

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Chechnya, Russia and the West

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

We see that the West does have a leverage over Russia. It can certainly start putting economic pressure on Russia with a view to restraining its policy of committing genocide in Chechnya. If Russia is not stopped now, it may feel tempted to take its war to Georgia — remember recent Russian interventions in Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — and Azerbaijan with the excuse of bringing them back to the fold.

THE second Russian war against Chechnya of the post-Soviet era (the fifth military campaign against Chechnya of the century) is in full swing. Most of the north of Chechnya is under the control of Russian forces. It is now a hungry depopulated land. Many towns and villages are in ruins. More than two hundred thousand Chechens have fled the country and are now living in make-shift refugee camps in neighbouring Ingushetia. Thousands have died. Grozny is under siege. It is under continuous bombardment from Russian guns and planes. Yet in spite of overwhelming superiority in firepower and manpower (the ratio is over thirty to one), a Russian victory is not in sight. In order to guarantee his victory in the March Presidential elections, Putin had wanted to take Grozny by 31st of December, 1999. The Chechens are putting up fierce resistance. The number of Russian casualties is on the increase. Although most political commentators discard a quick Russian victory, there is no doubt that sooner or later Grozny will fall. The surviving Chechen fighters will take refuge in the southern mountains to wait for another day and the ongoing independence war will continue as before with a brief respite.

Several questions come to mind at this point: What is the origin of this conflict? What do the Chechens want? Why have the Russians started this war now? What are the Russian objectives? What is the West's stand on this issue? Do the Americans have a common policy? Can the West put pressure on Russia to reach a political settlement with the Chechens?

From an ethnic point of view, the majority of Russians are Slavs and are Orthodox Christians by religion. According to the Russian constitution, Chechnya (only 5800 sq. miles) is one of the twenty-one ethnically based republics which form the Russian Federation. It is located in the Caucasus, on the southern rim of the Federation. This is a mountainous area which has been home to more than 50 separate ethnic groups, speaking dozens of different languages, for thousands of years. The Arabs named the Caucasus as Jabal al Ahsine, the mountain of languages. They may speak different languages but they have one characteristic in common, i.e. they are a fiercely independent people. The Chechens, who are not Slavs and who number only a million people speak a language — the Nakh group of Caucasian languages — which has nothing to do with Russian. Arabic script was used for the written language until the middle of the 1920s, when it was replaced by the Latin script. The Russians imposed the Cyrillic script in 1938, but in the early 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Chechens went back to the Latin alphabet. The Chechens are Muslims not Orthodox Christians and have vigorously fought for centuries to have a separate identity. Thus we see that ethnically, culturally, linguistically and even from a religious point of view, the Chechens have nothing in common with the Russians. So the question is: How and when did the Chechens come under the Russian rule?

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Czar Alexander I and Czar Nicholas I vigorously pursued a policy of territorial expansion, as a result of which vast swathes of territory in Europe and Asia came under Russian control. In the Caucasus, Russian incursions started even earlier. As a part of the Czarist imperial policy, which was very much in line with the colonial policies of other European countries, the Russians started mounting expeditions in the Caucasian territories in early eighteenth century. So this is a three hundred-year-old conflict. While the Caucasians understood and appreciated the value of maintaining economic ties with the Russians, they, particularly the Chechens, fiercely resisted these military incursions. One of their legendary leaders, Mansur, died in the closing days of the eighteenth century after being taken prisoner by the Russian forces. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Russian rule was established by hook or crook in most of the Orthodox territories of the Caucasus like Georgia and the surrounding principalities. This territorial gain made the position of the Muslim territories of the Caucasus militarily more difficult. The Chechens, under the leadership of Imam Shamil, continued to resist the Russian incursions until 1859, when they were completely defeated and Chechnya was officially incorporated in to the Russian empire.

