

**One day in Chechnya**

Next Sunday in October, 2003, there are elections in Chechnya. The people will elect the President of Chechen Republic. Of course, long before elections everybody in Russian Federation knew who will be the next, — after Mashadov, — President of Chechnya. It will be Kadyrov.

I am going to Chechnya as a member of national and international observers delegation to see if there are any violations of law during elections. I am a member of the Commission on Human Rights of the President of Russian Federation. Among delegation members — the Chairman of Commission on Human Rights Ella Pamfilova, my colleagues by Commission, deputies of the State Duma of Russian Federation, representatives of Islamic Conference, League of Arab States, Community of Independent States etc.

I am sure we will not see any violations of law. What one could see in one day being a member of official, closely guarded delegation? But first of all I am a member of the Union of the Committees of Soldiers Mothers of Russia. The soldiers mothers closely cooperated with Chechen people since 1994, trying to stop the war. We were the first NGO in Russia who publicly made anti-war statement in November, 1994. We always were and we are against war in Chechnya. For the first time I flew to Grozny two months before the first Chechen war. We hoped to prevent war. Now, in 2003, the war is still not over. I want to see Chechnya again. This land is dear to me. I am going to Chechnya.

Early in the Sunday morning we begin to move by desert road from Vladikavkaz (capital of Alania-Northern Osetia Republic) to the place of our group destination — the big district center Urus-Martan situated in the middle part of Chechnya. Previously I visited Urus-Martan in 1996. I The other observers groups will go to the other regions. It seemed to me that the number of block-posts on the road increased in comparison with the 1993-1996 years. Our cars procession includes several police cars. On the border of Chechnya Osetia police turns us over to Chechen police. At last we arrive to the central square of Urus-Martan. To the right — big poster with Putin and Kadyrov in the position of handclasp with slogan «Clean intentions — strong power». To the left — big portray of Kadyrov without any slogans. In the electoral office — poster with portrays of seven candidates to the presidential post. Six of them are without any head-dresses, Kadyrov — in the center — with the big papakha (national hat) on the head. Is it clear who is the main candidate at once.

Our hosts — the local officials — are worrying of our security. They are against any divisions of our group. We understand their difficulties and after some attempts of resistance begin to visit the various electoral offices in Urus-Martan and other villages all together. All the offices are guarded by armed military.

One of the village civil administration head is in the military uniform with AK in his arms. We were told that after seven attempts on his live the Federal military presented him AK and uniform of sub-colonel. He told me that early in the morning there was shooting near electoral office. No victims, but danger is still here, he said. I asked him who, by his opinion, was responsible for shooting—local people or those who came from mountains. He replied that chances are fifty-fifty.

In general organization of elections, by itself, as we could see, was not better and not worse than in any other elections in Russia. The main thing — the results of elections were known before elections, like, for example, in St.-Petersburg.

I spoke mainly with women, there were a lot of them nearby electoral offices. Many women worked as heads and officials of electoral commissions. We did not discuss elections. We spoke of our mutual memories of war, of their husbands, brothers and sons who were killed, wounded or disappeared, of women life in Chechnya to-day. Of their sons who are in double danger to be taken by terrorist to the mountains to fight and to be killed or to be taken by Russian military to disappear forever. I saw in their eyes the hunger for normal human life. And fear: any day of their life could bring new disasters from any side. We cried on each other shoulders. The soldiers mothers are well known in Chechnya.

One of the administrative officials told me that twice the military from Vladikavkas came to his district to open some burials of Russian soldiers killed during the first war. The military had not enough equipment to open the big burials for seven hundred bodies shown to them. He did not know if they will continue their work.

We also visited electoral office in the military unit — the battalion of interior troops which is located in the district on the so called «permanent base». The territory of the unit was surrounded by barbed wire and, as I suspect, with other means of security. The soldiers in dismounted formations silently went to vote. More than half of them came here not by their own choice, but by obligatory conscription. I tried to imagine the everyday life in this unit divided from outer world by barbed wire. Nobody can walk out of the unit without arms and armoured troop-carriers. And if one goes out one has to be ready to fight, to kill or to be killed. I felt myself like in prison. One of war horrors: how the normal human consciousness could stay not distorted if people are thrown in abnormal conditions?

In the end of this day the local officials invited us to have some food. The food was modest, the people — very hospitable. I think, they were happy that the main part of the delegation visit was over: their responsibility for our lives certainly was a heavy burden. I was proposed to say a toast. I was the only women in the delegation and the member of soldiers mothers NGO. I said everything what I thought of war and Federal policy in Chechnya. I said, the soldiers moth-

ers are grateful to Chechen people who helped soldiers mothers to look for their sons. I told them of our last Conference on Chechnya and how we tried, together with our Chechen quests, to look for the exit from Chechen dead-end. I wished our hosts to use their power for peace and people wealth.

It was my only semi-official speech in Chechnya. I did not participate in the final press-conference of the delegation. I did not want to speak of elections. Everybody understood the simple fact: these elections were just a next attempt of Putin to control the uncontrollable Chechen situation.

I tried, with all my small abilities, to describe the day I spent in Chechnya. I tried to make my comments as short as possible. The Union of the Committees of Soldiers Mothers of Russia made enough official statements on the matters. I did not want to repeat them. I just hoped to express my feelings when visiting Chechnya. I wish all the people whom I met to stay alive.

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Dr. Ida Kuklina,

Member of the Coordination council of the Union  
of the Committees of Soldiers Mothers of Russia,

Member of the Commission on Human Rights  
of the President of Russian Federation