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Russian Federation: Systematic repression on eve of elections

Amnesty International is gravely concerned about the Russian authorities' systematic disregard for basic human rights in the run-up to parliamentary elections in the country, scheduled for 2 December 2007.

Over the last few months, the organization has seen numerous attempts by the authorities of the Russian Federation to interfere with the right to freedom of assembly, to freedom of association and freedom of expression including of supporters of the political opposition as well as of human rights activist and journalists.

Garry Kasparov, an opposition leader, was arrested on 24 November and sentenced to five days' administrative detention for allegedly leading an unsanctioned demonstration and resisting police arrest. Several witnesses told Amnesty International that they had overheard conversations among the police indicating that it had been planned in advance of the march to detain Garry Kasparov. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate release.

"From the unprovoked arrest and imprisonment of opposition leader Garry Kasparov, to the beating of journalists and human rights defenders and the excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators, the Russian authorities have created a climate in which it is difficult, if not outright impossible, to express dissenting views and to report these," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

On 24 and 25 November, police detained scores of people before, during and after "marches of dissent" in several Russian cities, beating and kicking them in the process. In St. Petersburg, Russian human rights defender Ella Poliakova, head of the Soldiers' Mothers Committee of St. Petersburg, was detained together with several other people on 25 November for 12 hours after she had attended a press conference of opposition party Yabloko.

Amnesty International is concerned about a number of violations of the right to a fair trial of those detained during the marches. Court hearings failed to adhere to international standards of fair trial with judges refusing to listen to evidence provided by the accused and with some of those accused, including Garry Kasparov, prevented from seeing their lawyers before and after the court hearings. Many people were detained for more than three hours, which is the maximum period under such circumstances. One person was also reportedly beaten by the police who then denied him necessary medical aid when he appeared before a Moscow court.

"The duty of the state to safeguard public order and to protect the rights and freedoms of those possibly affected by public events is no justification for excessive use of force against peaceful demonstrators and can not be used as an excuse when clamping down on dissent," Nicola Duckworth said.

Amnesty International is also deeply concerned about the attack and resulting death of Farid Babaev, a prominent political activist involved in human rights work. Farid Babaev was the first candidate on Yabloko's party list for the Russian State Duma elections in the southern Russian Republic of Dagestan. On the evening of 22 November, he was shot and fatally wounded outside his flat in Dagestan's capital Makhachkala by unidentified perpetrators. Two days later he died in hospital. Relatives and human rights activists have cited Farid Babaev's outspoken political views as being a motivation for his murder, while the authorities reportedly deny the murder had any political motivation.

Amnesty International repeats its concerns regarding the abduction and ill-treatment of Oleg Orlov, head of the Human Rights Centre Memorial, and three journalists from the Russian TV station *REN TV*. The four men were taken from a hotel in Nazran, Republic of Ingushetia, during the night of 23 to 24 November by armed masked men in camouflage. They were driven outside of town and abandoned in a field, after being beaten and threatened that they would be shot.

"The silencing of media and human rights defenders, the harassment and ill-treatment of those who highlight human rights violations or those who express dissent, is unacceptable and cannot be excused, neither during election time nor during periods of heightened security concern," Nicola Duckworth said.

Amnesty International is publishing today a briefing on human rights defenders in the North Caucasus, calling on the Russian authorities to respect the lawful work of human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists and to refrain from any unlawful attempts to interfere with their work.

See: *Russian Federation: Human Rights Defenders at risk in the North Caucasus*, AI Index: EUR 46/053/2007, <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur460532007>

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