Even though the Chechens conceded defeat for the time being, they never lost an opportunity to rebel against the Russian rule. The objective was always to win back their independence. They rose up in arms against Russian occupation after the Russian Revolution in 1917, again in the thirties and the forties. Stalin was so infuriated by the Chechens in 1944 that he deported the entire population to remote regions in central Asia. Many perished in exile and the survivors were not allowed to return to their homeland until 1957, when Stalin was luckily dead. Again, in 1991, when the vast Soviet empire (Russian territorial expansion had continued unabated both in Eastern Europe and Asia under communism) was about to fall, the Chechens, under the able leadership of Dudaev declared themselves independent and in December, 1994 the Russian President Yeltsin launched his first Chechen war (1994-1996), which according to most experts left nearly one hundred thousand (mostly civilians) dead, a country totally devastated and three hundred thousand Chechens in refugee camps in spite of their vast numerical and technological superiority. The Russians lost the war and the Chechens won back their independence although a final decision on the exact constitutional status was postponed until 2001. The Russians and the Chechens signed a peace agreement pledging never to use force, or threat of force again. If that was the agreement why did Yeltsin feel compelled to launch his second Chechen war only three years after giving that pledge? What made him break his pledge? Is it because he never intended to keep his pledge? There is no doubt that President Yeltsin is a vengeful man. Of course, he wanted to restore Russian pride as soon as possible. So was this the only reason why he started this war? No, there were a number of other hidden reasons and they had hardly anything to do with the

Chechens but with Russia's internal situation. As the Chechen President Aslan Masjadow said in an interview with the German weekly Der Spiegel in September 1999, "The Russians always play the Chechen card, whenever they have parliamentary or presidential elections. It is even more true now because Yeltsin and his clan fear that the new President will send them to prison as soon as he takes office."

The Russian internal situation had slowly but steadily deteriorated over the last few years. In 1991, when the old Soviet Union started to disintegrate, Boris Yeltsin became the first elected president of the Russian Federation, the largest of the constituent parts of the Union. His political agenda was very impressive. The brutal authoritarian political system would be dismantled and replaced by western style democracy under which the rule of law would be established. He promised to reform the corrupt and inefficient Soviet economic system and in its place introduce market economy. He would increase the standard of living of the ordinary people. He would restore Russian pride. He would indeed a formidable task to accomplish all this. The Russian people had been led to believe that a prosperous new order was in the offing. They thought that they could have all the material advantages of capitalism and at the same time retain the military power of the Soviet era. For a time it seemed the Russians could pull it off under the prime ministership of Yegor Gaidar. But the odds were too great and the vested interests

too powerful. Yeltsin, who did not have any knowledge of economics became more and more impatient and started acting as though economy could be reformed merely by passing decrees. He became suspicious of everybody and everything. He surrounded himself with his family members and a few cronies. His main objective in life had become somehow or other to hang on to power. In order to divert public attention from his own failures, he started his first Chechen War. His adventure in Chechnya further weakened the economy and the humiliating defeat suffered by Russia's armed forces revealed the organisational and technological weaknesses of the military. No wages were paid for months to millions of workers, miners, soldiers, teachers all over Russia for lack of funds. "Beggary, penury, crime, alcoholism" and a virtual breakdown of law and order made living conditions almost unbearable. The ordinary people just could not understand what had happened to their beloved country or what to do to avoid a complete collapse of the steadily degenerating state. They became increasingly angry and that anger was turned on capitalism, the new economic order. Public support for Yeltsin started to wane.

Not everybody was against Yeltsin, however. Taking advantage of the privatisation scheme a few members of Yeltsin's inner circle became fabulously rich. They controlled banking, finance, insurance, mining, energy and almost all other branches of the Russian economy and of course,



Russian soldiers place the body of a dead comrade next to other killed Russian soldiers near an APC on the outskirts of Chechen capital Grozny Tuesday. Chechen snipers firing from cement bunkers fought federal soldiers Wednesday in a building-by-building clash for control of Grozny's key Minutka Square amid unprecedented criticism of the war effort in Russia. — AFP photo

the media. They paid hardly any taxes and transferred a large share of their profits to numbered accounts in foreign countries. They, in effect, became the power behind power. They needed Yeltsin to amass even greater wealth and Yeltsin needed their money to finance his election campaigns. It had become a vicious circle. According to many reporters, Yeltsin, who had earned a reputation in the Soviet era of being an honest man with an austere lifestyle took to luxurious living. He built dachas all over the country for his personal use. By some accounts, he and his daughter accumulated millions of dollars, deposited in foreign countries.

