

PUBLIC

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EXTRA 06/00

Fear of torture or ill-treatment / Arbitrary arrest /
Incommunicado detention

1 February 2000

RUSSIAN FEDERATION: CHECHEN REPUBLIC

Andrey BABITSKY, 35, journalist

Amnesty International is concerned for the safety of Andrey Babitsky, a highly respected Russian war correspondent who has been arrested by the Russian military authorities. In flagrant violation of Russian law and international standards, he has been placed in incommunicado detention at an unknown location where he is at risk of being tortured or ill-treated.

Andrey Babitsky apparently last made contact with his colleagues at the Radio Liberty office in Moscow on 15 January as he was preparing to leave Grozny in Chechnya.

The Russian authorities initially denied having any knowledge of his whereabouts, suggesting he might have been detained by Chechen fighters. On 28 January, however, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs admitted that he had been arrested on 23 January at a check-point on the Grozny-Gudermes road, apparently for not having official accreditation to be in the war zone. His colleagues, however, believe he was arrested much earlier.

The head of the press service of the Russian Presidential Administration, Sergey Yastrzhembsky, reported on 31 January that Andrey Babitsky is being held in a pre-trial detention centre (SIZO) in the Naursky District of the Chechen Republic.

On 28 January the Russian Interfax news agency reported that, according to unidentified sources at the Federal Security Services (FSB), he had been charged with "taking part in an illegal armed formation", which carries a punishment of up to five years' imprisonment, although this has not been confirmed officially by the Russian authorities.

Amnesty International is concerned that Andrey Babitsky's arrest is an attempt by the Russian authorities to silence him. His reporting about Russian attacks of civilians in the current conflict in Chechnya has apparently angered a number of Russian military officials, who had accused him of being pro-Chechen.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Andrey Babitsky is well known for his objective and courageous reporting on the human rights violations committed by both sides during the previous war in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996. In June 1995 a group of armed Chechen fighters killed more than 100 civilians in the southern Russian town of Budennovsk when they took some 1,000 people hostage at the local hospital. Some hostages were later forced to act as human shields for Chechen fighters during a subsequent assault on the hospital by Russian government forces. Andrey Babitsky, who was at the scene, reportedly volunteered to be taken hostage in place of another civilian.

According to his wife, Lyudmila Babitskaya, on 21 January two FSB officers seized photographs from their home taken recently in Grozny by Andrey Babitsky and other foreign journalists. They claimed they needed them to identify Chechen terrorists. On 24 January the photographs were returned.

Since the beginning of the current conflict in Chechnya the Russian authorities have exerted a high level of control over journalistic reporting of events. Although some foreign journalists, accompanied by Russian military officials, have been allowed to interview Russian troops in Chechnya, they have not reportedly been taken to Grozny or anywhere near the conflict. Journalists and independent monitors are officially barred from entering the only open border crossing between Chechnya and the neighboring state of Ingushetia. Russian forces are also confiscating any cameras found on Chechens entering Chechnya. Foreign journalists in Ingushetia have told Amnesty International

that all their activities have been monitored by the Russian authorities and some of them have been threatened with cancellation of their media accreditation if they attempt to enter Chechnya. Other foreign media representatives who have crossed into Chechnya unofficially have been detained by the Russian authorities and later expelled from the war zone. The granting by the Russian military authorities of journalistic accreditation is arbitrary.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in Russian or your own language:

- urging the Russian government to immediately make public the whereabouts of Andrey Babitsky, his well-being and the legal basis for his arrest and detention;
- urging the authorities to grant him immediate access to his family, a lawyer of his own choice and medical care;
- asking the authorities to release him, unless he is officially charged with a recognizably criminal offence;
- asking the authorities to initiate an investigation into his incommunicado detention and for those responsible for this violation to be brought to justice.

APPEALS TO (please note that, as fax machines can be switched off, it is better to fax during office local time +3 GMT):

Acting President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir PUTIN
 Rossiyskaya Federatsiya, g. Moskva, Kreml
 I.o. Prezidenta Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Russian Federation
Telegrams: PUTINU V., Kreml, Moskva, Russia
Faxes: + 7 095 206 6277
Salutation: Dear Acting President

Director General of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation
 Nikolay PATRUSHEV, Rossiyskaya Federatsiya, 101000 g. Moskva
 Bolshaya Lubyanka 1/3
 Federalnaya Sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Russian Federation
Telegrams: Generalnomu direktoru FSB, PATRUSHEVU N., Moskva, Russia
Faxes: + 7 095 975 24 70
Salutation: Dear Director General

Acting Procurator General of the Russian Federation, Vladimir USTINOV
 Rossiyskaya Federatsiya, 103793 g. Moskva K-31
 Ul. B. Dimitrovka, d15a, Generalnaya Prokuratura Rossiyskoy Federatsii
 Russian Federation
Telegrams: I.o. Generalnogo prokurora, USTINOVU V., Moskva, Russia
Faxes: + 7 095 292 88 48
Salutation: Dear Acting Procurator General

COPIES TO:

Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Igor Ivanov
 Rossiyskaya Federatsiya, g. Moskva 121200, Smolenskaya-Sennaya pl., 32/34
 Ministerstvo inostrannykh del RF, Ministru IVANOVU I., Russian Federation
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and 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 29 February 2000.