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Russia: Winter games Olympic torch throws light on human rights violations

As the Olympic torch arrives in Moscow ahead of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, Amnesty International is launching a worldwide campaign to highlight Russia's increasingly deplorable human rights record.

"The Olympic flame can throw light on the human rights violations that the authorities would prefer to hide behind the celebratory decorations. It is important that all those with a stake in the Games are aware of restrictions placed by the Russian authorities on civil society and ordinary citizens, and use their influence to oppose them," said John Dalhuisen, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

With the arrival of the Olympic flame in Moscow and the start of its journey to Sochi on 7 October, hundreds of thousands of Amnesty International members will stage a series of events and protests worldwide.

Supporters from Ottawa through to Puerto Rico, Warsaw, Paris, Brussels and Moscow are organizing vigils, flash mobs and pickets in public places and in front of Russian embassies to raise awareness about the range of violations to the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Russia.

"The Olympic fanfare and spectacular ceremonies will not hide the fact that fundamental human rights are trampled over despite being explicitly guaranteed by the Russian Constitution and international human rights treaties to which Russia is party," said John Dalhuisen.

Amnesty International campaign will highlight:

- **Three prisoners of conscience**, Vladimir Akimenkov, Artiom Saviolov and Mikhail Kosenko, detained over a year ago solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly. In May 2012, they were detained in Bolotnaya square in Moscow, amid the wave of mass protests that followed much-contested parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011 and 2012. Thirteen people are on trial in Moscow in relation to the Bolotnaya square protests, and several others are still awaiting trial in this case.
- **Legislation curtailing peaceful protests** imposes heavy fines on organizers of demonstrations for violations of a restrictive list of rules and regulations, often arbitrary applied. In 2013 more than 600 people were detained in the course of 81 events in and around Moscow alone.
- **The 2012 "foreign agents" legislation** unleashed a clampdown on NGOs across the country, including the inspection of Amnesty International's office in Moscow. Court cases brought about by the Prosecutor's Office against NGOs have resulted in hefty fines against several organisations and their leaders. Many more NGOs across Russia have been issued with official demands to register as "foreign

agents” or face similar penalties.

- **Homophobic legislation** introduced in 2013 is used to restrict the rights to freedom of expression and assembly of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Intersex people (LGBTI) and has already encouraged homophobic violence across Russia. LGBTI events have been disrupted by counter-protesters and banned by the authorities, with participants detained for promoting "propaganda of non-traditional relations among minors". Anyone breaching the law, including foreigners, faces fines of up to US\$3,000.

- **The ‘blasphemy’ law** introduced after the ‘Pussy Riot’ punk group staged a brief and peaceful albeit provocative political performance in the main Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow in 2011. Two of the performers are currently serving a two-year prison sentence after a politically motivated trial: one of them, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, is on hunger strike and being held in solitary confinement after complaining about prison conditions.

- **The failure to effectively investigate the murders of journalists and human rights activists.** Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in 2006, but the mastermind of her killing has never been identified. No one has been brought to justice for the killings of Natalia Estemirova, Khadzhimurad Kamalov and Akhmednabi Akhmednabiev, amongst others.

”The Russian authorities must not use the Olympic games being played on TV screens across the world as a smokescreen behind which they can abuse human rights across the country,” said John Dalhuisen.

“Any attempts by the Russian authorities to use the Olympic Charter as a pretext to prevent individuals or activists engaging more generally in legitimate and peaceful demonstrations, would not only fall outside the prohibition envisaged in the Charter, but also violate standards on freedom of expression, association and assembly .

“The Olympic Charter prohibits demonstrations at Olympic sites, but such measures should be exercised only at the sporting sites and venues, and strictly for legitimate purposes. The Olympic Games are not a human rights-free zone. The Games are hosted by a city, but they are also effectively hosted by the country at large, and violation of fundamental human rights in this country, as we see it in Russia, is unacceptable and must immediately stop.”

“Everybody who holds dear human rights, everybody with a stake in the Olympic Games, including those involved in organising and running them, should speak out over violations of the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.”