

**Ilyas Akhmadov, Foreign Minister, Chechnya**

**"The View from Grozny"**

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The presentation was in Russian with English translation.

Mr. Ilyas Akhmadov was born in 1959 in Kazakhstan. He graduated with honors in political science from Rostov University, Rostov-on-Don. During the last Chechen war he served as a press attaché to Chechen President Maskhadov. Only two weeks before the war began in Daghestan, Mr. Akhmadov was appointed foreign minister. Mr. Akhmadov has also established a political party called "Freedom," with an orientation toward democracy and democratization.

**Akhmadov:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to have the opportunity to meet with you here at Harvard. It is a shame that I am here on a very sad occasion for us. But I hope that the Chechens will come one day and tell you about how they are building a democratic state. I'll try to describe briefly the situation and then will be glad to answer your questions.

As you know, for the past few months war has been raging in Chechnya. This war began on the pretext that the Russians are fighting against a center of international terrorism. The number of civilian casualties during this war has reached at least 10,000. Virtually no center, village, or town has escaped bombardment by Russian artillery or aircraft. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their homes, and about 250,000 have become refugees. About 350,000 people are trapped inside the theater of war. Of all the territory under Chechen control, there is virtually no piece of land where civilians feel safe. Electricity, gas, and water were cut off at the very beginning of the conflict. The Russians were trying to emulate the American military in Kosovo, but on a very poor scale. First they destroyed the industrial areas. Then, as they said, they "exterminated" the military camps, and then they started to attack markets and hospitals.

The Russians did two things before they started the campaign. First, they persuaded the Russian public that they would do everything in order to preserve the life of their military. At the

same time, they started a propaganda campaign in the West claiming that they have the technologies to fight terrorism, and that they are able to carry out this operation without significant loss of civilian lives. The Russian leadership set up a precedent in fighting terrorism with tremendous military equipment and an army of over 500,000 men. If the rest of the world resorted to this kind of military strategy, then the world would be completely destroyed.

Despite our persistent calls to the Russian leadership to resolve the conflict by political means, the Russians have proved unwilling to engage in political negotiations. The Istanbul Summit called for an immediate halt to military actions and for negotiations between the parties to the conflict. The Summit laid out in clear terms the subject of the negotiations between the Russian government and the Maskhadov government. Moreover, the Summit identified a realistic mediator in the negotiation process, namely OSCE. But after signing this agreement, Russia only increased its military operations against Chechnya. In the best tradition of the Russian army, victories in the operation were tied to certain Russian national holidays. First they tried to take Grozny by December 25 as a celebration of Christmas. Another date was set up for December 31, so that it would coincide with the Orthodox festivities. And then Putin declared a 3-day ceasefire for the period of Ramadan. It had nothing to do with a sincere wish to stop the war. Russian Commander General Kazantsev said that they had to suspend the operation because of the high number of casualties.

We agree with Moscow on the number of about 25,000 civilian residents trapped today in the city of Grozny. The safety corridors were bombarded on several occasions, and when civilians were trying to reach the Ingush border, they were turned back because the computer that was used to register the refugees had allegedly broken down. The movement of refugees and people trying to escape the war zone is very complicated, because there are no clear-cut front lines. The refugees have to cross two or three fronts to reach the border with Ingushetiya, which is about 40 kilometers from Grozny. Refugee columns have become favorite targets of the Russian units. And when they attack these columns, they report that they have destroyed another group of terrorist fighters. Once a column was attacked and about 60 people were killed, among them two members of the International Red Cross local staff. At first, the Russians claimed that this was a group of terrorist fighters. Then the

International Red Cross insisted on an investigation, after which the Russians admitted that it was a mistake. Another peculiarity of this conflict is that Russians do not allow international aid agencies and human rights organizations access to refugees in Ingushetiya and elsewhere in order to assess the situation. The Russian propaganda machine uses special routes when they take international observers in order to show the barbarities of the Chechens. The international community has no clear picture of what actually is going on. This is briefly what I wanted to say to you. Now, I'll be glad to answer any questions you might have.

