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Chechnya: Crime and punishment

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe today voted to suspend the voting rights of the Russian delegation and to call on its Committee of Ministers to immediately invoke a procedure for the suspension of Russia's membership.

Amnesty International takes no position on the membership of states to intergovernmental organizations, however, today's decision by the Council of Europe is a strong and clear message that human rights violations will not be tolerated.

Last week Amnesty International revealed the existence and locations of secret "filtration camps". Vladimir Kalamonov, the Russian presidential representative on human rights in Chechnya, and Yuriy Kalinin, the deputy Minister of Justice, publically denounced Amnesty International's findings claiming that no secret "filtration camps" exist and that no detainees in Chechnya are tortured.

"The Russian government has proved that they have no political will to investigate human rights abuses in Chechnya," Amnesty International said. "Only an international investigation by the United Nations will suffice."

Russian authorities claim that they have initiated up to 129 investigations against army personnel, reportedly the vast majority of these investigations were related to cases of bullying in the army and other such offences, and not to the core issue: human rights violations against civilians. Although Russian authorities claim that they have initiated seven investigations into alleged offences against civilians, Amnesty International knows of only one publicly announced investigation into alleged human rights abuses: that initiated against a Russian officer for rape and murder.

In the previous 1994-1996 Chechnya conflict no military personnel were prosecuted or convicted for crimes against civilians as far as Amnesty International is aware. So far the Russian authorities have not given any indication that this time things will be different.

This week Amnesty International has been lobbying members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to support a call for an international inquiry. Amnesty International does not believe that an investigation of human rights abuses by Mr. Kalamonov's office will be impartial.

"How can anyone expect Mr. Kalamonov and his staff to investigate abuses, such as torture and ill-treatment in secret "filtration camps", when he himself last week denied that such camps and abuses exist?" Amnesty International said.

During her visit to Chechnya The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, Mary Robinson, asked to visit a number of secret "filtration camps" that were made public by Amnesty International, for example, "PAP-1" and "PAP-5" in Grozny, and another five locations, including the so-called "Internat" in Urus-Martan. The Russian authorities did not allow her to visit these places, justifying their denial with security considerations and bad weather. For Amnesty International this is yet another confirmation of the Russian authorities' lack of will to engage in an open and credible investigation.

“Only an independent, international team of investigators, including forensic and medical experts, allowed unimpeded access by Russian authorities to all parts of Chechnya would be in a position to establish the truth of human rights violations,” Amnesty International said. “Such an investigation is the first step to bring the perpetrators to justice.”

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