

## Keeping Hope Alive

*Experiences of the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya<sup>1</sup>*

*1995-1997: Conflict, Mandate and Accomplishments*

The groundwork for Chechnya's drive for secession from the Russian Federation was laid in 1991-92 through a series of unilateral declarations of sovereignty and independence, culminating with the adoption on 17 March 1992 of the Chechen Constitution. Although denying that the Chechens had a legal right to secession, Russia in dealing with this challenge to the Federation's territorial integrity adopted (after a half-hearted show of force in November 1991) a peaceful-temporizing strategy, including withdrawal of troops and (eventually unsuccessful) negotiations with the separatist Chechen regime, led by President Djokhar Dudaev. The conflict took a new turn when Russia on 11 December 1994 started a military campaign in order to "restore constitutional order" in the Chechen Republic. The ensuing hostilities, which lasted until the signing on 31 August 1996 of the Khasavyurt Agreement, led to the loss of tens of thousand human lives and enormous physical destruction, creating a disastrous socio-economic environment including the plight of large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons.

Against the background of these hostilities, the decision to create an OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya was made at the 16th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on 11 April 1995. The Council also gave the Assistance Group a mandate to carry out the following tasks (to be performed in conjunction with the Russian federal and local authorities, and in conformity with the legislation of the Russian Federation):

- promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the establishment of facts concerning their violation; help foster the development of democratic institutions and processes, including the restoration of the local organs of authority; assist in the preparation of possible new constitutional agreements and in the holding and monitoring of elections;
- facilitate the delivery to the region by international and non-governmental organizations of humanitarian aid for victims of the crisis, wherever they may be located;
- provide assistance to the authorities of the Russian Federation and to international organizations in ensuring the speediest possible return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes in the crisis region;

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<sup>1</sup> State of affairs as of August 1999.

- promote the peaceful resolution of the crisis and the stabilization of the situation in the Chechen Republic in conformity with the principle of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and in accordance with OSCE principles;
- pursue dialogue and negotiations, as appropriate, through participation in "round tables", with a view to establishing a cease-fire and eliminating sources of tension;
- support the creation of mechanisms guaranteeing the rule of law, public safety and law and order.<sup>2</sup>

The Assistance Group began working in Grozny on 26 April 1995. Despite the importance and urgency of several of the other tasks included in the Assistance Group's broad mandate, the most prominent part of its activities during the following year and a half was - given the immediacy of the armed conflict - the Assistance Group's *mediation* efforts. Thus, a comprehensive cease-fire agreement was concluded on 31 July 1995 under the auspices of the Assistance Group. Although not observed, the agreement remained a precedent for further negotiations, with the Assistance Group playing an active role as mediator. Tireless shuttle diplomacy by the then Head of the Group, Ambassador Tim Guldemann, paved the way for talks that led to a cease-fire agreement signed on 27 May 1996 (also soon broken), and was instrumental in getting the negotiation process back on track that led to the Khasavyurt Agreement of 31 August 1996, which brought an end to the armed conflict. Besides establishing a cease-fire, the Khasavyurt Agreement had a provision for pulling out all troops, and stipulated that "agreement on the principles of mutual relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic is to be worked out by 31 December 2001". Also under the terms of the Agreement, Presidential and Parliamentary elections took place on 27 January 1997 - under the auspices of (and actually organized by) the OSCE Assistance Group.<sup>3</sup>

... *Carried out in Full*

Thus, the accomplishments of the Assistance Group by March 1997 were substantial, and very evident. At this stage, with the armed conflict having been brought to an end and elections having been held, the general attitude of the parties involved (i.e. the Russian federal as well as the Chechen regional authorities) seemed to have been that the major - and most pressing - tasks of

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2 Cf. OSCE, Permanent Council, 16th Plenary Meeting of the Council, Journal No. 16, 11 April 1995, pp. 2-3.

