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**Statement by Derek G. Evans  
Deputy Secretary General  
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(Checked against delivery)

Amnesty International sees this as a crucial moment for human rights in Russia. We welcome President Yeltsin's initiative of declaring 1998 as the Year of Human Rights in the Russian Federation, especially his plans for setting up federal program for the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. However, Amnesty International remains seriously concerned at the deep gap emerging between the President's declared intentions and the practical measures being put in place, or not being put in place, to make them a reality.

The fact is, serious human rights violations persist in the Russian Federation.

- Torture and ill-treatment continue: in places of detention before suspects are even charged, as a result of the heavy reliance by the police on confessions; in pre-trial detention centres where in many places conditions are so severe as to constitute torture; in military barracks where traditional but brutal practices are applied to conscripts.
- Prisoners of conscience remain detained, in some cases because of the lack of any concrete means to ensure the right to conscientious objection to military service, and in other cases, such as that of Alexander Nikitin, because of politically-motivated repression of the freedom of expression.
- Despite commitments made when Russia joined the Council of Europe in 1996, there is still not even a formal moratorium on the use of the death penalty, and the commitment to move in this direction increasingly seems to hang by a thread.
- Little, if any, investigation has taken place into the cases of thousands of civilians indiscriminately killed, tortured or extrajudicially executed by the Russian Federal army during the conflict in the Chechen Republic.

Virtually everyone, including officials in the Presidential Administration, the Government and the Duma, recognize this as the reality. Unfortunately, they are also unanimous in pointing to financial constraints or political opposition as excuses for not moving forward. We believe the respect for fundamental rights needs to be a clear priority commitment for all leaders and officials in the Russian Federation, a commitment that we believe at this point is failing.

The purpose of our visit to the Russian Federation at this time has been two-fold:

- first, to meet with victims of human rights violations, their relatives and activists and organizations in the human rights movement to learn of their direct concerns and experience;
- second, to initiate a dialogue with governmental authorities on the way forward to improving protection for human rights in the Russian Federation.

We have come at this time because we believe this is a critical and defining moment for human rights in Russia, when crucial laws need to be instituted and new practices – of police, judges and other key players – need to be established.

We have met with a wide range of victims and human rights defenders, including women's groups, representatives of religious confessions, members of the Chechen diaspora, and the Soldiers' Mothers. We also met with a wide range of official bodies:

- representatives of the Presidential Administration's Legal Department and Clemency Commission, the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, the Public Chamber on Human Rights of the Presidential Political Consultative Council;
- the office of the Procurator General and military procurators, the Federal Security Service, the Ministry of Interior's General Department of Executions of Punishments (GUIN);
- the State Duma Commission on control over violations of human rights in places of detention, the Duma's Committee on Freedom of Conscience and Public Organizations, Chairman of the Moscow City Duma, and Members of the Federation Council;
- and the Supreme Court.

We are pleased that we have been invited to contribute to the formulation of the draft Federal Programme on Human Rights. With a view to doing so in a manner that is constructive and open, we have presented to these officials a "Working Document" setting out our preliminary analysis of the human rights situation in the Russian Federation and some 51 specific recommendations for steps to be taken to improve human rights protection, in line with international standards. We have invited these official bodies to provide us with comments on these proposals, and our revised recommendations will then be submitted to the President. Most officials have agreed with our request.

Our visit has served to confirm our already strong impression that the authorities' are clearly failing to translate their commitment to human rights into reality. Amnesty International welcomes Prime Minister Kirienko's statement to us on Wednesday that "the protection of human rights is the most important priority in the work of the Government of the Russian Federation." This priority needs to be ungenly applied in a number of concrete areas.

On the issue of the death penalty, for example, the Presidential list of federal laws to be adopted this year concerning human rights does not mention the introduction in national law of a moratorium on executions. We also see with great concern the apparent retreat from the government's commitment in the current debate taking place in the Duma, as well as the recent statements by the newly elected Human Rights Ombudsman, Mr Mironov, and statements by the Minister of Justice that Russia is, in his words, "not ready to annul the death penalty". We are

especially concerned about the Government's official opinion on the draft law on the moratorium, signed by the Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, that the death penalty should not be abolished because of the expense of providing life imprisonment. In other words: it is cheaper to kill than to protect human rights.

Another of Amnesty International's key concerns, conscientious objection to military service, offers another example of the discrepancy between the government's expressed goodwill and its failure to translate it into legislation. While the Russian Federation's Constitution guarantees this right, no legislation has been enacted to create an alternative civilian service of non-punitive length, and conscientious objectors continue to be imprisoned or forcibly recruited into the army.

We believe the authorities are also failing to reform the current practices of those who should protect human rights, but who are in fact the main violators: the police, prison guards, the security forces. An effective system of independent inspections of all places of detention is urgently needed.

The doors of temporary isolation centres, police stations, SIZOs and prison colonies should be open to public control and to the human rights NGOs. Amnesty International has noticed with great concern that at a recent seminar on conditions in pre-trial detention centres, organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the cooperation of experts from the Council of Europe, which we attended, not even a single Russian NGO was allowed to participate in the discussions.

On this subject, we are particularly disappointed at the lack of cooperation we have encountered concerning our request to visit prisons and detention centres during this visit. Although at the beginning of our visit we were personally promised access to pre-trial detention centres by General Ovchinnikov, head of the GUIN in the Ministry of Interior, this access was denied, and we were refused access to the CUZOs we had asked to visit.

However, even in the trap of this legal limbo, some have found the formula for the immediate improvement of justice: a dozen judges in different regions of Russia have had the courage to directly apply the constitutional provisions for the right to conscientious objection to military service, in order to avoid putting young men in prison.

Another judge we visited, judge Vasilij Martyshkin, from Mordovia's Supreme Court in Saransk, has not only prosecuted the policemen involved in the torture and death of 19-year-old Oleg Igonin in Saransk, but has called for a change in the very system that allows for the practice of torture to exist. His special private statement has so far been met by total silence by the Minister of Interior.

Respect for the law is fundamental to the development of political and economic stability. Human rights cannot be postponed or traded off under the argument of achieving or preserving those two aims. The reduction of human rights - including the right to life and the right not to be tortured - to an economic luxury can only lead to a circle of increased instability followed by further human rights violations.

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