

# The Norwegian Helsinki Committee

## Annual Report 2008



NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

# The Norwegian Helsinki Committee

## Established in 1977

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee is a non-governmental organisation that works to promote respect for human rights, nationally and internationally. Its work is based on the conviction that documentation and active promotion of human rights by civil society is needed for states to secure human rights, at home and in other countries.

The work of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC) is based on the Helsinki Declaration, which was signed by 35 European and North American states at the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975. The declaration states that respect for human rights is a key factor in the development of peace and understanding between states.

Main focal areas of the NHC are the countries of Europe, North America and Central Asia. The NHC works irrespective of ideology or political system in these countries and maintains political neutrality.

## HOW WE WORK

### HUMAN RIGHTS MONITORING AND REPORTING

Through monitoring and reporting on problematic human rights situations in specific countries, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee sheds light on violations of human rights. The NHC places particular emphasis on civil and political rights, including the fundamental freedoms of expression, belief, association and assembly. On-site research and close co-operation with key civil society actors are our main working methods. The NHC has expertise on election observation and has sent numerous observer missions to elections over the last two decades.

### SUPPORT OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

By sharing knowledge and with financial assistance, the NHC supports local initiatives for the promotion of an independent civil society and public institutions as well as free media. A well functioning civil society is a precondition for the development of democracy in a society.

### EDUCATION AND INFORMATION

Through education and information about democracy and human rights, international law and multi-cultural understanding, we work to increase the focus on human rights violations. Our aim is to influence both public opinion and governments in human rights matters.

### INTERNATIONAL PROCESSES

Through participation in international processes, meetings and conferences, the NHC seeks to influence governments and international organisations to make human rights a priority.

## Focus on Russia

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has worked with human rights issues in Russia for many years. In close cooperation with our friends and partners in the Russian human rights movement, we have documented violations of fundamental human rights and reported our findings to an international audience. This is an important part of our work.

During the last few years, we have focussed on human rights education in Northwestern Russia. Together with North-Norwegian municipal institutions, we have organized various human rights schools and programs for youth in their late teens from Russia and Norway, for teachers, journalists and recently also for prison guards and officers working in detention- and penal facilities. Murmansk and Arkhangelsk are key areas in this regard.

Gradually, cooperation with Russian local authorities and local organizations has taken root.

In December 2008, however, I was detained in Murmansk together with the head of our education department, Enver Djuliman, by officers from the Federal Migration Service. We were interrogated and fined for overstepping visa regulations. Enver Djuliman had his visa revoked and was again fined in early March 2009.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee regrets the actions of the Russian authorities, which to us seem unfounded, and may result in damaging our work for Russian youth.

Unfortunately, the events in Murmansk are part of a larger picture in which human rights defenders, civic activists and journalists work under increasingly difficult conditions, and face problems ranging from administrative harassment to, in extreme cases, murder.

In the current climate, critics of the authorities and of human rights abuse risk being killed. Such crimes are often without punishment. Since 2000 more than 15 journalists have been killed, many of them after writing about the conflict in Chechnya, which remains a forbidden subject for Russian media.

Russian authorities have tightened their control of civil society and media, through a wide range of legislative and regulatory measures (including the so-called NGO-law of 2006) which are selectively and arbitrarily used to restrict organizational freedom and freedom of expression. The political opposition has difficulties in operating freely and accessing the public in a meaningful way. The courts are not functioning independently.

In short, the authoritarian traits of the new Russia are becoming increasingly visible.

Norway and other European countries must react forcefully and confront Russia regarding these developments. At the same time they need to support the strong forces in Russia that remain committed to human rights, the rule of law and democratic values.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee will continue to report about human rights violations in Russia, just as we do in other countries. We will continue our cooperation with Russian human rights groups, and seek to develop our relations with Russian official institutions involved in human rights issues.

Our aim is to promote fundamental human rights. The peoples of Russia are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as the other peoples of Europe.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bjørn Engesland". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Bjørn Engesland,  
Secretary General

## The NHC Secretariat



**Bjørn Engesland**  
Secretary General. Member of the board of the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, member of the board of trustees of the Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights. Head of the Norwegian Human Rights House.



**Anders Nielsen**  
Information officer. Responsible for the EEA grants information portal [www.ngonorway.org](http://www.ngonorway.org)



**Mina Skouen**  
Project co-ordinator of the NHC human rights education programme. Responsible for programmes in North Caucasus, the Balkans and Norway.



**Elena Saenkova**  
Project co-ordinator, Murmansk office.

### OTHER STAFF:

**Anne Marit Austbø**  
Advisor. On leave in 2008.



**Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal**  
Deputy Secretary General. Responsible for the work of the NHC in Central Asia, Turkey, Armenia and Rwanda. Key competence in the field of international criminal courts and justice.



**Aage Borchgrevink**  
Advisor, focus on Russia. Member of the board of the NGO Russian Justice Initiative, the Netherlands.



**Csilla Czibalmos**  
Project assistant, human rights education programme.

**Nebojša Tašić**  
Regional co-ordinator of Human Rights Schools in the Western Balkans, Beograd.

**Adela Galešić**  
Regional co-ordinator of Human Rights Schools in the Western Balkans, Sarajevo.



**Vanja Bentsen Kleven**  
Co-ordinator for EEA grants.

**Silja Nordahl**  
Head of information until April 2008.



**Ole B. Lilleås**  
Advisor, focus on Western Balkans. Co-ordinator of the Norwegian NGO forum for Human Rights.

**Julie Chadbourne**  
NHC representative in Kosovo until June 2008.



**Fernanda Zubillaga Nilsen**  
Head of administration, responsible for office management and finance.



**Inna Sangadzhivaya**  
Project co-ordinator, focus on Russia and Belarus.



**Ivar Dale**  
Regional representative in Central Asia.

**Zuzanna Godzimirska**  
Project assistant until October 2008.

**Toita Asjgirieva**  
Volunteer.



**Berit Nising Lindeman**  
Head of information since April 2008. Advisor, focus on Central Asia, Belarus, Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Key competence in election observation.



**Enver Djuliman**  
Head of the NHC human rights education programme. Responsible for all education programmes, focus on the education programmes in Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.



**Elena Mamadnazarova**  
Project co-ordinator at the NHC Central Asia office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

**Gloria Pesarin**  
Trainee until June 2008.

**Lene Wetteland**  
Election observer Armenia, February/ March 2008.

## Organisation

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee's bodies consist of the annual meeting, the board and the council. The annual meeting is the committee's highest body, and consists of members of the council and the board. The board holds monthly meetings, where decisions relevant to the committee's strategy, principles and economic dispositions are made. The Secretary General is Head of the secretariat, and is responsible for the daily operations of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee.

### BOARD

Chairperson: **Stein Ivar Aarsæther**, Information Director, ABB Zurich.

Vice Chairperson: **Ragnhild Astrup Tschudi**, Human rights activist with a special focus on Russia and Eastern Europe.

