

## Take Action with #EyesOnChechnya<sup>1</sup>

As gay men have been rounded up, tortured, and even killed in the Russian republic of Chechnya, HRC has taken action to help put an end to the atrocities.

From working with the U.S. administration and Congress to activating our membership and raising up our voices together, HRC has sent a clear message that we have our #EyesOnChechnya and that the human rights violations must stop. The #EyesOnChechnya campaign is a partnership of the Human Rights Campaign and Human Rights First.

### What can you do?<sup>2</sup>

- Learn More.** This document contains information about the situation in Chechnya and actions you can take to help LGBTQ Chechens who are facing persecution. You can also keep up to date by subscribing to HRC's daily [A.M. Equality](#) email, and keeping up with our [blog](#) and our [website](#).
- Speak Up.** Whether speaking to a co-worker or to your social media network, we must raise our voices and focus the world's attention on Chechnya. Below is sample social media language you can use to join the public outcry:
  - Twitter
    - Reports of gay men being forcibly held in detention camps in Chechnya is a crime against humanity. #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>
    - Gay men are being beaten & tortured in camps in Chechnya. We cannot turn away from these atrocities. #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>
    - The U.S. should welcome gay Chechen refugees. We can't turn our backs on them #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>
    - Reports of gay men in detention camps in Chechnya is a crime against humanity. World leaders must act #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>
  - Facebook
    - Gay men are being detained and killed in Chechnya - but officials are denying these reports. We must elevate the victims' stories and put a stop to these atrocities. #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>
    - Men in Chechnya are being detained, tortured and killed on suspicion of being gay. We cannot turn away from these atrocities. Take action today. #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>
    - Men in Chechnya are being detained, tortured and even killed on suspicion of being gay. Chechen and Russian officials are refusing to stop the detentions. We must give shelter to the victims and call on the Russian government to put an end to these crimes against humanity. #EyesOnChechnya <[hrc.im/chechnya](http://hrc.im/chechnya)>

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1 Published June 20, 2017. This document will be updated weekly to reflect new actions and information.

2 The #EyesOnChechnya resource page can be accessed at <http://www.hrc.org/campaigns/eyesonchechnya>

- 3 **Take Action.** Join HRC in [urging](#) the White House to speak up about the ongoing atrocities. While U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations [Nikki Haley](#) and the State Department have issued statements, it is time for the White House to speak up. [Join thousands of other HRC members](#) in calling for action by the White House.
- 4 **Support the Victims.** HRC encourages people to [donate](#) to the Russian LGBT Network which is doing critical work to help evacuate vulnerable people out of Chechnya and provide support for those who remain there. U.S.-based donors can also make tax-deductible [donations](#) to ILGA-Europe's fund which helps to cover the medium- and long-term costs of relocating the victims to safe countries. HRC is also [calling on the U.S. government](#) to take in those fleeing the violence.

## The Situation

Over the last few months, authorities in Chechnya, a federal republic of Russia located in the North Caucasus, have rounded up and detained men suspected of being gay or bisexual. While it appears that there have been no new arrests since the beginning of May 2017, the detentions - often in secret prisons - are continuing. There are [widespread reports](#) that some of the men have been tortured and up to twenty may have been murdered. One victim said authorities treated them "like animals." He said: "Beatings, electric shocks I could deal with... I was strong. But the humiliation was unbearable," he [said](#). "The [police] spit in our faces, they called us disgusting, offensive names, they forced us into humiliating poses... When they finally released me, I was close to hanging myself."

Chechen officials have also reportedly [encouraged](#) families to murder relatives they suspect might be gay, something that [at least one family](#) seems to have taken quite seriously.

Chechen leaders have denied these reports, going so far as to [deny the very existence of LGBTQ people in Chechnya](#). Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov [said](#) in an interview, "We have never had them [LGBTQ people] among the Chechens. Unless we are talking about those who aren't Chechens but say they are so that they can get to the West."

Despite the denials, [recent British reports](#) suggest that Chechen officials have set a target to "eliminate" all gay people from Chechnya by the start of Ramadan, which begins at the end of May this year.

While the initial detentions and attacks targeted suspected gay and bisexual men, the campaign has also brought about a surge in lesbian women sharing stories about humiliation, abuse and threats they have faced from male relatives or from friends. There are also reports that the wives of some of the detainees are frightened that they will be targeted as well.

The Russian government, which has a complicated relationship with Chechnya following [two bloody wars](#) there, initially refused to intervene, telling victims to ["file official complaints and go to court."](#) which is, of course, unlikely to yield any results.