No wonder everything came to a head in August 1998. The rouble collapsed, the stock market slumped and the inflation shot up to 100% p.a. The government defaulted on \$40 billion of rouble bonds and the Russian financial system virtually collapsed. The West came to its rescue with a huge stabilisation fund. By now Yeltsin, as a political power, had become a spent force. In a desperate bid to avoid a complete collapse of the state, Yeltsin changed his Prime Minister in late 1998. This time he chose Primakov, a former head of the KGB, who was considered to be an able administrator. Although not a visionary reformer, Primakov turned out to be the right man for the job — oligarchs, smooth enough to build up a working relationship with Yeltsin's enemies in Parliament and honest enough to restore some confidence in government.

Primakov was fired in May, 1999 and replaced by Sergei Stepashin, who did not fit the bill either. He lasted only three months. Finally, "the Family" found their man in Vladimir Putin, a former spy who considered himself as a disciple of a former KGB boss Yuri Andropov, who ruled the Soviet Union in the early eighties. So in August, 1999 Vladimir Putin was appointed as the Prime Minister. According to many political observers, subsequent events seem to indicate that a deal was struck between the oligarchs and the new Prime Minister. No efforts would be spared to promote Putin and his Unity Party with the objective of winning the parliamentary elections, after which Putin's name would be put forward as the successor to Yeltsin. Once Putin's chances of winning the presidential elections (to be held in March 2000) were more or less assured, Yeltsin would step down after appointing Putin as the acting President, thus combining the offices of the Prime Minister and the President in the same person, i.e. Putin. In return Putin would sign a decree giving complete immunity to Yeltsin and his close associates from prosecution on charges of corruption. All this seemed fine and dandy as far as a plan could be. But the crucial question was: How to increase Putin's popularity rating from zero to 50% or 60%, which would assure the success of the plan? Everything hinged on that factor. Nothing raises the patriotic zeal in a poor dispirited people than a war against a hated enemy. So an enemy had to be found against whom a war could be

launched with the possibility of a quick victory. Since their humiliating defeat in 1996 at the hands of the Chechens, the Russian armed forces and the secret service had been licking their wounds and looking for an opportunity to restore their pride. They also wanted a larger share of the federal budget. Chechen incursions in Dagestan with the intention of establishing an Islamic republic there in August 1999 and several bomb explosions in Russian cities killing hundreds of civilians gave Yeltsin and Putin the perfect excuse to launch the second Chechen war of the post-Soviet era. It is a pity that the Chechen President could not establish his authority over the unruly Chechen warlords. Although no proofs were submitted, the blame for the bombings was firmly laid on the Chechens. Many prestigious Western analysts and even some opposition leaders in Russia have also raised doubts about these charges. They have even gone so far as to suggest that in order to foment war fever among the public, the Russian Secret Service (remember Putin was until recently the head of this organisation) carried out these bombings. The war has already served most of its immediate purposes. Putin's popularity rating has gone up from zero to over 60%, his party has won a landslide victory in the parliamentary elections opening up the possibility of the Duma and Kremlin working together, not one against the other, for the first time after the collapse of the Soviet system. Yeltsin has resigned and Putin appointed as the acting President. Putin has already signed a decree giving immunity to Yeltsin and his close associates from prosecution. Russian pride has to some extent been restored. If the Russians can take Grozny by the middle of February and continue to manipulate the media to hide the real number of Russian casualties, the chances are that Putin will become the President at the end of March 2000. Everybody seems to have won except the poor Chechens. But who cares? Can the West do anything to alleviate their suffering? Until now the West has followed a policy of appeasement. Although it has deployed the indiscriminate use of force against the Chechens, it has not openly rejected Russian contention that it is a Russian internal matter and has paid lip service to the ideal of waging an "anti-terrorism" campaign without any collateral damages particularly among the civilians. The Western politicians argue that if they push Russia too hard, then it may plunge into anarchy or disintegrate or succumb to an ultra-nationalistic military coup. Actually it seems that the West lacks a common policy on Russia. Clinton has made some empty threats such as "Russia would pay a heavy price" if it continues with its policy of indiscriminate killing of the Chechen civilians. Europe has threatened Russia with the suspension of its membership of the European Council. It is true, Russia is still an important nuclear power with a huge army. It is not expected that the West would take military action against the Russians to defend the Chechens. But there are other ways of putting pressure. The West can hit them in their pocket. Russian econ-

