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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Russian Federation: Chechen Republic -- Russian Government must protect civilians of Chechnya

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that the continuing bombing in Chechnya carried out by the Russian military over the past week has resulted in civilian deaths and thousands of displaced people fleeing the Chechen Republic. The air raids began following the recent apartment explosions in Moscow and two other Russian cities, which killed at least 292 people, and which have been attributed by the Russian government to Islamic groups from the Chechen Republic, but for which no group has yet claimed responsibility. The organization is concerned that the Russian government's response to the apartment bombings appears to be a campaign to punish an entire ethnic group. "Fighting crime and terrorism" is no justification for violating human rights.

International humanitarian law prohibits deliberate attacks on civilians and civilian sites. It also requires stringent safeguards when carrying out attacks against military objectives, including giving effective advance warning of attacks which may affect the civilian population. The Russian military has stated that its air attacks on Chechnya are aimed at legitimate military targets, which were strongholds of Islamic armed guerilla groups in the Chechen Republic. Russian military officials have denied targeting civilians and civilian sites during the air attacks.

Authorities in the Chechen Republic claim that since the beginning of the bombing, 400-500 civilians have been killed and over 1, 000 wounded, with half of those killed and wounded allegedly women and children. For example, it was alleged that during the air raids on 27 September, the Russian military bombed a school and housing estates in the town of Staraya Sunzha, in the north of the capital Grozny: 21 civilians were reportedly killed and 44 wounded. During an air strike on 24 September along the Rostov-Baku highway in the area of the town of Samashki, eight civilians travelling on a bus were allegedly killed. Reports from Chechnya claimed that a number of areas with heavy civilian concentration, including a television station, have been subjected to shelling. Amnesty International is not able to assess the exact number of civilian casualties or to determine the circumstances surrounding their deaths because the current security situation makes it very difficult for independent media and human rights observers to obtain access to Chechnya. However, available reports on several incidents suggest that Russian forces are not taking all necessary precautions to protect civilians.

The intensified air raids have driven, according to official estimates, over 88,000 men, women and children to flee Chechnya and seek refuge in the neighbouring Russian Federation's Republic of Ingushetia. The Russian Ministry for Emergency Situations claimed that just over 13,000 displaced persons have been registered in Ingushetia. However, Amnesty International is concerned about reports that the majority of civilians who fled the bombing do not have any special status as internally displaced people and therefore do not have regular access to medical care and social services.

At the same time, Russian law enforcement officials and local authorities in Moscow and other big cities launched what appeared to be a massive intimidation campaign to enforce the unlawful practice of “resident permits” or “registration”, which allegedly targeted mainly Chechens and other people from the Caucasus. Reports suggested that up to 20,000 non-Muscovites were rounded-up by the police last week and more than half of them were refused official registration and a resident permit. Officials in Moscow claimed that some 10,000 non-Muscovites who lacked resident permits and were refused registration, have been deported from the city. Reports over the past two weeks indicated deliberate targeting, detention and expulsion, including incidents of ill-treatment in custody of Chechens and other “darker” people from the Caucasus by Russian law enforcement officials and the local authorities in Moscow and other big cities in the Russian Federation.

Amnesty International is urging the Russian Government to implement, as a matter of urgency, the following recommendations:

The Russian Government should comply with the provisions of international humanitarian law regarding the protection of civilians during armed conflict, which prohibits attacks on civilians and civilian sites. The Russian military should take sufficient precautions to protect civilians in selecting and vetting targets, in choosing the timing of its attacks, in giving an advance warning to civilians. Other rules require specific precautions to be taken when launching attacks, including desisting from an attack if it becomes apparent that the objective is not a military one or the attack risks being disproportionate to the military objective.

The Russian Government should comply with its other commitments to protect human rights in times of armed conflicts, including the OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security adopted in December 1994. The Russian Government should comply with its commitments on respect human rights, given to the Council of Europe upon Russia’s acceptance to the Council in February 1996, including the commitment to “respect strictly the provisions of international humanitarian law, including in cases of armed conflicts on its territory”.

The Government should immediately take steps to recognize all civilians fleeing the conflict area as internally displaced persons, and ensure that they have access to social services, medical care, education and unrestricted travel within the borders of the Russian Federation.

The Government should take measures to stop the campaign of intimidation against Chechen civilians and other people from the Caucasus who reside in Moscow and other cities of the Russian Federation, including the practice of unlawful arrests, denial of registration and resident permits and forcible expulsions. The Federal Government should uphold and enforce the 1998 Constitutional Court’s decision ruling illegal the use of resident permits and a resident registration system in Moscow and the whole territory of the Federation. The Government should inform all local government and law enforcement officials regarding the prohibition of resident permits.

The Russian authorities should hold a comprehensive and impartial investigation into the allegations of targeting civilians and civilian sites in the course of the bombing of Chechnya and bring all military and government officials responsible to justice.

The Russian authorities should investigate the reports and allegations of unlawful and arbitrary arrest and detention of civilians in Moscow and other cities, including allegations of ill-treatment of people in custody by law enforcement officials. The authorities should bring all officials responsible for these abuses to justice.

The Government should take all steps to ensure access and to guarantee the safety of independent media and human rights monitors to the Chechen Republic.

Background

While Amnesty International takes no position on the reason for armed conflicts, or the resort to the use of force *per se*, it does call on all parties to a conflict to abide by international humanitarian law. The organization reports on and takes action against specific human rights abuses occurring in situations of conflict, including deliberate or indiscriminate killing of civilians, detention without charge or trial, the torture, ill-treatment or extrajudicial execution of persons detained, including soldiers or other combatants who are *hors de combat*, the use of the death penalty, the taking of hostages or the “disappearance” or abduction of any person.

Amnesty International has called repeatedly on the Russian authorities to stop the use of the so-called “*propiska*” system (resident permit) in the Russian Federation. The resident permit system, although legally abolished in 1991 in national law, continues to be enforced by the local authorities in Moscow, St Petersburg and other big cities, which reinforced strict rules, requiring prior official permission for residence. Migrants, internally displaced persons or asylum seekers who lack resident permit do not enjoy regular access to medical care, education and social services and are often subjected to arbitrary arrest and forcible expulsion by the law enforcement officials.

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