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RUSSIAN FEDERATION: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SENDS OPEN LETTER TO THE
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES IN RUN UP TO RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

As the date of the presidential elections draws near, Amnesty International is sending an open letter to all the presidential candidates urging them to make a public commitment to a plan of action to strengthen human rights protection in the country.

The organization is also urging them to promote respect for the rights of all in the Russian Federation, no matter what their race, ethnic background, gender, political beliefs, and other individual differences.

“Promises made by the Russian Government to obtain membership of the Council of Europe in February 1996 appear to be nothing but a diplomatic and public relations exercise to convince the international community that it has improved its human rights record,” Amnesty International said today.

The Russian Federation remains a country where serious and widespread human rights violations occur, both in peace-time and during the armed conflict in the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic. Torture and ill-treatment continue in police custody, in prisons and in the armed forces during peace-time; prison conditions are appalling; prisoners of conscience remain detained; refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced persons are not given adequate protection; prisoners are still facing the death penalty and executions are continuing despite the official moratorium. The lack of laws and regulations makes it impossible in many cases to implement the provisions of the Russian Constitution safeguarding the human rights of Russian citizens.

Thousands of civilians have become victims of indiscriminate killings, torture and extrajudicial executions by the Russian federal army during the conflict in the Chechen Republic. From the very beginning of the conflict, in December 1994, the Russian authorities have shown a marked disregard for the rules governing armed conflict and the protection of the civilian population.

Amnesty International is calling on the future President and the Government of the Russian Federation to develop a strategy to respect and implement its pledged commitments to the Council of Europe on a wide range of human rights issues and work on improving the human rights situation in Russia. It is urging them to make a commitment to:

- introduce and respect the moratorium on executions and fully abolish the death penalty within three years;
- end torture and ill-treatment in prisons, in police custody and in the army, including conditions of detention amounting to ill-treatment;
- reform the legal and justice system to ensure respect for human rights;

- protect national minorities;
- adopt a law on a civilian alternative to military service;
- respect freedom of assembly and of religion;
- release all prisoners of conscience and ensure fair and prompt trials for political prisoners;
- investigate as a matter of urgency and in a thorough and impartial manner all past and present human rights violations and abuses, and specifically those committed during the conflict in the Chechen Republic. Anyone found guilty of perpetrating human rights violations, regardless of their post and position, should be brought to justice promptly, giving a clear message that human rights cannot be violated with impunity.

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