**Hans Morten Haugen**, Associate Professor, Diakonhjemmet University College.

**Hauk Lund**, Executive director, Hauk Lund Consulting A/S.

**Anne Julie Semb**, Associate professor, Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo.

**Julie Wilhelmsen**, Research fellow, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).

**Morten Bergsmo**, Senior Researcher, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO).

### COUNCIL

#### President:

**Kristin Clemet (2010)\***

#### Vice president:

**Bjørn Jacobsen (2011)**

- Anniken Huitfeldt (2010)
- Ellen Juul-Andersen (2011)
- Frode Bakken (2010)
- Trond Bakkevig (2009)
- Peter Batta (2010)
- Jo Benkow (2009)
- Tor G. Birkeland (2010)
- Anne Marit Bjørnflaten (2010)
- Anders Bratholm (2009)
- Bernt Bull (2011)
- Nils Butenschjøn (2011)
- Tor Böhler (2010)
- Juni Dahr (2009)
- Ole Drolsum (2010)
- Grete Faremo (2011)

- Arne Fjeld (2010)
- Dankert Freilem (2009)
- Grethe Fossum (2010)
- Bjørn Cato Funnemark (2011)
- Aleksander Gleichgewicht (2009)
- Fredrik Grønningsæter (2010)
- Bernt Hagtvat (2011)
- Bjørn Hoelseth (2011)
- Leiv Hovelsen (2011)
- Ingunn Jordheim (2009)
- Knut Kloster jr. (2009)
- Berit Kvæven (2009)
- Arne Liljedahl Lynngård (2010)
- Inge Mannsåker (2011)
- Eigil Nansen (2010)
- Mette Newth (2010)
- Manuela Ramin Osmundsen (2009)
- Pål Erik Plaum (2010)
- Victor Roddvik (2009)

- Jan Tore Sanner (2009)
- Marianne B. Skou (2009)
- Erik Solheim (2009)
- Lars Petter Soltvedt (2010)
- Atle Sommerfeldt (2009)
- Bjørn Stordrange (2009)
- Michael Tetzschner (2009)
- Ane Sofie Tømmerås (2011)
- Linn Ullmann (2010)
- Kåre Vollan (2010)
- Maria Warsinski (2011)
- Svein Wilhelmsen (2011)
- Kristin Aase (2009)
- Helge Blakkisrud (2011)

\*Election year

## Content

<b>The Norwegian Helsinki Committee</b>	2
Focus on Russia	3
The nhc Secretariat	4
Organisation	5
<b>I The year 2008 in retrospect</b>	6
Human Rights abuses in the North Caucasus	6
Greece and the Dublin II regulation	7
Troubles in Bishkek	7
ACTIVITIES, BY COUNTRY	8
The Russian Federation	8
Belarus	9
Ukraine	10
SOUTH CAUCASUS	11
Armenia	11
Azerbaijan	12
Georgia	13
CENTRAL ASIA	14
WESTERN BALKANS	17
<b>II Human Rights Education</b>	19
<b>III Human Rights in Norway</b>	22
<b>IV Co-operation and International Processes</b>	24
<b>V EEA Grants</b>	26
<b>VI Information</b>	27
<b>VII Finances</b>	27

## I

## The year 2008 in retrospect

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has a strong national and international commitment, with widespread activities in many countries. Historically, our commitment has its basis in the OSCE Helsinki document, which makes it natural to maintain a continuous focus on the human rights challenges in Eastern Europe as well as in our own country, Norway. Through the strong commitment, expertise and wide-ranging networks of our staff we follow developments closely, take action on urgent matters and have an extensive range of project activities. The focus is determined by our planning and decisions, but also by current events. In 2008, three major areas of our attention, concern and activity were the critical situation for human rights in North Caucasus, Norwegian refugee policy and the Dublin II regulations, as well as developments around our representative office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

### Human Rights abuses in the North Caucasus

Russia's North Caucasus region – Chechnya in particular – has been at the centre of the NHC's attention since the first war in Chechnya broke out in 1994. Although the wars are over, Chechnya still suffers from military operations, lawlessness and enormous human rights challenges. On numerous occasions the NHC has documented such grave violations of human rights as forced disappearances, torture in secret prisons and extrajudicial executions. Ramzan Kadyrov, a Kremlin protégée who allegedly has personally taken part in torture, leads the Chechen republic. In 2008 the Norwegian Helsinki Committee published *A Regional System of Torture, Forced Confessions and Fabricated Trials in North Caucasus*. This report received wide attention in national and international media and was also presented at a hearing in the Council of Europe.



Poster from Chechnya

The NHC has actively promoted security measures for plaintiffs to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) from the North Caucasus, as many have been exposed to threats. We have urged the Council of Europe and ECHR to introduce a protection programme, and Norwegian authorities to offer asylum to threatened applicants and their families.

In 2007 the Norwegian authorities tightened their practice concerning asylum seekers from the North Caucasus. Since that time, around 80% of asylum seekers from the North Caucasus have had their applications rejected. In July 2008 the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the



A police office in Chechnya.

Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS), Amnesty International Norway, Human Rights House Foundation and asylum lawyers analysed many of those decisions, and concluded that neither the legal application nor the assessment of the security situation in Russia and North Caucasus were satisfactory. The group requested the Norwegian immigration authorities to revise their practice and lower the asylum threshold for applicants from the North Caucasus. The NHC has also provided assistance to a number of asylum applicants from the North Caucasus.



From seminar discussing Chechnya. From left Bjørn Engesland, Aage Borchgrevink and Bjørn Jacobsen

In February the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, in co-operation with Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers (NOAS) sent a letter to the head of the Norwegian Immigration Appeals Board, asking for a halt in the returns of asylum seekers from Norway to Greece. As a country located on the edge of Europe, Greece has a large burden of immigration, and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and NOAS did not consider Greece a safe place for those in need of protection. The Dublin II regulation is an agreement within the European Union, and has been supported by other European countries, including Norway. The Dublin system provides that the first member state an asylum seeker enters should be the one to deal with the application.

On 7 February 2008, Norway made the decision to suspend the Dublin system and to examine the applications of all asylum seekers who had passed through Greece on their way to Norway. Representatives of the NHC and NOAS travelled in March to Greece and together with the Greek Helsinki Monitor examined the treatment of asylum seekers in Greece. These investigations resulted in the report *A Gamble with the Right to Asylum in Europe*, published in April. It documents massive deficiencies, ranging from the lack of legal safeguards to the appalling reception conditions. In 2007, only 0.04% of the 25,000 persons seeking asylum in Greece were granted asylum in first instance. The report was presented by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in the European Parliament, as well as in Stockholm in May. Norway's Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion

responded by instructing the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration to re-open consideration of returning applicants to Greece. This was a controversial decision. Throughout the year there were various media reports of the ill-treatment of asylum seekers in Greece, and regular discussions were held with the Ministry. The Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion followed up by restricting application of the Dublin II regulation in its immigration policy measures published in September. The NHC and our partners have continued to pursue this important issue of principle, not least as we feel that, in returning asylum seekers to Greece, Norway may be in breach of the UN Refugee Convention.

Refugee camp in Greece. Photo Linda Engelberth



## Greece and the Dublin II regulation

In November 2006, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee established a Regional Office in Central Asia. Located in downtown Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, the office was welcomed by local non-governmental organisations, as well as by the authorities, who participated at the opening conference. The office was intended to monitor the human rights situation in the five Central Asian republics, and administer a small grants fund in

The road between Bishkek and Osh



support of local initiatives in human rights.

The NHC embarked on the registration process with the Kyrgyz Ministry of Justice, but soon encountered numerous bureaucratic obstacles to registering as an international NGO. However, the office continued to carry out its work in understanding with the authorities, who among other things were happy to collaborate on a project in a local youth prison.

On 9 June 2008 the NHC office was visited by four police officers – two of them from the GKNB (Kyrgyz security services), who filmed and took pictures of documents in the office. The two NHC representatives working in the office were repeatedly brought in for long rounds of questioning by the police, and were eventually charged with illegal work. The matter went to court, where a series of totally unreasonable claims were made by the authorities. A document purporting to 'prove' that Ivar Dale, the NHC Regional Representative, had given 'untruthful information' about himself

## Troubles in Bishkek



Ivar Dale at the office in Bishkek, shortly after the raid



Ivar Dale is interviewed after the raid

was quickly dismissed by the judge as obviously falsified by the authorities themselves. The NHC won the case.

Our surprise was therefore greater still, when on 12 October 2008, the NHC Representative was denied entry to the Kyrgyz Republic and forced to leave the country. The Border Police later confirmed via the media that a 10-year ban had been placed on Dale. The security services have refused to comment on the matter, saying that such deci-

sions are made 'without any kind of explanation'.

