

**“Disappearances” and abductions in the Chechen Republic:**

Thousands of Chechens are believed to have been "disappeared" or abducted since the outbreak of the second conflict in the autumn of 1999.

The Russian non-governmental organization (NGO) Memorial has estimated that between 3,000 and 5,000 people have gone missing in the Chechen Republic following what they term as abductions, arbitrary arrests and detentions since 1999 when the second Chechen conflict began. Memorial emphasizes that their statistics are based on research conducted in about one-third of the territory of the Chechen Republic, and therefore may not represent the full extent of the violations. Moreover the pervading atmosphere of fear in the region, leading to many people being reluctant to come forward, the preference in many cases of relatives to attempt to secure the safe return of their relatives through unofficial channels and the extremely dangerous conditions for independent monitors such as journalists and human rights defenders attempting to research the situation, means that there is an underreporting of cases of “disappearance” and abductions.

Many men and women were taken away from their homes during so-called "zachistki" (military raids), allegedly conducted to check the identity documents of people in a village or district, during which whole villages were surrounded for days at a time and Russian troops, sometimes accompanied by Chechen security forces, went from house to house, conducting searches, checking identity documents and detaining people.

Large scale raids on villages and towns by Russian and Chechen security forces, which were common during the first two years of the armed conflict have ceased but there continue to be regular reports about targeted operations in Chechnya, which mostly take place at night, usually by armed men, in camouflage and often masked, who often arrive in a large number of military vehicles of which the identification plates are covered, and in which one or more people are taken away in an unknown direction. In some cases the individuals are released within a few days, in other cases they remain missing, and in some cases their bodies are found bearing signs of a violent death.

It can be difficult to attribute responsibility for these crimes. The language that the armed men speak – Russian, Chechen, Ingush – the type of vehicles used, and if unmasked, their appearance, are often the only indications of their identity. The procuracy open criminal investigations under Article 126 of the Russian Criminal Code (“abduction”) but almost always the investigations fail to identify those individuals responsible or the crimes are attributed to actions by armed opposition groups.

While it may be difficult to establish who is responsible for the abductions, in many cases, circumstances indicate that Russian federal forces or Chechen security forces were responsible for what was in fact a “disappearance”, or an abduction by or with the support of state officials, and there have been a number of statements attributed to officials that confirm this.

In an interview with the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* on 28 March 2003 an unnamed officer, working for the department of military intelligence of the Ministry of Defence, admitted that the Russian federal forces had turned to such methods in order to avoid control by the procuracy. While claiming that these raids in the night are necessary tools in the armed conflict which Russia describes as “war against terror”, he admitted: “sometimes innocent people end up in this.... And when we find out the truth, it turns out it is too late to correct something, the person is already gone.”<sup>1</sup> Russian federal forces

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.izvestia.ru/politic/article31814>, also quoted in Amnesty International, *Russian Federation: Chechen Republic “Normalization” in whose eyes?* (AI Index: EUR 46/027/2004)

include the Vostok (East) and Zapad (“West”) battalions, which are part of the Russian federal Ministry of Defence’s 42<sup>nd</sup> Motorized Infantry Division, and are permanently deployed in Chechnya. Their members, who are ethnic Chechens, are alleged to be responsible for serious human rights violations, including “disappearances”.

On 6 May 2005, the Chechen President, Alu Alkhanov, was reported to have stated that in some cases, people that had been reported as missing had in fact been held as suspects in criminal inquiries by a certain subunit of the security forces, although he did not clarify who had carried out the detentions in these cases. He reportedly presented this as an explanation for confusion over whether someone was missing or not. Alu Alkhanov is said to have stated that "the percentage of people who are detained by federal forces for committing terrorist acts or other grave crimes and who later go missing, has also decreased today several times... the number of such incidents among missing people in general is about 5 to 10 per cent".<sup>2</sup>

Increasingly Chechen security forces have also been implicated in “disappearances”. Some of the “disappearances” by Chechen security forces in 2004 and 2005 are alleged to have been carried out by the so-called *Kadyrovtsy*, who are effectively under the command of Ramzan Kadyrov, the First Deputy Prime Minister of Chechnya. Amnesty International is aware of allegations that members of security forces under the control of Ramzan Kadyrov have been drawn from criminal groups. Concerns have been raised as well about the establishment of so-called Anti-Terror-Centres, which have been set up since 2004 in several villages or towns in Chechnya. It has been alleged that members of these centres have been involved in human rights violations, including “disappearances”. The so-called “oil regiment”, a Chechen security force, formerly part of the Security Service of the President of the Chechen Republic, and headed by Adam Delimkhanov, has also reportedly been implicated in “disappearances”.

Amnesty International is opposed to the "disappearance" of prisoners and detainees in all cases, irrespective of the reasons for their detention and seeks an immediate end to all "disappearances". AI also condemns abductions and hostage-taking by armed opposition groups. All people held in detention have the right to have their physical and mental integrity respected and protected, to have their detention properly logged and formerly acknowledged, to be promptly informed of the charges against them, and to be granted prompt access to relatives, legal counsel and medical treatment. Whenever people are held in unacknowledged detention, the risk of their being ill-treated, tortured and extrajudicially killed is increased.

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<sup>2</sup> Reuters, *Russian troops carry out 10 pct of Chechen kidnaps*, 6 May 2005 and Interfax, *Twenty-three missing in Chechnya since start of year – president*, 6 May 2005