



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

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Without international action to address the plight of Chechnya, the country remains a potential tinderbox of instability at the heart of the North Caucasus. In the last year, tragedies such as the Moscow Metro bombing and the explosion at Moscow's Domodedovo airport have brought Chechnya to the world's attention. World news of these events lasts a few days, but the constant underlying fear and oppression of its people which drives some of them to extremism in the absence of a credible alternative, remains out of the global eye.

In February 2010, I witnessed the problems for myself on a visit Chechnya with Lord Judd and the All-Party Human Rights Group. We had significant concerns about the terrifying situation in the Republic, and appalling human rights violations against Chechen civilians by both Russian soldiers and Chechen forces alike. We felt then that the international community was not doing enough to address the plight of Chechen civilians. This undoubtedly remains so, and for this reason I have since raised the political situation in Chechnya in Parliament.

At first glance investment in the Republic's reconstruction, from impressive Mosques to shiny new schools, appeared to indicate a country getting back on its feet after the two appalling Chechen wars. However Chechnya's people told a very different story, where laws offer no protection from routine human rights abuses, state-sponsored violence is common and the regime is pursuing a policy of enforced Islamisation. Alongside the many reports we received of house-burnings, disappearances and torture, a distressed mother showed us three photographs of her brother, son and daughter – three of Chechnya's "disappeared". No information, no investigation, no justice. A culture of impunity, especially for President Kadyrov's Chechen security forces, means most people are too afraid to report such crimes, and even those reported do not generally result in thorough investigation and prosecution.

In such a widespread climate of fear, speaking out for justice carries a real risk of reprisal. The non-governmental organisations in Chechnya working to protect and promote human rights operate in an extremely dangerous environment, and the country's own Human Rights Ombudsman is hostile to the concept of independent NGOs holding the Government to account. No one can challenge the regime's authority, and there is no proper parliamentary scrutiny or transparency over what President Kadyrov and his Government are doing, as 37 of Chechnya's 41 MPs belong to the same party. Keeping the population in check through fear and repression is fuelling tensions and encouraging some young people to turn to the terrorist cause, whilst Russia and the rest of the international community turn a blind eye to human rights abuses – under the misplaced assumption that Chechnya is stable under Kadyrov's iron regime.

Condoned by the Russian Federal Government, the Kadyrov regime still provokes extremism which provides a recruiting base for terrorism across the region and the world. It is a direct challenge to us all in the UK in our concern for security. The fear and terror created by the Chechen security forces' scant regard for human rights is counter-productive, and dangerous, undermining efforts to tackle terrorism. We cannot afford to let this problem turn into a global one.