The matter has been raised with Kyrgyz authorities on all levels. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has repeatedly appealed to Kyrgyzstan to resolve the situation – the same has been done by the European Union and the US Permanent Mission to the OSCE. So far, all these efforts have been to no avail, so we will need to find alternative ways for running the NHC Central Asia programme.

## Activities, by country

### The Russian Federation

Developments in Russia are pivotal for all of the former Soviet Republics, and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee has a firm commitment to the promotion of human rights in Russia. Early 2008 was dominated by the presidential elections on 2 March, where Medvedev and Putin changed positions, now with Dmitry Medvedev as president of the Russian Federation and Vladimir Putin as prime minister. However, throughout the year, we at the NHC did not see any meaningful steps towards a more open and democratic society. President Medvedev appeared to be pursuing the policies of former president Putin, and the pressure against independent media and civil society organisations in opposition continued to be severe.

The conflict in North Caucasus remains the most urgent human rights question for the Russian Federation. The rule of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya has been characterised by the extensive use of torture, kidnapping and enforced disappearances.

In November 2008 president Dmitry Medvedev submitted legislation to the Russian State Duma to extend presidential terms from four to six years and also to extend term-limits for State Duma deputies from four to five years. In December 2008 the government proposed to radically expand the definition of treason and espionage. Many analysts, including those from human rights organisations, fear such a wide provision may be misused to criminalise the legitimate activities of international co-operation, such as support for human rights activities.

In connection with a visit to Murmansk in December, NHC Secretary General Bjørn Engesland and the head of our education programme Enver Djuliman were taken from their hotel by police, questioned for several hours and finally fined for allegedly exceeding the limits of their visas. The police asked detailed questions about NHC activities and contacts in the region. Engesland considered the police intervention as 'sheer harassment'.

### ACTIVITIES

Representative of the NHC have closely followed human rights developments in Russia, visiting Moscow, Northwestern Russia and North Caucasus.

Just prior to the Russian presidential elections, the NHC and the Norwegian Union of Journalists hosted an open seminar on Russia after Vladimir Putin's presidency, titled 'After Putin – Putin?', focusing on the prospects for independent media, the conflicts in the North Caucasus, and what Norway can do. NHC invited two highly knowledgeable guests from Russia: Irina Yasina of the Regional Journalists' Club and the Institute of Transitional Economy, and Grigory Shvedov, Director of the information agency 'memo.ru' and member of the board of the International Society

The Kazan-cathedral in Moscow





'Memorial'. These guests shared their views on the political development in Russia, and also had meetings with representatives of the Norwegian Parliament, the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, and other state institutions.

In addition to following the general developments in human rights in Russia, NCH focuses on the country's relationship to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The work-load in the Court is an overwhelming 97,000 cases, of which as much as 28% are cases filed against Russia. The 12 February seminar hosted by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee in Moscow on reform of the European Court of Human Rights urged the Russian authorities to strengthen their co-operation with the European Court of Human Rights and to ratify the protocol on reform of the Court. Several human rights organisations and experts supported the statement from the seminar.

Much of our activity in the Russian Federation has been related to the massive challenges in the North Caucasus. On 14 May the report *A Regional*

*System of Torture, Forced Confessions and Fabricated Trials in North Caucasus* was introduced at a seminar at the House of Literature in Oslo. The report provided an overview of developments in the human rights situation in five republics of the North Caucasus region – Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan – between March 2007 and April 2008. The report concluded that despite some positive developments, the underlying problem of impunity for human rights abuse persists, and the practice of enforced disappearances is being replaced by a regional system of torture, forced confessions and fabricated trials.

On 27 May, the NHC together with the Norwegian environmental protection NGO Bellona examined the impacts of the so-called NGO law – legislation regulating non-governmental organisations, introduced in April 2006. The NHC invited the leader of the Ingush-based NGO MASHR Magomed Mutsolgov, who related first-hand experiences of his organisation regarding the function of the new legal regime.

Belarus under President Alexander Lukashenko is still characterised by a concentration of power and authoritarian rule, suppression of independent media and NGOs, arbitrary arrests and harassment of opposition forces. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has continued its active involvement for the improvement of the human rights situation in Belarus, including support for civil society.

The European Union and Norway suspended for six months the visa sanctions against most senior Belarusian senior officials. This decision came after some of the conditions set by the EU had been met by Belarus, most notably the release of political prisoners. Many friends of Belarus assessed the timing of the suspension of these sanctions negatively, as it came just after the parliamentary elections during which no opposition candidates had won a seat, and the elections had been far from democratic. However, a renewed discussion of the European strategy towards the Lukashenko regime has been unleashed, and some hope that Lukashenko's concession on the issue of political prisoners will form part of a new approach of moving closer to Europe. A condition for increased interaction with the other countries of Europe and the Lukashenko regime must be based on a clear agreement outlining the benchmarks for improvements in the field of human rights.

## ACTIVITIES

The Parliamentary elections held in Belarus on 28 September 2008 were observed by representatives



The parliament, Minsk

of the NHC. The elections took place in a strictly controlled environment with a barely visible campaign. Only 47 out of more than 69,000 members of polling-station election commissions were representatives of opposition parties. Only 276 candidates were registered to compete for 110 seats in



Demonstration in Minsk

the parliament, making these elections the least competitive ever in modern Belarusian history. Prominent opposition leaders of the Belarusian Popular Front Party Viktor Ivashkevich and Vintsuk Viachorka were denied registration, and some members of the opposition decided not to participate in the regime-controlled elections. Some

space was provided for holding election campaigns, but opposition candidates systematically faced more restrictions than the pro-government candidates, including access to coverage in state media. Observers recorded a number of violations during the voting on Election Day as well as massive violations and non-transparent processes during the counting of the ballots.

The NHC condemned the arrests and brutal attacks against peaceful demonstrators in Minsk in March, and called for the immediate withdrawal of the restrictive measures in the draft law on mass media in July.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee nominated 'Ejdevnik', the first electronic daily newspaper in Belarus, [www.ej.by](http://www.ej.by), and the regional newspaper *Gazeta Slonimskaya*, to the Freedom of Expression Foundation/ZEIT Stiftung's press award for 2008. Both received the award at a ceremony in Hamburg in June. This prize is awarded to journalists and media in Russia and Eastern Europe, and is intended to support the independent role of journalists, despite reprisals and financial difficulties, and to encourage people not to be intimidated by censorship and to resist self-censorship.

## Ukraine

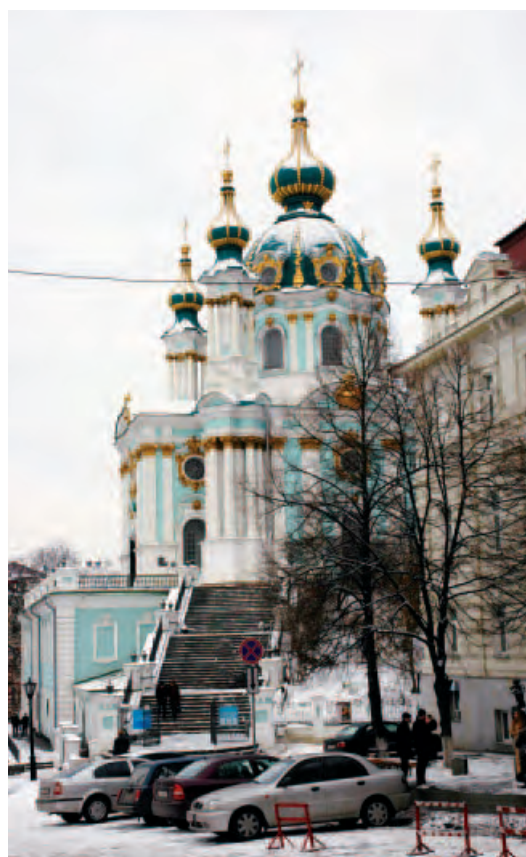
In 2008 disagreement within the government continued, notably demonstrated by the open conflict between the president and the Parliament. The coalition government between the two Orange Revolution allies President Victor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko collapsed once again in August, giving rise to new legal battles over Yushchenko's dissolution of the Parliament and his call for new elections. Despite improvements, the Orange Revolution has still not delivered on its promise to bring respect for the principles of human rights. In particular, ill-treatment in detention is a problem yet to be resolved. On the positive side, important revisions have been made in the country's criminal and law enforcement legislation.