3 For a detailed account and analysis of the Assistance Group's mediation role, see: Tim Guldemann, Supporting the Doves against the Hawks, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (Ed.), OSCE Yearbook 1997, Baden-Baden 1998, pp. 135-143.

the Assistance Group as envisaged in its mandate had been dealt with successfully and definitively. This view was explicitly laid down in a Statement by the Russian Federation to the OSCE Permanent Council of 13 March 1997, as follows:

"Taking into account the fundamentally new situation that has arisen with regard to the settlement in the Chechen Republic (Russian Federation), the Russian side wishes once again to draw attention to the fact that the part of the OSCE Assistance Group's mandate which is related to mediation efforts in the context of settling the armed conflict and smoothing the way to negotiations has been carried out in full.

The dialogue that has begun between the federal authorities and the new leadership of Chechnya as a subject of the Russian Federation is, as is natural, being conducted directly and excludes any mediation efforts whatsoever by the OSCE representatives.

We presume that the work of the Assistance Group has now been refocused on other aspects of its mandate, namely those that relate to essential areas in OSCE activities: monitoring of the human rights situation; assistance in establishing democratic institutions and in ensuring the return of refugees and displaced persons; and co-ordination of efforts in providing humanitarian aid.

The Russian side reiterates its willingness to engage in constructive cooperation with the Assistance Group on these issues."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, although the basic text of the Assistance Group's mandate remained unchanged (last updated 19 December 1997), the tasks contained therein were henceforth effectively and substantially restricted in scope.

For a while during the first half of 1997, the Assistance Group continued to be involved in the talks between federal and Chechen representatives aimed at signing a detailed agreement on economic issues and peace relations. Two Accords - a Treaty on Peace and Principles of Mutual Relations and an Agreement on Economic Co-operation - were signed on 12 May 1997 in Moscow. Prolonged negotiations were started in order to provide a settlement on the oil problem for the entire region, including transit through Chechen territory and the debts to the Chechen state-owned oil company, as well as the restoration of Chechnya's oil and chemical complex, and agreements were signed on 12 July and 9 September 1997. By and large, however, the numerous political and economic agreements proved to be very fragile and failed to make a difference in terms of practical implementation. The Chechen crisis remained unresolved. Talks, as envisaged in the Khasavyurt Agreement, on the political status of Chechnya were resumed on several occasions, but were eventually discontinued as no progress could be made in overcoming the

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4 Statement of the Russian Federation, in: OSCE, Permanent Council, 105th Plenary Meeting of the Council, PC Journal No. 105, 13 March 1997, Annex 3, Agenda item 7(d).

main difference in principle, i.e. Chechnya's insistence on full independence. At the same time, the difficult - and gradually worsening - internal situation in Chechnya made it progressively more difficult to take any substantial steps towards either a political or an economic settlement.

In retrospect, it would thus appear that the dialogue between federal and Chechen authorities that should have rendered the Assistance Group's mediation role superfluous, had soon run out of steam.

### *Tasks to Be Accomplished*

From mid-1997 the emphasis of the Assistance Group's work had changed visibly from mediation to post-conflict rehabilitation and other points of its mandate. In addition to the Russian Statement of 13 March 1997, other subsequent developments - notably the Accords signed on 12 May 1997 - would necessarily entail a certain re-orientation of the Assistance Group's further activities. This was also acknowledged publicly by the then Head of the Group, Ambassador Rudolf Torning-Petersen, who in an interview with the news agency *Interfax* pointed out that the situation prevailing in Chechnya after the agreements reached between Moscow and Grozny would have an impact on the priorities of the OSCE Assistance Group's activities, adding that the main direction now would be to render humanitarian and practical assistance for the peaceful reconstruction of the republic. Despite the substantial scaling-down of the Assistance Group's role, the still operative parts of the mandate left significant tasks yet to be handled. The Russian Statement of 13 March specifically identified three priority areas, notably:

- monitoring of the human rights situation;
- assistance in establishing democratic institutions and in ensuring the return of refugees and displaced persons; and
- co-ordination of efforts in providing humanitarian aid.

In addition, there remained the task of supporting the creation of mechanisms guaranteeing the rule of law, public safety and law and order.