**Question:** Foreign Minister Ivanov sent a letter to Mr. Seleznev, the speaker of the Duma. It speaks about certain security measures that should be adopted by the Security Council. The measures include: deporting the population of southern Chechnya, dismantling any industry, and basically conducting a policy that would make southern Chechnya uninhabitable. This looks very much like a policy of deportation and genocide. Do you have any comments on this?

**Akhmadov:** I heard about this letter, but I am not familiar with it. I cannot say anything about the nature of this letter. On the other hand, the Russians have been implementing these sort of policies for the past 400 years. It has been one of the major components of Russia's national policy. Our relations with the Russian government have been far from warm for a long time, and they are characterized by many cases of deportation and conflicts. The Russian attitude towards the Chechens has been far from fatherly ever since 1708, when the troops of Prince Apraksin were destroyed at the battle of Novy Aldy. They never had illusions about us, and we never had any illusions about them. When I am asked whether or not a compromise with Russians is possible, I find it very difficult to give an answer. Our past is very painful.

**Question:** When do you think the preparations for this war started?

**Akhmadov:** I think General Lebed clarified this matter better than anyone else. He said, "When I was signing the treaty with Chechens with my right hand, another thought was going through my head, and that was how we can raise 50,000 wolfhounds to wipe out the blemish of this disgrace." This initial agreement was doomed to fail.

**Question:** How many Russians are still in Chechnya?

**Akhmadov:** Practically speaking, I do not have the exact figures. Maybe 30,000 or 50,000. They were not members of our government. Of course, they occupied mid-level positions, but our laws did not prohibit them or any other nationals from occupying these or any other positions.

**Question:** Taking into consideration that approximately 400,000 Russians were originally living in Chechnya as compared to 40,000 now, does it mean that all the Russians have been chased out of Chechnya?

**Akhmadov:** During the previous war of 1995, about 60,000 ethnic Russians were killed during the Russian attack on December 31. Russian refugees, unlike their Chechen neighbors, were allowed to travel freely to the town of Mozdok in the south of Russia.

**Question:** What kind of role does oil politics play in all of this? Could you explain the simultaneity of the incursion into Daghestan and Putin's announcement that Russia would begin the construction of the pipeline through Daghestan that would bypass Chechnya? Was the fact that Russia recognized Chechnya's de facto independence between 1991 and 1994 a result of the fact that there were those in Moscow who were benefiting from selling oil from Chechnya directly abroad without going through the official Russian channels?

**Akhmadov:** There is a strong opinion that Russian policy in the Caucasus is pretty much determined by attitudes towards oil. I would like to make a slight correction to this point of view. I do not think that the oil issue is the most important one, but it is definitely a major determinant. Unfortunately, oil and oil pipelines have become the curse of my people. Competition for access to this oil and pipelines have caused a number of conflicts. After the first Chechen war, an agreement was signed between Russia, Azerbaidzhan, and Chechnya concerning the construction of the pipeline. On several occasions oil was actually transported through this pipeline. In accordance with this agreement, Azerbaidzhan was to make payments to Russia and Russia was supposed to give a certain amount of money to the Chechen National Bank. Our government never received a single penny. In May 1998 this agreement ceased to exist and the pipeline stopped functioning. It is difficult to say for me whether Basayev's and Khatab's incursion into Daghestan was directly connected to this agreement or to oil transport. I think that this pipeline played a certain role in the long chain of provocations which eventually led to this incursion. I cannot agree with the statement that our de facto sovereignty was supported simply because of our oil sales. But, of course, there were cases during those four years when large quantities of oil were sold, bypassing Moscow altogether. As a matter of fact, the Russian political elite had trouble enough fighting one another before 1994, and they had no time for us. When they finally settled their differences and found out about the unauthorized oil sales, they simply cracked down on Chechnya, which cost us approximately 120,000 lives during the war.

