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Russian Federation: Foreign students at People's Friendship University victims of discrimination

Amnesty International is concerned that the response of the emergency services to the recent fire at the Russian People's Friendship University in Moscow may have been hampered by racial prejudice. Amnesty International is urging the Russian government to take immediate measures to ensure the safety and well-being of all students at the university.

"Victims' accounts of the rescue operation, frequent bomb scares and continuing racist attacks on the university grounds are a serious cause for concern," the human rights organization said.

"Reports received by Amnesty International concerning the way in which foreign victims of the fire were treated by emergency service personnel, are consistent with the discriminatory treatment we see meted out by other agents of the state such as the police," a spokesperson for the organization said.

The fire which swept through dormitory block six of the Russian People's Friendship University in the early hours of 24 November 2003 has killed 42 people. Up to 200 other students received injuries, with some 100 remaining in hospital. Amnesty International has received credible reports from the Task Force on Racial Attacks and Harassment of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy and the Association of African Students at the University - which allege that the emergency services responded sluggishly to news of the blaze. Contrary to official reports stating that the emergency services were on the scene within minutes, many students have contested this version and condemned the way in which the rescue operation was conducted. Most of the students interviewed by the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy's Task Force expressed a belief that the fire itself was "a racially-motivated act of arson".

Numerous students have reported that ambulances and fire services arrived between 30 minutes and one hour after they were alerted to the fire. By the time the fire-fighters arrived on the scene, many students had already been forced to throw themselves from dormitory windows -- some from as high as the fifth floor;

A number of students have reported that ambulance personnel tried to extort money from foreign students before taking them to hospital. Some have also stated that medical personnel chose to transport "their patients" (ie. ethnic Russians) to hospital first;

There are claims that victims -- both injured and deceased -- were handled roughly and inappropriately by fire-fighters and medical personnel at the scene.

Racist attacks, bomb threats and suspected arson attacks which have taken place in recent weeks have created a climate of fear which is being felt throughout the student community. In the week prior to the blaze and in early December several neighbouring dormitories received bomb threats which resulted in students having to evacuate buildings. On 9 December, a main building at the centre of the university campus was evacuated following a bomb scare. Four days after the fire, six students (four Jamaicans and one Columbian national) sustained serious injuries after being attacked by a gang of skinheads on the university campus. Two of the victims were female and several of the victims remain in hospital.

Background

Since the fire, the rector of the university has resigned and the chief fire inspector for the south-west district of Moscow - where the university is situated - has been charged with negligence. High ranking officials have denounced the lack of safety precautions and numerous health and safety violations that were in evidence at the dormitory and throughout the student accommodation at the university. At the time of the fire, two out of three exits to the dormitory were locked; there was no functioning fire alarm system and no fire extinguishers. The Russian government has asserted publicly that additional measures will be taken to improve the safety in such residential blocks for students.

The Russian People's Friendship University has attracted students from Africa, Asia and Latin America since it was opened in 1960. The predominance of students from foreign countries on and around the university campus has meant that it is frequently targeted by skinhead gangs. Racist attacks continue to be commonplace, despite increased police presence on the university campus.

Many communities in the Russian Federation report that police unjustly target members of ethnic minorities and automatically see them as potential criminal suspects. There have been a number of reports of law enforcement officials making statements which negatively stereotype certain ethnic or national groups. In the overwhelming majority of instances which have come to Amnesty International's attention, the authorities have failed to act decisively to combat racism of this kind in the administration of justice.

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