omy is being sustained by loans from the West, specially from the IMF and everybody knows that the US is its most important paymaster. A rough estimate of the Russian debt situation will show how crippled the Russian economy is: According to some estimates, the government owes approximately one hundred billion roubles to its citizens only in wages and pension arrears. It owes billions of dollars to the IMF and the World Bank. Russia debt to the holders of Eurobonds, the Minifins, to the Paris Club (Western governments of which Germany is the largest single contributor) and to foreign private sector creditors is astronomical. The Russian government has got into the habit of defaulting on repayments. Actually the US and Europe have bent all rules to accommodate Russia as far as the restructuring of the loans are concerned. It is a joke that with such a precarious economic situation, Russia wants to join the G7. One need not be a mathematical genius to realise that the billions of dollars that Russia is spending to destroy Chechnya are indirectly coming from the loans given by the West, admittedly for other purposes. Besides this absolute financial dependence on the West to keep its economy going, Russia has got other reasons to be grateful to the West. In 1998, the US and Europe gave more than a billion dollars to Russia for projects like nuclear safety, market reforms, education, health care etc. Although the exact amount for 1999 is not yet available, it is estimated that a similar amount was given in aid to Russia for such mundane activities as supporting four thousand of Russia's best teachers, buying books for its public libraries and of course, fighting nuclear contamination.

So we see that the West does have a leverage over Russia. It can certainly start putting economic pressure on Russia with a view to restraining its policy of committing genocide in Chechnya. If Russia is not stopped now, it may feel tempted to take its war to Georgia — remember recent Russian interventions in Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia — and Azerbaijan with the excuse of bringing them back to the fold. Why is the West behaving in such an indulgent manner with the Russians? If I were a man with little faith in the sincerity of human motives, I would be allowed to think that Russia and the West have already reached a secret understanding on geopolitical strategy in this part of the world. That Russia would not create trouble in southern Caucasus over the construction of a pipeline between Baku (Azerbaijan) and Ceyhan (Turkey), which would give effective control over Caspian oil and gas to the West. In exchange, Russia would be allowed to destroy the Chechen independence movement without any intervention from the West. Thus Russia would get back its control over the already existing Makhachkala-Novorossiisk pipeline, which runs through Grozny. This strategy will at the same time seriously undermine Iran's position in the area, who happens to be a common enemy of the Americans and the Russians. Only the future will reveal whether these are wild conjectures or there is some truth in all this.

Priceless or Valueless?

