

AI INDEX: EUR 46/07/00
10 February 2000

Chechnya: Russian government must order the release of Radio Liberty journalist

The Russian government should immediately make public the whereabouts, and order the release of, Radio Liberty journalist Andrey Babitsky, Amnesty International said today. Latest indications are that Babitsky is being held by a pro-Russian Chechen militia. The organization fears Babitsky's life is in great danger and that he may have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment while being held in incommunicado detention since he was last contacted on 15 January.

Russian television broadcast a video tape of a message from Babitsky on 8 February which stated that he was 'ok' but that he wanted to return home. The date and place of the message remain a mystery.

The tape was delivered and sold for \$300 to the Moscow office of Radio Liberty on 6 February by a man who identified himself as "Aleksey", a Chechen from Istanbul. "Aleksey" reportedly arrived in a grey "Mercedes" and was accompanied by another man, "Mairbek", who was dressed in a fatigue uniform with Russian special troops (OMON) and Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs badges. "Aleksey" reportedly said that Babitsky is being held by Chechens in Alkhazurovo, and that he may re-emerge shortly in Poland.

However, according to another media report and Radio Liberty, Andrey Babitsky was last seen on 7 February -- the day after the message was allegedly taped -- at Gudermes, Chechnya's second city which is under Russian control. The eyewitnesses, who wished to remain unidentified, allegedly saw him with members of the militia of pro-Russian Chechen leader Bislan Gantamirov, but it was unclear whether he was being held against his will. The same sources claimed that his face was swollen and bruised and he had some blood on his clothes.

On 8 February Russian Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Ivan Golubev, had reportedly said Andrey Babitsky was "alive, in good health and being moved around constantly."

On 9 February Sharip Yusupov, who reportedly identified himself as "a spokesman for Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov", told Echo Moskv radio station that the Chechen commanders are holding Andrey Babitsky and want to transfer him to another European country. However Chechen authorities close to President Aslan Maskhadov stated that Sharip Yusupov is not an official representative and is working for the Russian Federal Security Services (FSB).

The Chechen Minister of Foreign Affairs, Iliyas Akhmadov, also made a statement on 9 February saying that since the last Chechen representative, Mayerbek Vachagayev, was arrested by the Russian police on 21 October in Moscow and charged with arms possession, the Chechen authorities have no official representatives in Moscow. The Chechen authorities continue to maintain that Andrey Babitsky is not in their custody.

Meanwhile, on 9 February the State Duma voted down a proposal by the Union of Right Forces and Yabloko faction to summon the Minister of Internal Affairs, Vladimir Rushailo, and the acting Procurator-General, Vladimir Ustinov, to discuss the case of Andrey Babitsky during the routine “parliamentary hour”.

“In the middle of this tale of intrigue is a man’s life. The Russian authorities and pro-Russian Chechen militia clearly know where Andrey Babitsky is and should free him immediately,” Amnesty International urged.

ENDS.../

For more information or an interview, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>