On May 5, Russian President Vladimir Putin [announced](#) that he would support an investigation and would ask his government to cooperate with Russia's human rights ombudsman in her inquiries. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Putin's government has a long history of undermining or ending investigations that might embarrass them, such as those looking into the deaths of [journalists](#) and [anti-corruption activists](#).

Indeed, on May 11, less than one week after Putin's announcement, a Russian diplomat in Israel [claimed](#) that the investigation had already concluded and that "there are no victims of persecution, threats or violence." The statement was part of a letter the Russian Embassy wrote to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, after the paper had published an article about the attacks. The Russians dismissed the allegations of secret prisons as "storerooms."

And on May 11, authorities in Moscow [detained](#) LGBTQ activists seeking to deliver a petition with signatures from "more than two million people around the world, more than the entire population of the Chechen republic," to the Russian prosecutor general's office, which asked that a full investigation into the crimes be launched. They had also [arrested protesters](#) on May 1 in St. Petersburg who were calling for a stop to the detentions.

However, on May 24, [reports](#) emerged that the Russians were conducting a more credible investigation under lead detective Igor Sobol, who is, according to a number of [reports](#) "meticulous," "fearless" and "reputable." This may also be a sign that the Chechen government had "crossed a line" in their relationship with the Kremlin. The Moscow Times [reported](#) on May 24 that Chechen officials were already in "panic mode" over the investigation and that several had expressed "newfound tolerance" for the LGBTQ community there, with one police chief even suggesting he'd permit a gay pride parade in Grozny.

## Helping the Victims

While some of the victims have been released from detention, they are not safe in Chechnya, in Russia, or even in many parts of Europe, where they can still be tracked down by family, associates, or even Chechen officials looking to conduct "honor killings."

The [Russian LGBT Network](#)<sup>3</sup> is a close partner of HRC and the most prominent organization working to evacuate people from the region. On May 18, BuzzFeed [reported](#) that conversations between the Network and the U.S. embassy "have led [the Network] to believe that visas to the United States are out of reach for gay Chechens fleeing" the purge. HRC immediately responded, sending a [letter](#) from HRC president Chad Griffin to Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asking him to welcome gay Chechens to the U.S. through any means possible.

On May 26, BuzzFeed [reported](#) that the victims were "finally" beginning to receive visas to leave Russia - two to Lithuania and seven more to undisclosed locations, at least partially facilitated by the Canadian organization [Rainbow Railroad](#). France [has taken in](#) at least one victim.

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3 The Network has set up a hotline to collect stories and provide assistance to LGBTQ people in Chechnya. More information can be found on their [webpage](#).

## Background

News of the arrests were first reported in the Russian newspaper [Novaya Gazeta](#) on April 1, though it is believed that detentions were occurring as early as February. On April 3, some 15,000 people gathered in Chechnya's capital, Grozny, to protest *Novaya Gazeta* and one speaker [called](#) its journalists "enemies of our faith and of our country." The journalist who broke the story, Elena Milashina, has reportedly [fled the country](#) because of threats against her life.

According to a Human Rights Watch (HRW) [report](#) released on May 26, the purge began with the detention of one young man outside of Grozny, the Chechen capital, who had photos on his phone that indicated he may be gay. Authorities there interrogated him and, using his social media connections, identified further gay men and detained them. This process repeated itself many times until they had dozens of men in detention. HRW also alleges that Magomed Daudov, the speaker of the Chechen parliament and "a close colleague and confidante of Kadyrov...played a key role in both securing and giving approval from the Chechen leadership to set in motion the purge."

This brutal crackdown on gay Chechens comes amidst a [warming of ties](#) between Russia and a number of anti-LGBTQ extremists in the U.S. Reverend Franklin Graham has [reportedly](#) met with Russian president Vladimir Putin to secure his help in producing conferences in Russia, and the leader of the National Organization for Marriage, [Brian Brown](#), has [said](#) that activists in both the U.S. and Russia are increasingly "uniting together under the values we share."

## Trump Administration Response

The U.S. response has been inconsistent. State Department spokesman Mark Toner issued a [statement](#) on April 7 "categorically condemn[ing] the persecution of individuals based on their sexual orientation or any other basis" and urging the Russians to speak out and conduct "an independent and credible investigation." U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley similarly [issued a statement](#) 10 days later condemning the atrocities as "a violation of human rights" and calling on the Chechen government to hold the perpetrators accountable.

However, Secretary of State Tillerson has yet to make a public statement on Chechnya and [admitted in a Congressional hearing](#) on June 13 that he had not yet raised the issue with his counterparts in Russia - despite receiving numerous letters from HRC and others, and despite the more than two months after the initial reports had broken.

