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Russian Federation: Council of Europe must ensure protection of human rights in Chechnya

On the eve of debates on the situation in and around Chechnya at the Council of Europe, Amnesty International is calling on the Council of Europe and its member states to use all available avenues to help protect and implement human rights in Chechnya and the surrounding republics of the North Caucasus.

The Council of Europe should continue to monitor and report on the situation in Chechnya as well as on the situation of refugees and internally displaced people from Chechnya, and further cooperation between Council of Europe human rights bodies and the relevant Russian government authorities should be encouraged.

When debating the three reports -- on the human rights situation in Chechnya, the political situation in Chechnya and on the humanitarian situation of Chechen internally displaced persons -- on 7 October, the Parliamentary Assembly should reiterate that human rights abuses are never justified and that impunity must end. Amnesty International calls on the Council of Europe and its member states not to miss this opportunity to further strengthen mechanisms to protect human rights in Russia and insist on the implementation of previous recommendation.

Throughout the conflict Amnesty International has documented cases of "disappearance", extrajudicial execution, torture, including rape and ill-treatment by members of the security forces, and indiscriminate killings of civilians by members of armed opposition groups. While most of these abuses are committed with impunity, victims of human rights abuses who dare to seek justice by lodging a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights may face serious reprisals for doing so. Amnesty International has, for example, documented a number of cases in which applicants to the court and their relatives have been murdered, "disappeared" or were subjected to threats and physical abuse. In some cases the victims of such violations were explicitly told that they were treated like this in order to force them to withdraw their complaint. On 14 October the European Court of Human Rights will consider the first cases of human rights violations in Chechnya.

As part of its documentation of continuing abuses, Amnesty International delegates travelled to Ingushetia in March/April and again in June this year, gathering information about human rights abuses both in Chechnya and in Ingushetia. In June 2004 the organization published a report on the situation in the North Caucasus, which among other things calls on the Council of Europe to increase measures of protection of human rights in the North Caucasus. (AI Index: EUR 46/027/2004)

The October session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is taking place against the backdrop of the recent tragic events in Beslan, North Ossetia. Amnesty International strongly condemned the hostage taking, during which 331 hostages died and many more were injured. The

organization is concerned that in the aftermath of the hostage taking human rights protection may be eroded in the name of security and the so-called "war on terror". The Duma (the Russian parliament) adopted a resolution calling for measures to combat terrorism, which may include infringements of human rights; freedom of movement and freedom of expression. Amnesty International is further concerned about reports that large numbers of people of Caucasian and Central Asian origin have been detained in Moscow and other major cities throughout the Russian Federation and have been deported to other areas inside Russia, and that during such deportations the human rights of many of these people have been violated.

While acknowledging Russia's obligation to protect its citizens from violent crimes, Amnesty International urges the authorities to ensure that any measures taken are in line with the Council of Europe Guidelines on Human Rights and the Fight against Terrorism. Reports received by Amnesty International suggest that immediately after the hostage taking Russian forces and Chechen forces under the command of the pro-Moscow government in Chechnya detained relatives of those who were suspected of being responsible for the hostage taking. Most of the detained were later released but some of them reported that they had been physically and verbally abused.

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