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Chechnya: Civilian hostages at risk

Civilian hostages kidnapped before the current conflict in Chechnya are reportedly now being held by armed Chechen groups, possibly for political reasons, Amnesty International said today, expressing fear for their safety and calling on the Chechen authorities to take all measures in their power to locate and release the remaining civilian hostages.

Two former hostages recently revealed that they witnessed the killing of Russian news agency ITAR-TASS photo journalist Vladimir Yatsina, kidnapped in Ingushetia by a Chechen group on 19 July 1999.

At a briefing on 28 February at the Federal Security Services (FSB) public relations office in Moscow, former hostage Alisher Orazaliyev, a 22-year-old citizen of Kazakhstan, was reported as saying: "On 20 February we [a group of hostages] were being transferred to the village of Shatoy. Yatsina had health problems, he had bad feet, couldn't walk any longer, although only five kilometres remained. The rebels shot him dead. We arrived in the village and were to stay there. But then bombing started and we had to go down into the forest. On the way back we saw his body."

Vladimir Yatsina's wife, Svetlana Golovenkova, an economist from Moscow, told Amnesty International: "I believe, he was kidnapped by professional criminals before the war, for whom this was their business. After the war began, they lost interest in Vladimir as a "business commodity" and as far as I know, his group of hostages had been transferred from one Chechen group to another several times".

Svetlana Golovenkova said that she appealed for help a number of times to different Russian officials and to the President of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev. She also wrote to the Chechen authorities, but said she had never received a reply.

The Chechen Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ilyas Akhmadov, told Amnesty International on 7 March that the Chechen government had many times in the past condemned the practice of abduction of civilians by criminal groups. He also said that he was not aware of the specific case of Vladimir Yatsina but he would personally arrange an investigation into the case through the official Chechen government channels.

Another former hostage, Kiril Perchenko, told Amnesty International: "We were kidnapped before the war purely for financial gain. We were held by an armed group of the so-called "Wahhabis". When the war began they forced us [the hostages] to dig trenches for them, while they were fighting against the federal forces. They were a group of about 70 well-armed men. The Chechen civilians did not like them and often refused to let them into their villages or to cooperate with them. This is not just some ad-hoc mafia; this is a well-organized military group."

Among the civilians taken hostage in the Chechen Republic known to Amnesty International is also Brice Fleutiaux, an independent French photographer, who has been detained in Chechnya since October 1999.

Amnesty International calls on the Chechen authorities to take all necessary steps to locate the kidnapped civilians and bring them to safety.

Background

Amnesty International has expressed concern to the Chechen authorities for the safety of journalists and humanitarian aid workers taken hostage in Chechnya -- in what the organization believed was an effort to target them for their professional activities. In 1997, Amnesty International campaigned for the release of a Russian journalist from NTV, Yelena Masyuk, and her crew, taken hostage in Chechnya.

In response to international criticism, President Aslan Maskhadov issued a decree in June 1997 allowing courts to sentence kidnapers to death. Amnesty International feared that up to 30 people in the Chechnya, who were awaiting the Shari'a court verdicts on charges of kidnapping, were facing imminent execution in 1998.

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