Furthermore, a number of problems were and remained particularly crucial in the post-conflict rehabilitation process, including mine-clearing and a solution for ecological problems, especially regarding water and sewage treatment. During 1997-99 the Assistance Group was involved in numerous activities addressing these and a series of other practical problems connected with the general post-conflict rehabilitation needs.

Without elaborating on the concrete details, it should merely - and as an understatement - be noted that the Group's mandate remained sufficiently broad and flexible, and obviously related to still existing, real and pressing needs, as to make it unnecessary to invent new tasks in order to justify the Assis-

tance Group's continued existence. Indeed, the pulling-out of other international bodies, leaving the OSCE as the only remaining international organization with a representation in Chechnya, would seem to lend yet another important dimension to its continued presence.

At the same time, one cannot but note that developments in Chechnya during 1997-99 made it progressively more difficult in practical terms for the Assistance Group to perform its tasks.

#### *The Deteriorating Security Environment; Evacuation*<sup>5</sup>

Since 1997, the modalities of the Assistance Group's work have increasingly come to be defined by the *security environment*. For years, Chechnya has been a high-risk area, especially for foreigners not protected by the restraints that societal traditions impose on Chechens, including the clan system and its blood vengeance code. In addition to criminal hostage-taking, there has been the constant danger of politically-motivated assassinations, such as the murder of six ICRC expatriate employees at Novye Atagi in December 1996, and the abductions in October 1998 of three British citizens and one New Zealander whose severed heads were found 8 December 1998. During 1998, the security situation in Chechnya was deteriorating to an extent which made it progressively more difficult for the Assistance Group to perform its tasks in a meaningful way while at the same time observing acceptable standards of safety for its own personnel. Developments so far in 1999 have only exacerbated the situation. Against the backdrop of ever-worsening socio-economic conditions, crime and unrest have acquired endemic proportions. The political unrest is intermingled with religious fanaticism, organized crime and a general break-down of law and order, manifesting itself in ever more frequent outbursts of violence, assassination attempts and other acts of terrorism. In particular, hostage-taking and abductions for ransom money have seen a sharp rise and become an all-pervasive evil not only in Chechnya itself but also spilling over into the adjoining regions. Official sources (Russian and Chechen) in May 1999 put the current number of abducted persons at about 600 non-Chechens and a corresponding or even higher number of Chechens. The hostages are held under miserable conditions, they are widely exploited as slave labourers, and are frequently traded between the criminal groups (which include quasi-political organizations and their armed formations) as income-generating commodities. Expatriates, especially those representing organizations believed to be capable of raising huge amounts of ransom

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5 Although the Assistance Group under the present evacuation regime has continued to be fully operational in most respects, this meant that a substantial part of the Group's archives, covering the period up to mid-1998, was left behind in Grozny. As a result, relevant source material, which would otherwise have been useful for the purpose of the present article, has unfortunately not been available.

money, have become prime targets for perpetrators of kidnappings. Hence, virtually all international institutions have left the region, terminating their previous activities or, at best, leaving it to their local sub-agencies or partners to carry on. Thus the OSCE Assistance Group - being the only remaining international body with a representation in Chechnya - had gradually come to be regarded as an increasingly vulnerable and likely target for a possible onslaught by malevolent forces.

Extensive security measures notwithstanding, the Assistance Group was forced four times during 1998 to evacuate its expatriate staff temporarily from Grozny to Moscow. The last such evacuation took place on 16 December 1998. Unlike previous periods, which were not longer than three weeks, this latest evacuation was subsequently - by decision of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office - prolonged repeatedly in view of the further deteriorating security situation. In order to ensure the continuity and regularity of the Assistance Group's on-the-spot operations, working visits to Grozny by members of the Assistance Group were made three times during January-March 1999.

Events in early March 1999 - notably the abduction of the Russian Interior Ministry representative General Gennadi Shpigun and the subsequent pull-out from Chechnya of the remaining Russian Federation representations - gave evidence of a further grave deterioration of the overall security environment. (Later developments have only confirmed this unfortunate trend, with the Interior Ministry of the Russian Federation in late May issuing a general warning to any outsider staying or travelling in Northern Caucasus, as nobody is in a position to guarantee the safety of anyone against the threat of abduction.)

