

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety/harassment/torture

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RUSSIAN FEDERATION **Over 80 relatives of Dr Omar Khambiev, former Chechen Minister of Health**

Former Chechen Minister of Health Dr Omar Khambiev is a high-profile critic of the impunity enjoyed by Russian federal forces responsible for massive human rights violations against civilians in Chechnya. He is now living in western Europe, but his family remains in Chechnya and many of them are in grave danger: more than 80 of his relatives were recently arbitrarily detained for several days and allegedly tortured, in an apparent attempt to force him to stop criticizing the authorities and return to Chechnya. Further threats have since been reported against them.

Dr Omar Khambiev, a surgeon, was detained by Russian forces in February 2000, together with 20 members of his medical team, and some 81 sick and wounded civilians in their care, as they attempted to cross the border into Russia. They were held incommunicado for more than two months, in so-called "filtration camps", where they were reportedly tortured and ill-treated. He left the country some time after his release, and ever since, he has been an outspoken critic of the authorities, giving public presentations at international forums such as the UN Commission on Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. His brother Magomed Khambiev was the Minister of Defence under the previous Chechen government of President Aslan Maskhadov, and a Chechen military commander during the present conflict with Russian federal forces, which began in 1999.

More than 80 of the brothers' extended family, including several teenagers, were detained on 29 February by the militia maintained by Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov, reportedly with the assistance of Russian federal forces. They were rounded up in several towns and villages and held for several days, during which they were allegedly tortured. The operation was supposedly intended to force Magomed Khambiev to turn himself in to the authorities, which he reportedly did on 8 March. According to Dr Omar Khambiev the detentions were also aimed at putting pressure on him to stop his public criticism of the authorities' actions in Chechnya at international meetings.

Dr Omar Khambiev claims that during March he received a number of phone calls threatening retaliation against his relatives unless he stopped speaking out about Chechnya, and handed himself in to the authorities. He also received calls from some of his relatives, who claimed they were being threatened with further torture. In the few days before his public intervention at the UN Commission on Human Rights on 2 April in Geneva, Dr Omar Khambiev said he again received several phone calls threatening his relatives if he continued to speak out about human rights violations in Chechnya throughout Europe, especially at the UN, Council of Europe and other international organizations.

No official investigation into the allegations of torture and ill-treatment of Dr Omar Khambiev's relatives is known to have taken place. Reportedly, none of the victims filed a complaint with the Office of the Procurator, fearing retaliation and further persecution. Several men, who reportedly sustained serious injuries as a result of torture and needed urgent medical attention, were hospitalized under false names, to hide their relationship with Dr Khambiev.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Throughout the present conflict in Chechnya Amnesty International has received reports of harassment and intimidation of activists, NGOs and lawyers in connection with the conflict in Chechnya. There has been a pattern of harassment of people from Chechnya who have petitioned the European Court of Human Rights, as well as those who are defending the rights of victims of abuses. Human rights groups in the region have

also faced increasing levels of harassment and intimidation. A number of activists have “disappeared” or been extrajudicially executed.

For example, prominent Chechen human rights defender Imran Ezhiev, who is the head of the Society of Russian-Chechen Friendship's Information Center in the Northern Caucasus, has been detained at least 17 times, and reportedly tortured and ill-treated in custody. Several other members of the Society of Russian-Chechen Friendship have been killed, allegedly by Russian forces, in what appears to be a deliberate campaign to target human rights activists in this organization. Criminal investigations into these incidents, if any, have been inconclusive and so far no one has been held responsible.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in Russian or your own language:

- calling on the authorities to put an end to the harassment and intimidation of Omar Khambiev and his relatives in Chechnya;
- expressing concern that Omar Khambiev has been harassed and threatened solely for his legitimate exercise of the right to freedom of expression in defence of human rights;
- expressing concern for the safety of over 80 members of Omar Khambiev's family, who were arbitrarily detained for several days in Chechnya on 29 February and have been threatened since;
- expressing concern at the allegations that his relatives were tortured and ill-treated in custody;
- asking for an immediate investigation into these allegations.

APPEALS TO:

President of the Russian Federation

Vladimir Vladimirovich PUTIN

g. Moskva, Kreml

Russian Federation

Telegram: President Vladimir Putin, Moscow, Russian Federation

Fax: + 7 095 230 24 08 / + 7 095 206 51 73 / + 7 095 206 85 10

e-mail: president@gov.ru

Salutation: Dear President

Procurator General of the Russian Federation

Vladimir USTINOV

General Procuracy of the Russian Federation

Ul. B. Dimitrovka 15a

103793 Moscow K-31

Russian Federation

Telegram: Procurator General of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russian Federation

Fax: + 7 095 292 8848 (if someone answers say "fax please")

Salutation: Dear Procurator General

President of the Chechen Republic

Akhmad Hadji KADYROV

ul. Garazhnaia, dom 10

364000 Grozny

Republic of Chechnya, Russian Federation

Telegram: President of the Chechen Republic, Grozny, Chechnya, Russian federation

Fax: +7 095 777 9228 (if someone answers say "fax please")

Salutation: Dear President

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of the Russian Federation accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 June 2004.