

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

AI Index: EUR 46/034/2011

3 August 2011

Human rights defenders working in Chechnya subjected to further threats and harassment

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the recent incidents of harassment and a series of threats, the most recent just days ago, made against members of the Interregional Committee against Torture, a non-governmental organization renowned for its work to uphold the rights of victims of torture and end impunity for members of law enforcement agencies for human rights violations in Chechnya and throughout Russia.

The increased pressure on the Committee in Chechnya began on 24 June 2011 when it had organized a picket in central Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic, intended to mark the International Day in Support of the Victims of Torture. Participants, including several victims of torture and relatives of forcibly disappeared persons, held banners which condemned the use of torture by police and impunity for human rights violations by police officers. The picket had been agreed with the authorities and proceeded peacefully. Nonetheless, an hour after it began it was broken up by the police who also threatened the participants with criminal prosecution for “defamation”. Supian Baskhanov, the head of the Committee’s office in Grozny, was detained and taken to a police station where he was compelled to give written explanations about the picket’s organizers and objectives.

He was released after he had written the statement, but later on the same day he was summoned to the police station again. He went with another colleague from the Committee, Magomed Alamov. According to them, this time they were held by police for over three hours and received direct threats from senior officers who speculated about the Interregional Committee against Torture’s “subversive activities”. They were asked about their addresses and members of their families including children. The police officers made it clear that the members of the Committee would not be allowed to continue their work in Chechnya and would face other serious consequences should they criticise the Chechen police. Such criticism, as the officers implied, could be taken to mean that the families of Committee members had ties with illegal armed groups.

A month later, according to the Interregional Committee against Torture, Supian Baskhanov received further threats from the police. On 28 July, he met with a Chechen police official in the building of Vedensky District Court who told him that the police were compiling a case file accusing him of aiding illegal armed groups. The officer said that this information would amongst other be forwarded to the Ministry of Justice, which does not conduct prosecutions but keeps a register of accredited lawyers, thus hinting that Supian Baskhanov would be stripped of his licence to practice law.

Members of the Interregional Committee against Torture based outside Chechnya have been receiving threats too. A week before the June picket was held in Grozny, the Deputy Head of the Committee, Olga Sadovskaya, found graffiti on buildings in her neighbourhood, in Nizhnii Novgorod, which contained direct threats and verbal abuse, and called her a traitor and supporter of terrorism and extremism.

In recent years, Amnesty International has received numerous reports of Chechen police threatening and harassing family members of individuals who criticized the authorities. Allegations of links with armed groups and of “aiding terrorists” have in the past often led to families in Chechnya being subjected to serious human rights violations, including unlawful detention and ill-treatment, forcible disappearances and the punitive destruction of property.

Independent non-governmental organizations working in Chechnya have for years faced regular intimidation and harassment. Following the murder of Chechen human rights defender Natalia Estemirova in July 2009 and the murder of humanitarian workers Zarema Sadulayeva and her husband Alik (Umar) Dzhabrailov in August 2009, several non-governmental organizations have curtailed their work in Chechnya fearing that the lives of their members were at risk for speaking out against human rights violations committed in the Chechen Republic or simply for calling for respect for human rights and the rule of law.

The murder of Natalia Estemirova and the temporary closure of the office of the human rights centre Memorial in Chechnya created a marked gap in terms of human rights work the Republic. In response, the Interregional Committee against Torture, which is based in Niznii Novgorod, came up with the initiative of creating a Joint Mobile Group for Chechnya. This initiative brought together lawyers and human rights defenders from non-governmental organizations across Russia who established a permanent presence in Chechnya, on a rotating basis, in order to take up cases of alleged human rights violations by Chechen officials such as members of the police. In May 2011, the group was awarded the prestigious Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk. On 23 June, the Committee itself was awarded the Human Rights Prize of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

One of the cases taken up by the Joint Mobile Group is that of Islam Umarpashaev, a young Chechen man who was unlawfully detained by law-enforcement officials and allegedly tortured, between 11 December 2009 and 2 April 2010. Islam Umarpashaev filed official complaints about his unlawful detention and torture, but for months his case was being investigated with flagrant inefficiency. However, owing to legal assistance and protection measures provided to Islam Umarpashaev and his family by the Joint Mobile Group, and owing largely to the courage and persistence of the members of the Interregional Committee against Torture as well as of the victim himself, the responsibility for the investigation of the case was transferred to officials based outside Chechnya. Since then, the investigation has made real progress in identifying some of the people who unlawfully detained and allegedly tortured Islam Umarpashaev and in collecting strong supporting evidence.

Amnesty International welcomes the progress which has been made by the investigation in the case of Islam Umarpashaev. However, the organization has also expressed concern about the threats which the investigation team has reportedly faced in Chechnya from persons allegedly associated with Islam Umarpashaev’s unlawful detention and torture, and called on the Russian federal authorities to provide the investigators with full and effective protection as necessary and appropriate in the circumstances. Amnesty International has also repeatedly expressed concern about the threats that have been made against members of the Interregional Committee against Torture, the organization which has been spearheading Islam Umarpashaev’s case, and against the Joint Mobile Group, which it has led in Chechnya.

According to the 1998 United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, states have the prime responsibility to take all necessary steps to ensure the protection of those who defend human rights. States should ensure that people are able to peacefully protest, publicize and circulate information and criticize the failure of national and local authorities to protect or promote human rights. At the same time, the rights to freedom of speech and expression and of association are basic human rights and are essential lawful and peaceful means by which human rights defenders and any person wishing to do so can promote, develop and protect human rights. People have the right to seek, obtain, receive and hold information about human rights and human rights violations, disseminate their findings and publicly express their opinions.

Following the abduction and murder of Natalia Estemirova and of other members of non-governmental organizations working in Chechnya, none of which has yet been fully investigated nor the perpetrators brought to justice, Amnesty International is alarmed that threats such as those described above have been repeatedly issued and is deeply concerned that they may have tragic consequences.

Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to effectively investigate threats and attacks against human rights defenders working in Chechnya. The perpetrators must be identified and brought to justice. The authorities in all constituent parts of the Russian Federation, including the Chechen Republic, must demonstrate respect for the lawful work of human rights defenders and enable them to do it without fear or reprisals.

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