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Missed opportunity to shed light on Russia's Katyn massacre

Today's European Court of Human Rights decision is a missed opportunity to ensure that the Russian state accepts responsibility for the murder of tens of thousands of Polish prisoners of war during the Second World War, Amnesty International said.

Some of the relatives of the more than 20,000 Polish prisoners of war and civilians who were killed during the 1940 Katyn massacre brought the case against Russia. But the Court found it was unable to determine the adequacy of an earlier investigation into the massacre because it took place before the adoption of the European Convention of Human Rights in 1950.

"Russian authorities are sitting on a wealth of information about the whereabouts of victims' remains, the circumstances of these killings, and potentially the identities of those who were killed. They have a duty to reveal the truth of what happened at Katyn to the relatives of the victims," said Michael Bochenek, Director of Law and Policy at Amnesty International.

"After starting an investigation in the early 1990s, they cited a dubious national security interest to justify first keeping their findings secret and then closing it with no information for the victims' relatives.

"What possible national security interest justifies keeping 44 volumes of evidence about 70-year-old crimes secret?"

Amnesty International has repeatedly reminded governments that using secrecy and national security interest is not a lawful excuse to discharge their legal obligations under international law.

In 2007, 15 relatives of those who were killed at Katyn complained to the European Court of Human Rights about the adequacy of the investigation by the Russian authorities into the 1940 massacre.

Their relatives were among the 22,000 Polish army officers, police, and officials who were taken to Soviet camps and prisons following the Red Army's invasion of Poland in September 1939. They were subsequently killed by the Soviet secret police without trial in April and May 1940. It is believed that most of them were buried in mass graves in western Russia's Katyn forest.