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Little progress on second anniversary of prominent Chechen activist's killing

(Moscow) – The Russian authorities have made little attempt to effectively investigate possible involvement by local officials in the July 2009 murder of the prominent human rights advocate Natalia Estemirova, Human Rights Watch, Civil Rights Defenders, Front Line Defenders, Amnesty International and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee said today, on the second anniversary of her death.

The organizations, citing a new independent report detailing severe problems with the government's inquiry, reiterated their call for a thorough, impartial, and transparent investigation and the prosecution of those responsible.

“Two years after Estemirova's murder, there are more questions than answers about the circumstances surrounding her killing,” said Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “The Russian authorities need to deliver justice in Estemirova's case to demonstrate their sincerity about protecting human rights in Chechnya and throughout the North Caucasus.”

Estemirova, a researcher for the Russian human rights group Memorial on human rights abuses in Chechnya, was abducted outside her home in Grozny on the morning of July 15, 2009. Her body was found in the neighboring republic of Ingushetia later that day. She had been shot.

Chechen authorities, including President Ramzan Kadyrov, had publicly criticized her relentless reporting of rampant human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and enforced disappearances by the Chechen government. The circumstances of Estemirova's death and the threats against her and others point to possible official involvement in or acquiescence to her murder.

Despite repeated reassurances by the Russian authorities that Estemirova's case was practically solved, the investigation appears mired in official findings that she was killed by Chechen insurgents in retaliation for having exposed some of their crimes. On July 14, the Memorial Human Rights Center, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and Novaya Gazeta published a report on shortcomings in the government's investigation.

They found, for example, discrepancies in the evidence taken from the car purportedly used in the killing, a failure to collect DNA samples from a broader range of suspects in Chechnya, and an unwillingness to look into a possible role by the Kurchaloi district police. The Kurchaloi district police had been implicated in an extrajudicial execution Estemirova had exposed in the weeks before her murder.

Threats and harassment against human rights defenders in Chechnya have increased since Estemirova's murder, and the working environment remains very hostile. Three weeks after she was killed, Zarema Sadulaeva and Alik Djabrailov, activists with "Save the Generation," a local nongovernmental organization, were also abducted in Grozny and murdered. The investigation into their killing has not yielded tangible results.

Staff members of the Joint Mobile Group of the Russian Human Rights Organizations in Chechnya (Mobile Group), established in November 2009 with lawyers and others from throughout Russia to work in Chechnya on a rotating basis, have been threatened on numerous occasions. Earlier in July, police in Grozny warned two local activists working closely with the group to discontinue their work. In February 2010, three of the group's staff were arbitrarily detained by police authorities in the Shali district of Chechnya. They were unlawfully kept in custody overnight, and some of their equipment was confiscated or damaged. The responsible officials have not been held to account.

The Mobile Group is the recipient of the 2011 Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk and the 2011 Human Rights Prize of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

“The Mobile Group essentially picked up the mantle of Natalia Estemirova as it is now handling the most sensitive human rights cases in Chechnya,” said Mary Lawlor, Front Line Defenders director. “We are immensely concerned about security for its staff on the ground.”

“The situation for human rights defenders in Chechnya is no better today than it was two years ago,” said Nicola Duckworth Europe and Central Asia Director at Amnesty International. “The authorities must demonstrate a sincere commitment to the defense of human rights defenders; this cannot be done without effective investigations into past killings.”

The Russian government has obligations under both domestic and international law to investigate Estemirova's case effectively and prosecute all those responsible, regardless of rank or position, the five organizations said. The standards for such investigations have been elaborated by the United Nations through the UN Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-Legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions, the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions, and other expert manuals and writings.

The investigation should thoroughly examine possible official involvement in Estemirova's murder, at all levels of government, the group said. It should not exclude the possibility of involvement of the republic's leadership, which has been implicated in other cases of retaliation against those who expose abuses in Chechnya, made threatening statements to Estemirova and other Memorial staff, and fostered an atmosphere of impunity for law enforcement and security forces.

“Estemirova exposed horrific abuses by military and law enforcement personnel at great personal risk,” said Marie Manson, program director for Civil Rights Defenders. “The Russian authorities need to fully investigate possible involvement of Chechen officials who may have seen her work as a threat, and may have been involved in her disappearance and murder.”