As was announced at the OSCE Permanent Council meeting on 11 March 1999, the evacuation regime - although still meant to be a temporary measure - was tightened up to exclude any further travels to Chechnya by Assistance Group members. Thus, the Assistance Group has henceforth continued to operate from Moscow, where temporary office facilities had been established at the premises of the Embassy of Norway. The understanding has been that the Assistance Group would return to Grozny when the Chairman-in-Office is satisfied that positive and significant improvements in the security situation have occurred. Unfortunately, this prerequisite has up to now (August 1999) failed to materialize. The Assistance Group has meanwhile been monitoring the political and security situation in Chechnya from its Moscow office, while at the same time directing the practical activities involving the local staff at the Assistance Group's Grozny office, which has remained fully operational with a complete infrastructure.

The premises of the Assistance Group's headquarters in Grozny are well protected, with personnel, equipment and a security system which allowed the Assistance Group previously to conclude that its own security situation was manageable. The deterioration of events since late 1998 and the long-term effects of the prolonged evacuation that these events necessitated, would

seem to call for a cautious approach. Following developments continuously and as closely as possible, the Assistance Group had by August 1999 not been able to report to the Chairman-in-Office that there had been enough of an improvement in the security situation to permit the Assistance Group's expatriate staff to return to Grozny.

#### *The Political Context - Developments in 1999*

The negative developments in the security situation have been paralleled or mirrored by a correspondingly negative development with regard to the overall political situation.

Alongside the seemingly endemic break-down of the normal structures of authority that characterize a functional civilized society, the power-struggle between President Aslan Maskhadov and the well-armed and uncontrollable opposition groups (comprising previous so-called "field commanders" and their allies, including militant Islamic extremists) demanding his resignation has moved from one crisis to another. In a bid to regain the political initiative and at the same time pre-empt and neutralize his opponents by adopting their demands as his own policies, President Maskhadov on 3 February 1999 announced the "full implementation of the Shariah rule in Chechnya". This decision, which came as a surprise to many observers, probably reflects not only the President's visibly weakened position but also his genuine commitment to peaceful solutions and to avoiding, at all costs, further internecine bloodletting or an all-out civil war. Maskhadov's Shariah initiative drew mixed reactions: the Parliament protested the initiative as anti-constitutional, whereas the extra-parliamentary opposition grudgingly admitted their agreement with the initiative, but sought to counter the President's move by setting up their own Council ("Shura"), which elected field commander Shamil Basaev "Emir" and called on Maskhadov to resign. Other reactions included confusion and various lines of scepticism. In talks with the Assistance Group, the Chief Mufti of Chechnya (Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov, otherwise a staunch Maskhadov supporter) denounced the move as premature, counter-productive and tactically unwise. Others saw the introduction of the Shariah as the only possible solution for establishing a modicum of law and order and combating the all-pervasive banditry, agreeing that "Shariah rule is better than no rule at all". In the short-term perspective his tactics may have helped the President to gain some breathing room, and may have been instrumental in averting a coup or larger-scale violent confrontation. From a practical point of view the introduction of Shariah rule would seem to imply the abolition of the secular Constitution and dissolution of the Parliament, and that the rule of Islamic law - Shariah - is to be extended to all spheres of social and political life. A special commission was set up by the President to draft a new Islamic Constitution, a task which was completed on 7 May 1999. How the draft will

eventually be adopted has remained a matter of contention, the President apparently favouring a constitutional approach with a Parliament-sanctioned referendum. The principles for the implementation of Shariah rule have not yet been clarified, but the draft Constitution reflects - predictably - the intention to islamize Chechen society completely, including a provision that only Muslims may participate in elections or be elected to higher office.

The kidnapping of General Shpigun and the increasing frequency of terrorist violence and abductions - with spill-over into adjacent regions - raised tensions between Moscow and Grozny, and led to sharp countermeasures by Moscow and the closing of railway and air transportation, and stricter enforcement of the administrative border regime. As seen from Moscow, the Chechen authorities had almost completely lost control over the political, economic and security situation in the republic.

