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Russian Federation: Nizhnii Novgorod Society for Human Rights ordered to halt activities

The well-respected Russian human rights NGO, the Nizhnii Novgorod Society for Human Rights, today reportedly learned of an official decision to suspend their organization's activities. According to Victor Gurskii, chairman of the organization and also a professional doctor, at 10am local time two representatives from the registration chamber of the Ministry of Justice burst into Victor Gurskii's consultation room while he was receiving patients, disrupting the consultation. Reportedly, the representatives brought into the room two people they found on the street outside, who were not sober at the time, to serve as witnesses. According to Victor Gurskii, the representatives told him that there had been a decision to suspend the work of the organization, and attempted to hand him a copy of the decision. Viktor Gurskii told Amnesty International that he refused to accept the document while he was consulting patients and requested them to come back another time.

Amnesty International is very concerned at this latest incident in a worrying trend of Russian authorities putting pressure on human rights defenders and human rights organizations who carry out legitimate and valuable work in the field of human rights in Russia. Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to halt the targeting of human rights organizations and to demonstrate that they not only tolerate but also respect and defend the right of individuals and organizations to be truly independent voices in society.

Background

The Nizhnii Novgorod Society for Human Rights was registered in 1993 and is one of the oldest and most high-profile human rights NGOs in the region. In cooperation with other NGOs, in particular, the Nizhnii Novgorod-based Committee Against Torture and the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society, it conducts human rights monitoring, organizes campaigns, offers free legal consultations to individuals, and publishes material, including the *Pravo-zashchita* newspaper. It has been at the forefront of a campaign for the right to conscientious objection, and work against torture.

The Nizhnii Novgorod Society for Human Rights has been in correspondence with the registration chamber of the Nizhegorodskii branch of the Ministry of Justice since February 2005. Since this time the Ministry of Justice has required the organization to submit documentation, which the organization has done. However, the decision to suspend the organization's activities is reportedly based on the grounds that the organization has not submitted required information. The organization considers that it has been complying with all its legal obligations in this respect and according to Viktor Gurskii, a court on 19 April 2005 found that the organization had not violated the administrative code in its correspondence with the registration chamber of the Ministry of Justice.

The Nizhnii Novgorod Society for Human Rights is not the only human rights organization currently

under pressure in Nizhnii Novgorod. Amnesty International has detailed an apparent campaign of harassment and intimidation against the Russian-Chechen Friendship Society. The organization is undergoing a criminal investigation into the publishing activities of the organization, as well as simultaneous checks by the tax authorities and checks by the Ministry of Justice. At the same time, one staff member, Oksana Chelysheva, has been the subject of threatening leaflets which have been distributed in Nizhnii Novgorod.