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Public Statement

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Russia: Protect Rights in the North Caucasus. Insurgency No Excuse for Abandoning Rule of Law, 7 Groups Say

The people in the North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation deserve real stability based on law and respect for their human rights.

Seven human rights organizations - the Swedish Helsinki Committee, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Human Rights Centre Memorial, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Human Rights Watch, the Austrian Helsinki Association and Amnesty International - are calling on the Russian authorities, including regional authorities, to adhere strictly to the rule of law in the North Caucasus to prevent the region from spiralling deeper into violence and human rights abuses.

The authorities are fighting an insurgency in the North Caucasus but it is imperative that they publicly and unequivocally pledge to do so in a manner that does not result in lawlessness and lack of accountability and human rights abuses, which would only fuel further conflict.

The insurgency in the North Caucasus has spread beyond Chechnya to Ingushetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria. An assassination attempt on the president of Ingushetia last month has left him critically injured. The deputy head of the Supreme Court of Ingushetia and the Minister of Interior of Dagestan were both killed in June. Dozens of police and security personnel have been killed and wounded. The government needs to address these serious crimes, apparently part of a violent strategy by armed groups. However, the fight against these groups can be successful only if it is carried out by legal means and with respect for the rights of everyone in the North Caucasus.

A report published by Amnesty International on July 1 documents cases of enforced disappearance, torture and other ill-treatment and forced "confessions" in the North Caucasus against those suspected of involvement in the insurgency and other crimes. (Russian Federation: Rule without law. Human rights violations in the North Caucasus. AI Index: EUR 46/012/2009). In a report published on July 2, Human Rights Watch documents the punitive burning by law enforcement officers of homes belonging to relatives of alleged insurgents in Chechnya.

We are concerned about the mounting evidence conveyed in these reports and from other sources that the authorities routinely use unlawful tactics to respond to crimes and to press relatives of suspected insurgents to get them to surrender.

The house burnings, torture and other ill-treatment and enforced disappearances alleged by numerous reliable sources constitute serious violations of international human rights law and are strictly prohibited by a number of international treaties, to which Russia is a party.

We are concerned that recent statements by a number of government officials in the North Caucasus that call for unlawful measures to tackle the violence could lead to further human rights abuses. We are also deeply concerned that Ramzan Kadyrov has apparently been given authority to undertake joint counterinsurgency operations in Ingushetia, in light of the credible and serious allegations that have come to the attention of our organizations that his forces have been involved in widespread human rights violations.

We call on the Russian government and on the regional authorities to

- publicly and unequivocally make clear that they will reinstate the rule of law in the North Caucasus;
- put an end to and refrain from any future unlawful measures in their counterinsurgency efforts;
- investigate and prosecute human rights violations;
- fully implement rulings relating to violence in the region by the European Court of Human Rights.

Background

The most recent armed conflict in Chechnya, which began 10 years ago, led to widespread, serious and systematic human rights abuses and war crimes, committed by armed groups as well as by Russian federal and regional forces. While the conflict has subsided in the territory of Chechnya, in recent years the armed insurgency seeking to overthrow the government and establish Islamic rule in the North Caucasus has gradually spilled over into other republics, such as Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan. Attacks by armed groups against law enforcement bodies have killed hundreds of people, including civilians. Enforced disappearances, torture and other ill-treatment by the authorities are reported frequently.

In Chechnya, Grozny and other towns have been rebuilt, but the lives of thousands of people have not yet returned to normal. They are waiting for justice for the torture and other ill-treatment they have endured, and for the forced disappearances and killings of their relatives. More than 100 cases from Chechnya have been decided already before the European Court of Human Rights. The remedies required by these decisions have yet to be implemented fully, beyond paying compensation. Investigations into these crimes should be fully and impartially investigated, with a view to prosecuting the perpetrators. Perpetrators of human rights violations should be brought to justice in trials that meet international standards to make clear that attackers will be held to account and to establish trust in the legal system.

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