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PUBLIC STATEMENT

Chechen Republic: Warning cannot justify attacking civilians

Following an official warning that civilians must evacuate the city of Grozny, Amnesty International is calling on the government of the Russian Federation to publicly commit to upholding its obligations under international humanitarian law by refraining from indiscriminate or direct attacks on the civilian population of the besieged Chechen capital.

Russian aircraft yesterday dropped leaflets over Grozny telling residents to leave the city before 11 December. "Only in this way will you be able to avoid death and save your city," one leaflet warns. Another leaflet reportedly states that Russian Federal armed forces will consider all those remaining in Grozny after the deadline to be "terrorists and bandits and will be destroyed by artillery and aviation." Estimates of the number of civilians remaining in Grozny range from 15,000 to 50,000.

"The fact that the Russian aircraft have dropped leaflets which present an ultimatum to residents of Grozny does not change Russia's obligations under international law," said Amnesty International. "Civilians who remain in Grozny after the deadline -- whether because they are too old, sick, wounded, poor or scared to leave the city or have not even heard about the warning -- remain non-combatants and as such are protected from attack."

"In the light of Russia's warning, Amnesty International is calling on Russian authorities to make an unambiguous public pledge to honour its commitment under international humanitarian law," said the organization. "In particular we remind the government that it must respect the principle of distinction which obliges its forces to take all measures to distinguish between civilians and military objectives."

"Russia's ultimatum to Grozny can in no way be considered a sufficient precautionary measure."

Background

While Amnesty International takes no position on the reason for armed conflicts, or the resort to the use of force *per se*, it does call on all parties to a conflict to abide by international humanitarian law. The organization reports on and takes action against specific human rights abuses occurring in situations of conflict, including unlawful killing of civilians, detention without charge or trial, the torture, ill-treatment or extrajudicial execution of persons detained, including soldiers or other combatants who are *hors de combat*, the use of the death penalty, the taking of hostages or the "disappearance" or abduction of any person.

Amnesty International is deeply troubled by repeated reports that Russian forces have committed grave breaches of humanitarian law during the ongoing campaign in Chechnya. Most recently, a correspondent for Radio Liberty reported that on 3 December Russian troops

deliberately killed at least 40 civilians who were trying to flee Grozny in a humanitarian convoy. Russian authorities have denied the report.

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