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EU-RUSSIA SUMMIT: THREE QUESTIONS FOR PRESIDENT PUTIN

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS ON THE EU TO DEMAND ANSWERS

EMBARGO: 10.00 Brussels time (09.00 GMT) Wednesday 5 November 2003

(Brussels 5 November 2003) On the eve of the European Union summit meeting with Russia in Rome, and with continuing reports of grave human rights abuses in Chechnya and neighbouring Ingushetia, Amnesty International is calling on EU leaders to pose three specific questions to the Russian President Vladimir Putin during their summit tomorrow and make public his response.

While the Russian government attempts to portray the recent presidential elections in Chechnya as a step towards stabilization, Amnesty International has received credible reports, including in September and October this year, that human rights abuses in Chechnya linked to Russian security forces and troops reportedly under the control of the newly elected Chechen President, are continuing and increasingly spreading to the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia.

At the same time, attacks, reportedly by Chechen fighters, on members of the Chechen administration and people linked to President Akhmed Kadyrov have also continued.

"While the EU used strong language to criticize the conduct of the recent elections in Chechnya and voiced concerns over human rights, it remains to be seen whether these strong sentiments will be repeated face to face in the meeting with the Russian President," the Director of Amnesty International's EU office Dick Oosting said.

"Amid the discussions on trade and cooperation in a future Common European Economic Space, the misery and despair which civilians in the EU's biggest new neighbouring state have endured, and still are enduring, must not be forgotten."

"The perpetrators of grave human rights violations must be brought to justice by the Russian authorities and it is difficult to see how the EU can build an enlarged area of political stability and functioning rule of law on its Eastern borders if the Russian President is allowed to continually sweep away criticism on these fundamental issues, and if the EU is not pushing for a concrete response," said Dick Oosting.

Amnesty International calls on the EU to pose the following, specific questions:

Question: Access for international monitoring

Will the Russian President allow unfettered international human rights monitoring in Chechnya, including by the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and provide dates for the visits to Chechnya of experts from the UN Commission on Human Rights (the Special Rapporteurs on Torture, on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, and on Violence against Women)?

Question: Protection of internally displaced persons

Will the Russian President commit to immediately halt attempts by the Russian authorities to forcibly return Chechen internally displaced persons until they can return voluntarily in safety and dignity to their place of origin or choice?

Question: Ending impunity

Will the Russian President ensure immediate action to bring to justice those responsible for the grave abuses committed during the conflict in Chechnya, and provide concrete information about all criminal investigations into alleged crimes which may amount to human rights violations or violations of international humanitarian law?

BACKGROUND:

Spread of human rights violations to Ingushetia

Human rights violations of the kind typically associated with the Chechen Republic -such as "disappearances", torture and ill-treatment and extra-judicial executions - have in recent months continued their spread into the territory of Ingushetia. Reports of numerous military raids - during which Russian federal forces as well as armed troops reportedly under the command of Chechen President and previous acting head of administration Akhmad Kadyrov are alleged to have targeted civilian settlements as well as IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps and committed serious human rights abuses - are a serious cause for concern.

Ingushetia is now no longer the safe haven for the internally displaced that it once was and the spread of the armed conflict into the territory has impacted on both the IDP and Ingush civilian populations.

Climate of impunity continues

On 14 October the trial against Sergei Lapin, a member of a special federal police force (OMON) began in Grozny. Sergei Lapin is accused of inflicting bodily harm on Zelimkhan Murdalov from Grozny, who "disappeared" in January 2001 after having been detained by Sergei Lapin and other members of his unit. It is the first time that a member of the Russian federal forces has been brought to trial in a court in Chechnya for crimes against the civilian population. Amnesty International is closely monitoring the case.

Amnesty International is aware of other ongoing trials against members of the federal forces for crimes committed in Chechnya, but they are few and far between and rarely relate to human rights abuses committed against the civilian population in Chechnya.

The organization remains concerned that the Russian government still appears to lack the political will to end human rights abuses in Chechnya and to bring to light the fate of the "disappeared".

No one has been brought to justice in connection with any of the well-documented raids including killings of civilians in places such as Alkhan-Yurt, Aldi, Staropromyslovskii or Sernovodsk. The failure to bring to justice those responsible for serious human rights abuses will further undermine the confidence of the civilian population in Chechnya that they can rely on the judicial system for protection and redress.

Russia has consistently failed to comply with resolutions by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe or the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in this regard.

Intimidation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Amnesty International remains seriously concerned that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are being subjected to extreme pressure to return from tent camps in Ingushetia to Chechnya, against their will and without guarantees for their security. During August and September 2003 attempts by the Russian authorities intensified to pressure the remaining IDPs living in tent camps in Ingushetia, who number approximately 12,000 out of the total 80,000 IDPs.

Consistent and credible reports from UN agencies as well as national and international NGOs stated that a variety of tactics such as intimidation, harassment, threats of deregistration from official camp lists of IDPs and the curtailment of vital services such as water, electricity and gas supplies are being used by the authorities to compel the IDPs to return.

In mid-August, 200 IDPs from Bella Camp, one of the five remaining tent camps in Ingushetia, came under particularly concerted pressure to return to Chechnya. Such activity prompted the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to describe the manner in which they were treated as "aggressive and unacceptable". On 30 September the camp was closed and the remaining IDPs were resettled to the neighbouring Satsita camp amidst pledges that all the necessary infrastructure services and facilities would be put in place.

Following initial reports that there were insufficient tents for the new IDPs and problems with the electricity and gas supplies, conditions in the Satsita camp are said to have improved. However, Amnesty International remains concerned that guarantees that the Bella IDPs resettled in Satsita would be registered in the official Ingush Migration Service camp list have not been fulfilled. Furthermore, it is reported that humanitarian and human rights agencies are being denied access to the Satsita camp.

Theatre siege - no justice one year on

The 23rd October 2003 marked the first anniversary of the theatre siege in the House of Culture on Melnikov Street in central Moscow during which 800 people were taken hostage by some 59 armed men and women. During the rescue operation to free the hostages - which is documented in the recent Amnesty International report: "***Rough Justice: The Law and Human Rights in the Russian Federation***"* - a soporific gas was released into the theatre and some 129 hostages are known to have lost their lives and a further 68 are said to be unaccounted for.

Amnesty International has a number of serious concerns about the way the rescue operation was conducted, and the fact that no one has yet been held to account for actions during and after the rescue operation, which in some cases may have violated human rights. Amnesty International maintains its call for a thorough and independent investigation of the rescue operation.

*"***Rough Justice: The Law and Human Rights in the Russian Federation***" (October 2003) is available on www.news.amnesty.org and www.amnesty.org (search by keying in "Rough Justice").

For further comment/background and interviews:

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