

#EyesOnChechnya Backgrounder¹

As men who were suspected of being gay or bisexual were rounded up, tortured, and even killed in the Russian republic of Chechnya in 2017, and as the atrocities continued into 2018 with continued detentions and human rights abuses, HRC members have taken action to help put an end to the violence.

From working with Congress to activating our membership and raising up our voices together, HRC has sent a clear message that we have our #EyesOnChechnya, the human rights violations must stop, the perpetrators must be held accountable, and the international community must recognize that these constitute crimes against humanity. [Click here](#) to learn more about how you can get engaged and help put a stop to the violence.

The Situation

Since early 2017, 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. There are [widespread reports](#) that some of the men have been tortured and up to twenty may have been murdered. Chechen officials have also reportedly [encouraged](#) families to murder relatives they suspect might be gay or bisexual, something that [at least one family](#) seems to have acted on.

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.” A Russian official [repeated that claim](#) at the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2018, saying that a Russian investigation into the crimes “did not confirm evidence of rights’ violations, nor were we even able to find representatives of the LGBT community in Chechnya.”

While the initial detentions and attacks targeted men suspected of being gay or bisexual, the campaign has also brought about a surge in lesbian women sharing stories about humiliation, abuse and threats they have faced from relatives or from friends.

Trump-Pence Administration Response

The U.S. response has been inadequate and inconsistent. The State Department spokesman issued a [statement](#) on April 7, 2017 “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](#) the same month condemning the atrocities as “a violation of human rights” and calling on the Chechen government to hold the perpetrators accountable.

However, former Secretary of State Tillerson never made a public statement on Chechnya and [admitted in a Congressional hearing](#) in June 2017 that he had not yet raised the issue with his Russian counterpart - despite receiving numerous letters from HRC and others. In July 2017, the State Department acknowledged that Tillerson has sent a letter to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov but the State Department has refused to share the text of the letter. HRC has [filed a request for](#)

1 Revised July 2018. This document will be updated to reflect new information.

[the letter](#) under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which has not yet received a response. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has not publicly raised this issue during his tenure either.

President Donald Trump has similarly failed to make any statements on Chechnya in the last sixteen months. In a June Congressional hearing, then-Secretary Tillerson stated that he did not know if the president had raised the issue with Putin. In July 2017 Trump met with Putin at the G-20 summit in Germany and, despite HRC's [renewed call for Trump to raise this issue](#) with his Russian counterpart, there are no reports that he did so. The two met again in July 2018 in Helsinki, Finland with the same disappointing result. On the eve of that summit, [HRC projected images](#) onto Helsinki's Presidential Palace, calling on the two leaders to condemn the crimes against humanity in Chechnya and to initiate a serious investigation into the atrocities. The director of HRC Global, Ty Cobb, also [spoke at a rally](#) in Helsinki that day, calling on Trump to speak out.

The Trump-Pence Administration has also been unhelpful toward those fleeing the violence. In May last year, 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. This is in stark contrast to the governments of [Canada](#), [Lithuania](#), [France](#) and others who have opened their doors to resettling these refugees.

Nonetheless, on December 20, 2017, the U.S. Treasury Department announced sanctions under the Magnitsky Act against Kadyrov and Ayub Kataev, whom Treasury [stated](#) was "involved in abuses against gay men in Chechnya during the first half of 2017." At HRC's urging, Congress had called on Treasury to sanction Chechen officials in the resolutions they had passed condemning the atrocities in Chechnya. (More on those resolutions below.)

Who is speaking out?

Despite the silence by President Trump, there have been a large number of statements from other American leaders, including the [U.S. State Department](#) (though not from former Secretary Tillerson), U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. [Nikki Haley](#), 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](#) floors.

On June 27, 2017 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 85 bipartisan cosponsors. 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."](#)

On October 30, 2017 the U.S. Senate passed [an identical resolution](#) (S.Res.211) that had been introduced in June by Senators Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Ed Markey (D-MA) with more than 35 of their colleagues.

Many voices in the international community have also condemned the arrests, including a [joint statement from 23 nations in the Equal Rights Coalition](#) in April 2017 calling on Russia to investigate. There have also been statements from the [European Union](#), the [European Parliament](#), the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#), German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#), British Prime Minister [Theresa May](#), Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#), French President [Emmanuel Macron](#), and a number of U.N. human rights [experts](#).

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.