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Russia must deliver justice for Natalia Estemirova and other murdered activists

Russia must show political will and end impunity for the murder of human rights activists and journalists in the North Caucasus, Amnesty International said today, three years after the brutal killing of activist Natalia Estemirova.

Those responsible for Estemirova's abduction and murder in Grozny, Chechnya on 15 July 2009 have still not been brought to justice.

Since then more civil society activists, independent lawyers and journalists have been intimidated, attacked and killed with impunity.

"The failure to bring to justice the murderers of Natalia Estemirova and of other human rights activists in the North Caucasus can only be explained by a complete lack of political will to end impunity for such crimes," said John Dalhuisen, Director of Europe and Central Asia for Amnesty International.

In spite of the Russian Investigation Committee's repeated statements that all leads, including those with possible involvement of government officials in Natalia's Estemirova's murder, would be investigated, there appears to be no progress and no meaningful steps have been taken in that direction.

"We have to conclude that the Russian authorities gave hollow promises which they never meant to fulfil", said John Dalhuisen.

Activists targeted in recent months include members of the Joint Mobile Group of Russian human rights defenders (JMG) who started to work in Chechnya shortly after the killing of Natalia Estemirova.

On 1 June its members were invited for a meeting with high ranking Chechen officials during which they were subjected to accusations and insults. None of the constructive questions asked by the JMG members as to how, for example, efficiency of criminal investigations could be improved, was answered.

On 7 July Igor Kaliapin, the chairman of leading human rights NGO Inter-Regional Committee Against Torture and one of the co-founders of the Joint Mobile Group was threatened with criminal proceedings for allegedly disclosing confidential information in his contributions to media publications in support of victims of human rights violations by law enforcement officials in Chechnya.

Igor Kaliapin claims that he had revealed no secrets but exposed the lack of effective investigation into the serious human rights violations and the lack of redress for the victims.

This is the third attempt to open criminal proceedings against Igor Kaliapin and to stifle the activities of his NGO and of the Joint Mobile Group.

"Rather than protecting human rights activists, the authorities engage in smear campaigns and acts of intimidation against them. Not only in Chechnya but in other parts of Russia", said John Dalhuisen.

"The authorities need to end this practice and show the world that they are capable and willing to tackle violence against human rights defenders and journalists."

Background information

Natalia Estemirova, a journalist and activist for the Russian human rights centre Memorial, was abducted by armed men outside the apartment building she lived in Grozny, Chechen Republic, on 15 July 2009. According to eyewitnesses, she was put in a car and driven away. Her body was found a few hours later in the neighbouring Republic of Ingushetia. She had been shot at point blank range.

Despite reassurances by the Russian authorities that Estemirova's case was practically solved, the investigation appeared mired in official findings that she was killed by Chechen insurgents in retaliation for having exposed some of their crimes.

On 14 July 2011, the Memorial Human Rights Centre, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH) and Novaya Gazeta published a report on shortcomings in the government's investigation.

They found, for example, discrepancies in the evidence taken from the car purportedly used in the killing, a failure to collect DNA samples from a broader range of suspects in Chechnya, and unwillingness to look into a possible role by the Kurchaloi district police. The Kurchaloi district police had been implicated in an extrajudicial execution Estemirova had exposed in the weeks before her murder.