

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: EUR 01/006/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 112
3 May 2005

Embargo Date: 3 May 2005 00:01 GMT

Europe and Central Asia: Human rights activists harassed, tortured and persecuted

Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.

UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders

Threats, harassment and intimidation against those who defend and protect human rights are unacceptable. The rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly are fundamental human rights, Amnesty International said on World Press Freedom Day.

The Russian Federation, Belarus, Turkmenistan and Turkey are among the countries in Europe and Central Asia with the poorest record of government harassment and persecution of people for peacefully exercising these rights. Amnesty International is concerned that the activities of human rights activists are being criminalized by the state, and that state officials are harassing, arresting and torturing them without fear of repercussions.

"Officials at every level of the state apparatus, including law enforcement officials, must respect the legitimacy of the work of people who defend and protect human rights and allow them to act without hindrance or harassment. They should publicly promote respect for and protect the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly," Nicola Duckworth, Amnesty International's Director of the Europe and Central Asia Programme, said.

In Belarus, the authorities do not tolerate any public criticism or dissent and have virtually monopolized the media -- critics of the regime risk imprisonment at the hands of a procuracy and judiciary under the control of the government. Amnesty International's latest report *Belarus: Suppressing the last voices of public dissent* presents how the authorities use controversial legislation to restrict the possibilities for non-governmental organizations, political parties, trade unions, journalists and individuals to express their personal opinion. Harassment, intimidation, excessive force, mass detentions and long-term imprisonment are increasingly employed as methods to quash any civil or political dissent.

In Turkmenistan -- as documented in Amnesty International's new report *Turkmenistan: The clampdown on dissent and religious freedom continues* that was issued today -- anyone the authorities suspect of any form of dissent is at risk of being subjected to unfair trials, torture and ill-treatment. Their

relatives are in many cases evicted from their homes, their property is confiscated and they are sacked from their jobs. Independent civil society groups find it impossible to operate and several activists have been forced into exile. The authorities control all media. They have taken a series of measures to curb access to independent sources of information within the country and to prevent critical information from reaching the international community including by cracking down on journalists who cooperate with foreign media outlets known to be critical of the authorities. The President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov and self-proclaimed *Turkmenbashi* (Father of all Turkmen) dominates all aspects of life in the country.

In the Russian Federation, activists trying to disseminate information about the human rights situation in the North Caucasus, as well as victims seeking justice at the European Court of Human Rights find themselves increasingly the targets of harassment and human rights abuses - several of them have even been killed. The Russian authorities appear to be tightening their control on the media to the point where information about the human rights situation in Chechnya and its neighbouring republics in the North Caucasus is stifled through censorship or self-censorship.

In Turkey, despite recent legal and constitutional reforms, human rights defenders continue to be targeted for harassment and intimidation by state officials. Their activities, their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly are still restricted through a huge number of laws and regulations. Many local officials -- police chiefs, governors, prosecutors -- continue to view human rights defenders as "enemies of the state". Activists of human rights organizations, such as the Human Rights Association (IHD), have been threatened, arrested, prosecuted, tortured, abducted and killed. At least 12 IHD representatives have been killed since 1991. In most cases the killers have never been identified, and members of the Turkish security forces have been strongly implicated in some of the killings.

"The work of an independent human rights movement is crucial to any society, in order to safeguard the human rights of all people and in the construction of a just society," Nicola Duckworth said.

"Governments must ensure that killings, 'disappearances', torture and ill-treatment of and threats against human rights activists are thoroughly and impartially investigated and those responsible must be brought to justice."

Amnesty International calls on the international community to exert pressure on the governments of the Russian Federation, Belarus, Turkmenistan and Turkey to stop the intimidation of human rights activists and to ensure that everybody can enjoy their rights to the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

Background

On 16 January 2004, the mutilated body of 29-year-old Aslan Davletukaev was found near the town of Gudermes in Chechnya. He had been working with the human rights organization Society for Russian-Chechen Friendship, which documents violations including "disappearances", torture and unlawful killings in the North Caucasus. Aslan Davletukaev had reportedly been detained by Russian federal forces on 9 January 2004. An investigation into his death has been opened and closed several times but nobody has yet been found responsible for his death.

On 30 September 2004, the editor of the Belarusian independent weekly *Birzha Informatsii*, Elena Rovbetskaia was fined the equivalent of US\$600 for criticizing the referendum which allowed President Lukashenka to serve more than the previous limit of two terms. In November the same year, the weekly was ordered to close down for three months for the same alleged offence. Due to the lack of independent printing houses the publication is still not available in print.

In July 2004, *Radio Liberty* correspondent Saparmurat Ovezberdiev was forced into exile from Turkmenistan because of his work for the Turkmen Section of the radio station. He had been under close surveillance for many years and pressurized to stop his work. Members of his family have also been targeted in an attempt to silence him even after his departure.

On 19 April 2005, three members of the Human Rights Association (IHD) in Turkey, Eren Keskin, Saban Dayanan and Dogan Genc, received death threats from an ultra-nationalist group called the Turkish Revenge Brigade (*Türk Intikam Tugayı*). This group claimed responsibility for an armed attack in 1998 on the then IHD president, Akin Birdal, in which he was critically wounded.

For further information please see:

Appeal Case: The Russian-Chechen Friendship Society under threat

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur460172005>

Russian Federation: Concerns over reports of "disappearances" of relatives of Aslan Maskhadov

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur460042005>

Russian Federation: Human rights group threatened by security forces

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur460012005>

Russian Federation: The Risk of Speaking Out: Attacks on Human Rights Defenders in the context of the armed conflict in Chechnya <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur460592004>

Belarus: Suppressing the last voices of peaceful dissent

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur490042005>

Belarus: Chernobyl commemorations end in large-scale arrests

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur490052005>

Turkmenistan: The clampdown on dissent and religious freedom continues

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur610032005>

Turkey: Death threats/Fear for safety <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur440142005>

Human Rights Defenders at Risk <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engact300202004>

Public Document

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>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>