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Chechnya - A joint statement by human rights groups *A joint statement of Memorial, FIDH, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International:*

Both parties to the conflict in Chechnya continue to commit serious violations of human rights and breaches of international humanitarian law. Russian forces are responsible for the overwhelming majority of physical harm and material damage suffered by civilians. Russian and international human rights organizations active in the region continue to document violations of the European Convention on Human Rights by Russian forces, including: the arbitrary detention, torture, extortion, "disappearance", and harassment of civilians. They have found that these practices have not lessened since the early months of the war, but rather have become a routine part of Russian operations. Chechen forces violate civilian immunity chiefly by killing, injuring, or threatening civilians working with the Russian-installed administration in Chechnya.

Russian forces on sweep (in Russian, zachistka, or "cleansing") operations in towns and villages continue to arbitrarily arrest, loot, and use disproportionate force against civilians. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, by the end of the summer 15,000 people in Chechnya had been detained in relation to the conflict; in fact, this number is likely to be higher. Most are reportedly beaten or subjected to torture; their relatives are almost always extorted for bribes in exchange for their release. Hundreds of others simply "disappear" in custody. Russian forces manning checkpoints throughout Chechnya routinely extort civilians for bribes.

Civilians fear these acts just as much as they feared the indiscriminate bombing and shelling that took thousands of lives in the early months of the war. Bombing and shelling continues in several districts, and landmines have killed and maimed countless civilians.

The conflict is being prosecuted "behind closed doors." Nongovernmental organizations and independent journalists face significant obstacles to gaining access to Chechnya and to carrying out their work there. Most of the territory has been utterly devastated, most civilians, including more than 100,000 persons displaced within Chechnya, are left to fend for themselves with no assistance from the Russian government.

Chechen fighters violate humanitarian law by failing to protect civilian immunity during attacks on Russian positions, by attacking civilians who work in the local administration in Chechnya, and by ill-treating and summarily executing Russian soldiers they have captured.

The Russian government is not committed to accountability for crimes committed in Chechnya. The procuracy is the only agency in Russia authorized to investigate crimes committed by federal forces in Chechnya and to prosecute those responsible. It has launched forty-seven investigations into crimes against civilians, including thirty-eight against servicemen and nine against Ministry of Internal Affairs personnel. Of these, according to information available at the end of December 2000 twelve were for murder, six for deaths resulting from bombardment or artillery fire, and six for theft; the remaining investigations relate to crimes that are either nonintentional or minor. It has launched fewer than 150 investigations into disappearances.

These efforts are inadequate given the magnitude of the crimes that have been perpetrated, including three well-known massacres that

took place earlier in the war. In addition, the procuracy has not, to the best of our knowledge, acted on the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture's recommendation to investigate allegations of torture at the Chernokozovo detention facility. In fact, according to our information, not a single investigation has been opened against Ministry of Internal Affairs or army servicemen for torture. The procuracy's efforts are inadequate also with regard to the volume of civilian complaints filed. The office of the Special Representative of the President of the Russian Federation for Human Rights in the Chechen Republic, Vladimir Kalamonov, has received 12,000 complaints filed by civilians, 1,200 of which concern arbitrary arrest and "disappearances".

The Russian government has not established any other agency with prosecutorial authority to investigate crimes against civilians committed in Chechnya. Mr. Kalamonov's office does not have such a mandate, and even with the participation of Council of Europe experts, it has not facilitated accountability or human rights protection in a meaningful way. The State Duma commission on Chechnya held its first hearing fully one year after the conflict started, and while it remains entirely unclear what results might come of its work, it is clear that it does not have investigatory powers. The "independent national commission" led by Pavel Krashenininov, which had no authority or mandate to conduct investigations appears to be defunct.

Russia has failed to implement most of the recommendations made by the Council of Europe since the conflict began, and its forces continue to commit serious human rights violations on an alarming scale in Chechnya. Any measures toward lessening pressure would be premature, and would signify Council of Europe's approval of Russia's conduct in the conflict.

We urge the Parliamentary Assembly in its current session to use all the mechanisms it has availed itself throughout 2000 to hold Russia accountable for crimes against civilians which its forces have perpetrated in Chechnya.

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