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Russian Federation: Agony without end for families of the "disappeared"

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"Raissa" was seven months' pregnant when her husband, a young man from Ingushetia, "disappeared" in June 2004. He was reported to have been detained by members of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in the Russian Federation republic and taken across the internal border to Chechnya.

"Raissa" looked for her husband in Chechnya and in Ingushetia. Travelling from the main Russian military base in Khankala to the procuracy in Ingushetia, she spoke to the border guards in Ingushetia and to the police. She told Amnesty International that sometimes she was ridiculed and, when she filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights, she was threatened. She was told to withdraw her complaint if she did not want her children to become orphans.

Another time, she was asked for a large amount of money in order to buy her husband back. She has recently left the Russian Federation out of fear for her own and her children's lives. Other members of her family remain in the North Caucasus; she also fears for their lives and does not want her name to be revealed.

The office of the Procurator General of the Russian Federation and other official sources state that about 2,500 people have been abducted or "disappeared" in Chechnya since the beginning of the second armed conflict in the republic in 1999. The authorities have admitted that members of the Russian federal forces and Chechen law enforcement agencies have been involved in the "disappearance" of civilians.

Nearly every person living in Chechnya is likely to have been affected by "disappearances". A relative, a friend, a neighbour may have been taken away and his or her fate and well-being remains unknown to those left behind.

"Disappearances" and abductions cause a particular agony for relatives of the victims, unable to determine whether the victim is alive or dead, unable to go through bereavement and unable to resolve legal and practical matters such as pensions and inheritance. For them, the "disappearance" continues without end.

Amnesty International interviewed Zara Gekaeva (54), a widow from Avtury, whose 27-year-old son was detained by armed men in the centre of the small Chechen town, Shali, on 7 July 2003. According to Zara Gekaeva, who is disabled, her son, Timur Ibragimovich Soltakhanov, who was living with her and taking care of her, was out buying food in the market. She said that a group of policemen, and possibly members of the FSB, came to the market in search of a wanted member of the armed opposition.

During an ensuing shoot out, Timur Soltakhanov was injured and detained. According to witnesses, he was taken to the local procuracy where it was found that he needed urgent medical treatment. However, it appears that he was not taken from there to the hospital, but may instead have been taken to the Russian military base in Khankala.

When his mother, together with members of a local human rights organization, turned to the local procuracy, they were told that no one by the name of Timur Soltakhanov was known there and that the police had only detained the wanted member of the armed opposition on 7 July.

Zara Gekaeva's said that her life stopped on that day. For more than two years now, she has spent all her time looking for her only child. She has written to the authorities in Chechnya and to the federal government in Moscow, she has travelled throughout the North Caucasus in order to meet with human rights activists, journalists and members of the International Committee of the Red Cross, hoping that someone would be able to tell her why her son was detained and what has happened to him.

Often, families are faced with several "disappearances". Those who look for their beloved "disappeared" relatives often risk becoming victims of "disappearance" or other human rights violations themselves. Marzet Imakaeva, like several other people Amnesty International has

spoken to, had to leave the Russian Federation in order to protect her remaining family from further persecution. She had refused to withdraw a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights following the “disappearance” of her eldest son, Said-Khusein Imakaev, in December 2000 and the subsequent “disappearance” of her husband, Said-Magomed Imakaev.

Rebaat Vakhaeva, an elderly woman whose only son Kazbek “disappeared” in 2000, was beaten up in early summer 2004 when she and other women requested information from the authorities in the Chechen capital Grozny about their relatives.

“There were many policemen and federal forces. They insulted us, beat and punched us. I showed them a picture of my son: ‘Look I have a son, just like you. I just want to know where he is. How can you do this?’ I cannot sleep and eat anymore. I walk around all the time and think of him. I don’t know anything about him. When I go to the local administration, they ask for forgiveness: ‘If you don’t forgive us, we will not have peace.’ I do not even know what I should forgive them for, for killing my son or for taking him away?”