**Question:** The Russian media once mentioned that it was some sort of war by contract, and that the Basayev brothers were involved with the Russian intelligence services. Some members of the political elite who did not want Primakov to become Russia's president devised this behind-the-scenes conspiracy, and organized this invasion of Daghestan to change the political landscape and to bring in Putin as a possible presidential candidate.

**Akhmadov:** I was a soldier myself and I participated in the previous war. It is very difficult for me to understand what a "contract war" is. It is very difficult for me to comment on this theory that Mr.

Chubais was involved in trying to block Mr. Primakov's attempt to be elected president. I do not have any information indicating that the Basayev brothers had connections with Russian intelligence. As far as certain political influences or certain political games and pressure, it is quite possible that things like that might have taken place. Several assassination attempts happened in the Caucasus as well.

**Question:** In regard to Islamic solidarity, what role does the solidarity of Moslems from other countries outside of the former Soviet republics play in the development of the conflict today? What role might the radicalization of Islam play in similar potential conflicts on the territory of the FSU?

**Akhmadov:** In the Moslem world there are several different attitudes toward the conflict in Chechnya. I am referring, of course, to the official policies of the Islamic world. The leading Islamic countries keep a certain distance from this conflict. They keep reiterating that they respect Russia's territorial integrity in that region, and that the conflict is an internal matter of the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, when the very same leaders talk to the public in the West, or when they talk to other Islamic nations, they say that they are horrified by what's going on in Chechnya. There are some countries, for example the small country of Bahrain, that have tried to raise this issue at the level of the UN Security Council. There are a number of Islamic organizations that try to give humanitarian assistance to the victims of this war. There are a number of Islamic terrorist organizations that the Russian propaganda machine tries to connect us with. There is a broad spectrum of attitudes and policies, and it is very difficult to identify one single attitude or policy in the Islamic world.

**Question:** What do you think about the explosions in Russia? Basayev accused the Daghestanis of being behind these explosions.

**Akhmadov:** I do not have any information on this issue. He probably meant the incidents in Buinaks. The role of these explosions in the conflict is a very interesting issue. These explosions

virtually became the major cause of this war. The last war cost us, as I mentioned before, 120,000 civilian lives, and many towns and villages were destroyed. Despite this, we do not take responsibility for the explosions that happened in Russia. A series of explosions took place in Russia, and Russia immediately accused the Chechens of being behind these incidents. Two buildings were blown up in Moscow, another explosion happened in Volgograd, and they both cost more than 300 lives. The Russian population was in a state of shock and hysteria. Then in the city of Ryazan the residents of an apartment building were awakened around 1:00 a.m. and told that explosive devices had been planted in the basement. They had to vacate the building and wait outside until the break of dawn. The handicapped were left inside the building. The military were able to display some white color substance that was supposed to be the detonator of one of the explosives. Anti-terrorist operations were launched in the area. People who even had the slightest Caucasian resemblance were arrested and beaten. The Russian police in that case were able to find and detain those individuals who had planted those explosives. The operation was immediately suspended, and a high ranking FSB official declared that this operation was a training exercise. The explosives were confiscated and they turned out to be simply sugar. The Chief of Civil Defense of the city of Ryazan was not even aware of these training exercises. The same was declared by the Chief of the Police of the city of Ryazan. What kind of exercise is it when old and handicapped residents are left behind in the apartment building? The question here is who benefited from these explosions. Neither the Chechens nor Russians. Only Putin benefited from these incidents, which allowed him to consolidate public support for the war in Chechnya. Recently Putin declared in the Duma that new explosions should be expected. We think that explosions are being used in Russia for political purposes. When you are told that you and your apartment building may be blown to pieces at night, you start thinking of nothing else.

