

December 21, 1999: War in Chechnya Fed by Religious Bigotry

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As United States and international policymakers wrestle with the important question about how best to express their deepest concern over Russian behavior in Chechnya, they should bear in mind that religious bigotry is helping fuel the conflict, said Rabbi David Saperstein, chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

"The Russian war on the tiny Chechen nation is more than ethnic-- Moscow is exploiting and inciting deep-seated and historic religious prejudices among the Russian population," Chairman Saperstein said. "This is most apparent in the constant reference to 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' terrorists or 'bandits.'" Almost all Chechens are Muslims, while the majority of Russians identify with the Russian Orthodox Church, a Christian denomination.

Saperstein noted that while the Russian government blames Chechen separatists for a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and elsewhere earlier this year that killed hundreds, it has to date presented no evidence as to who was responsible. "One has to wonder how a police force that reportedly hasn't solved a single murder case involving businessmen can be so certain about who is to blame for the bombings," the chairman said. "And at any rate, the entire Chechen nation is not responsible for the alleged crimes of a few."

Saperstein called upon the U.S. government "to press Russia to stop playing upon popular prejudice against and fear of Muslims to justify its military excesses. The West must make clear to the Russian government that, while we value our relationship with them and want no return to a cold war, they cannot behave in this fashion and expect no repercussions."

Rabbi David Saperstein, Chair

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