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PUBLIC STATEMENT

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

PLANS TO FIGHT CRIME BY EXECUTING PEOPLE ARE OUTRAGEOUS

Amnesty International was appalled by the recent statement of the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs who reportedly has promised tougher law and order enforcement in the Russian Federation, declaring that serious criminals should be sentenced to death.

Sergey Stepashin is reported to have stated on Russian national television channel NTV on 11 November: "A thief should go to prison, but a gangster should be killed."

During a meeting in London in June, he assured Amnesty International that all steps would be taken to abolish the death penalty in the Russian Federation and to stop the practice of torture and ill-treatment of suspects in custody by law enforcement officials.

Amnesty International notes with great concern the apparent retreat, in the debate which has been taking place in the Duma, from the government's commitment on accession to the Council of Europe, to abolish the death penalty.

Other worrying signals include statements earlier this year by the newly elected Human Rights Ombudsman, Oleg Mironov; a letter to the President by the Procurator General, Yury Skuratov, who insisted on preserving the death penalty; statements in May by the Minister of Justice, Pavel Krasheninnikov, and the latest statement in November by the Minister of Internal Affairs that the Russian Federation should retain the death penalty and continue executions.

No official moratorium on executions has been put in place in the Russian Federation, although the authorities claim that no executions have taken place since August 1996.

According to official government information, as of 30 April, 894 prisoners remained on death row. However, in October the Minister of Justice reported that 839 people were under sentence of death. Amnesty International is concerned about the apparent discrepancies in the official government statistics.

People continue to be sentenced to death and any information concerning their execution, including the time and place where the execution was carried out, or where the bodies were buried, remains a state secret.

Amnesty International is especially concerned about the government's official opinion on the draft law on the moratorium, signed on 30 April by the Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov, that the death penalty should not be abolished because of the expense of providing life imprisonment for some 1,300 death penalty prisoners by the year 2000. In other words: it would be cheaper to kill than to protect human rights.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to take the following steps:

- The President and the central government should issue public orders to all prison governors that there is an official moratorium on executions in place.
- All existing death sentences should be commuted. No further death sentences should be imposed. Any that are imposed should immediately be commuted.
- The government and parliament should adopt a law on the moratorium on executions pending the full abolition of the death penalty. The parliament should enact the legislation, prepared by the Ministry of Justice, to remove the death penalty from the Russian penal code. The constitution also should be amended to exclude the death penalty.
- The Russian Federation should move swiftly to ratify Protocol No. 6 to the European Convention on Human Rights. The government should fully abolish the death penalty by 28 February 1999, the deadline set by the Council of Europe on Russia's accession in 1996.
- The authorities should publish comprehensive information on the use of the death penalty, including the names and case details of all prisoners currently under sentence of death, and should remove the secrecy surrounding the executions.

Background

In 1994, Sergey Stepashin, then head of the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB) made a statement similar to today's while commenting on the Presidential Decree on fighting organized crime (decree no.1226), which provided for the detention of criminal suspects for up to a month without charge or access to a lawyer (later rescinded by President Boris Yeltsin after a popular outcry). On that occasion he declared: "I am all for the violation of human rights if the human is a bandit or a criminal."

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