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Justice urged for Russian human rights defender's murder

One year after the murder of human rights defender Natalia Estemirova, Amnesty International is calling on the Russian authorities to stop the harassment and intimidation of her colleagues and to bring those responsible for her murder to justice in an open and fair trial.

“The murder of Natalia Estemirova highlights the very real threat which human rights defenders are facing in the course of their legitimate activities in the Russian Federation,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

“They must be able to carry out their important work without fear and without facing harassment.”

On 15 July 2009, Natalia Estemirova from the Russian Human Rights Centre Memorial was abducted outside her home in Grozny in the Chechen Republic and killed. Her body with bullet wounds was found on a roadside in neighbouring Ingushetia.

Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev condemned the murder and ordered a high-level investigation. In a statement he linked Natalia Estemirova's murder with her activities as a human rights defender. The activist took great risks researching some of the most serious human rights violations in Chechnya and made the information public.

In January 2010, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called on the local authorities to ensure safe conditions for the work of human rights organizations in the North Caucasus.

“Despite official declarations, the authorities have yet to ensure that the investigation into the murder of Natalia Estemirova is timely, effective and impartial and that it can establish the truth beyond any doubt,” said Nicola Duckworth.

“Anything less raises concerns that there is no political will to identify the perpetrators and bring them to justice.”

Like Natalia Estemirova, her colleagues from Human Rights Centre Memorial and other activists in the North Caucasus continue to provide essential support, legal and humanitarian aid to those in the region whose rights have been violated.

However, government officials in the Chechen Republic continue to put pressure on regional human rights NGOs and to denounce their work.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who had called Natalia Estemirova in an interview given in August

2009, a “woman without honour and shame”, further alleged on 3 July 2010 that staff members of Memorial were traitors and only worked in the interest of Western donors.

Natalia Estemirova’s murder followed the killings in Moscow of human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist Anastasia Baburova in January 2009, and of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in October 2006.

In Chechnya, human rights activist Zarema Sadulayeva and her husband Alik (Umar) Dzhabrailov were killed only four weeks after the murder of Natalia Estemirova.

"These human rights activists spoke up in the name of victims of serious human rights violations. Their work continues to be essential," Nicola Duckworth said.

“President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin should make the investigation into the murder of Natalia Estemirova and her colleagues a high priority. This will send a clear message that attacks against human rights defenders, independent lawyers or journalist will not be tolerated.”