



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

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New Hope for Peace in Chechnya

In a groundbreaking move to resolve the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, the Chechnya Peace Forum has mediated the first talks in nine years to seek lasting political stability in the region. Last month, Akhmed Zakayev, the exiled prime minister of the unrecognized Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, and Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, the speaker of Chechnya's parliament, met in Oslo and spoke for the first time in public about their negotiations. Continuing these discussions behind closed doors, the most recent meeting between both sides took place Wednesday in London. As a direct result of these talks, a commitment to convene the World Chechen Congress was announced.

As the mediator and host of these talks, I am delighted with these landmark developments. Both parties in these Russian-Chechen consultations have taken an important step toward transforming the geopolitical landscape. This process can have a radical impact on both Russia and Chechnya. By reaching an agreement on the necessity to convene the World Chechen Congress, the prospects for Chechen-Russian relations and the Chechen people are going in the right direction for the first time in 20 years.

I have spent many years trying to promote the cause of democracy, the rule of law, peace and human rights in Chechnya with the hope of encouraging a new negotiated settlement between the Russian government and the resistance movement.

The Kremlin-friendly government under Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov has not been able to stabilize and control the continual violence, kidnappings and abductions and other human rights abuses that remain commonplace in Chechnya. The killings of Chechen charity worker Zarema Sadulayeva and her husband, Umar Dzhabrailov, on Tuesday are the latest case of brutal violence against human rights workers in the republic. Like the work of human rights activist Natalya Estemirova, who was killed in Chechnya in mid-July, Sadulayeva's work gave many people hope that the rest of the world would not turn a blind eye to what is happening in Chechnya.

That is why these talks are so crucial in the hope of putting an end to the struggle of the Chechen people. Approved at the highest levels of the Russian leadership, this new dialogue is certainly a significant step toward a serious political discourse between the Kremlin's official representatives and the Chechen opposition. Abdurakhmanov made it clear in Oslo and again

in London that his talks with Zakayev were approved by both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. This is of particular significance because now a direct and promising Russian-Chechen dialogue for Chechnya's future has started on an official level. It also represents a shift in Russia's approach for peace in the North Caucasus.

Engaging both sides through settlement talks rather than violence is the only way to achieve stability in the region, and for the first time in a decade there is a desire to establish a unifying platform in the hope of reaching a joint agreement through political resolution.

This is indeed why many would call these talks a breakthrough in the much-needed peace process. Of course, there is a lot more work to do, but my hope is that these talks will ultimately lead to a higher degree of Chechen autonomy within the Russian Federation.

By Ivar Amundsen

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