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**RUSSIA: AMNESTY CALLS ON RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES TO RELEASE OR CHARGE
CHECHEN DETAINEES**

The Russian authorities should immediately release two ethnic Chechens detained since last month, if they are not to be charged with a recognizably criminal offence, Amnesty International said today.

The two men are held under a presidential decree which allows suspects to be detained without charge for up to a month, contravening Russian constitutional standards and international standards, that stipulate that those arrested or detained should be brought promptly before a judge.

Amnesty International is calling for them to be given prompt access to a defence counsel and a fair trial if charged.

Both men are associated with political opposition to the Russian military operation in the Chechen Republic. Khamad Kurbanov, the Russian representative of Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev, was detained on 17 June. Ramzan Muzayev, secretary of the Chechen-Press information agency, was detained two days later. Khamad Kurbanov has now spent over 20 days on a hunger-strike in protest at his detention.

They have been detained under a 1994 presidential decree on "Urgent measures to defend the population from banditry and other manifestations of organized crime." Under its provisions a person suspected of involvement in organized crime may be detained for up to 30 days without charge.

By using this presidential decree the Russian authorities are contravening both the Russian Constitution and international standards. Both stipulate that those arrested or detained should be brought promptly before a judge.

Furthermore, the presidential decree makes no mention of the right of the accused to access to a defence counsel during the period spent under the 30-day detention. Such access is especially important because Khamad Kurbanov and Ramzan Muzayev may face a charge of treason which carries a possible death sentence.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The detentions came against the backdrop of events in the southern Russian city of Budennovsk in June, when around 1,000 civilians were taken hostage by armed Chechens. They were led by one of President Dudayev's field commanders, Shamil Basayev, who stated that he was acting without the knowledge or consent of the President.

Chechen forces reportedly killed at least 40 people when they entered the town on 14 June. They rounded up hostages and took them to the local hospital where they were held along with staff, patients and visitors.

Chechen forces allegedly threatened to execute five hostages for every one of their men wounded, and 10 for every man shot, should Russian forces attempt to storm the building. When such an attempt was made on 17 June, hostages reported that some were forced to stand at windows as shields for Chechen fighters during the assault.

At a press conference in the hospital Shamil Basayev was also quoted as saying that he and his men would fight to the death, and shoot the hostages if necessary, to achieve their demands that Russian forces declare a ceasefire and disengage from the Chechen Republic.

Most hostages were released when Chechen forces left Budennovsk on 19 June, although over 100 accompanied the departing group as "volunteer" human shields and were not finally released until the convoy reached the Chechen Republic the next day.

At least 123 people are reported to have died between 14 and 20 June as a result of actions by both Chechen and Russian forces.

According to Amnesty International, which opposes hostage-taking and the deliberate and arbitrary killing of civilians, "President Dudayev, as formal commander should condemn publicly these abuses and take all necessary steps to ensure that no forces under his command commit such acts in future."

The organization calls for a rigorous investigation of responsibility for the abuses by Chechen forces reported in Budennovsk, with the findings made public.

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