At the same time, the negative developments seem to have brought about in Moscow (and apparently also in Grozny) a growing sense of urgency for the need to revive and step up the negotiating process between the federal and the Chechen authorities. Notably during the second quarter of 1999 a significant number of official statements were issued from both sides on the necessity of holding a "summit" meeting between Presidents Yeltsin and Maskhadov. Although the basic political disagreement on the republic's future constitutional status seemed likely to remain unresolved, the first and foremost aim of such a summit would presumably be to lay down the main modalities for active co-operation in handling the most pressing issues, viz. putting an end to banditry, terrorism and kidnappings; and taking steps towards restoring the Chechen economy, including the implementation of previously agreed economic reconstruction programmes. With a more long-term perspective, such a summit could also be a first step towards reviving the defunct negotiation process aimed at implementing the Khasavyurt Agreement of 31 August 1996.

Viewed in this context, it seems likely that the wave of terrorist acts during the spring and early summer of 1999 had the combined political aims of destabilizing President Maskhadov's regime, breaking relations between Moscow and Grozny and provoking a failure of the proposed meeting between Presidents Yeltsin and Maskhadov.

Since early 1999, the Chechen side has repeatedly expressed the desirability of including a third party - preferably the OSCE - in a resumed negotiation process with the federal authorities. In a number of talks with Russian representatives, the Assistance Group consistently confirmed its readiness to assume this task - in terms of its mandate, and if and when the parties should so desire. The prevailing view in Moscow has continued to follow the restrictive line expressed in the Russian Federation's Statement of 13 March 1997, which maintained that the part of the Assistance Group's mandate related to mediation efforts had been carried out in full, and that no further third-party involvement in a resumed Russian-Chechen dialogue was envisaged. In their

talks with the Assistance Group, some federal spokesmen, including the then (24 March 1999) Minister of Interior Sergei Stepashin, nevertheless indicated that some form of involvement - for example in observer or advisory capacity - on the part of the Assistance Group could be useful.

A prerequisite for an eventual revival of the Russian-Chechen negotiating process would, however, seem to be that a "summit" meeting between Presidents Yeltsin and Maskhadov take place as proposed. Despite continuing assurances from both sides that the summit would go ahead, the preparations dragged on throughout the summer. In this connection, the repeated changes of governments in Moscow probably had a disruptive effect, as did certainly the ever-increasing incidents of armed encounters on the Chechen administrative border and in adjacent regions, culminating so far in the larger-scale hostilities unleashed by the intrusions (from 7 August 1999) into Dagestan of Chechen-trained armed groups, led by the notorious warlords Shamil Basaev and Al-Khattab.

### *The Socio-Economic Situation*

The security situation, the internal political developments as well as the developments in Russian-Chechen relations cannot be properly understood in isolation from the context of Chechnya's socio-economic situation. Chechnya shows few - if any - signs of recovery from the near-complete physical destruction caused by the 1994-1996 hostilities. Federal and local authorities agree that restoring the Chechen economy - including reconstruction of buildings, infrastructure and production facilities - remains a joint priority, but very little has been achieved so far. During the past three years hardly any money from the federal budget (apart from the resumed payments of pensions) have been paid into Chechnya as stipulated in the numerous agreements on economic reconstruction. The situation is characterized by massive unemployment, an absence of foreign investments and general economic decay. Large segments of the population are left without the wherewithal to cover their most basic needs, such as adequate food and shelter, clean water, heating and the most common medicines. The school system has collapsed, with disastrous effects already visible in the educational level of the generation now approaching adulthood. The quality and availability of basic social services are insufficient to alleviate the deteriorating socio-economic conditions. Massive emigration has resulted in a significant drop in the population, leaving behind those with the most meagre resources, who have become increasingly vulnerable to crime or to the lure of making a living by joining the various armed opposition groups, including militant Islamic extremists. Needless to say, this desperate situation serves to further aggravate the already volatile political situation. Any hope for improvement would seem to depend on the prospects of the federal and Chechen authorities finding a joint

approach towards handling the twin problems of restoring the economy and getting the security situation under control.

