

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL EU OFFICE PRESS RELEASE

EU-RUSSIA FOREIGN MINISTERS MEETING THURSDAY: FIRST TEST FOR THE EU'S "NEW" APPROACH TO RUSSIA SAYS AMNESTY

EMBARGO: 12.00 Brussels time (11.00 GMT) Tuesday 9 March 2004

(Brussels 9 March 2004) Amnesty International today called on the Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen, representing the EU Presidency, to put into practice the EU's recently stated objective to make the EU's relations with Russia "more effective", by demanding concrete answers on human rights protection in the Chechen Republic from Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov during Thursday's talks in Dublin.

In the past few weeks alone, Amnesty International has sent out three urgent appeals to the Russian government regarding "disappearances" and abductions of Chechen civilians reportedly carried out by Russian federal forces.

(See: *Amnesty International Urgent Appeals - Chechnya. January-February 2004* on www.amnesty-eu.org).

These involve a driver working for a US journalist, two Chechen women, one a widow, and the other whose husband has "disappeared". In addition, a prominent Chechen human rights defender was recently arrested and ill-treated by police in neighbouring Ingushetia in a long standing campaign of persecution by the Russian authorities.

"Following the failure of the outgoing Italian EU Presidency to address the Russian President over the continuing grave violations of human rights in Chechnya, and the consequent loss of credibility for the EU's foreign policy, Amnesty International expects the Irish EU Presidency to take a tougher stance with Russia this time around," Dick Oosting, Director of Amnesty International's EU Office said.

Amnesty International recalls that the European Commission recently proposed that in all talks with Russia, "recent political developments, which demonstrate discriminatory application of the law, or the non-respect of human rights should be raised vigorously and coherently by the EU and its Member States."

"We hope that this time, the Irish foreign minister will not be satisfied with empty assurances that things are improving in Chechnya. Europe cannot ignore this ongoing human rights crisis which is now on the EU's own doorstep."

"We are also calling on the EU to take a stronger collective stand on Chechnya when the new session of the United Nations Human Rights Commission opens in Geneva next week. This year, the EU should propose and lobby hard for a resolution which calls on Russia to face up to its responsibilities under international law," Dick Oosting said.

The situation in Chechnya

Despite the insistence of the Russian government that normal life is resuming in Chechnya, Amnesty International continues to receive credible reports of grave violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

These reports indicate the existence of secret, illegal places of detention where Chechens (mostly men, but also women) detained during raids are held and often tortured. The number of these centres appears to be growing and there are additional reports that such detention centres exist outside Chechnya as well.

Chechen civilians who have petitioned the European Court of Human rights, as well as those defending victims, are reportedly subject to torture, ill-treatment and even extra-judicial execution. Russian security forces in Chechnya continue to enjoy almost total impunity for serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

At the same time, Amnesty International has unreservedly condemned the indiscriminate killing of civilians in the bomb blast in the Moscow metro on 6 February that killed up to 41 people and injured more than 100. Indiscriminate killing of civilians can never be justified. Amnesty is concerned however about the reported wave of hostility towards Chechens and other people from the Caucasus region in the wake of the metro blast including arbitrary document checks and searches, discriminatory rhetoric and racially-motivated revenge attacks.

Three questions for the EU

Before the EU-Russia summit in Rome in November last year, Amnesty International called on the EU to put three specific questions to the Russian President Vladimir Putin. No response from the EU was forthcoming.

Amnesty International repeats the same three questions for the Irish foreign minister to put to his Russian counterpart, in the hope that this time, the EU will attain some concrete results from its "new" relationship with Russia.

Question:

Will the Russian government allow unfettered international human rights monitoring in Chechnya, including international organizations, 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:

Will Russia commit to immediately halt attempts to forcibly return Chechen internally displaced persons until they can return voluntarily in safety and dignity to their place of origin or choice, and ensure adequate protection and humanitarian assistance?

Question:

Will the Russian government ensure immediate action to bring to justice those responsible for the grave abuses committed during the conflict in Chechnya

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