by Abul M Ahmad

THE media has been publicising adequately the weaknesses of the current deplorable political culture, as the politicians are very much exposed to public life. The instability in the politicians is understandable from the historical background of absence from governance for 16 years. The gain is staggering and the public policies muddled. Add the greed for power and money, and there is no room left for alibis, except for materialistic hedonism, displayed with uncouth taste. The prerogative of the regime in power is being misused openly, in the name of fertile ideologies of the chameleon class. The masses are indifferent to the nuances and artificial finesse of the various stances, whether it be to the left, right, centre, or slightly off-centre; excluding 'fundamentalism', as defined in Dhaka, or for that matter Bangladesh. The proof of the pudding lies in the eating, but before that the pudding must be clearly visible, as it is public property, and no private or clandestine dining-room, parties are permissible, according to the codes of the constitution. After partaking of the feast, comes the digestive period. And the society could not digest most of the goodies offered for nearly three decades. The fault is with the menu, or with the gourmets? It is a metaphysical question: who is the greater offender, the trend-setter, or the follower. The latter is in larger number, and more visible in their acts of omissions and commissions. Political stylings tend to leak out and pervade the other sectors of the society, as those behind the operations are powerful members of the society. The fish first rots at the head, therefore spinning tales have no meat in the version. Who are responsible for the Operation Clean-up? The same set of governors, who do not rule (democratically speaking) but govern the country. Where the academia got the ideas for supporting violence in the campus? Certainly not from the books. So there are forces more powerful than the noble ideas enmeshed within the books of learning. It is easy to dismiss the 'academic issues'. But the virus remains and infect more people, especially the new generation, who get new ideas of doing things in the wrong way, and get away from the responsibility. Blame the mould or the moulded product? That is a issue not being discussed publicly. (Partials (strikes, bandh) have been allowed to become an integral part of daily life, on call at the slightest notice, right or wrong. What is the lesson? A

tool becomes a principle; a means becomes an end. Who are noticing such immoral conversions? When integrity is contaminated, reliance suffers. A Trust is a trust, trust it or not. A nation which has no contingency plan, physically or morally, is very vulnerable. Moral principles are not a circus juggery with enticing balls, but more like walking on the tight-rope, needing precision of balance; to maintain the integrity of character, nobility of thought, and transparency of benevolence. In civilized societies, what is the role of violence as a tool for achieving objectives? The 20th century was not the warbling of the doves. How the rule of the jungle has penetrated the air-conditioned skyscrapers? Somewhere something has been badly mixed up, imperilling the society. The society is facing a sardonic campaign: to protect the weak leadership! Protect, improve, strengthen; or classify technically as 'redundant'? A strong personality does not change his character so easily (what is there to change)? Bangladesh lies in a tropical region, hence the spring is mild and fleeting. But the need of the hour is spring-cleaning, right from the top, to wash out the environmental pollution, so nobly programmed worldwide with hundreds of millions of dollars.

DEVALUATION Little Cure for Ailing Economy

by Mohammad Shahid Jamal

The economies of developed countries practice free-floating exchange rate to keep the monetary mechanism out of influence of vested quarters and controversy. On the other hand, often the governments of developing countries fail to achieve benefit of fixed exchange rate due to wrong and whimsical monetary decision.

and by taking effective long-term economic policies to prepare the country to face the withdrawal of the 'Multi Fibre Agreement' in the year 2005. We should assess our steps if any taken to overcome this crisis. It is clear that we have done nothing to set up backward linkage industries to support garments industries in the face of quota withdrawal in the year 2002. This devaluation which is frequently advocated by our government machinery will only complicate the economic crisis in the long run. The latest devaluation is made for the fifth time in last two years and this time at a higher rate i.e. 3 per cent. Did we ever evaluate how much our export growth increased from devaluation in last two years? Do we have concrete evidence of its positive outcome? Recently, many analysts agreed on its negative effects on the overall economy. The government should single out import items which are not essential and thereby impose tariffs on them to cut their consumption and reduce the burden on the foreign currency reserves. Nothing much is done to abolish huge trade deficit with India. Indian consumer goods have significantly captured our domestic market destroying our infant industries due to huge retail price differences created through adopting policy differences between the two countries. On the other hand, our India's vast consumer market due to some hurdles imposed on them. The government should ensure better communication and infrastructure facility, political stability, improved law and order situation, transparency in awarding international tender, efficient banking and insurance service and timely approval of work order from the respective government departments to increase FDI (Foreign Direct Investment). Now is the right time to think an alternative of devaluation. For example, the gov-

Garfield



by Jim Davis

