

Opening Remarks at the NAI Chechnya Conference
HIGH COMMISSIONER RUUD LUBBERS
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Introduction

As a starting point, allow me to provide a brief statistical overview to describe the magnitude of the crisis affecting the people of Chechnya.

We estimate that up to 300,000 persons are still in a situation of displacement within the Russian Federation: outside of Chechnya they are mostly in Ingushetia (70,000) and in other constituent entities of the Federation (up to 48,000 – including 8,000 in Dagestan). In Chechnya itself, according to governmental sources, there are more than 190,000 displaced persons.

Despite the problems of violence and instability that still prevails in Chechnya, returns are taking place (some 16,000 from Ingushetia since 1 January 2003) and we can ascertain that none of these have been forcible, some have been voluntary and others have been conditioned by withdrawal of other options and characterized by a climate of pressure that has been problematic for UNHCR.

I am here to explain to you the two-pronged approach that UNHCR is promoting for Chechnya and the Chechens.

We expect the Russian authorities to respect the voluntary nature of return and the possibility of taking care of and protecting internally displaced Chechens who wish to remain in Ingushetia.

At the same time - and this is the second prong - we declared ourselves available to go back to Chechnya, making it clear that the voluntary return for Chechens is a real option, being there for the returnees and with the returnees and also assisting in reintegration and rehabilitation.

Through this two-pronged, we want to build confidence. This is also my contribution to this conference.

1. A constructive dialogue concluding with sound and pragmatic recommendations is a goal I would endorse for this meeting. My Office has striven to find a balance of constructive dialogue. I would like to remind those present that there is a goal not only to find durable solutions for the Chechen population but to remember that the Russian Federation is itself a country in transition; we must also address in any scenario of solutions the need to support a unified and functioning society in the entire Federation. The task is tremendous. Can we achieve the necessary

level of partnership with the various authorities and those affected to reach our goal?

Can we all become a catalyst for building trust?

2. Some may question UNHCR's current focus on building trust.

But I strongly believe that this is our current point of departure.

3. The strategy of my Office is anchored in this concept of trust building while at the same time remembering that I am internationally mandated to ensure the protection of people of concern to my Office. I think the two elements must go hand in hand in order to hope for success.

4. My office has held extensive recent talks with Russian authorities. We have discussed that indeed the Chechen tragedy is not limited to domestic considerations. It is an international discussion. Therefore, there must be a real spirit of international partnership. UNHCR has asked our Russian interlocutors to exhibit an advanced level of cooperation and partnership with the international community. Additionally, UNHCR has pointed to clear examples that sudden and destabilizing actions toward the displaced do not build trust and in fact work not only against the

protection needs of the displaced but against the authorities own stated objectives of promoting voluntary return to Chechnya, stabilization and civil society.

5. We should avoid actions that are sudden, threatening, misunderstood and inconsistent. Thus, there is a call for an open and transparent set of agreements and actions that support trust.

6. With this in mind, I announced my so-called Two-Pronged Approach at this year's UNHCR Executive Committee two months ago. The concept is clear. UNHCR and hopefully all concerned will look towards a greater degree of activities inside Chechnya if security conditions permit on condition that UNHCR and others have continued certainty that a real programme of safe-haven is maintained outside of Chechnya in the Russian Federation, mainly Ingushetia, and returns when they take place, do so under safety and dignity and as result of a well informed decision, made voluntarily.

7. I can report that most recently there have been very real indications that authorities have demonstrated a will to allow alternative accommodation in Ingushetia to exist. Recent decrees have formalized this point.

8. The officially stated policy of the Russian Federation to support returns with grant programmes and other incentives appears impressive. This is a positive foundation. However, UNHCR has found in programmes around the world that refugees and the displaced must have complete information on all aspects of return in order to reinforce the “trust agenda”. Return information is usually neither sufficient, nor strategically well structured; unfortunately, the bearers of information are not always credible.

9. Therefore, and this will be a pillar of the Two-Pronged Approach, I have offered to the Russian Federation authorities to co-develop and to co-publish a brochure on all aspects of return to Chechnya AS WELL AS STAY for those not yet ready to return. We have temporarily called such a brochure “Conditions of Return”.

10. The “Conditions of Return Brochure” would have several objectives. It would address the partnership and trust requirements between my Office

and the authorities, it would set down in clear language real entitlements that could be used to measure implementation and serve as benchmarks for measurable evaluation. It would serve as a protection tool for all parties. Most importantly it would give the displaced and refugees a tangible tool to mark and measure for themselves the sincerity, political will and ability of those in power to fulfill promises. Practical brochure elements would need to include the process of getting return assistance, actual timelines, address the need for official verification of grant applications, details of social benefits, personal identification and documentation issues, etc. I am willing to put the name of UNHCR on such a document along with Federation authorities. The process of developing this brochure and the required dialogue to do so would hopefully contribute to a very real component of trust building.

11. In recent high-level discussions with authorities, there has been a pragmatic and necessary political indication that this joint effort can materialize. The goal is to remove the vast uncertainty about both the possibility to maintain a safe-haven and as well to support a programme of measurable standards supporting sustainable return. We envision that this programme will address the “trust agenda”. UNHCR should not be the sole external partner in this process.

12. The trust building contribution of UNHCR is only part of a larger effort. The 2004 UN Consolidated Appeal or CAP for the Northern Caucasus reflects an amount of US\$62 million of which only 5% represents the budget for UNHCR. In terms of quality and trust building, I consider this, however, as a component of very high value.

13. In closing, let me observe that regarding this topic there is much fatigue among the displaced Chechens as well as the general Russian population. I believe this is a result of despair. The syndrome of fatigue must be carefully analyzed because fatigue can manifest itself in different ways. On one hand, it can be a catalyst for change – on all sides – in search of positive solutions. On the other hand, fatigue can also lead to acts of desperation and a radicalization of actions because there are no perceived solutions in sight.

14. It is our collective duty to understand the full consequences of a spiraling radicalization of any population. This brings me back to my

starting point of the necessity to embrace calculated opportunities that present themselves in an effort to build trust.

15. I want to thank you for inviting me to the opening of this conference. I am not asking you to dismiss the many individual tragedies, there have been victims on all sides of this dark chapter of contemporary history – but I kindly ask all to endorse the guiding understanding that we must break the violent cycle that has engulfed the Northern Caucasus.

Thank you.