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1998 - YEAR OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Government plans to “physically eliminate” criminals

The recent statement by the Russian Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, that violent criminals should die – made as the world is preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – is cause for great concern, Amnesty International said today.

His statement was made as he promised tougher measures to fight crime, following the recent murder in St Petersburg of a member of parliament Galina Starovoitova. He is reported to have called for the "physical elimination of those who raise their hands against society".

"His stand puts at risk the existence of a moratorium on executions in the Russian Federation. Killing cannot be punished by killing. As Andrey Sakharov put it in 1977, ‘savagery begets only savagery’,” Amnesty International noted.

Following the Prime Minister’s statement, the Chairman of the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, Vladimir Kartashkin, was quoted today as saying: “It is obvious the moratorium will be revoked and that methods of punishment will be strengthened.”

Amnesty International urges the President and the Prime Minister to publicly declare the existence of a moratorium on executions in the Russian Federation and the government’s intention to comply with its commitment given to the Council of Europe to fully abolish the death penalty by 28 February 1999.

Background:

On 28 November Prime Minister Primakov reportedly stated in televised remarks during a visit to the city of Belgorod in Western Russia: “The criminals, as the Minister of Internal Affairs has rightly said, have thrown down a challenge. We must accept that challenge. And I’m saying straight out here that we may be talking about, should be talking about, the physical elimination of those who raise their hands against society, the people, the public, against children. We are heading towards this”. According to reports, in the same broadcast the Prime Minister voiced particular concerns about the rise in crime among police officers.

Amnesty International notes with great concern the apparent retreat in recent official statements from the government’s commitment, on accession to the Council of Europe, to abolish the death penalty. Similarly, in a recent statement the Russian Minister of Internal Affairs promised tougher law and order enforcement in the Russian Federation, declaring that serious criminals should be sentenced to death. Sergey Stepashin was reported to have stated on national television on 11 November: "A thief should go to prison, but a gangster should be killed."

It was reported that Vladimir Kartashkin, the Chairman of the Presidential Commission commented today: “In any event, various people at the highest level and also in the Procuracy-General, Supreme Court and Ministry of Justice , and many others, are saying that we ought to lift the moratorium on capital punishment.”

No official moratorium on executions has been put in place in the Russian Federation, although the authorities claim that no executions have taken place since August 1996. According to official government information, as of 30 April, 894 prisoners remained on death row. However, in October the Minister of Justice reported that 839 people were under sentence of death. Amnesty International is concerned about the apparent discrepancies in the official government statistics. People continue to be sentenced to death and any information concerning their execution, including the time and place where the execution was carried out, or where the bodies were buried, remains a state secret.

Amnesty International wishes to remind the Russian government that one of the most prominent supporters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the founder of the Russian human rights movement, Andrey Dmitriyevich Sakharov, wrote in a letter to the organization in September 1977: “I regard the death penalty as a savage, immoral institution which undermines the ethical and legal foundations of a society. The state... assumes the right to the most terrible and irreversible act – the taking of human life. I reject the notion that the death penalty has any real deterrent effect whatsoever on potential criminals. I am convinced that the contrary is true – that savagery begets only savagery”.

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