

Wednesday, April 7, 2010

GOPALAN: Russia's Islamic time bomb

Sandeep Gopalan

Bomb blasts in Moscow and Dagestan this week are just the latest ticks from Russia's Islamic time bomb. Russia's Muslims - estimated at more than 23 million out of a total population of 142 million - are a reminder of the country's bloody past. Alienated by a succession of horrific acts dating back at least to the 1850s, the "Black Widows" and their sympathizers seek revenge. Still, Russia persists with rhetoric recalling the worst in its history: Vladimir Putin promising to "drag them out from the bottom of the sewers into the light of God," while Dmitry Medvedev calls the Black Widows "animals."

To be sure, there can be no justification for terrorism. These criminals must be dealt with aggressively. But through legal means. Illegal retribution by Russia will only yield more foolish suicide bombers for gangsters and jihadists.

The international community has to step up. Russia must be persuaded to re-examine its lackadaisical approach to human rights and the rule of law. Offering legal avenues for ventilating disaffection is superior to fighting dissent through brute military force.

Let's rewind for a minute.

Chechnya declared independence in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Arguing that Chechnya was not allowed to secede under the Soviet constitution, the Russians launched a military offensive in 1994 to quell the rebellion. Despite fighting for more than two years, they were unable to prevent the territory from falling into separatist hands. In 1999, the Russians launched another offensive, killing everything in their path, including civilians, and succeeded in installing a puppet regime in Chechnya. The war is estimated to have claimed more than 100,000 lives.

This is only the most recent grievance for Muslims in the region. If the brutalities of the czarist wars in the Caucasus were the beginning, Josef Stalin's horrific ethnic cleansing was the high point in terms of brutality. In February 1944, he forcibly deported 400,000 Chechens and their neighbors to Central Asia. A third of the Chechens perished.

The wars of the 1990s are just a continuation of Russia's colonial approach to the North Caucasus. Human Rights Watch has documented that torture is a systematic practice. Forces

under the command of the prime minister were found to be responsible for the torture of 115 persons between 2004 and 2006. Amnesty International (AI) reported that 97 policemen and military officers were killed in 2008 alone and at least 138 were injured. AI also documented instances of arbitrary detentions, torture, custodial deaths, enforced disappearances, threats to human rights activists, targeting of relatives of suspects, and forced evictions in a report issued in 2009.

Victims have sought justice in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. The court has ruled repeatedly against Russia, finding that disproportionate force had been employed in its military operations, that it indiscriminately targeted civilians and failed to adequately investigate civilian deaths. Indeed, the European court has become a major battleground against the Russians - it has ruled that Russia is liable for human rights abuses in Chechnya in more than 100 cases as of last year. Russia paid 3.7 million euros in reparations in 2008. The tab is only going to increase - more than 27,000 cases are pending against Russia.

Yet Russia's reaction is contempt for both the court and human rights agencies. It has little credibility in the international community - a shame, considering the leadership role it could have played in resolving problem cases such as Iran and North Korea.

The international community can do more to influence the Russians. So far, we've only had plenty of cheap talk. For instance, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNHRC) passed toothless resolutions calling on the Russian government to stop abuses in Chechnya. Similarly, the European Union, after introducing resolutions about Chechnya in the UNHRC, has dropped the ball in recent years. Russia's abysmal record does not seem to have stopped it from becoming the chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, either.

Today's tragic loss of innocent lives makes a more vigorous engagement with Russia essential. Respecting the rule of law and guaranteeing human rights protections will strip terrorists of their most powerful recruiting tool - the feeling of injustice with no legitimate avenues for redress. While it will not stop madmen from taking to terrorism, committing to a justice system will significantly reduce disaffection and offer an alternative to vengeance for most people. It also will bolster Russia's international reputation and allow it to take a role in international affairs commensurate with its status.

As a first step, Russia must immediately implement decisions of the European court and commit to preventing human rights abuses in Chechnya. It also should ratify the optional protocol to the U.N. Convention Against Torture and the Convention for the Protection of Persons From Enforced Disappearance. Signing on to these treaties alone is not enough. Russia must embrace the rule of law and create a culture of respect for human rights. This starts with a full public investigation of all purported violations and prosecution of criminals. If officials are found to be guilty, they must be punished in accordance with the law. Key to

the integrity of the process is a guarantee of access to EU bodies and international nongovernmental organizations.

Black Widows do not deserve our sympathy. No cause justifies the taking of innocent lives, and terrorists must be defeated. However, military force alone will not guarantee Russia security. Rule of law is essential to stop Russia's disaffected Muslims from becoming terrorists. They must see that justice is available not only through guns and bombs.

Sandeep Gopalan is the head of the law department at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

· **Ads by Google** 

[Global Poverty](#)

[Global Poverty Rates](#)

[Global Development](#)

[Global Poverty Facts](#)

[Fight Global Poverty](#)