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Russian Federation: Chechen Republic -- humanity is indivisible

The unfolding catastrophe in the Northern Caucasus and the international community's muted response to the situation is further evidence of the selectivity of response to human rights violations when it comes to action, Amnesty International said today in an Open Letter to the United Nations.

"Political and economic considerations for action or inaction on the part of the international community cannot come first when the lives of ordinary civilians are at stake," Amnesty International said.

"Russia's seat on the UN Security Council must not mean it escapes censure for human rights violations," the human rights organization stressed. "There is no place for political compromise when international law is being blatantly ignored and the Russian government, as any other, is not above the law."

In August and September of this year, the Security Council passed two resolutions -- 1261 and 1265 -- on the protection of children and civilians in armed conflict. The resolutions, consistent with international humanitarian law prohibiting direct attacks on civilians and indiscriminate attacks, strongly condemned the targeting of civilians and called for full and unhindered access to civilian victims.

However, Amnesty International continues to receive reports that artillery attacks on Chechnya have resulted in civilian deaths and serious injuries, despite Russia's claims that all its attacks are aimed at military targets. On 21 October an attack on Grozny's central market, mosque and maternity hospital resulted in the deaths of at least 137 civilians, including 13 mothers and 15 newborn babies, and left over 400 wounded.

On 29 October a Russian air attack at Shami-Yurt on a humanitarian convoy of five vehicles, reportedly 'clearly marked with the Red Cross emblem', killed at least 25 people, including two staff members of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and wounded more than 70 others.

"All parties to the conflict must abide by international humanitarian law, and in particular 'ensure respect for and protection of the civilian population'," the organization stressed.

The intensity of the Russian air raids and artillery attacks have led to nearly 190,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing Chechnya for the neighbouring republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan and North Ossetia and Stavropol Territory. Smaller numbers have also fled to Georgia and Azerbaijan, thereby becoming refugees.

The recent closure of the only remaining highway to Ingushetia from Chechnya by Russian troops on 23 October has worsened the plight of the hundreds of IDPs who now find themselves trapped with no way out to reach safety. Recently there have been conflicting reports

suggesting that Russian troops have reopened a border crossing with Ingushetia, but it is not clear whether people are allowed to cross in both directions, or only from Ingushetia to Chechnya.

Amnesty International calls on all UN member states, as well as the Representative of the Secretary-General for Internally Displaced Persons, to urge the Russian government to ensure full protection and assistance for all IDPs in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. In addition, the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies must be allowed to take all necessary actions to assist and protect all IDPs and refugees, especially with the onset of winter.

The organization urges all members of the international community to fully respect their commitments under international refugee law, in particular not to return anyone seeking asylum in another state without assessing the merits of their claim.

Amnesty International continues to receive reports of unlawful detention and expulsion of ethnic Chechens from large cities, in particular Moscow, and also allegations of ill-treatment while in custody.

"The Russian government claims to be fighting 'international terrorism', but in fact it seems to be targeting people based on their ethnic origin," the organization added. "'Fighting crime and terrorism' is no justification for violating human rights."

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