

**17 December 1996**

**Six ICRC delegates assassinated in Chechnya**

In the early hours of 17 December 1996, six delegates of the International Committee of the Red Cross were assassinated in a brutal attack by gunmen at the ICRC hospital in Novye Atagi, near Grozny.

In late summer 1996, the ICRC had decided to open a field hospital in Chechnya because the main hospitals in Grozny had been seriously damaged, thus leaving large numbers of war-wounded without proper care.

Several locations had been considered for the hospital facility. The village of Novye Atagi, some 20 km south of Grozny, was selected because it was largely untouched by the fighting, its inhabitants having managed to remain uninvolved, and there was a compound formerly belonging to a boarding school that could easily be converted into a field hospital.

The hospital equipment was donated by the Norwegian government and the Norwegian Red Cross, and most of the medical staff were seconded by National Societies of Western Europe, Canada and New Zealand. The ICRC assumed overall responsibility for running the facility.

The hospital opened on 2 September 1996. That same day it admitted some 50 patients, all of them war-wounded. By the time the attack occurred on 17 December, the hospital had treated 321 patients; its staff had performed 594 surgical operations and given 1,717 outpatient consultations.

These activities, the sole purpose of which was to relieve the suffering of victims of the conflict in Chechnya, came to an abrupt end in the early hours of 17 December, when masked individuals, armed with guns fitted with silencers, broke into the hospital compound. They burst into the building where the delegates were sleeping and cold-bloodedly shot six of them dead at point-blank range. The victims were:

**Fernanda Calado**, an ICRC nurse of Spanish nationality  
**Ingeborg Foss**, a nurse from the Norwegian Red Cross  
**Nancy Malloy**, a medical administrator from the Canadian Red Cross  
**Gunnhild Myklebust**, a nurse from the Norwegian Red Cross  
**Sheryl Thayer**, a nurse from the New Zealand Red Cross  
**Hans Elkerbout**, a construction technician from the Netherlands Red Cross.

A seventh delegate, Christophe Hensch, was wounded in the shoulder and left for dead.

Within hours of the attack, the ICRC handed over responsibility for the hospital and its patients to the Chechen Ministry of Health. All the staff were evacuated, and Christophe Hensch was flown back to Switzerland on board an ambulance aircraft. The following day the other survivors and the bodies of the six murdered delegates were repatriated on a specially chartered aircraft. Ceremonies fraught with emotion were held before the aircraft's departure and on its arrival, and other ceremonies took place in the victims' home countries. A day of national mourning was declared in Chechnya.

The brutal assassination of its expatriates compelled the ICRC to suspend all operations in Chechnya requiring the presence of delegates. Aid programmes conducted with the help of local partners, such as the Ministry of Health or local committees of the Red Cross, are nevertheless still under way, and are receiving material support from the ICRC and assistance from its locally recruited staff. The ICRC has also suspended some of its activities in the neighbouring autonomous republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia owing to growing insecurity in these regions. On the other hand, the organization has maintained its mission in Nalchik, capital of the autonomous republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, which enables it to monitor developments in the situation in the northern Caucasus.

Following the attack, the Chechen and Russian federal judicial authorities immediately opened an inquiry. Although the ICRC has yet to receive any information on the findings of the investigation, it is clear that the murders were carefully planned. The assassins were familiar with the premises and were equipped with weapons designed for this type of operation. The attack was obviously aimed at the expatriate staff, since the two Chechen interpreters sleeping in the same building as the delegates were spared, and the two guards whom the assailants came across were struck but not killed. There is every indication that the intruders intended to murder all the expatriates at the hospital, but were interrupted in this grisly undertaking when the alarm was sounded.

To date, the ICRC has no knowledge of the identity or motives of either the attackers or those who ordered the killings. No one has claimed responsibility for the murders and it appears likely that no one ever will, since this heinous crime was universally condemned. Under such circumstances, the ICRC can do little more than speculate on the matter, since none of the hypotheses put forward is based on actual evidence.

There is a striking contrast between the horror of the crime, which was premeditated and committed in cold blood, and the countless messages of condolence and solidarity that have poured in from all over the world and from Chechnya in particular.

The ICRC expresses its deepest sympathy to the families of the deceased, who gave their lives for the humanitarian ideal and in the name of solidarity with the victims of the conflict that has ravaged Chechnya. It also offers sincere condolences to the Canadian Red Cross, the Netherlands Red Cross, the Norwegian Red Cross and the New Zealand Red Cross.

The ICRC unreservedly condemns the attack, which struck at the very core of humanitarian action. For the murders were committed within the confines of a hospital that was not only under the protection of the red cross emblem, but whose sole purpose was to provide medical aid to the victims of war.

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