Eight years after his murder, three persons from the Ministry of Interior were convicted for the killing of the journalist Georgy Gongadze. However, many remain critical, maintaining that also others were behind the crime.

Even though refugees and asylum seekers regularly arrive in Ukraine, there is no asylum policy to offer protection. Ukraine continued in 2008 to extradite asylum seekers, without a process that could offer legal security. Ukraine has also expelled refugees who have been granted UNHCR status.

### PROJECT SUPPORT

- › Kharkiv Public Committee for Human Rights Defense. Conducting public actions to improve human rights in Ukraine.



Kiev

## South Caucasus

### Armenia



Riot police

Despite its membership in the Council of Europe and other organisations that demand respect for human rights, Armenia still has issues concerning its own human rights policy. The main problems in Armenia are torture and abuse in the country's prisons and in the military. Freedom of the press is also limited.

### ACTIVITIES

Presidential elections were held in Armenia on 19 February 2008. The incumbent Prime Minister Serge Sargsyan was officially declared the winner, having received 52.8% of the vote. However, opposition candidates disputed the result, claiming several irregularities during the election process. The NHC was represented at the presidential elections with one observer, Lene Wetteland, who monitored and reported from the elections. The OSCE Election Observation Mission concluded the elections were 'mostly in line' with international standards, but listed significant shortcomings. At 16% of the observed polling stations, counting was assessed as 'bad' or 'very bad', and the overall counting process did not contribute to increasing popular trust in the elections. In addition, media coverage of the election campaign appeared biased in favour of the incumbent Prime Minister, who also relied on administrative resources in his campaign.

In the aftermath of the elections, the opposition organised demonstrations in the capital Yerevan that led to major clashes between demonstrators and police. In response to the unrest, the outgoing president of Armenia declared a 20-day state of emergency on 1 March 2008 to restore order. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre, on 4 March, asking Norway to be active on the issue and request the Armenian authorities to promptly carry out an independent investigation into the actions and responsibility for the violence against demonstrators, which caused several deaths on March 1 and 2.



Singing for victory

Demonstration in Yerevan



### PROJECT SUPPORT

- The Armenian Helsinki Association. Monitoring of conditions in prisons and psychiatric institutions.

Azerbaijan

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee remains highly critical towards the Azerbaijani government headed by President Ilham Aliyev. His second term started after presidential elections were held on 15 October, with no serious competition. The incumbent Aliyev was declared the winner, with 89% of the vote. However, this took place in an environment where a free and fair election was not possible. For years, the opposition had operated under conditions of harassment and violence, and had only marginally been allowed to participate in real political processes. For these reasons it decided to boycott the October 2008 elections.

Free media and critical journalism have largely been silenced, thus removing a basic condition for public debate. Several prominent media representatives have been imprisoned for their critical journalism. These include the editor of the newspaper *Azadliq*, Ganimat Sahid, and his brother, the satirical journalist Sakit Sahid, as well as editor and journalist Eynullah Fattullayev. They now are among the more than fifty political prisoners in the country. Corruption remains an enormous problem, evident everywhere in society. Unfortunately, this situation is likely to continue as long as the policies of Western countries towards Azerbaijan appears to be based on the need for access to the vast oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea. The partly state-owned Norwegian oil company StatoilHydro is among the major oil companies operating in Azerbaijan.



Rauf Mirgadirov

ACTIVITIES

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee sent three observers to the October elections, but was for the second time refused accreditation from the Central Elections Committee, and was prevented from entering the polling stations. However, NHC issued a widely-published critical statement on the elections.

Heidar Aliyev still dominates in the streets of Baku



Berit Lindeman and Sardar Jalaloglu, leader of The Azerbaijan Democratic Party

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has provided assistance to the widow of Elmar Huseynov, the murdered editor of the critical journal *Monitor*, with a view to raising a claim against Azerbaijan with the European Court of Human Rights.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee nominated the acclaimed Azerbaijani journalist and political commentator Rauf Mirgadirov to the Freedom of Expression Foundation/ZEIT Stiftung's press prize for 2008. Mirgadirov won this award and was in Oslo in March 2008.

In December the NHC, together with several other international NGOs, protested against the forced closure of the Azeri-language radio broadcasts of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America.



From the OSCE press conference

Leader of the OSCE delegation Ambassador Boris Frlec





Troops in South Ossetia during the election.

The year 2008 was a dramatic one for Georgia. Presidential and parliamentary elections were held in the country, and in August, tensions in the South Ossetian conflict zone escalated into full-scale warfare. As a result, both regions demanding independence – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – were recognised by the Russian Federation, leaving the conflict even more frozen than before.

The NHC is of the opinion that the August war could have been avoided, and that responsibility for the ensuing human suffering rests on all sides involved. On one hand, Russia seems to misuse

### THE KHURCHA INCIDENT

On day of the parliamentary elections on 21 May, a dramatic incident occurred in the small village of Khurcha, inside the de-militarised zone between Abkhazia and Georgia's Zugdidi region.

Two buses carrying voters from the Abkhazian side of the border were blown up by missiles, triggering a massive shoot-out between Georgian forces and unseen enemies nearby. The dramatic images were broadcast widely on Georgian television, while President Saakashvili flew to Zugdidi to visit the injured at a local hospital.

The two NHC representatives observing the elections travelled from nearby Svaneti, and were among the first to reach Khurcha. What they found made them question what had truly happened there.

On the basis of interviews with local people and military experts, the NHC reported that there were indications that the attacks on the buses had been staged by the Georgian side. The details of the NHC visit to Khurcha were made available in a written report. These findings led to a string of inquiries in Georgian media in the following months. A documentary film was also made about the incident.

the simmering conflicts in the Caucasus for its own gains, and its involvement in the conflict went beyond what can be tolerated. On the other hand, Georgian President Saakashvili also bears responsibility for allowing the conflict to escalate to such extremes.

The NHC remains critical of Saakashvili's commitment to human rights and democracy in the spheres of the media and rule of law.

### ACTIVITIES

Two representatives of NHC were accredited observers during the parliamentary elections in May, visiting polling stations in the Samegrelo, Svaneti and Zugdidi regions. Various irregularities were noted – especially evident was the strong presence of police and security services around the polling stations.

Details of NHC's findings were published in a report made available through our website. The report was presented at a press conference in Tbilisi two days after the elections.

Following the war in August, NHC representatives travelled to South Ossetia and the areas around the conflict zone. Numerous interviews of eyewitnesses and victims of aggression on both sides were recorded, using the Case Matrix of the International Criminal Court. These findings will form the basis of a report on human rights in Georgia to be published in 2009.

Throughout the year, the NHC worked together with the Human Rights Documentation Centre, a Georgian NGO operating in large parts of the country.

In December, NHC invited to a seminar with Sozar Subari, the Ombudsman of Georgia, as well as representatives of Georgian civil society. Our guests were also given the opportunity to present their views on developments in their country to the Norwegian Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Relations and to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Burned out buses after the Kurcha incident



## Georgia



Ivar Dale together with a representative from the UN



Georgia during election in may



Sozar Subari

### PROJECT SUPPORT

- Human Rights and Documentation Centre

## Central Asia

The human rights situation in Central Asia remains serious.