President Trump has similarly failed to make any statements on Chechnya. In that same June 13 hearing, Secretary Tillerson stated that he did not know if the president had raised the issue with Putin.

The Trump Administration has also been unhelpful on helping those fleeing the violence. On May 18, Buzzfeed [reported](#) that conversations between the Russian LGBT Network and the U.S. embassy "have led [the Network] to believe that visas to the United States are out of reach for gay Chechens fleeing" the purge. (See more in section above on "Helping the Victims.")

## HRC's Ongoing Efforts

From the day the news about detentions and abuse of gay men in Chechnya broke, HRC has been in contact with advocates in Chechnya and Russia to better understand how we can support their efforts. After consultations with them and with coalition partners in the U.S., HRC has taken a number of actions:

- HRC launched its #EyesOnChechnya webpage and campaign, in partnership with Human Rights First, to help draw further attention to the issue.
- On April 4, HRC president Chad Griffin sent a [letter](#) to U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson asking him to raise these human rights violations with the Russian government during his visit to the country the following week.
- On April 12, HRC sent out a [membership action email](#), asking HRC members to take action and urge President Trump to call on Russia to immediately stop the detention and murder of LGBTQ people in Chechnya. Thousands of HRC members responded.
- On May 9, HRC joined together with Amnesty International and Human Rights First to stage a protest [rally](#) outside the Russian Ambassador's residence.
- On May 15, HRC [penned an op-ed in The Advocate](#), calling further attention to the situation and connecting it with the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) on May 17.
- Throughout the period, HRC staff have met with and spoken repeatedly with officials at the U.S. State Department and the U.N. to urge them to take further steps.
- HRC staff have worked with members of Congress on issuing and amplifying statements, such as the bipartisan letters in the U.S. [House](#) and [Senate](#) condemning the atrocities.
- HRC has worked to bring visibility to the issue through statements by influencers like former U.S. Vice President [Joe Biden](#) and the [U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum](#).
- On May 22, HRC President Chad Griffin [sent a second letter](#) to Secretary Tillerson asking him to welcome gay Chechens to the U.S. through any means possible, and once again asking him to condemn the atrocities in Chechnya.
- On June 13, HRC publicly [blasted](#) Tillerson for failing to raise the atrocities with his counterparts in Russia.

## Who is speaking out?

There have been a large number of statements from the international community condemning the arrests, including a [joint statement from 23 nations in the Equal Rights Coalition](#) on April 26 calling on Russia to investigate. There have also been statements from the [U.S. State Department](#), U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. [Nikki Haley](#), the [European Union](#), the [European Parliament](#), German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#), U.N. human rights [experts](#), former U.S. Vice President [Joe Biden](#), Senate Democratic Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) (D-NY), House Democratic Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-CA) and House Democratic Whip [Steny Hoyer](#) (D-MD). U.S. Senator Marco Rubio and Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both Republicans of Florida, each highlighted the issue on the [Senate](#) and the [House](#) floor. Senators Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Susan Collins (R-ME) sent a [letter](#) to the Trump Administration on May 10, asking Secretary Tillerson to press his Russian counterparts on the situation there.

On May 17, in honor of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDA-HOT), Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney (D-NY) organized a [video campaign](#) among his colleagues, in which members of Congress recorded their support for the victims and condemned the atrocities.

On May 25, the Foreign Affairs Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives [passed](#) a resolution, [H.Res.351](#), which condemns the atrocities and “calls on Chechen officials to immediately cease the abduction, detention, and torture of individuals on the basis of their actual or suspected sexual orientation, and hold accountable all those involved in perpetrating such abuses.” The resolution was introduced by Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and had 66 bipartisan cosponsors as of May 26. During debate on the resolution a number of speakers from both sides of the aisle also condemned the atrocities, including the chairman of the committee, Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), [calling them “brutal,” “outrageous,” “shocking,” “inhumane,” “barbaric” and “unthinkable.”](#)

In addition, celebrities including Ariana Grande, Evan Rachel Wood, Trace Lysette, Don Cheadle, RuPaul, Nyle Dimarco and Alyssa Milano have joined HRC in bringing attention to this issue by sharing our content through social media.

On May 9, Sen. Ben Cardin (D-MD) sent a [letter](#) to Secretary Tillerson and Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly, raising the situation in Chechnya and asking them to “pursue possible avenues for urgently admitting these persecuted LGBT individuals to the U.S.” through different tools available to the U.S. government.