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EU-Russia Summit: Amnesty International calls on EU to address growing persecution of human rights defenders in Chechnya

(Brussels 24 November 2004) On the eve of its summit in The Hague with Russian President Vladimir Putin tomorrow, Amnesty International is presenting the European Union with detailed testimonies showing that victims of human rights violations in Chechnya who complain to European institutions have been killed or "disappeared".

The Amnesty International report submitted to the EU leadership states that human rights defenders in Chechnya have been killed and others have been tortured. Many more have been harassed or intimidated. Amnesty International says there is evidence that human rights activists have been targeted by agents of the state in order to silence them.

As recent as 4 November, Ruslan Susaev, head of the organization "Citizens' Protest", was detained together with his wife and threatened that his family "would suffer" if he did not sign a statement in relation to a bomb explosion in Sernovodsk on 1 November. The couple, parents of six children, were released on 5 November. Armed uniformed men had conducted several searches of their house in August and September 2004. On one occasion, they kicked and hit Mr. Susaev's mother and some of the children. Another time, they took two children with them, who were later released.

In particular, the Amnesty International report details how Chechens who have sought redress in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg for violations of their rights have been the subject of reprisals ranging from harassment and threats, to the killing of applicants themselves or their close relatives.

"The European Union cannot ignore the worsening situation for those who speak out about human rights abuses in Russia, especially when they relate directly to a sister institution - the Council of Europe's own European Court of Human Rights," Dick Oosting, Director of Amnesty International's EU Office said.

"The EU is not only putting its own credibility on the line if it fails, finally, to engage the Russian Federation on human rights, but also the core institution of human rights protection in Europe," he said.

The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly recently concluded that the continued death toll and human suffering in the Chechen Republic was of "great concern to the common values" of the organization. The Assembly also addressed EU Member States in its call not to "remain inactive

when people are dying every day in Chechnya and neighbouring Republics through terrorist attacks, snipers, land mines, abuse of force by security services and acts of organised crime".

"Tomorrow's EU-Russia Summit is to address the issue of creating a 'common space of freedom, security and justice' between the EU and Russia," said Dick Oosting. "Given the increasing threats to human rights protection in Russia, the EU must adopt a fresh approach. It is not just Russia's sensitivities, but the EU's concerns that should set the tone of the talks."

"The 'common space' will remain a vacuum unless the EU lays down non-negotiable principles from the start - that 'freedom' means human rights defenders are free to stand up for the rights of others, 'security' means journalists and lawyers can speak their mind without being harassed or attacked, and 'justice' means that victims of human rights violations can freely seek and find redress in courts of law," Dick Oosting said.

Throughout the ongoing conflict in Chechnya, the Russian authorities have attempted to restrict information about the human rights situation there. Human rights organizations, activists, lawyers, independent journalists and individuals continue to play a crucial role in documenting human rights abuses.

One applicant to the European Court of Human Rights appealing over the "disappearance" of his son during a military raid has had his other son killed after lodging his case. Another man appealing over the "disappearance" of his brother, has himself "disappeared" since lodging his case with the Court.

Amnesty International's report details how the family of human rights activist Luisa Betergiraeva, who was shot dead in 2001, continues to be harassed. The report states: "In early July 2004 in a raid on their house by Russian federal forces, one of Luisa's sons, Zelimkhan Betergiraev, 28, was detained and has since 'disappeared.'" In a second raid on 20 July, when relatives in the house asked why they were being beaten by the soldiers, they were told: "So that you complain less! All of Europe knows already about you!"

In addition, harassment of activists has sometimes included threats by police to plant evidence in a person's house to suggest they have been involved in "terrorism".

In line with the EU's Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by EU Foreign Ministers in June 2004 Amnesty International calls on the EU to:

- Support the legitimate work of human rights defenders in the North Caucasus as suggested in the EU guidelines;
- Raise its concern about attacks on human rights defenders in its dialogue with the Russian Federation, including at tomorrow's summit with President Putin;
- Insist on the initiation without delay of independent and thorough investigations into all allegations of reprisals against any person in relation to applications filed with the European Court of Human Rights and the torture, killings and "disappearances" of human rights defenders and activists. The findings of such investigations should be made public and perpetrators brought to justice.

See "[Russian Federation: The risk of speaking out. Attacks on human rights defenders in the context of the armed conflict in Chechnya](http://www.amnesty-eu.org)" available on <http://www.amnesty-eu.org> from 00.01 GMT Wednesday 24 November 2004. Journalists can obtain a copy of the report by contacting the EU Office in Brussels.

Photos and TV clips of interviews with human rights activists are available by contacting Lydia Aroyo, Press Officer, at the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London Tel: 44-20-74135599 or email: laroyo@amnesty.org

For further comment/background and interviews:

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