

Appeal Case: The Russian-Chechen Friendship Society under threat

The Russian-Chechen Friendship Society (RCFS) is a non-governmental organization that monitors human rights violations in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus, producing daily press releases on “disappearances” and other serious human rights violations. The Society, which has its head office in Nizhnii Novgorod, and another office in the North Caucasus, also produces the *Pravo-zashchita* newspaper (‘Rights Protection’) jointly with the Nizhnii Novgorod Human Rights Society.

Amnesty International is concerned by an apparent campaign of harassment and prosecution of the RCFS coordinated by the Russian authorities which seems to be in response to its work on human rights. Since 2000, when the organization was officially registered, there have been a number of cases of torture and ill-treatment, “disappearances” and alleged extrajudicial executions of members of the Society in the North Caucasus. In 2005, the campaign has extended to include a criminal investigation into alleged articles published by the organization, checks by the tax authorities and moves by the Ministry of Justice to close the organization. There has also reportedly been negative media coverage in Nizhnii Novgorod of the organization’s activities and one staff member, Oksana Chelysheva, has been the subject of threatening leaflets.

According to the RCFS, the criminal investigation, which has been opened by the office of the Nizhegorodskii Regional Procurator (the regional procurator for Nizhnii Novgorod and the surrounding region), relates to materials published in *Pravo-zashchita* and cites Article 282 of the Russian Criminal Code (incitement of ethnic, racial or religious hatred or enmity). The materials under investigation include an appeal, published in the April-May 2004 edition, to the European Parliament by the late Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov calling for help in finding a peaceful settlement to the Chechen conflict and an appeal in the March 2004 edition by Aslan Maskhadov’s London-based envoy Akhmed Zakaev to the Russian people not to re-elect President Putin.

The criminal investigation was opened on 11 January 2005, although the RCFS only found out about it on 20 January 2005, when Federal Security Service (FSB) officers raided the organization’s Nizhnii Novgorod office and seized documents and computers (see *Russian Federation: Human rights group threatened by security forces*, AI Index: EUR 46/001/2005). Since then, the editor-in-chief at the RCFS, Stanislav Dmitrievskii, editor Oksana Chelysheva and other colleagues in both Nizhnii Novgorod and the North Caucasus have been called in for questioning as witnesses by FSB officials in the Nizhegorodskii region and in the Shali district, Chechnya. While charges have not been formally brought against any of the staff of the RCFS, Article 282 carries a possible punishment of five years’ imprisonment.

Aslan Davletukaev

On 16 January 2004 the mutilated body of RCFS activist Aslan Davletukaev, aged 29, was found near the town of Gudermes in Chechnya. Reportedly, he had been detained by Russian federal forces on 9 January 2004. On that day about five military vehicles had stopped at the house of the Davletukaevs at about 10.15pm. A group of 25 or 30 armed, masked men told the family they needed to check passports and conduct a search of the house. They forced Aslan Davletukaev out into the courtyard and reportedly threatened to kill him and his wife in front of their children if he refused to go with them. When Aslan Davletukaev’s father asked the men if his son had committed a crime he was allegedly told “he is guilty of being Chechen”. Aslan Davletukaev’s eight-year-old son tried to cling to his father but was allegedly kicked away by one of the men. After about an hour the men left the house and took Aslan Davletukaev with them, reportedly driving in the direction of a military post in Shali. The family went to the military post, the local procuracy and local government administration but did not receive any reasons for Aslan Davletukaev’s detention nor information as to his whereabouts. Relatives, who spoke with Amnesty International’s representatives, said that when his body was found seven days later outside a deserted cafe they could scarcely identify him as he had lost all his teeth and his face was covered in bruises. Criminal investigations into his killing have been inconclusive; one that began in January 2004 was subsequently closed reportedly owing to a failure to identify the perpetrator(s).

Oksana Chelysheva

On 14 March 2005, threatening leaflets were distributed in the neighbourhood of Nizhnii Novgorod where RCFS editor Oksana Chelysheva lives. The leaflets were signed by the "Young Patriotic Front" (A.P. Ivanov) and labelled Oksana Chelysheva as a traitor, a supporter and a helper of "terrorist" activities carried out by Chechen fighters, and claimed that she was financed by them. The leaflet gave her home address and concluded "She deserves shame and contempt! We are ready to fight her." The office of the Nizhegorodskii Regional Procurator opened a criminal investigation on 30 March into the leaflets under Articles 129 (libel) and 130 (insult), following the submission by the RCFS of a complaint to the prosecutor.

Please write politely worded letters in English, Russian or your own language, calling on the Russian authorities to:

- Commit to explicitly and publicly promoting respect for human rights and to protecting human rights defenders;
- Take effective action and measures to ensure that state officials at every level of the state apparatus, including law enforcement officials, respect the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders and allow them to carry out their work without hindrance or harassment, including Stanislav Dmitrievskii, Oksana Chelysheva and all other staff at the RCFS;
- Ensure that the principles contained in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders are fully incorporated into national law and mechanisms for the protection of human rights, and are fully implemented in practice;
- Work with human rights defenders and non-governmental organizations to establish an Action Plan for the implementation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders to ensure that the rights set out in the declaration are guaranteed to human rights defenders, non-governmental organizations and other civil society actors so that they can carry out their activity without fear for their safety.

Send letters regarding Aslan Davletukaev, urging the Russian authorities to:

- Ensure that a thorough and impartial investigation is carried out into the killing of Aslan Davletukaev, and that any findings of such investigation is made public;
- Bring anyone found responsible for the killing of Aslan Davletukaev to justice in a court of law in accordance with international standards of fair trial;
- Set dates and facilitate the visits of the UN Special Rapporteur on torture, and the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial summary and arbitrary executions.

Send letters regarding the case of Oksana Chelysheva, urging the Russian authorities to:

- Express concern that the criminal investigation into the leaflets targeting Oksana Chelysheva reportedly currently do not adequately reflect the serious nature of the threat to her safety;
- Ensure that a thorough and impartial investigation into the threats against Oksana Chelysheva is carried out and that any findings of the investigation are made public, and those responsible are brought to justice;
- Condemn publicly any threats and attacks against human rights defenders by non-state actors.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir PUTIN

Kreml, Moscow, Russian Federation

Fax: + 7 095 206 85 10 / 206 51 73 / 230 24 08 (if someone answers say "fax please")

Email: president@gov.ru

Salutation: Dear President Putin

Procurator General of the Russian Federation, Vladimir USTINOV

Ul. B. Dimitrovka 15a, 103793 Moscow K-31, Russian Federation

Fax: + 7 095 292 8848 / 921 4186 (if someone answers say "fax please")

Salutation: Dear Procurator General

Russian Federation Minister of Justice, Yurii CHAIKA

Ul. Vorontsovo pole, 4, 109830 Moscow, Russian Federation

Fax: +7 095 916 29 03 / 209 6138 (if someone answers say "fax please")

Salutation: Dear Minister