The region is rarely covered in Western media, and the situation in each country is poorly known in Norway and Europe. Although some international human rights organisations are represented in Central Asia, there is a need for greater involvement. In some of the five republics of the region, functioning NGOs are few and far between, and it is imperative for civil society in these countries to receive continued support. Two of the most repressive regimes in the world today are located in Central Asia – in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The region has been experiencing increased activity in terms of Western companies' interest in the oil and gas sector. We believe that parallel to increased activity on that level, there must also be greater involvement in civil society, and human rights in particular.

NHC's Central Asia programme is an important contribution in providing attention to local organisations, as well as raising awareness of developments at home and maintaining a dialogue with local authorities.

While there are many similarities among the five republics of Central Asia, the important differences and specifics of each country are often overlooked.

Over the past year, **Kyrgyz** authorities have tightened control of civil society and the media. Restrictive amendments to the law on peaceful assembly seriously hinder the possibility of citizens to voice their concerns in public, leading to arrests. The authorities seek to obstruct the opposition in

Mosque in Tajikistan



On the streets of Dushanbe, capital of Tajikistan

its work by legal persecution of central figures. The difficult economic situation contributes to discontent among the general public, and there is a danger of unrest in 2009.

In **Tajikistan**, the media and civil society are poorly developed. The authorities often use the law on defamation to stop critical voices from being heard in the media, and human rights organisations must exercise caution in their public statements. The situation in the country is still, after the civil war of the 1990s, marked by serious economic difficulties, out-migration to Russia, smuggling and widespread corruption.

**Uzbekistan** is still among the most repressive regimes in the world. In the period after the May 2005 massacre in the town of Andijan, most international organisations were forced to leave the country, and, despite promises of dialogue, the situation remains very serious. Human rights activists, opposition forces and religious groups are routinely imprisoned. The use of torture is common, and civil society operates under near-impossible terms.

In **Turkmenistan**, President Berdymukhamedov has led the country in a somewhat different direction than his predecessor Niyazov, but the changes



The president of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov

have been largely cosmetic. Opposition politicians have largely fled the country and now live abroad. Turkmenistan remains off-limits to human rights organisations, although the authorities have been engaging in dialogue with foreign gas and oil companies. The Norwegian company StatoilHydro established a presence in the country in 2008.

Although **Kazakhstan** has made promises to improve its human rights record, challenges remain in terms of political rights, freedom of religion and other basic rights. The proposed restrictions to the legislation on religious communities sparked national and international criticism. It is to be hoped that the international community will put pressure on the country to make further improvements as Kazakhstan prepares to take over the OSCE chairmanship in 2010.

## ACTIVITIES

Throughout the year, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee was involved in range projects in Central Asia through its Regional Office in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The office carried out its own monitoring of the human rights situation in the region, and supported local initiatives through its small grants fund.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee also actively followed up on several cases where individuals were persecuted. The most notable case concerned the Turkmen dissident *Gulgeldy Annaniyazov*. Annaniyazov was granted refugee status in Norway in 2002. He returned to Turkmenistan in June 2008, apparently hoping to contribute to positive developments in the country under its new president. He was swiftly arrested and later convicted in a closed trial and under unknown charges to 11 years' imprisonment. The NHC has worked actively for his release, but by the end of the year he was still held incommunicado in prison. We have also intervened in support of releasing the arrested poet Yusuf Yuma.

The NHC also continued its involvement in the work at the Youth Prison in Voznesenovka in 2008, visiting the inmates and participating in

One of the projects supported by NHC has been led by an idealistic young Kyrgyz woman, Gazbubu Babayarova (better known as 'Gazi'), who is at the forefront in changing popular ideas on the practice of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. The NHC supported her project first in 2007.

Gazi travels tirelessly to villages throughout the country, arranging workshops and seminars on women's rights as related to bride-kidnapping and forced marriages. Opinions are strong on the matter. Some consider it to be a tradition and a part of Kyrgyz culture, whereas others maintain it is a human rights violation, and that police should become more actively involved in preventing what is a crime – also according to Kyrgyz law. The NHC has published a letter to Kyrgyzstan's political parties in local media, challenging them to take a stand on bride-kidnapping ahead of the Parliamentary elections, and has also raised the issue in Kyrgyz and Norwegian media.



Astana



From the 2005 election in Kyrgyzstan

The Tower of Death, Bukhara



various activities and competitions. This project was started in 2007.

In Tajikistan, the NHC has worked to promote media freedom. Representatives travelled to a several towns and cities, and met with a wide range of journalists, editors and others in the media sector. The impression was not encouraging – the Tajik media suffer under self-censorship, newspapers present very little in-depth journalism, and the government has a hand in most of what is written. As a result, the NHC selected for financial support four projects related to freedom of speech and the media in different parts of the country – from Penjikent in the Sogdh Region, to the town of Khorog, high up in the mountains of Gordo-Badakhshan, and of course in the capital, Dushanbe.

In connection with this project work, the School of Independent Journalism of Tajikistan organised a series of round tables and discussions where representatives of the authorities met with journalists and civil society to talk about these challenges. They also held trainings in journalism for young writers, who were awarded diplomas at the end of the course.

In Kazakhstan, the NHC funded a coalition of human rights organisations to hold a series of lectures on principles of human rights at a university in Almaty. Each week throughout the year, students would have the opportunity to listen to lectures by well-known activists, lawyers, diplomats and experts. During their visit to the university, the NHC representatives were pleased to see how interested young Kazakh students were in this topic.

Together with our friends in the Swedish Helsinki Committee, the NHC helped to organise trainings

on international human rights mechanisms for Uzbek lawyers in 2008.

In Turkmenistan, we supported a documentary film describing life under the new president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov. The British filmmaker Simon Ostrovsky, whose documentary on child labour in the Uzbek cotton industry made headlines all over the world, agreed to make a film on Turkmenistan on our request. The programme was shown on Al-Jazeera, a version has been developed for screening among relevant stakeholders, and we hope that also other international TV channels will take an interest. The documentary can be found on [www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no) as well as on YouTube.

The NHC has also funded the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, who continued their invaluable work on the website [www.chrono-tm.org](http://www.chrono-tm.org), which provides an up-to-date overview of the current situation in the country. Turkmenistan remains one of the most closed and repressive countries in the world today.

The NHC was a supporting organisation when several international NGOs addressed the European Parliament to stress basic human rights conditions in connection with a trade agreement with Turkmenistan.

Throughout the year, leading human rights activists from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan visited Norway in connection with various events organised by the NHC. Among other activities, they had the opportunity to present their views on the current situation in their countries to the asylum division of the Directorate of Immigration, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and with journalists and other interested parties in Oslo.

Registan Samarkand





## Western Balkans

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has been involved in human rights work with local partners in the West Balkans since the second half of the 1980s. An important focus has been to support human rights activities that bring governments to account, especially with respect to transitional justice, the rule of law, human rights of minorities and other vulnerable groups, as well as election standards.

**Kosovo** declared its independence on 17 February 2008 and was quickly recognised by many Western states, but much of the year was lost in a protracted transition from UN authority to an EU-led presence, which ended up under a UN umbrella. To the surprise of many observers, the 2008 parliamentary elections in **Serbia** did not deliver an extreme nationalist government. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the politics of division took the country backwards. The prime minister of **Republika Srpska** threatened with secession, and political leaders continued to nurture nationalist agendas. Few compromises were reached, and decisions and reforms remained clogged in the country's complex political and administrative structures. Elections were held in **Macedonia** in March, amidst elements of violence and irregularities. The name dispute with Greece has continued to cast a shadow over Macedonia's Euro-Atlantic prospects – which are the main motivation for the current peaceful multi-ethnic political co-operation in a country marked by fragile inter-ethnic relations.

