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Breaking the cycle of impunity in the North Caucasus

I am at a stage when I envy those parents who find their children's corpses.
Boris Ozdoev, father of a forcibly disappeared man

The Russian authorities must strengthen the accountability of law enforcement agencies which in their crude response to the activities of armed groups in the North Caucasus contribute to insecurity in the region, Amnesty International warned in a new report.

[*The circle of injustice: Security operations and human rights violations in Ingushetia*](#) examines human rights violations, including unlawful killings, disappearances and torture, and the policies and practices behind them focusing on one particular republic but Amnesty International's findings and recommendations apply to the whole region.

"The situation in the North Caucasus has dropped of the national and international radar in recent years, but serious human rights abuses are still going unchecked and unpunished across the region. A real effort must be made now to impose the rule of law and crack down on human rights abuses by law enforcement officials operating outside control. The long-term security of the region depends on it," said John Dalhuisen, Director of Amnesty International's Europe and Central Asia Programme.

It has been estimated that since 2002 more than 200 people have been abducted by armed and masked men. No one has ever been prosecuted for an enforced disappearance in Ingushetia or in the region.

Allegations of unlawful executions, often during security operations, are made each year in Ingushetia but not a single case has been brought before a court.

Security operations are shrouded in secrecy, effectively giving the green light for human rights violations.

The structure of the law enforcement agencies operating in the North Caucasus is also complex and opaque and allows them to disclaim responsibility for, or knowledge of, human rights violations that are typically committed by law enforcement officials wearing masks, but no identifying insignia and driving unmarked vehicles.

"It is as though a corporate veil has been drawn across the activities of law enforcement officials in the North Caucasus", said John Dalhuisen.

"Sometimes investigators and prosecutors are unable to investigate the abuses. Often, however, they appear to be unwilling to do so as obvious lines of enquiry are dropped or not pursued effectively, bringing their independence and impartiality into question."

In spite of the recent significant reform of Russia's criminal justice system and the introduction of procedural and practical safeguards against torture in line with international human rights law there is

compelling evidence that torture is still widely used by law enforcement officers in order to extract testimonies and for evidence in court.

Zelimkhan Chitigov, an ethnic Chechen man in his early twenties, was abducted in April 2010 by some 30 armed men and taken to an unknown location with a plastic bag over his head and hands bound behind his back. After he refused to confess to any terrorism-related activities, he was beaten and electrocuted, his toe-nails were pulled out, skin twisted with pliers and he was suspended on metal bars. Zelimkhan Chitigov later learnt that he was tortured in the Centre for Combating Extremism of the Ministry of the Interior, in the town of Nazran. When he was finally brought before a judge, Zelimkhan Chitigov could no longer walk and collapsed in court. He was taken to hospital where he remained under guard for two months, and was then released under travel restrictions. At that point, he could neither walk nor talk and was suffering from frequent panic attacks. He was been diagnosed with serious head, spinal and internal organs injuries. In July 2010, a criminal case was opened into his allegations of torture and secret detention; the trial is ongoing.

“Zelimkhan Chitigov is one of many who have been beaten and tortured in Ingushetia. His case is unique only in that it is the only one where charges have been brought against one of the perpetrators – but these charges cover only his secret detention and not the allegations of torture,” said John Dalhuisen.

“At present the only real hope of redress for victims of human rights violations in the North Caucasus is the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg – a process which takes years and has often proved dangerous for applicants. The Russian authorities must bring justice home,” said John Dalhuisen.

“Nobody is above the law, especially those whose duty is to uphold it. The Russian authorities must develop a ‘zero tolerance’ policy of human rights violations by law enforcement officers through prompt and impartial investigations and prosecution of those responsible.”

Background

Ingushetia is the smallest constituent part of the Russian Federation with 413,000 residents, bordering with Georgia in the south, and Chechnya and North Ossetia to the east and west respectively. It is one of the poorest subjects of the Soviet Federation with the highest unemployment at 47.7 per cent and 91 per cent of its budget made up of direct federal subsidies.

As a result of the military conflict in Chechnya in the 1990s, Ingushetia was swamped with more than 100,000 refugees. As the Chechnya conflict spread over to neighbouring republics, over the last decade the activity of armed groups in Ingushetia grew, including the attempted assassinations of presidents Murat Zyazikov (April 2004) and Yunus-Bek Yevkurov (June 2009). Civilians have also been targeted, or caught and killed in the crossfire. This led to the influx of numerous law enforcement agencies and regular launching of security operations of varying scale, mostly small.