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Launch of Amnesty International's Campaign on the Russian Federation "Justice for Everybody" Speech delivered by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International Moscow, Tuesday 29 October 2002

Amnesty International is a worldwide human rights movement. We have a million members in over 140 countries of the world, including Russia, who campaign and fund our work. We work independently and impartially. We do not support or oppose governments or regimes or political causes. Our sole aim is to promote and protect the human rights of all persons, whether rich or poor, from whatever country or background.

Today marks the start of a year-long campaign by Amnesty International on the human rights situation in Russia. Unfortunately, we begin in the shadow of tragedy.

As Russia mourns the death of many of the hostages, I would like to extend, on behalf of Amnesty International, our condolences and sympathy to the grieving families and to those who were injured.

Amnesty International has condemned the hostage taking incident in the strongest possible terms. The deliberate targeting of civilians is forbidden under international law and no cause can justify it.

Such wanton disregard for the life of innocent people brings home, once again, the terrible abuse and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law of human rights which have marked the conflict in Chechnya.

It is yet another example of how ordinary people's human rights are flagrantly disrespected in the Russian Federation, and in that sense it reiterates the fundamental message of our campaign. That message is that ordinary Russians suffer daily from serious violations of human rights at the hands of the authorities, the armed groups and private actors, and, most significantly, that the failure of the authorities to bring perpetrators to justice - sustains and perpetuates this environment of abuse.

Our report is entitled "Justice Denied". It is based on research going back over a number of years and analyses how and why human rights are violated in Russia, and what needs to be done urgently to put a stop to that.

We analyse the persistent pattern of gross abuse of human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict in Chechnya both by the Chechen rebels as well as the Russian forces.

The Chechen rebels have kidnapped civilians and killed them. They have attacked and killed civilian members of the pro-Moscow administration, and executed captured Russian soldiers. We condemn these practices in the strongest possible terms. But Amnesty International is also deeply concerned about the numerous, consistent and credible reports that show Russian forces too have been responsible for widespread and very serious human rights violations, including arbitration detention, "disappearances", unlawful killings, torture and rape.

Very few of these incidents have been investigated - and hardly any have led to prosecution of those alleged to be responsible. On the contrary, the Russian authorities are reportedly redeploying units widely believed to have been involved in human rights violations back to Chechnya.

When people around the world talk about human rights in Russia, they think about Chechnya. And of course, they are right to do so. But what is much less known is that the same climate of impunity which has marked the Chechen situation unfortunately permeates the entire criminal justice system of Russia.

Our report shows that rights protected under the law in Russia are regularly violated by those very officials who are responsible for respecting them. Torture and ill-treatment by police and other law enforcement officers are widespread. Anyone, even a child, who is taken into police custody for questioning is at risk of torture and ill-treatment. Those who seek to protect them - journalists like Olga Kitova, lawyers, human rights activists are themselves targeted for abuse.

Although the victims are drawn from all walks of life, ethnic minorities and the poor are most at risk. Racist violence against ethnic and religious minorities and foreigners are not properly investigated by the police and go unpunished usually. Not only that, minorities and foreigners are often the victims of discriminatory policing, harassment, and extortion by the very people who are supposed to protect them.

We have received reports of torture and ill-treatment of children. Tens of thousands of children in Russia are routinely detained for months, even years, in filthy, overcrowded, sometimes even cruel and inhuman conditions. There they risk torture and ill-treatment. They are often sentenced to long terms of imprisonment for relatively minor offences. In one case we have documented, a boy of 15 years of age was sentenced by a court in Moscow to five years in prison for stealing a cigarette lighter.

Violence against women is severe. According to the Russian authorities, 14,000 women die from domestic violence - yet the authorities have shown little interest in doing anything to stop it. Women also suffer violence by state agents. There are regular reports of torture and ill-treatment, including rape, in police stations, pre-trial detention centres (SIZOS) and prisons.

One reason why these abuses continue to happen is because those responsible often get away with their crimes. This cycle of impunity must be broken.

In our report we suggest a number of concrete recommendations for reform.

We call on the Russian government to:

- To take urgent steps to protect civilians from the impact of security operations in Chechnya
- To institute an independent and effective mechanism for investigating and prosecuting those suspected of committing torture and ill-treatment
- To criminalise domestic violence
- To safeguard the rights of children
- To abolish those aspects of the registration system which discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities.

With the help of our NGO partners in Russia and our members around the world, we will campaign vigorously to bring about these changes.

But most importantly of all, the key to breaking this cycle of abuse and impunity lies in political will. The Russian Government, at the highest level, must send a clear message that human rights violations will not be tolerated, that this pernicious cycle of abuse must end.

That challenge has never been more acute than at this moment, in the aftermath of the hostage-taking incident.

The so-called "war against terrorism" must not be used to divert attention from the denial of justice which permeates all aspects of Russian society.

It must not be used as an excuse to encourage more human rights violations in Chechnya. It must not lead to a racist backlash, victimising innocent Chechens and other ethnic and religious minorities.

We call on the international community not let Chechnya to slip off the agenda. We urge them to put pressure on the Russian government to protect the human rights of all its citizens.

The Russian government has a responsibility - indeed an obligation - to protect its people but it has an equal responsibility to protect the rights of the people, whether Russian, Chechen or otherwise. Human rights must not be traded off in the name of security because as we know from history, there can be no peace without human rights.

Russia has an impressive record of human rights on paper. The Russian Federation is a state party to numerous international treaties that protect human rights. It is now time to honour these pledges.

If President Putin wants to promote Russia as a global player, he must begin by delivering real justice and rights for everyone in Russia.

Our call for justice is supported by many Russians who care about human rights. We are honoured to have here with us Olga Kitova, Sergei Kovalyov and Anna Politkovskaya, all strong, committed and outspoken advocates for human rights. I thank them for supporting our work.

Thank you.

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