drugs. Hospitals and clinics in the region are not only of low quality, but moreover struggle with power cuts and are in need of generators. There are health programmes run by WHO and other agencies to support hospitals in Chechnya and Ingushetia and also train medical staff.

Like all over Russia and Eastern Europe, it is common to prescribe drugs in any case. Although drugs are often expired and expensive, they are very popular among the people, hence there is a high demand for pharmaceuticals.

For surgeries, people attempt to go to Sochi, Rostov on Don or Moscow. As this sort of is very expensive, they usually have to borrow money from friends and relatives.

No treatment of PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) is available in Chechnya at the moment, neither for civilians nor for former soldiers or officials. The only exception in the North Caucasus was the victims of the Beslan incidents to whom psychological care was provided.

The average life expectancy of men is about 48 years, but not only because of the war, rather because of their lifestyle, characterized by stress and smoking, and due to the health care situation.

8. Human Rights Violations

The best source to be consulted as to human rights violations is the European Court of Human Rights, which is addressed in cases of torture and mistreatments and has insight into how widespread these incidents still are.

Organisations like Human Rights Watch also well document human rights violations, but the number or frequency of occurrence of committed crimes are not ascertained. Due to the NGO law (see above), there are not many NGOs dealing with human rights protection, neither international nor Russian ones that can operate without impediments.

It is reported that often the investigations on human rights violations are suspended/stopped at a certain point. The reasons for suspensions vary, but the common one is that suspects are

not mentally fit at the time when they commit the claimed acts. Military officials can be only brought to the military court which is not fully independent. It also occurs that the claimants are intimidated or even murdered or abducted.

9. Religion

In general, the secular status is maintained in Chechnya, though occasionally there are official discussions about headscarves for women. The only religious movement which is facing restrictions and has been put under watch is Wahhabism.

10. Women

Single women who apply for asylum in European countries often do so with the argument that they have lost their husbands and cannot live unaffiliated in Chechen society.

According to the experience of UNHCR regarding single women and their protection by the state, it is generally true that people rely very much on their relatives for support. If they are ethnic Chechens, women who have lost their husbands or have been divorced usually go back to their own families and are protected to a certain extent. But this does not necessarily mean that they will be able to lead a normal life devoid of specific difficulties like property issues, housing, childcare etc. Widows or divorced women may be remarried by their relatives, but normally they are considered 'second class women' and thus not very popular brides. In the case of divorce, tradition demands that the children stay with the family of the husband. These practices are not observed by everybody these days. While traditionally problems in the family are being settled by elder family members, there are couples these days that go through courts to settle problems, such as the custody of children in dispute at the time of divorce. General court practice is to give the custody to mothers. Also, there are widows/ divorced women who do not return to their family, but live on their own. All depends on individual situations.

Domestic violence is considered a private issue related to the clan structure of the regional society and therefore is hardly ever reported to UNHCR or other institutions. Usually such cases are solved under the terms of cultural traditions, which make it difficult to tell how widespread this problem actually is. The usual way to deal with rape or kidnapping of young women is to marry the couple and not to consider the act as a crime any more. But nevertheless, UNHCR has had a few cases the last two years.

11. Returnees

In general, UNHCR has not much information about persons returning from abroad. It has so far only been able to monitor a trickle of returnees from CIS. UNHCR is not aware of any cases of returnees from abroad who were persecuted upon return for the mere fact of having been abroad. UNHCR is, therefore, not in a position to verify claims related to the fate of returnees such as 'returnees from Europe will be subject to robbery due to presumed wealth'.¹ However, there are reports that indicate that returnees were routinely questioned and placed under surveillance by the FSB. Returnees from Europe with a 'past', i.e. a record of co-operating with the rebels or having been sanctioned for such an accord, could be 'at risk' upon return. The Migration Service, as a federal body, should be aware of all returnees from Europe who returned through some 'return assistance' programme (e.g. assisted by the Consulates or through an agreement between IOM and the country of origin). Hence Migration Service would report those with a 'suspicious past'.

12. Internal Flight Alternative (IFA)

UNHCR is of the position that the application of IFA is neither relevant nor reasonable. First of all, for individuals who have fear of being persecuted by State organs (both Federal and Chechen), the concept is not applicable, as the State authorities act through out the territory.

Also, it should be noted that there are factors which make it difficult for Chechens to settle outside the Republic; such as the current residence registration system, anti-Chechen sentiment among the general population in other parts of the Russian Federation, and the recent deteriorating security situation in the neighbouring republics.