**Question:** What Islamic postulates or political bodies determine today's Chechen official policy?

**Akhmadov:** I cannot really single out any *tarikats* [Sufi order] as a major determinant in the political life of Chechnya. At the same time we cannot deny that they have certain influences. You are probably a specialist in this very narrow topic including the definition of *tarikats*. It will be very difficult to explain what *tarikats* is. I am not an expert myself and it will be very difficult for me to comment. What I can say is that the Nakshvandi *tarikats* in Chechnya is widespread and is characterized by its moderate stance. Our President Maskhadov met with the sheik.

**Question:** What was and is the relationship between Basayev and Maskhadov?

**Akhmadov:** As you know, we had elections after the first Chechen war. Basayev and Maskhadov were political opponents during those elections. I know both these men very well. I served during the Grozny battle in Basayev's battalion, later I was transferred to Maskhadov's headquarters as a senior officer, and then I became a lieutenant under Basayev. I was able to observe the interactions between these two men during the elections. Certain differences emerged between the contenders, especially between Basayev and Maskhadov. Despite these differences, when Maskhadov was elected Chechen president, Basayev was offered the position of vice premier in Maskhadov's government. Basayev worked for a while in Maskhadov's cabinet, but later some technical differences emerged between Maskhadov and Basayev that were probably related to staff selection and policy. Basayev resigned but later was invited again to become the prime minister of Chechnya. Afterwards he resigned again and became an honest man.

It is very difficult to see from these events how the relationship between these two men developed.

There are a lot of rumors and exaggerations about the extent of their differences. In any case, Basayev became a normal civilian before the incursion took place. He led a private life, raised bees, and observed the laws of Chechnya. When the military campaign started, there was no choice for either of them; they had to join forces and did not have a choice of allies. When you are an army of 20,000 and you have an army of 500,000 marching against you, you have no other choice but to join forces to protect your country. And, as you know, at the moment Maskhadov is the commander-in-

chief of the Chechen forces, and Basayev is one of his commanders. It seems like they are doing a good job.

**Question:** I am interested in the Daghestani aspect of the war and the role of the Daghestani Congress formed by Basayev in this conflict. What is the general attitude of the Daghestani people towards this war? What is the attitude of the Aki Chechens towards this war?

**Akhmadov:** The Congress of the Daghestani Chechen people was not created by Basayev, but was formed by Udugov. I am not sure if this Congress still exists and if it preserved its integrity. But I do know that the majority of the members of this Congress are fighting in Chechen forces right now because they simply do not have any choice. Many other members of the Congress repented on Russian television, and they are now ordinary citizens of Daghestan. I think the Daghestani people are very much concerned about the current situation in Chechnya. There were a few occasions at the initial stages of the war when some citizens of Daghestan were elated to see how the Russians were cracking down on Chechnya. Later on this elation turned into the mood of frustration and disappointment. Aki Chechens experience similar concern and disappointment.

**Question:** What do you think is going to be the future of Chechnya? What will relations between Chechnya and Russia be like?

**Akhmadov:** It is difficult to talk about any future guarantees and peaceful initiatives while bombs are falling on our heads. We have to stop the war in accordance with the Istanbul summit resolutions. We need a realistic intermediary who will bring both sides to peace. If we are left alone with Russia without a mediator, we'll have to deal with someone like General Lebed who dreams about coming back to Chechnya with tanks. When we have strong guarantees that Russians will not crack down on us again, when we have the attention of international organizations and the international community, including the UN, when people who are fighting at the moment can return to their jobs, then we can

