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Russian Federation: The state has an obligation to defend the activities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs)

Amnesty International calls on the Russian Federation to fulfil its obligations to international human rights standards and allow an active Russian non-governmental organization to continue its work in defence of minority rights.

"According to the *Human Rights Defender's Declaration* adopted as a resolution by the UN General Assembly, people and NGOs working for human rights have to be given the necessary freedom to do so and be protected against prosecution of any kind. The state has an obligation to protect those activities against its own representatives and against violent groups who take the law into their own hands," Amnesty International said.

The world's biggest international human rights organization raises its concern as the "School of Peace" Foundation based in the city of Novorossiysk in Krasnodar Territory comes under an increased threat of closure. Federal authorities justify taking action on the grounds that it no longer has the three founding members that such organizations in the Russian Federation require by law. Reportedly, "School of Peace" Foundation was told by the Ministry of Justice in 1999 that they could continue to work in spite of the fact that they had less than the three founders.

The "School of Peace" Foundation works for the protection of human rights of children, human rights education and the promotion of tolerance. In the last two years it has been fighting discrimination against Meskhetians in Krasnodar Territory. Local human rights defenders say that local authorities have begun threatening the foundation with closure since they took up the protection of the human rights of Meskhetians. Allegedly, representatives of "School of Peace" were recently called "for talks" with the regional administration in which they were told that they would be closed down unless they ceased their activities in defending the rights of the Meskhetians living in Krasnodar Territory.

Yuri Dzhibladze, President of the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights told Amnesty International this was at least the fourth NGO that had been harassed by the authorities of Krasnodar Territory in the past year:

"Human rights defenders in the Russian Federation are trying to stop the repressions against NGOs in the region - we sent a special report to the UN General Secretary Special Representative and organized a public debate in Moscow with the Presidential Commission on Human Rights, but this did not help. Our Krasnodar NGO colleagues need urgent and more consolidated actions of solidarity in order to put a stop to the harassments of NGOs there and to prevent the closure of the "School of Peace"

Foundation," said Yuri Dzhibladze.

In 2002, the legal authorities of Krasnodar Territory closed down the local branch of the organization of Meskhetians "Vatan" and suspended the activities of the Krasnodar Human Rights Centre. Earlier this year, they also threatened with closure the Civic Debate Club "Southern Wave". These organizations were actively involved in human rights work and were repeatedly attacked by the authorities for criticizing the regional administration's non-compliance with Russian and international human rights law. Russian NGOs have documented numerous human rights violations in the Krasnodar Territory, in particular in the area of ethnic discrimination, independence of the judiciary and freedom of expression.

"At a moment when the Russian Federation is preparing to go into a general election campaign, it is very important that the state should put forward on the agenda the protection of human rights. It can do so by fulfilling its obligation under the *Human Rights Defender's Declaration* and stop the closure of the "School of Peace" Foundation," Amnesty International said.

Background

Meskhetians are a largely Muslim group who were forcibly relocated from southwest Georgia in 1944 by the former Soviet regime. As citizens of the former USSR who were legally residing on the territory of the Russian Federation at the time of the adoption of the 1992 Citizenship Law, they are by law Russian citizens. However, the vast majority of the 13,000 to 16,000 Meskhetians living in Krasnodar Territory continue to be denied their legal rights, including their right to citizenship, because of discriminatory legislation and practices in the Territory.

In its report '*Dokumenty! Discrimination on grounds of race in the Russian Federation*', launched in the course of its year-long campaign on human rights in the Russian Federation, Amnesty International urged the Russian Federation to ensure that all those who are entitled to citizenship of the Russian Federation -- including Meskhetians in Krasnodar Territory -- are not denied their legal right to citizenship because of discriminatory legislation, regulation or practices.

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