Ingushetia used to be a safe haven for displaced persons from the Chechen Republic. Approximately 14,000 IDPs from the Chechen Republic are residing in Ingushetia. However, the security situation there has been sharply deteriorating since the beginning of 2007. Though most attacks in Ingushetia target law enforcement agencies and government officials, they have created a situation of growing insecurity in the Republic. Moreover, since January 2007, five non-Ingush families were killed and it is reported that about 30 Russian families fled Ingushetia in the autumn of 2007.² More recently, in November 2007, reports were received

¹ According to Ms. Svetlana Gannushkina from Memorial (Lecture in Hohenheim, 25 November 2006, see: http://www.d-k-g.de/S.Gannuschkina-Seminar_fuer_Verwaltungsrichter.pdf -), returnees to Chechnya (especially young males) may arise suspicion, when they return after a long absence. In her view, this problem has worsened because of the "chechenization" of the conflict, because the Chechens themselves have good knowledge about the relatively small Chechen population, and it is hardly possible for a returnee to hide from them. A returnee might have problems on the one hand, because he might be suspected of having supported rebel forces, and on the other hand, because it might be assumed that somebody who has travelled to the West must have money.

² See <http://www.gazeta.ru>, 12/11/2007

of three attacks against immigrant workers from the CIS and other parts of the Russian Federation (ethnic Armenians and Russians).³ In terms of the security situation, Dagestan remains equally unstable; attacks against law-enforcement agents, federal troops and the local administration continue in major cities and in the mountainous areas bordering the Chechen Republic.

In view of the above, these neighbouring Republics are not considered to be able to provide a possibility of relocation.

National and international organisations have documented trends of growing racism and xenophobia in the Russian Federation, particularly against persons from the Caucasus.⁴ According to the annual report of the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, a national NGO, 361 persons became victims of racially motivated violence in the Russian Federation in 2006. Among those, 51 were killed and 310 wounded. Moscow and St. Petersburg occupy the first place as to the number of attacks. Further to these incidents, 109 persons were sentenced for crimes on ethnic grounds. Another indicator of xenophobia is the result of a recent opinion poll which shows that around 60% of respondents expressed negative views on persons from the Caucasus.⁵ Such risks make the relocation of Chechens irrelevant.

Under the present system of registration at the place of sojourn ('temporary registration') or at the place of residence ('permanent registration'), citizens notify the local bodies of interior of their place of sojourn/ residence.⁶ This is contrary to the former *propiska* regime which empowered the police authorities to authorise (or deny) citizens to sojourn or reside in a given location. However, there are reports that local authorities retain the possibility to determine modalities of implementation of choice of place of sojourn or residence, sometimes in a restrictive manner and that Chechens were denied to be registered at the places of sojourn and thus not able to reside there legally. The lack of sojourn/ residence registration affects one's access to the labour market, education, health care facilities and other social and civil rights. Besides, their status as illegal residents would lead to a higher risk of check-ups on identity documents and to a higher susceptibility to harassment.

³ See Caucasian Knot, of 05, 06 and 12 November 07 at: <http://eng.kavkaz.memo.ru>

⁴ See UN Human Rights Council: Addendum to the Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, Mission to the Russian Federation, 30 May 2007. A/HRC/4/19/Add.3 (paragraphs 46 to 51).

<http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain?docid=46723d7e2>

⁵ Aslambek Paskarchev "Conflict Geography: Kondopoga, Stavropol, Moscow" in Noveye Izvestia (6 August 2007).

⁶ See Russian Federation Federal Law No. 5242/1 - *The Law of the Russian Federation on Freedom of Movement, Choice of Place of Sojourn and Residence within the Territory of the Russian Federation* (25 June 1993).

13. UNHCR activities

UNHCR carries out its activities in the Chechen Republic as a lead agency of protection and shelter, in accordance with the framework of the UN Interagency Transitional Workplan, and provided assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees as well as the war-affected population. The projects include (i) the provision of free legal counseling and assistance, (ii) the provision of temporary shelter to IDPs returning from Ingushetia and partial rehabilitation of damaged housing, and (iii) the implementation of quick impact projects (income-generating activities).

