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Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders, and Human Rights Watch

Joint Letter to President Putin: Investigate Attacks against Human Rights Defenders, Condemn Collective Punishment

Dear Mr. President

In the past few days a Russian human rights group in Chechnya and its staff have been the targets of an apparent arson attack, arbitrary arrest and detention, death threats, and serial harassment. Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders and Human Rights Watch are alarmed about serious threats to the safety of the group's staff and urge you to ensure that the arson attack is immediately investigated and that effective measures are taken to protect the human rights defenders.

The target of these escalating attacks is the Joint Mobile Group of Russian Human Rights Groups in Chechnya (JMG). Headed by Igor Kalyapin, a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights, the group investigates human rights violations in Chechnya and presses local and federal authorities to hold accountable those responsible. On 9 December, Igor Kalyapin requested the Russian criminal investigation authorities to assess whether Ramzan Kadyrov's statement, made on 5 December, promising to expel insurgents' family members from [Chechnya](#) and destroy their [houses](#) would constitute a criminal act. Ramzan Kadyrov made this and similar statements on television and through social media.

The statements followed a deadly insurgent attack on Grozny on 4 December, during which 14 policemen and at least one civilian, as well as 11 attackers, were killed. Over the next few days, our organizations became aware of several instances in which the homes of families of suspected insurgents were torched, apparently by Chechen law enforcement personnel.

In a television broadcast on 10 December, Ramzan Kadyrov accused "a certain Kalyapin" of assisting terrorism in Chechnya, including by means of providing money to insurgents, and that he would not tolerate "these kalyapins" in Chechnya. Such accusations by a high-ranking state official can be understood only as serious and clear threats, and shortly thereafter Kalyapin and his staff were targeted.

At a joint press conference, held on 11 December in Moscow, on collective punishment in Chechnya, two men [pelted eggs](#) at Kalyapin and, jointly with a third man, accused him of defending terrorists. On 13 December, a 50,000-strong government-sponsored demonstration against terrorism took place in Grozny, with some of the banners featuring such slogans as “Kalyapin go home \$” and “Stop the Lying Activists!” Later that day, unknown men, at least one of them armed, tried to break into the Joint Mobile Group’s apartment in Grozny. In the evening, the office of [JMG was destroyed by fire](#) caused by an apparent arson attack.

On 14 December, several Chechen police officials forcibly entered the JMG’s apartment in Grozny, located next to the burned office, and searched Sergei Babinets and Dmitry Dimitriev, two JMG members who were there, and their car. Police had no warrant and provided no explanations other than to point to Sergei Babinets’s beard as a suspicious feature. Police held and questioned the two for several hours before allowing them to leave. They also confiscated their mobile phones, car webcam, four cameras, laptop computers, and other JMG equipment without providing any documentation. During the search and questioning, Babinets and Dimitriev had no legal representation, as the lawyer hired by the JMG was prevented from entering the building. Russian media reported that local Ministry of Internal Affairs officials later denied detaining the activists.

Igor Kalyapin, who is not in Chechnya, has been getting threatening phone calls and text messages, including death threats, from unknown individuals.

Russia’s leadership has repeatedly pledged to foster a normal working climate for human rights defenders, in line with its international commitments. The threats against the Joint Mobile Group in Chechnya are extremely serious and clearly intended to silence the activists, who have been working in the region for five years, helping victims of human rights abuses to obtain justice within the law. We urge you to ensure that the Joint Mobile Group is able to continue their work in the region without unwarranted interference from the local authorities and that any unlawful actions against them are effectively and independently investigated and the perpetrators are held to account.

We also urge you to send a clear signal to the Chechen leadership that collective punishment practices are unlawful and unjustified under any circumstances and should be stopped immediately.

Yours truly,

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