### *Current Activities of the Assistance Group*

Under the present circumstances, which include:

- the continuing stand-still of the Russian-Chechen negotiation process;
- the prevailing negative developments in the internal political situation in Chechnya; and
- the extremely dangerous security situation, which has necessitated the present evacuation procedure;

the practical possibilities for the Assistance Group to fulfil its mandate are obviously rather restricted.

Different teams from the Assistance Group visited Grozny from 30 January till 4 February, 21-23 February and from 28 February till 4 March 1999. These visits included numerous and extensive meetings and talks with Chechen official representatives and other local leaders and spokesmen. Subsequent contacts with Chechen authorities have been maintained via President Maskhadov's General Representative in Moscow or through indirect communication.<sup>6</sup> During their stay in Moscow, the Assistance Group has similarly strived to maintain broad contacts and working relations with key OSCE countries through their embassies, and not least, with Russian federal authorities.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Talks and meetings with Chechen authorities in Grozny have included President Aslan Maskhadov and his Press Secretary Mairbek Vachagaev, First Deputy Prime Minister Turpal-Ali Atgeriev, Deputy Prime Ministers Khamzat Shidaev, Kazbek Makhashev, Alkhazur Abdulkarimov, Akhmed Zakaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs Akhyat Idigov, Minister of Shariat State Security Aslambek Arsaev and his Deputy Khasan Khatsiev, Speaker of the Chechen Parliament Ruslan Alikhadzhiev, Deputy Speaker Selam Beshae, Deputy Attorney General Abu Arsuksaev, the Chief Mufti of Chechnya Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov, and others. Until July 1999 the post as the Chechen President's General Representative in Moscow was held by Edelbek Ibragimov, who was subsequently replaced by president Maskhadov's former Press Secretary, Mairbek Vachagaev.

7 The Assistance Group's extensive contacts with Russian federal authorities have included the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Minister Evgeni Gusarov and Department Director Vladimir Chizhov) as well as numerous high-level meetings with other relevant interlocutors such as the (then) Minister of the Interior Sergei Stepashin (later to become Prime Minister), the (then) Minister of Nationalities Ramazan Abdulatipov, the FSB Director and Secretary of the Russian Federation's Security Council Vladimir Putin (later to succeed Stepashin as Prime Minister), the Deputy Secretary of the Russian Federation's Security Council Vyacheslav Mikhailov (a former and the present Minister of Nationalities), Duma Members Vladimir Zorin and Mikhail Gutseriev, the Russian Federation's President's Representative to Chechnya Valentin Vlasov, the Russian Federation's Government's Representative to Chechnya Georgi Kurin, former Secretary of the Russian Federation's Security Council and Russian Federation's Chief Negotiator Ivan Rybkin, and others.

The Assistance Group's contacts with officials and others in Moscow as well as in Grozny confirm that *humanitarian aid* is seen as the main area where the Assistance Group can make a valuable contribution. In view of the disastrous socio-economic situation and appalling living conditions, the *need* for humanitarian assistance to Chechnya is, indeed, obvious and formidable. In this context, it should however be borne in mind that the OSCE itself is not a humanitarian organization, and that the OSCE's mechanisms and assets in this field are of a rather moderate capacity. The Assistance Group can supplement professional humanitarian aid providers in their absence, but is not in a position to run large-scale humanitarian operations single-handedly. The Assistance Group could, however, provide advice to foreign governmental or non-governmental organizations which may want to finance such programmes. The Assistance Group would be able to act as intermediaries between them and the local partners, to help in preparation and to supervise the implementation of their projects, to provide the follow-up monitoring and reporting etc.