guarantee the creation of a normal democratic state. If we sign another document in Makhachkala that bears absolutely no power or authority, then other Hatabs will appear, and the terrorism and unrest will go on. We have to demonstrate that we have all the necessary prerequisites and conditions to build our democracy in peace. Nobody should threaten us with bombs. It is very difficult to picture any future relations with Russia after five years of war. You know that before 1994 certain projects were circulating. Some were coming from the Russian side, other were initiated by General Dudayev. All these projects had something to do with a possible compromise between Russia and Chechnya and with a possibility to transfer certain authorities and powers to Russia, especially in the areas of military, communications, and foreign policymaking. Unfortunately all these proposals ended up in the bloody war of 1994. And since 1994, neither side has been interested in reviving and promoting any of these projects. We cannot guarantee that there will be no new war after this one. The only choice left for us at the moment is to preserve our sovereignty and to be recognized by the world community. The creation of this independent state is not intended to counterbalance or challenge Russia. Russian politicians should eventually realize the inevitability of our sovereignty. Both Chechnya and Russia must start building good neighborly relations based on peace, democracy, and respect. We are also interested in a stable Russia. Unfortunately, for the past nine years our countries have not had any opportunity for serious negotiations.

**Question:** Could you please comment on the puppet government phenomenon in Chechnya?

**Akhmadov:** The puppet government is a remnant of Soviet-era policies. The czarist government never resorted to these sort of means. At the moment, Moscow supports many opposition forces and groups to basically all post-Soviet states, including the groups that oppose the government of Shevardnadze, Aliyev, and others. And certainly they were anxious to support the Moscow opposition to our government as well. But these opposition forces do not represent the Chechen people. Putin claims that President Maskhadov, who was elected during popular elections monitored by the representatives of more than 88 countries, is an illegitimate leader. Then Putin, by his own decree,

bypasses the Supreme Court to release from prison Gantimirov, the former mayor of the city of Grozny. He then declares this man to be the legitimate leader of Chechnya.

**Question:** What's your reaction to the Chechen terrorist raids in Budyonovsk, where a civilian hospital was attacked and more than 1,000 people were killed? Why wouldn't the Chechen government dismiss Khatab and Basayev from their positions to demonstrate the government's intolerance of the terrorist policies these two men advocated?

**Akhmadov:** You could have straightforwardly asked me whether I participated in the Budyonovsk raid or not. A journalist from the newspaper "Izvestiya" implied that I was one of the members of the terrorist group that participated in the raid in Budyonovsk. I recently telephoned a friend of mine, a general in the FSB, and asked him about these allegations. The general honestly answered to me that he told those morons (journalists) not to write that article. I did not participate in the raid in Budyonovsk, since at that time I was in the hospital after being wounded. But I was a soldier at that time. And if I had been ordered to go to Budyonovsk at that time, I would have gone. We had plenty of Budyonovsk-type hospital terrorist atrocities in Chechnya from December 31, 1994 [is this year correct?] to February 23, 1995. Basayev never killed a single civilian. It is true that he killed Russian pilots and thus violated all international conventions. The majority of the civilians were killed by the Russian artillery and tanks when they were trying to liberate the refugees at the hospital. We can argue on and on about what happened there, but please take into account the 120,000 civilians who died in Chechnya during the war. How many more would have been killed if Basayev had not undertaken this operation in Budyonovsk? He had to show the Russians that their citizens had to die too in order to get the Russian government to stop the war.

**Question:** Do you have any information on the size of Chechen diaspora in Russia? What is the attitude of the Chechens who live in Russia towards the war? Can this diaspora play any role in the peace making process of this conflict?

**Akhmadov:** There are very few Chechens living in the world. When you listen to the Russian propaganda machine, you get the impression that there are 350 million Chechens living in the world who affect world politics and the geopolitical situation. The estimated total world population of Chechens in 1991 was about 1 million. We do not distinguish between the Chechens who live in Chechnya and the Chechens who live somewhere else, since our total ethnic population is so small, unlike the Armenian, Georgian or Jewish populations. The Chechen diaspora is trying to play a certain part in the political process and to set up a political dialogue between Russia and Chechnya by acting as mediators and by trying to contact the members of Russia's political elite and government. It is apparent that everyone condemns the war in Chechnya, including the Chechen diaspora living in Moscow.