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The world fiddles as the North Caucasus simmers

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This week, the one-year anniversary of the hostage siege and massacre of children and parents in the Beslan school gym is tinged with a specific sorrow; it could happen again. The political situation in Russia's North Caucasus region is dangerously unstable but few outside the region are paying attention.

Beslan was an especially depraved example of what has spread well beyond Chechnya. Acts of intra-communal violence, brutal assassinations, explosions and armed clashes are the norm in places such as Dagestan and Ingushetia. Local politics is circumscribed by corruption, incompetence and a lack of interest in the wellbeing of ordinary people. Many regional leaders are running their fiefdoms into the ground. While some in the Russian government claim that the situation has "normalised" (the Putin administration plans "parliamentary elections" in Chechnya this November), a recently leaked document from the Kremlin's own representative to the North Caucasus asserts that the situation is perilous.

Unlike other conflicts where expertise, political will and millions of dollars have been deployed to contain regional violence, this has not happened for Chechnya or the North Caucasus. The international response to date has been grossly inadequate. There are many explanations for this, including, chiefly, the Putin administration's ambivalence over international engagement on the issue. But it is also difficult to determine what will actually help. About three months ago in Berlin, we gathered representatives of key international organisations, several European governments and representatives of the younger generation of human rights activists from Russia to discuss exactly that. One answer given by many was to focus on the next generation. Young people in the North Caucasus have known nothing but war, leaving many vulnerable to extremism. The international community must create opportunities for young people from the North Caucasus to be integrated with their peers from around Russia and other countries. Donors should support the creation of networks of young people that focus on common concerns, establish political dialogue about the future and address issues of reconciliation. Students from the North Caucasus need scholarships for study abroad, and universities and schools need assistance packages.

In addition, monitoring needs to be improved. For years, local organisations have tracked tens of thousands of detentions, killings, disappearances and incidences of torture in Chechnya. The shocking details have not moved the international community (with a few exceptions) to pay attention. As atrocities spread beyond Chechnya, local groups need help finding novel ways of conveying this information to the international community.

The security implications of abuse need also to be addressed. Events in Chechnya and the North Caucasus are often depicted as peripheral to developments in Russia. In fact, human rights abuses and impunity have had profound security implications. Of grave concern are the links between the abuses experienced by civilians, the lack of response from local and central authorities, and the growth in support for insurgents and terrorists among local populations. Clearly this is not a set of circumstances exclusive to this region.

International donors need to co-ordinate their activities in the North Caucasus. At the same time, donors need to get better at learning what types of humanitarian and developmental assistance are most effective in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, including from non-governmental experts. An international working group must be created on the North Caucasus. The conflict resolution community should be engaged to draw lessons from other regions. Many donors that support work in Russia have not made conflict resolution an area of funding. This should change.

The conventional wisdom that we can do nothing to tackle the problems of the North Caucasus must be challenged. On the anniversary of Beslan, and in memory of the tens of thousands of other Russian civilians and military personnel who have died or been affected by the war in Chechnya, the international community must dedicate new leadership and resources to persuade and assist Russia in addressing the crisis of the North Caucasus. It needs to happen before another Beslan turns the region into a full-scale conflagration.

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