

AI Index: PRE 01/323/2011
29 June 2011

Fresh threats against human rights defenders in Chechnya

The Chechen authorities must end their intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders, Amnesty International said today, after recent threats made to activists.

Members of a leading non-governmental organization (NGO) in the capital Grozny were threatened by police after a peaceful protest was broken up on 24 June. Several weeks earlier, a group of armed men entered the office of another Grozny-based NGO and threatened the staff.

“The environment for independent human rights organizations in Chechnya has long been hostile. In recent weeks it appears to have got even worse. Russia’s authorities must allow these organizations to carry out their crucial work in Chechnya and effectively investigate all threats and attacks against them,” said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

“Preventing peaceful demonstrations and threatening their participants violates Russia’s laws and its international human rights obligations.”

Police in Grozny broke up a peaceful demonstration organized by the Interregional Committee against Torture on 24 June, to mark the International Day in Support of the Victims of Torture.

Authorities had earlier agreed to the demonstration, but police later halted the protest, threatening the demonstrators with criminal prosecution for “defamation” over banners they were carrying, which condemned torture and other abuses by police.

Two of the demonstration’s organizers, Supian Baaskhanov and Magomed Alamov, were taken to a local police station for questioning. The Interregional Committee against Torture told Amnesty International that senior police officers threatened them with serious consequences if they continued to criticize the authorities.

Members of another Grozny-based NGO, the Chechnya Human Rights Centre, also faced threats when armed men burst into their office on 30 May. The intruders waved their weapons around aggressively and warned the activists that they would not be able to continue their work.

Independent NGOs in Chechnya have faced systematic intimidation and harassment for years.

Following the murders in mid-2009 of human rights defender Natalia Estemirova and humanitarian workers Zarema Sadulayeva and her husband Alik (Umar) Dzhabraïlov, several NGOs have stopped working in Chechnya out of fear for their members’ safety.

“Experience shows the very great dangers for human rights defenders working in Chechnya who ignore threats made against them. This new wave of harassment is therefore extremely worrying. The Chechen authorities behind these threats must as a matter of urgency be brought under control,” said John Dalhuisen.

“Human rights defenders must be able to work without fear for their safety.”