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Russian Federation: The palpable undercurrent of fear and violence

Victoria Webb, Amnesty International Researcher on the Russian Federation, writes about what she heard on a mission to Ingushetia.

Life in Ingushetia, at first sight, seems uneventful. Just another autonomous republic on the periphery of the Russian Federation, this one set at the foot of the Caucasus Mountains. On a clear day, you can see the snow-capped Kazbek. The difference is - the palpable undercurrent of fear and violence.

Reports from the Northern Caucasus regularly bring further evidence of continuing arbitrary detentions, followed by torture, "disappearance" or unlawful killings. As a rule, the authorities fail to investigate such incidents effectively and victims or their relatives turn to the European Court of Human Rights to seek justice.

"Disappearances" used only to be associated with Chechnya, where Amnesty International has recorded a series of such violations. However, the borders between Ingushetia and Chechnya have blurred when it comes to serious human rights violations. We had a glimpse of this reality during an Amnesty International mission to Ingushetia in June 2006.

On a warm, summer evening, sitting in a shady courtyard, we listened to Kazban, mother of Adam Bersanov, who is reported to have "disappeared" in Ingushetia in December 2004. Kazban has been tirelessly searching for her son, sending countless letters, appeals and complaints to the authorities, with no success.

Adam, who was born in 1977, was detained in front of his mother's eyes by unknown armed men at home just after midnight on 5 December 2004 and taken away. The family have received information that suggests he was detained by law enforcement officials. However, while a criminal case has been opened into his "disappearance", the authorities have failed to identify who took him away and what happened to him. Adam is married; his wife gave birth to a daughter a week after he was taken away.

Adam's cousin, 40-year old Bekkhan, then took us to the house of his deceased brother, Bashir, and told us how he and his brother had been detained there in July 2004 and tortured in police detention. Bashir died in detention that night.

Bekkhan Velkhiev told us that he was kicked and punched and threatened with rape during interrogation at the Department for the Fight Against Organized Crime in Nazran. He was asked where he had been during the attack on government buildings in Ingushetia in June 2004.

When he gave a credible alibi, he was offered money and a car in exchange for reporting on other people. Bekkhan Velkhiev told them that he had no desire at all to work with people who had treated him so badly. He was then tortured further, including being beaten and with electric shock.

"I could hear people scream in other rooms and I was screaming at the pitch of my voice. Then they put a plastic bag over my head and closed it tightly. They tried to prevent me from hearing or seeing what was happening to my brother. They told me he had signed a confession and now it was my turn."

Later that night, Bekkhan was put in a car and left somewhere not far from the police station. "I was afraid they may have mined the car. I was too weak to get out and when two police officers came, they ordered me to get out but I couldn't. They dragged me out and detained me again. From then I heard that my brother had died."

Bekkhan was hardly able to walk after his night in detention. For two years, the family has been trying to find out why and how Bashir died. His death certificate records that he died of a heart attack and had sustained other injuries. It is officially acknowledged he died in office no. 17 of the Department for the Fight Against Organized Crime in Nazran.

However, while a murder investigation was opened, it has been suspended -- on the grounds that the investigators couldn't identify a suspect. A criminal case was also opened into the unlawful detention of Bekkhan, this has also been suspended. The authorities say that the duty guard at the police station is no longer in Ingushetia and they can't find him to question him.

No investigation has been opened into Bekkhan's torture, even though he submitted a complaint about this. As a result, he cannot claim any compensation for the torture and ill-treatment he suffered.

Bekkhan now looks after his brother's children who are still traumatised by the police raid on their house and the death of their father.

We heard and recorded other such stories. After Bashir Mutsolgov "disappeared" in Ingushetia in December 2003, his brother Magomed, set up an NGO. *Mashr. Mashr* ("peace" in Ingush) is dedicated to finding out what has happened to all those people "disappeared", abducted or missing in Ingushetia, raising awareness about the issue and seeking justice. The organization's website lists over 100 cases.

Such efforts of local organizations are vital in providing information on human rights, legal assistance, as well as moral support to the relatives of "disappeared" people. They fill the gap where the Russian authorities dismally fail to demonstrate real commitment to the protection of human rights.

AI World Wide Appeal – Bashir Mutsolgov – teacher "disappears" in Ingushetia.
<http://web.amnesty.org/appeals/index/rus-010504-wwa-eng>

World Wide Appeal – Yakub and Aiubkhan Magomadov – Two brothers "disappear" in Chechnya. <http://web.amnesty.org/appeals/index/rus-011105-wwa-eng>