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Russian Federation/Chechen Republic: The "normalization" of a human rights crisis

"If my son committed a crime, bring him to justice, but tell me where he is."

In spite of claims to the contrary by Russian and pro-Moscow Chechen officials the situation in the Chechen Republic is far from normal. The continuing conflict in Chechnya, characterized by violence and a wide range of systematic human rights abuses, is spilling over into neighbouring Ingushetia, Amnesty International said today as it launched its report *"Russian Federation: Chechen Republic - "Normalization" in whose eyes?"*

Few families in the war-torn North Caucasus Republic have been left unaffected by human rights abuses after five years of continuing armed conflict. "Russian federal and security forces continue to carry out human rights violations such as extrajudicial executions, 'disappearances', arbitrary detentions, ill-treatment and torture, including rape, with impunity," Amnesty International said. "Chechen armed opposition groups have targeted civilian members of the Moscow-backed Chechen administration and it has been alleged that they are responsible for a number of bombings, which have caused indiscriminate harm to civilians."

In Chechnya, civilians are being held in incommunicado detention in undisclosed locations after being detained by Russian federal and security forces. No information regarding their whereabouts and well-being is being given to their families. Women have increasingly been targeted -- a number of women described to Amnesty International's representatives how they were tortured, including with electric shocks, and raped in detention. Peaceful demonstrators have been beaten and arbitrarily detained.

Impunity persists -- very few perpetrators have been brought to justice for human rights violations. People who have petitioned the European Court of Human Rights appear to be particularly targeted by the authorities. They have been threatened and intimidated, in some cases their relatives have "disappeared" or been killed. A number of victims told Amnesty International's delegates that they fear for their lives and that they were explicitly warned by the federal forces and the pro-Moscow Chechen special security forces, under the command of Ramzan Kadyrov, that they and their families would be killed if they filed a complaint about their treatment or petition the European Court of Human Rights. Today, fewer and fewer people are willing to speak out against the perpetrators -- a climate of fear and mistrust is prevalent.

Human rights abuses against civilians, many of which constitute war crimes, continue to be

committed with impunity, as very few perpetrators are ever identified and brought to justice. "Such abuses, which previously occurred almost exclusively in Chechnya, are increasingly spreading across the border to neighbouring Ingushetia," the organization said. A wave of "disappearances" has spread throughout Ingushetia in recent months.

Amnesty International has received information that at least 34 people have been "disappeared" between September 2003 and the end of March 2004. A number of these people have been outspoken about human rights violations in Ingushetia or are prominent members of the community. Participants in peaceful demonstrations in Ingushetia against such human rights violations are apparently targeted by the authorities; they have been subjected to ill-treatment and arbitrary detention.

The last tent camp in Ingushetia housing people fleeing the conflict in Chechnya was closed on 10 June. The refugees who remain in temporary accommodation or spontaneous settlements are being pressured by federal and local authorities to return to the Chechen Republic.

"We will stay here. As long as they can't guarantee our security, we won't go back (to Chechnya). If there is no war, why don't they withdraw the troops? Everybody would like to go home, but it is too dangerous," a father of five told Amnesty International.

The report is based on the findings of an Amnesty International delegation that travelled to Ingushetia in March/April 2004 as well as ongoing research by the International Secretariat in London. In addition, the organization's delegates have just returned from a second visit to Ingushetia where they collected testimonies from victims of human rights violations committed in both Chechnya and Ingushetia.

"More than a month after the killing of the President of the Chechen Republic, Akhmad Kadyrov, and two months before presidential elections there, violence and human rights violations continue, leaving civilians more and more desperate and with little hope for a peaceful future," the organization said. Amnesty International is particularly concerned that Ramzan Kadyrov, First Deputy Prime Minister of Chechnya and the son of the late President Akhmad Kadyrov, is reported to have stated recently that he wants to punish relatives of alleged fighters. According to reports he said "... they [the fighters] are allowed to kill our relatives, fathers and brothers and we are not. This should not be the case."

"Such official statements encourage human rights violations and reinforce the climate of impunity for such violations," Amnesty International said.

As a signatory to a number of international human rights treaties, the Russian Federation is obliged to respect and protect the human rights of all people within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction without discrimination. Its failure to do so during the conflict in Chechnya has more often than not produced inadequate responses from governments and from some inter-governmental bodies.

"The international community must intensify its scrutiny of the situation and put pressure on the Russian Federation to live up to its international human rights obligations," Amnesty International said.

"It is imperative that the human rights crisis in the North Caucasus is placed higher on the international agenda."

For the full report *"Russian Federation: Chechen Republic - "Normalization" in whose eye"* visit: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur460272004>

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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