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Russian Federation: Brutal killing of human rights defender Nikolai Girenko

Nikolai Girenko -- prominent human rights defender, Professor of Ethnology and expert on racism and discrimination in the Russian Federation -- was shot dead on 19 June 2004 in his home in St Petersburg. He was aged 64. According to reports, Nikolai Girenko was approaching the front door of his apartment to answer the doorbell when he was reportedly shot through the door with a shotgun.

Nikolai Girenko was well-known and widely respected for his work and research on racism and discrimination in the Russian Federation. He was Head of the Minority Rights Commission at the St Petersburg Scientific Union and had conducted several studies for Moscow and St Petersburg authorities on neo-Nazi and skinhead groups in the Russian Federation and had repeatedly warned that such groups were on the rise. Nikolai Girenko made expert contributions to a number of high-profile investigations and court cases concerning alleged racially-motivated attacks and was renowned as the foremost expert on this issue within the Russian Federation. Academic colleagues and fellow human rights defenders believe his murder was connected with his human rights activity, in particular in light of his anti-racism campaigning and work on the "skinhead" movement. According to reports, Nikolai Girenko and many of the academics working alongside him on research into racism regularly received threats.

Andrei Zhukov -- Deputy St Petersburg Prosecutor -- is reported to have said that investigators also believe that his work as a researcher and expert witness in racism trials and investigations is the most likely motive for his murder. However, he also reportedly stated that the killing might have been motivated by hooliganism -- a claim frequently made by police in connection with alleged race hate attacks.

Amnesty International calls for a prompt, thorough and impartial investigation into the killing of Nikolai Girenko and for perpetrators to be brought to justice in the course of proceedings which meet international fair trial standards. Allegations that the killing was connected to the human rights activity of Nikolai Girenko in combating racism and discrimination should also be thoroughly and impartially investigated. The organization also calls upon the authorities to take active measures to protect human rights defenders in line with their international obligations and in particular, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 1998)

Background

Amnesty International is concerned about the rise in racism, and about a recent violent spate of racially-motivated attacks in the Russian Federation. In particular, skinheads have carried out numerous

racially-motivated murders in St Petersburg in the past year, including those of a six-year-old Roma girl in September 2003 and a nine-year-old Tajik girl in February 2004.

The organization calls upon the Russian authorities to take urgent measures to combat racism and discrimination, protect minorities from race hate crimes, and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Under national and international law, all people living in the Russian Federation are guaranteed equality and protection from discrimination. Despite this, research conducted by Amnesty International has shown that the authorities and institutions charged with upholding human rights are often acquiescent in racially-motivated attacks and discriminatory treatment. The organization is concerned that law enforcement agencies frequently dismiss racist attacks as the actions of hooligans, rather than thoroughly and impartially investigating allegations of racial motivation.

On 29 April 2004, anti-racism activist Aleksei Kozlov of the Youth Human Rights Movement in Voronezh was reportedly attacked in Voronezh city centre by two skinheads allegedly shouting "Beat the chief anti-fascist". Police in Voronezh have detained the suspected attackers who have been charged with "hooliganism." In February 2004 a medical student from Guinea-Bissau -- Amaru Antonio Lima -- was murdered in Voronezh in an alleged racially-motivated attack. The city is known as a centre for "skinhead" activity and local NGOs report that racist attacks regularly take place near student hostels in the town.