Legal Counseling: Through the Legal Counseling Programme, the lawyers working at 9 Legal Counseling Centres throughout Chechnya (located in Grozny, Urus-Martan, Shali, Gudermes) run by Memorial, NIZAM and VESTA, provide free-of-charge legal consultations and also assist in writing application to courts and referring cases to the law-enforcement and administrative structures. Between 1 January and 31 October, the Legal Counseling Centres provided 4,397 consultations. The major subjects they deal with are housing issues (20%), criminal cases (12%) and problems with documents (10%). Very few protection or security concerns are reported to the LCCs, as people are often unwilling to bring up these issues with the authorities. It is estimated that about 60-70% of the population have access to the LCCs run by UNHCR in the North Caucasus.

Shelter: under the box-tent programme which started in 2003, UNHCR distributed 305 box-tents (249 beneficiary families) from January to September 2007. In total, from 2003 to September 2007, 1741 box-tents were distributed for 1,584 beneficiary families. Another shelter project is the One Dry Room project. In 2007, a total of 65 households were repaired in Grozny.

Income-generation: the quick impact projects are meant to support the re-integration of families returning to Chechnya and to improve the living conditions and to promote the self-reliance of vulnerable families. UNHCR introduced this scheme in Chechnya in 2004 and it will be finished at the end of 2007. Under these projects, the beneficiaries selected are provided with basic equipment to be engaged in small-scale income generating activities, such as opening and running of small mechanical workshop and cattle breeding. Some projects are for the benefit of the community.

In addition, in October 2007, UNHCR organised a follow-up seminar on "International and National Mechanisms of Legal Protection of Displaced Population on the Territory of the Russian Federation" for some 25 judges and 15 lawyers from the Republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. With the Ombudsman of Chechnya UNHCR has signed a Memorandum of Understanding.

14. Chechen asylum seekers in Austria and Poland (presented by the participants from Austria and Poland)

Asylum authorities in Austria and Poland report a massive flow of refugees from Chechnya in the last few years. At the moment in Austria there are about 5,500 asylum-seekers from the Russian Federation, most of them from Chechnya. This raises the question who these people are and what reasons they have for leaving their country. In the discussion with the audience, a few apparent inconsistencies with regard to the stories told by Chechen asylum seekers in Europe, especially in Austria and Poland, in the context of the information provided by UNHCR were mentioned. Among others, such inconsistencies included the claim of Chechen asylum seekers that they had travelled in a few days from Chechnya to Poland or Austria, whereas a multitude of checkpoints located all over the country and at the borders were mentioned by UNHCR.

UNHCR has no information on the profile of Chechen asylum-seekers in Europe. It was, therefore, suggested that the immigration officials share such data with UNHCR. UNHCR also commented that it had not noticed the recent departure of several hundred Chechens.

The participants from Austria and Poland found some disagreements between the situation described by UNHCR and the claims made by asylum-seekers. For example, according to UNHCR, currently the armed clashes happen in a "surgical" manner in southern Chechnya. However, a majority of asylum applicants in Austria and Poland claim to be from the North (Grozny, Argun, Urus Martan, Shali) and refer to security problems linked with the conflict. Concerning their routes, the heavy restrictions of movement within the North Caucasus reported by UNHCR are not in agreement with the usual claims of refugees made with the Polish asylum authorities that they travelled from Grozny to Warsaw within a few days. Chechens travel by train from Grozny to Moscow and then to Brest, the border between Belarus and Poland.

Another incongruity occurred in the discussion about hostage-taking and kidnapping: Among the asylum seekers in Austria up to 95 % claim that they have been kidnapped and released only after their relatives had paid ransom. Some claim that this can happen to a person not only once, but several times in succession, and there are even rumours about lists of "particularly lucrative hostages". Strangely enough, Memorial has reported only 160 cases of kidnapping in the year 2006, a number which is confirmed by the ombudsman in Chechnya - and this is far less than indicated by the claims of 2,500 asylum applicants in Austria. As one can usually trust reports by Memorial, and as kidnapping or hostage-taking are not raised as big issues in the regular protection working group meetings, UNHCR estimates that there certainly are cases like that. However, the incidents do not seem to occur nearly as frequently and as widespread as refugees claim. On the other hand, one should be aware that cases like that are possibly not reported, because people are too scared or do not have access to legal counselling centres or do not expect any benefit from reporting them.

15. Concluding remarks

UNHCR is planning a couple of workshops for migration officers in Moscow as well as for European ambassadors. These workshops should take place in late November 2007 or in the first quarter of 2008. Apart from that, a closer cooperation between UNHCR and European agencies would be useful for both sides – for the European agencies to obtain reliable country of origin information, and for UNHCR to get to know the profile of the Chechen asylum seekers and the information the European asylum institutions need in order to decide on Chechen cases.