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Russian Federation: Detention of suspect in journalist's murder - a step in the right direction

The arrest of a suspect in the murder of journalist and human rights defender Anna Politkovskaya on 7 October 2006 is a major step towards justice Amnesty International said today, after the Russian Investigation Committee announced on 2 June that Rustam Makhmudov had been charged with her killing.

Rustam Makhmudov was detained on 31 May in Chechnya, after it had been reported for several years that he had fled the country and was hiding abroad. Three suspects, two of them brothers of Rustam Makhmudov, had been acquitted of complicity in the murder for lack of evidence at an earlier trial in 2009.

The arrest and charges against Rustam Makhmudov are an important step towards ending impunity for crimes committed against those who spoke out against human rights violations in Chechnya and the North Caucasus in general.

An effective investigation into the murder of Anna Politkovskaya remains a key benchmark to demonstrating that Russia is willing and able to tackle the violence against journalists and human rights defenders. Amnesty International urges the Russian authorities to ensure that Rustam Makhmudov and any alleged accomplices in the crime receive a fair trial in proceedings that meet international standards.

In a separate development, just a day earlier on 1 June a court in Vienna convicted three men under Article 75 of the Austrian Criminal Code for the murder of Umar Israilov, a Chechen, in Vienna on 13 January 2009.

In addition, the jury in Vienna reached a unanimous decision that the three men, Otto Kaltenbrunner, Suleiman Dadaev and Turpal-Ali Esherkaev, had attempted to hand Umar Israilov over to a foreign power (Article 103 of the Austrian Criminal Code, it is the first time someone has been sentenced under this Article).

The person suspected of firing the shots which killed Umar Israilov, is believed to be hiding in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation. The Austrian court asked the Russian Prosecutor General for assistance in solving the crime. According to the information received during the hearing in Vienna, such assistance has not been provided.

According to the Secretary General of Amnesty International Austria, who observed the trial, a lot of evidence and testimonies were presented in court about the involvement of high ranking individuals from Chechnya in the crime.

It is deeply regrettable that the Russian authorities have not supported the Austrian court in solving the murder of Umar Israilov.

In view of this judgment, Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to bring to justice the murderer and those responsible for organizing the killing of Umar Israilov from within the Russian Federation.

Amnesty International also expresses hope that the arrest of Rustam Makhmudov is not an isolated step, but a sign that the Russian authorities are willing and able to tackle impunity and lawlessness in the North Caucasus.

To convincingly demonstrate a real political will to establish a rule of law in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, more steps need to be taken.

Background:

On 19 February 2009, a jury trial at Moscow's Military District Court acquitted three suspects in the murder of journalist and human rights defender Anna Politkovskaya for lack of evidence, but the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation sent the case back for further investigation. Two of the suspects are brothers of the man charged now with her murder. A third man, a former police officer, is currently imprisoned for extortion. The Investigation Committee of the Russian Federation continues to suspect all three men as accomplices in the murder of Anna Politkovskaya.

On 13 January, Umar Israilov, a former armed fighter and then bodyguard of Ramzan Kadyrov, was shot dead in Vienna, Austria, where he had been granted political asylum. Umar Israilov had reported threats against him to the authorities in Austria. He had appealed to the European Court of Human Rights against Russia and to the Austrian authorities against the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. He had made claims of having been tortured and ill-treated and that he had been forced to torture other people.

The three men sentenced for the murder of Umar Israilov have made numerous calls right before and after the murder to telephones believed to belong to individuals close to Chechen government officials.