Croatia



Demonstration in Mitrovica  
26 February 2008



Celebrating the independence

Security concerns for human rights activists and journalists have been increasing in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Notably, the heads of the Helsinki Committees of Serbia, Sonja Biserko, and of Republika Srpska (in Bosnia and Herzegovina), Branko Todorovic, received severe threats in 2008. Threats, intimidations and violence appear to be linked particularly to the issues of corruption, organised crime and war crimes. Dusko Kondor of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska was murdered and his daughter wounded, in an attack on their apartment in 2007. In May 2008, two persons were sentenced to twenty and to seven years' imprisonment respectively for their role in the murder.

**Transitional justice** is still a key concern. Serbia finally apprehended and extradited Radovan Karadzic and Stojan Zupljanin to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. At the end of 2008, Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic were the only two remaining fugitives. The Belgrade War Crimes Court suffers from lack of funding and political support, but has several cases pending. In Kosovo, cases were transferred from UNMIK (the UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo) to EULEX (the EU Rule of Law Mission), apparently without any determined plan or ambition for the systematic pursuit of war-crimes cases. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, discussions got underway on dealing with the huge backlog of war-crimes cases. At the end of the year the Council of Ministers adopted a War Crimes Justice Plan. The state court continued its work within this field, although relatively few cases are being conducted at lower levels.



Sonja Biserko



Branko Todorovic

Across the region there is widespread denial of war

crimes committed by one's own ethnic kin, and rejection or ignorance of the findings of international and domestic courts. Although regional co-operation has improved, much remains to be done. The lack of extradition agreements between countries in the region provides de facto immunity from prosecution for many alleged perpetrators.

The Roma, Ashkaeli and Egyptians continue to be the most economically and politically marginalised groups in all the countries of the region.

## ACTIVITIES

When Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia on 17 February 2008, the NHC published a document on the main human rights challenges for Kosovo, titled 'Kosovo: Need for a long-term approach to the protection of human rights'. It focuses on the justice sector and the plight of internally displaced persons and members of minority communities living in the territory, especially with regard to their security, freedom of movement, discrimination and access to public services, such as education. The document has been widely disseminated.

The NHC has done advocacy work for the development of systems of accountability for international actors in Kosovo, especially within the justice sector.

In Oslo, the NHC acted as host to Sonja Biserko, the chair of the Helsinki Committee of Serbia, in March/April, and our Kosovo representative Julie Chadbourne in May. Both had come to address representatives of the Norwegian government, political parties, press and public. Biserko was the main speaker at our well-attended seminar titled 'Where is Serbia going? What can Europe do to promote human rights in Serbia and Kosovo?'

The river Donau in Belgrade



Poster of Tomislav Nikolic in Mitrovica



Independence for Kosovo February 2008

We continued to follow the situation of the Roma in Kosovo. The report '*Second-class Minorities. The Continued Marginalisation of RAE Communities in Kosovo*', first published in October 2007, was translated and issued in the Albanian and Romani languages in 2008. The NHC has intervened in several individual cases concerning non-discrimination in schools and the right to return to one's place of origin.

NHC representatives travelled to Kosovo in February, Bosnia and Herzegovina in April, Croatia in August and Croatia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina in December. All these visits focused on monitoring, lobbying and project support.

The NHC attempted to assist civil society actors interested in forming a new broad-based Helsinki human rights monitoring organisation in 2008, without sustainable success. As a result, however, the NHC network in the Kosovo human rights community grew significantly.

During the first half of the year, Julie Chadbourne worked as NHC representative in Prishtina, Kosovo.

## PROJECTS

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has collaborated with the following Helsinki Committees in other countries on human rights projects, on monitoring, reporting and awareness-raising.

- Albanian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Macedonia
- Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Montenegro

## Human Rights Education

Human rights education is an integral part of the work of the NHC. Our focus on human rights education started in the early 1990s, and today the NHC runs human rights training programmes both in Norway and abroad.

Our human rights education programme aims to:

- Impart information on human rights, multi-cultural understanding and peaceful conflict solution, and knowledge about the institutions that work to develop, promote and protect these values
- Impart information about the relationship between individuals and human rights
- Impart an understanding of how human rights can contribute to develop better relations among human beings, equitable social conditions, and create the conditions necessary for individual self-realisation
- Create a meeting place for dialogue for people from different backgrounds

In 2008, a total of 1400 people from various different backgrounds participated in the human rights schools organised by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. These 'schools' are seminars that last from five to eight days, where participants live and learn together. In 2008 the NHC education programme underwent administrative and professional consolidation. The staff was expanded to three full-time employees in the main office; and in addition to the target groups of previous years, we have focused on two new groups: prison staff and the police.

Our human rights education programme has had five focal areas internationally in 2008: the Barents region, Belarus, Ukraine, the North Caucasus and West Balkans. A range of education measures aimed at youth, teachers, activists, journalists and prison and police employees have been carried out.

### 1. THE BARENTS REGION

The NHC has been engaged in the Barents region since 2001. In this period we have carried out extensive training in human rights and multi-cultural understanding for journalists, youth, teachers, local government employees, and prison and police employees in South Varanger, Tromsø, Oslo, Murmansk, Severomorsk and Arkhangelsk. In 2008 the department established a programme in Karelia, where activities build on the great cultural variety in the region.

The programme in the Barents region is a good example of cross-sector, regional co-operation



Human rights seminar for prison employees in Arkhangelsk

involving local public administrations, the private sector and non-governmental organisations. In organising courses for journalists from Murmansk and Arkhangelsk regions, collaboration has been established between the Barents Press and independent and state-owned media organisations. Journalists attending these courses have had the opportunity to visit relevant institutions in Norway, such as the Human Rights House, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NRK), the Freedom of Expression Foundation (Fritt Ord) and the Norwegian Journalists' Association (NJ). The programme has also opened up the possibility for visiting Russian journalists to experience the daily procedures of various Norwegian media organisations in order to gain insight into the democratic interplay between public institutions, NGOs, the media, journalists' associations and journalists.

Human rights school Murmansk



### ACTIVITIES IN 2008

- Established an office for human rights education in Murmansk
- Conducted human rights schools for Russian and Norwegian youth in Kirkenes and Arkhangelsk, and a youth group at our office in Murmansk
- Held seminars on human rights for Russian teachers, journalists and prison employees in Murmansk and Arkhangelsk
- Created a Russian-language manual for organising human rights schools

## 2. BELARUS

The aim of our Belarusian programme is to provide training in human rights, democratic processes, multi-cultural understanding and conflict solution, in addition to building competence in human rights education. Due to security reasons and difficult working conditions for human rights activists in the country, the extent of activities carried out for Belarusian participants has been rather limited in comparison to other areas. Nevertheless, we have been able to maintain a strong focus on inter-regional co-operation and exchange of experiences, expertise and practices, especially with organisations from Ukraine and Russia.

### ACTIVITIES IN 2008

- Conducted one human rights school for teachers
- Conducted three human rights schools for youth
- Arranged two seminars on human rights for journalists
- Established youth groups
- Created a Belarusian-language manual for the organisation of human rights schools
- Developed other education materials

Learning non-violent communication



Human rights school for journalists

## 3. UKRAINE

'Let us understand human rights' is a programme the NHC has arranged in collaboration with the Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, the youth organisation M'ART and 15 other organisations, to develop human rights education in Ukraine. Under circumstances where the Orange Revolution has yet to deliver on its promise to bring respect for the principles of human rights, 'Let us understand human rights' stands as a promoter of human rights values and ways of achieving them. The programme targets significant sectors in Ukrainian society, including youth, teachers, journalists and state officials. Main problems in focus are the generally low level of knowledge about human rights,



Participants at a human rights school in Ukraine

With diplomas



the scarcity of information on human rights distributed among the population, the need for professional support to target groups to enable them to apply human rights standards in their work, and the need for systematic and specialised educational material on human rights and human rights education.

