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Russian Federation: President Medvedev must act to end attacks on human rights activists

Human rights activists in Russia and the North Caucasus face increasing violence and intimidation three years after the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya, Amnesty International said today.

In a letter to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Amnesty International urged him to take genuine steps to stop the attacks and for his administration to demonstrate a commitment to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice.

“That those who murdered Anna Politkovskaya and ordered her killing remain free reflects a failure by the Russian authorities to fully investigate such crimes,” said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

A number of people who have spoken out against human rights violations in the country, including human rights activists, lawyers and journalists, have been killed or faced intimidation, most likely as a result of the work they were doing.

In January this year, Stanislav Markelov, a lawyer who had been working closely with Anna Politkovskaya, was shot dead in Moscow. Anastasia Baburova, a journalist, was gunned down at his side.

Attacks against those working to protect human rights are common in the North Caucasus. On 15 July, Natalia Estemirova of the Memorial Human Rights Centre was abducted in Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic. Her body was found later the same day in Ingushetia.

Natalia Estemirova had received a number of threats in connection with her human rights work.

Her killing has taken place in a climate when human rights activists have been verbally attacked by the Chechen authorities, who accuse them of being supporters of illegal armed groups.

Amnesty International condemns comments of high ranking officials given around the time of her killing.

In early July, Adam Delimkhanov, a member of the Russian Parliament and a close ally of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, was shown on Chechen TV, threatening “so-called human rights defenders, who support terrorists.” In an interview with Radio Liberty shortly after Natalia Estemirova’s murder, President Ramzan Kadyrov dismissed her work as irrelevant and described her as a person who ‘never had any honour or sense of shame.’

“It is of the utmost importance that the investigations into the killings of Natalia Estemirova, Stanislav

Markelov, Anastasia Baburova and Anna Politkovskaya are conducted in an independent and impartial manner, and, where grounds exist, do not stop short of investigating possible links with government officials, including the highest government officials,” Irene Khan said.

Amnesty International in particular continues to be concerned about the safety of Natalia Estemirova’s colleagues from Memorial offices in the North Caucasus and in Moscow.

Akhmed Gisaev had been working with Natalia Estemirova and, shortly before her killing, had been researching together with her a case of alleged extrajudicial execution in a Chechen village. He reported that he was being followed and had been threatened that he might meet the same fate.

Other recent attacks include Zarema Saidulaeva, head of the humanitarian organization Let’s Save the Generation, and her husband, Alik Dzhabrailov, who were both killed on 11 August. They were abducted from their office in Grozny by men identifying themselves as law enforcement officials, and a few hours later they were found dead in the boot of their car.

The office of Mothers of Dagestan for Human Rights in Makhachkala, capital of Dagestan was recently burned down. Two representatives of this organization, Svetlana Isaeva and Gulnara Rustamova, as well as other human rights activists, lawyers and journalists from Dagestan, were named as aiders and abettors of members of illegal armed groups in leaflets distributed in Makhachkala. The leaflet called for a “blood feud” against these people.

“It is time President Medvedev showed the political will to protect people that stand up for human rights in Russia. He must act now to end the climate of fear and intimidation,” Irene Khan said.

Amnesty International has called on President Medvedev to ensure that all these crimes are fully investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice in trials that meet international standards. Three years on from the murder of Anna Poilitkovskaya, the Russian authorities must take action to end the attacks against those working to protect human rights in the country.