Catastrophe in Chechnya: Escaping the Quagmire
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Introductory Remarks to Panel on "Search for Peace"

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This past April, we marked the 10th Anniversary of the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The opening occurred on a very cold day, a blustery day, a wet day. The ceremony was attended by thousands, including Holocaust survivors, veterans of the armed forces that defeated Nazi Germany and liberated the concentration camps, 61 heads of state from around the world, a large portion of the diplomatic corps, most members of the United States Congress and the recently inaugurated President of the United States, Bill Clinton.

On that bitter April day, Elie Wiesel told of a young Jewish woman in the Carpathian Mountains of Hungary who 50 years earlier read a brief account of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. "'Why,' she said, 'are our Jewish brothers doing that? . . . Couldn't they wait quietly' – the word was quietly – 'until the end of the war?'" She didn't know, Wiesel said, of names like Treblinka or Belzec or Birkenau. A year later, the young woman and her family were deported to Auschwitz.

But the names that the young Jewish woman did not know, others did: "Mr. President and distinguished guests," Wiesel said, "these names were known to officials in Washington, and London, and Moscow, and Stockholm, and Geneva, and the Vatican. After all, by April 1943, nearly 4 million Jews from surrounding countries had already vanished . . . . The Pentagon knew, the State Department knew, the White House knew, most governments knew." And Wiesel proceeded to recite an anguished litany of questions. Why were the Hungarian Jews not warned? Why were the railways to Birkenau not bombed? Why was there no public outcry? "And for me, a man who grew up in a religion, the Jewish religion, a man who his entire life thought that God is everywhere, how is it that man's silence was matched by God's?"

Wiesel offered no answers. Indeed, he said there are no answers. Nor did he consider the new Holocaust Memorial Museum to be an answer. Rather, he said, the Museum "is a question. If there is a response, it is a response in responsibility."

By the time that Wiesel neared the end of his address, his prepared text had been rendered useless by the rain. His face pinched from the cold, Wiesel stopped his story about the Holocaust, turned to address President Clinton directly, and raised an issue that in April 1993 was very current. "Mr. President," he said, "I cannot *not* tell you something. I have been in the former Yugoslavia last fall. I cannot sleep since, for what

I have seen. As a Jew, I am saying that we must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country! People fight each other and children die. Why? Something, anything must be done." To conclude, to bind this plea tightly with all he had said before, he offered "just one more remark. The woman in the Carpathian Mountains of whom I spoke to you, that woman disappeared. She was my mother."

The juxtaposition of Bosnia and, the next year, Rwanda with the opening of the Holocaust Memorial Museum threw into sharp relief an issue that had been highlighted by Elie Wiesel and the President's Commission on the Holocaust in 1979, when they first recommended creation of what ultimately became the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Commission observed that "of all the issues [it] addressed, none was as perplexing or as urgent as the need to insure that such a totally inhuman assault as the Holocaust -- or any partial version thereof -- never recurs." The Commission believed very strongly not only that remembrance of the past could influence the course of the future, but that "a memorial unresponsive to the future would . . . *violate* the memory of the past." Thus, it recommended that a *living* memorial to Holocaust victims include a Committee on Conscience to speak out on threats of contemporary genocide.

The Museum's board of directors followed through on that recommendation shortly after the Museum opened by creating a Committee on Conscience. And I am privileged to be the Committee's staff director. The Committee's mission is to use the Museum as a platform to address issues of contemporary mass violence. In particular, the Committee's mandate is to alert the national conscience and influence policymakers to confront and work to halt acts of genocide and related crimes against humanity.

The Committee has concluded that to be effective in fulfilling this alerting function, it must monitor situations where it is concerned that there is a potential for genocide. For that reason, the Committee placed Chechnya on its "Watch" list.

The particular bases for Committee's concern are

1) the history of persecution of Chechens, including the deportation of the entire Chechen population in 1944, which resulted in tremendous loss of life;

2) the tendency in Russian society to demonize Chechens as a group; and

3) the amount of violence directed against civilians in military operations beginning at the end of 1999 and continuing through means of a "dirty war" to the present, involving apparent violations of international humanitarian law with no meaningful attempts at accountability. In addition to continuing disappearances of Chechen civilians, a large portion of the population remains displaced, many in neighboring Ingushetia who are afraid to return to their homes. Forcing them to return, as has been happening, does not remove the source of their fear, nor does extending the dirty war to Ingushetia.

All of these factors together raised enough concern about the potential for genocide for the Committee to put Chechnya on its "Watch" list.

The dangerous nature of the situation is summed up by a scene in a film that we recently screened at the Holocaust Museum – Greetings from Grozny, which originally aired on PBS's Wide Angle series. A Russian major was speaking on camera to the filmmakers, and said very matter of factly – "We're different than the Germans because we don't kill the children. But the consequence is that we are creating another generation to fight us." You can easily see the genocidal logic embedded in his observation.

In addition to violence against civilians by Russian security forces, there have also been attacks against civilians by Chechen rebel forces, such as the October 2002 hostage taking at a theater in Moscow and the bombing in December 2002 of the main government building in Grozny, killing at least seventy-two civilians and wounding over 200. More recently, there have been suicide bombings, including, apparently, one yesterday in Moscow. Attacks such as these have been cited by the Russian government as evidence that its actions are part of an international war on terror.

The situation in Chechnya is extremely complex. Understanding it is made even more difficult by obstacles that the Russian government has raised to impede outside scrutiny by journalists and international monitors, and by recent harassment and intimidation of international nongovernmental organizations.

But the complexity does not relieve us of the obligation to try to learn more when the ultimate reality is that there is a civilian population at risk, a unique society that is in danger of disintegrating from the constant, grinding pressure from competing forces.

Nor does it relieve us of the obligation to search for peace – which brings us to today's final panel.

Thank you.