#### ACTIVITIES IN 2008

- Conducted human rights schools for teachers, youth, trainers and school leaders, and persons with special needs
- Arranged seminars in human rights for employees at the Department for Monitoring Human Rights in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Ukrainian journalists
- Created and published a Ukrainian-language manual for organising human rights schools
- Established youth groups

## 4. NORTH CAUCASUS

Our programme in North Caucasus has focused mainly on Chechnya, but the NHC has a long-term goal of expanding to both Ingushetia and North Ossetia. There is in the region an acute need for education in human rights, multi-cultural understanding and conflict resolution, due to the high level of conflict, continuous violations and deteriorating relations between the countries and different nationalities. Teachers, young people and journalists need access to information that is not readily available to them.

#### ACTIVITIES IN 2008

Due to the difficult situation in the region, we have had to postpone implementation of programmes in the region several times. Our local partner has informed us that it is not advisable to start up the planned activities due to reasons of security.

## 5. WESTERN BALKANS

Our regional programme for human rights education in the Western Balkans has in 2008 undergone an important process of defining the main focus and areas of intervention for the coming years. This has included systematic work and advocacy for human rights education within institutions, resulting in the institutions providing more access to our programmes; a strong focus on measures to improve the situation in divided communities; and a regional approach to including young people in the process of dealing with the recent past.

#### ACTIVITIES IN 2008

- 580 young people have participated in our local human rights schools on basic and advanced levels. Here they have learnt about human rights and their significance, instruments of protection,



Human rights school visit to Srebrenica

prejudices, conflict resolution, understanding among ethnic groups, re-building of trust and reconciliation, and transitional justice, as well as civic initiatives and activism.

- 132 young people have participated in regional human rights schools, where the focus has been on dealing with recent past in Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo, as well as training in human rights project development
- 17,824 young people and others have been involved through 15 youth groups dealing with human rights and rights of minorities/children/women/socially endangered families/minors with physical disabilities, domestic violence, discrimination, corruption, tolerance, student rights, active citizenship, European integration, begging, humanitarian activities and state of school infrastructure. More information about the youth groups may be found on [www.humanrightsschools.org](http://www.humanrightsschools.org).

Flowers at the monument in Srebrenica



# III

## Human Rights in Norway

In 2008 the Norwegian Helsinki Committee has been particularly involved in the following two thematic areas:

- The Norwegian government's policy towards the national minority known as 'the travellers' (in Norwegian: *tater/romani*)
- Norwegian asylum policy

### HEARING: NORWEGIAN POLICY TOWARDS THE NATIONAL MINORITY 'THE TRAVELLERS'

In 2008 the Norwegian Helsinki Committee arranged a hearing regarding the situation for the national minority known as 'the travellers'. The hearing was held at the Norwegian House of Literature on 12 November, with wide representation from the travellers themselves, as well as from the government, scholars, NGOs and the media. The aim was to shed light on the human rights violations suffered by this group in the recent past. The hearing was also intended to contribute to a policy for successful integration of 'travellers' in Norwegian society, while maintaining and fostering their own cultural heritage.

The travellers in Norway were the victims of a systematic policy aimed at eradicating their culture and identity as a people. Adults were sterilised and lobotomised, and children were taken away from their parents, with tragic consequences for those targeted.

Over 100 people attended the hearing



State Secretary Raimo Valle



Jim Roger Pettersen



Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal, Bjørn Engesland and Karen Sofie Pettersen

Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal, Member of Parliament Kari Lise Holmberg and State Secretary Raimo Valle



The Norwegian government has already done some work in an attempt to repair damages, but there remains a need to raise awareness in society about these violations of human rights. The hearing challenged the Norwegian government to work out a more efficient policy. State Secretary for Sami and Minority Affairs in the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, Raimo Valle, focused on the importance of constructive dialogue with the travellers in order to create an active new policy.

The hearing was planned by the NHC together with representatives from the travellers, whose contribution was invaluable. Five travellers also shared their personal stories and views on the present and current situation for their people.

A report with the findings and conclusions from the hearing is to be published by the NHC.



## NORWEGIAN ASYLUM POLICY

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee considers the rights of asylum seekers arriving in Norway as one of the most burning human rights issues. Each year, many asylum seekers turn to us for assistance. This concerns in particular applicants from Russia (North Caucasus), Azerbaijan and Central Asia. 2008 was a turbulent year in asylum policy in Norway, for several reasons. After months of a sharp increase in the arrivals of asylum applicants, the government issued a list of 13 points for tightening its asylum policy in September. The intention was to signal abroad that Norway is a country where it is difficult to achieve asylum, and the NHC engaged critically against several of the measures proposed.

Together with NOAS, Amnesty Norway, Human Rights House Foundation and practising lawyers, the NHC in July requested the authorities to reconsider their assessment of Chechen refugees' need for protection and internal flight alternatives, and to secure protection for more refugees from this group.

We were also heavily engaged in seeking to halt the return of asylum seekers to Greece under the Dublin II regulations. As mentioned above, the legal safeguards in Greece are so weak that Norway could be in breach of the UN Refugee Convention by its return policy.

The NHC also turned to the Norwegian Minister of Labour and Social Inclusion with an appeal to secure the right to provide humanitarian assistance to illegal immigrants, and contributed commentaries and recommendations to proposed amendments to the regulations of the Aliens Act.

Afghan refugees in an Athens basement



Afghan refugee in Athens

## GUANTÁNAMO PRISONERS TO NORWAY?

In December 2008, the NHC wrote to Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, urging the Norwegian authorities to receive some of the prisoners remaining in the US prison in Guantánamo. Some 60 of these prisoners cannot be safely returned to their country of origin as they risk imprisonment, torture or other degrading treatment there. Of course, main responsibility for these prisoners lies with the USA. President Barack Obama's pledges to close the prison as quickly as possible must be followed up by concrete action. However, we believe European countries, including Norway, can help Obama by taking some of the prisoners.



Guantánamo.  
Photo Carlos de Vega

## PARTICIPATION IN THE FIRST EUROPEAN HOSPITALITY TRIBUNAL IN STAVANGER

As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights turned 60 in 2008, the major aim of the First European Hospitality Tribunal was to measure how and to what extent political and juridical practices in Europe correspond with the continent's humanitarian values and obligations. How are immigrants and refugees received at Europe's borders, and how do European countries integrate these new citizens? At the tribunal, the NHC made an intervention on 'Unwelcome minorities in Europe: Chechens, Roma, Kurds. How are they treated when they seek refuge in Western European countries?'

## IV

## Co-operation and International Processes

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee is a member of several national and international networks of human rights organisations. Each year, our representatives participate in a range of international meetings and conferences. We strive to be key player among organisations and forums dealing with human rights issues, our goal being to influence international organisations and states to protect human rights and promote human rights issues.



Palais des Nations in Geneva

### ORGANISATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE (OSCE)

The Human Dimension Implementation Meeting is the single most important annual OSCE event focusing on human rights and democracy in Europe, North America and Central Asia. Representatives of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee participated in the October 2008 conference, with interventions on European asylum policy, the use of the Dublin II regulation in the Schengen area, as well as on restrictions on freedom of freedom in Azerbaijan.

### NGO FORUM FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The NHC serves as the secretariat and co-ordinator for the Norwegian NGO Forum for Human Rights, a network of independent Norwegian NGOs. In March 2008 the NGO Forum developed a position document recommending which countries and particular themes Norwegian authorities should raise in the UN Human Rights Council in 2008. In a letter addressed to the Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jonas Gahr Støre, the Forum has written: 'We expect Norway to be a driving force in UN human rights questions. Norway must, amongst other things, criticise states



for violations of human rights and promote important thematic issues related to human rights in the various UN forums.'

