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News Flash

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Russian Federation: Supreme Court decision gags civil society

Amnesty International is deeply distressed by today's decision of the Russian Supreme Court to reject the appeal against the closure of the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society (RCFS).

"Today's decision delivers a double blow - one to freedom of expression and another to civil society," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"This ruling against the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society sends a chilling signal that other NGOs stepping out of line can share its fate. The Russian authorities have an obligation to guarantee a climate free of intimidation in which human rights activists can work."

The RCFS, which used to monitor the human rights situation in Chechnya, was closed down in October last year largely on the basis of the new Anti-Extremism and NGO laws that made it illegal for an organization to be headed by a person convicted of "extremist" activities. The Executive Director of the RCFS, Stanislav Dmitrievskii, had been convicted on 3 February 2006 on "race hate" charges, for publishing non-violent articles by Chechen separatist leaders. He was, in the view of Amnesty International, convicted for the peaceful exercise of his right to freedom of expression and should not have faced trial in the first place.

After the Supreme Court announced its decision, Stanislav Dmitrievskii told Amnesty International that the RCFS would seek justice at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. He said:

"The Supreme Court's decision is dangerous for civil society and for Russia as a whole. It is a political decision and clearly illustrates that the Russian authorities do not care about civil society. It sends the wrong signal and has not gone unnoticed by the international community. In our appeal we have shown that the initial verdict of the court in Nizhnii Novgorod was unlawful. The Supreme Court's decision has put a number of administrative problems before us but it will not stop our work on human rights."

People around the world, including many members of Amnesty International as well as leading Russian and international figures such as Nobel Prize laureates Elie Wiesel and Harold Pinter have appealed to the Russian authorities against the closure of RCFS.

Background

The RCFS used to monitor human rights violations in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus. Staff and volunteers in Nizhnii Novgorod and the North Caucasus produced daily press releases on "disappearances" and other serious human rights violations. In 2005, the organization was subjected to legal proceedings by both the tax authorities and the registration department of the Ministry of Justice. At the same time, both Stanislav Dmitrievskii and another staff member, Oksana Chelysheva, were the

subject of constant harassment and threatened with death.

Public Document

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