The present circumstances behind the Assistance Group's activities - with its international staff operating from Moscow - have so far not entailed insurmountable obstacles for the continuation of the Assistance Group's activities along previous lines and in line with priorities discussed with and approved by the OSCE Permanent Council. Adequate routines have been established for directing and ensuring the continuity and regularity of the Group's on-the-spot operations. During the past few months, the Assistance Group has continued all the previously started long-term humanitarian aid projects in Chechnya, and also initiated some new ones. In addition to utilizing its own resources for humanitarian aid activities (budget allocation for 1999 US-Dollars 100,000), the Assistance Group has succeeded in attracting some voluntary contributions from OSCE States, providing distribution and monitoring their aid programmes. Among the main projects, special mention should be made of the "Wheat Flour Program" sponsored by the U.S. State Department, which was started in December 1998. Plans and agreements made prior to the evacuation have ensured that the project has been implemented as scheduled. Regular meetings with the Assistance Group's local staff and the implementing partners - the Chechen Red Cross and Red Crescent Society and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers - have been held outside of the application area. The project has successfully attained its goal of providing vital assistance to the most needy, and a follow-up for next winter is under consideration. Another large-scale project is the "Psycho-medical Rehabilitation Project", financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), which addresses a particularly serious issue within the overall post-conflict rehabilitation problem areas.

The Assistance Group is currently in the process of preparing, in co-operation with Chechen NGOs, additional projects, the implementation of which would depend on the support of possible voluntary contributors.

As mentioned above, a main provision of the Assistance Group's mandate remains to "promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and (...) help foster the development of democratic institutions and processes". In addressing these tasks, the Assistance Group has had to adopt a flexible approach, taking into account the specific situation in Chechnya, including the problems arising from the post-war environment and complete lack of any infrastructure for the protection of human rights and democracy-building measures compatible with European standards. Thus, the Assistance Group has been trying to build up its activities in co-operation with a scattering of resource persons or existing skeleton organizations. With the generous sponsorship of the government of Finland, the Assistance Group was able to organize the participation of three Chechen delegates to the OSCE Human Dimension Meeting on Gender Issues in Vienna, 14-15 June 1999.

As the only remaining international organization with fully developed facilities in Grozny, the Assistance Group fulfils to a certain degree the function of a human rights watch, advising and urging Chechen authorities to adhere to internationally recognized standards in the field of human rights. However, recent developments in the fields of human rights and democracy-building in Chechnya have not been encouraging. The introduction of Shariah rule contradicts the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, and seriously hampers the fulfilment of the Assistance Group's mandate to "support the creations of mechanisms guaranteeing the rule of law, public safety and law and order". This system also leads to violation of human rights, especially to discrimination against the political rights of non-Muslims.

#### *The Road Ahead*

We are forced to acknowledge that under the present circumstances, including the prevailing evacuation procedure, the practical possibilities for the Assistance Group to fulfil all aspects of its mandate (notably, apart from facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid) are significantly restricted. This situation would, realistically, call for a continuous appraisal and possibly a reassessment of the basis for the continued operations of the Assistance Group, including the further prospects for the Assistance Group to perform its tasks in terms of its mandate in a sufficiently meaningful and cost-effective way. The author of this article is convinced that the long-term usefulness of the Assistance Group's assignments by far outweighs the current short-term disadvantages, and that the Assistance Group is indeed making a difference. Appreciating the continuous assurances and expressions of support that it has received from all quarters, including Russian federal authorities, Chechen authorities, NGOs and other relevant partners and interlocutors, the Assistance Group cannot help noting that a common denominator in the way the Assistance Group is viewed is that it represents a measure, albeit modest,

of *hope* in an otherwise gloomy situation. Although the open Russian-Chechen armed hostilities were formally brought to an end in 1996 and despite the fact that democratic OSCE-sponsored elections were conducted successfully in 1997, much remains to be accomplished before normal, peaceful conditions are established in this still conflict-ridden and suffering region. With progress being dismally slow, it is ever more important that hope be kept alive.

Although not specifically mentioned in the Assistance Group's mandate, a main reason for the continued OSCE presence in Chechnya is the *political* dimension of the mission's work. The OSCE presence is a political message that Chechnya has not been forgotten by the international community. For Chechnya the Assistance Group is important as a channel of contact with the outside world. For the OSCE, the Assistance Group fulfils the functions of carrying out independent observations, analyses, assessments and reporting on general political developments as well as on economic developments including conditions of life in the region. Thus, the OSCE maintains a presence which enables the Organization to monitor these developments on a continuous basis. The Assistance Group is confident that it is able to fulfil a substantial part of these tasks even under the prevailing circumstances.