## UNITED NATIONS

In addition to interventions on behalf of the Norwegian NGO Forum on Human Rights, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee has worked together with UNESCO and other bodies to highlight the human rights perspectives of heritage preservation, and organised a conference in February 2008.

In connection with the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the NHC criticised the Norwegian government for not protecting human rights defenders in line with its pledges and international obligations.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DIALOGUE

NHC Secretary General Bjørn Engesland has since 1999 participated in the official Human Rights Dialogues held by the Norwegian government with China and Indonesia. The efficacy of the human rights dialogue with China has been questioned. The NHC is of the opinion that even though dialogue with China is challenging and it may be difficult to see many concrete results, such dialogues provide a forum for discussion and the possibility to raise important issues and cases. The 2008 dialogues were held in China from 27 to 31 October and in Indonesia on 14–16 April.

## THE NORWEGIAN CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The NHC has a close ties with the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights. We regularly provide briefing lectures for election observers headed to missions in areas where the NHC has key competence. Secretary General Bjørn Engesland is also a member of the board of the Centre for Human Rights. Additionally, the NHC contributed to the commentaries issued by the Centre concerning an evaluation of the ethical guidelines for the State Pension Fund.

## INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee is a member of the coalition for the International Criminal Court, which is a global network of more than 2500 civil society organisations working together for a fair, effective and independent International Criminal Court (ICC). NHC is also one of the select NGOs who are allowed to make use of the ICC legal tools 'Case Matrix'. NHC contributes regularly in public discussions on promoting the importance of international justice.

## EURO-MEDITERRANEAN HUMAN RIGHTS NETWORK

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee is an associate member of the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, which consists of more than 80 human rights organisations, institutions and individuals in 30 countries in the European/Mediterranean region.

## DARE

The NHC is also member of Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe (DARE) Network, which consists of 37 members from 23 European countries.

Beijing





## EEA Grants

Through the EEA grants Norway, together with the other donor states Iceland and Liechtenstein, contributes with € 1.3 billion of project funding over five years to reduce social and economic disparities in Europe. Since 2005, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee has had co-ordination and information responsibility for bilateral partnerships between non-governmental organisations in Norway and the beneficiary countries under the EEA grants. The assignment was given to the NHC by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The beneficiary countries are the 10 new EU member states, together with Spain, Portugal and Greece. The NHC collaborates with the Ministry, the Norwegian embassies in the beneficiary countries, as well as the Financial Mechanisms Office in Brussels in this work.



Interaction between Hungarian and Norwegian organisations in Budapest.

Within the EEA Grants project The Norwegian Helsinki Committee additionally works as an advisor for the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, especially in matters regarding the civil society.

In 2008, seven NGO funds were launched in six beneficiary countries. The NHC has been a key organiser for Norwegian NGOs at these events, and has also participated in the planning of the various launches together with the Norwegian embassies and the intermediaries in the beneficiary countries.

### LAUNCHES

In 2008 there were launches of NGO funds in the following countries

- > Bulgaria
- > Cyprus
- > Hungary
- > Portugal
- > Romania
- > Slovenia

60 representatives from various Norwegian organisations have been present at these launches.

### CYPRUS

In September 2008, the NHC carried out an additional analysis assignment in the Republic of Cyprus, on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The focus was an analysis of Cypriot civil society.



Cypriote and Norwegian participants at the NGO fund in Cyprus



NGO fund launch in Ljubljana

NGO fund launch in Bucharest



### INFORMATION

In 2008, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee has contributed to information dissemination about NGO funds and EEA grants through:

- > The webportal [www.ngonorway.org](http://www.ngonorway.org)
- > Newsletters
- > Lectures at seminars, meetings and conferences
- > Contact with Norwegian organisations

The web portal NGO Norway Information Portal ([www.ngonorway.no](http://www.ngonorway.no)) mediates news about the NGO funds, and contributes to bilateral partnerships. The web portal consists of:

- > A database of Norwegian NGOs
- > Information and news about the NGO funds
- > Links to relevant documents
- > An overview of projects with Norwegian partners

## Information

### MEDIA CONTACT

As an independent human rights organisation, we consider it imperative to maintain high visibility and communicate our points of view to the general public, the media and directly to the Norwegian authorities. A significant aspect of the activities of our information department is therefore to communicate the work of the NHC and its views to the media and the general public.

The NHC subscribes to a service from Meltwater news that tracks media appearances. In 2008 the NHC or its advisors were registered with 532 hits in Norwegian electronic media. Here it should be noted that this figure refers only to electronically published articles and reports. Material in printed publications is not taken into account, but these represent an additional source of visibility. Additionally, NHC representatives are frequently used as commentators and experts in radio and TV programmes. We have also been mentioned on numerous occasions in Russian-language and other international media.

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee has set the agenda in several important human rights questions in 2008.

### WEB PAGES

The information department communicates the work of the NHC through its own webpage and publications. In the course of 2008, the NHC published 141 relevant news articles on the web page [www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no), in addition to other postings. On

average, the NHC web page was visited 653 times per day in 2008.

### PUBLICATIONS

The Norwegian Helsinki Committee published two printed reports in 2008:

- Aage Borchgrevink: *Anti-Terrorism Measures and Human Rights in Northern Caucasus: A Regional System of Torture, Forced Confessions and Fabricated Trials*. (NHC report 2008:02).
- Berit Nising Lindeman: *A Gamble With the Right to Asylum In Norway*. (NHC rapport 2008:03)  
The report was co-authored with the Norwegian Organisation for Asylum Seekers and Greek Helsinki Monitor.

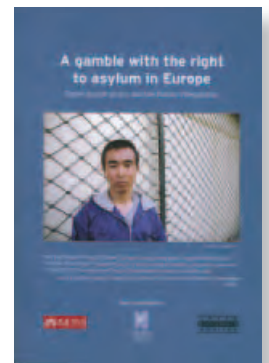
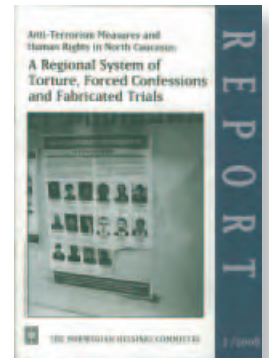
Additionally, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee published following reports electronically in 2008:

- Ivar Dale and Aage Borchgrevink: *Report From Election Observation 21 May 2008. Extraordinary Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Georgia and The Khurcha Shootings*.
- Lene Wetteland : *Report from the Armenian Presidential Elections 19 February 2008* (edited by Gunnar Ekeløve-Slydal and Berit Nising Lindeman).

The publications can be downloaded from the web page [www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no), or purchased from the NCH information department on request.

### MEMBERS

As of the end of 2008, the NHC had 573 individual members.



## Finances

The total spending in 2008 was 29,33 million NOK out of which project support for partners constituted 17,01. Total income balanced the costs at 29,33 million. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs granted project support totaling 28,50 million for a wide range of projects. The Norwegian Freedom of Expression Foundation (Fritt Ord),

Open Society Institute, National Endowment for Democracy and the Barents Secretariat granted a total of 0,78 million NOK. Unspent project funds of 17,16 million were transferred from 2008, while 17,24 were transferred to 2009. Gifts and members contributions etc, provided an additional 119 000 NOK in income.



Refugee camp in Greece. Photo: Linda Engelberth

## NORWEGIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

The Norwegian Human Rights House, Tordenskioldsgate 6B, N-0160 Oslo  
Telefon: (+47) 22 47 92 02 - Fax: (+47) 22 47 92 01  
[www.nhc.no](http://www.nhc.no)