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Russian Federation: Ingushetia must remain safe haven for displaced Chechens

Amnesty International is seriously concerned that internally displaced persons (IDPs) are being returned from tent camps in Ingushetia to the Chechen Republic against their will and without guarantees for their security.

"Local and federal authorities in Ingushetia must immediately cease any attempts to coerce these internally displaced people into returning to what continues to be an unsafe environment," Amnesty International urged.

"Despite assurances by the authorities that life in the Chechen Republic is returning to normal, the situation is still characterized by gross human rights abuses such as 'disappearances', torture and ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions."

Amnesty International is also concerned about reports that military raids -- which during the first three years of the current conflict mainly took place on the territory of the Chechen Republic -- have spread to neighbouring Ingushetia. During these raids federal forces have targeted civilian settlements as well as IDP camps and committed serious human rights violations.

"Such raids have no place in a country that claims to adhere to international human rights standards," Amnesty International said.

According to recent reports, 200 IDPs from Bella Camp, one of the five remaining tent camps in Ingushetia, have been subjected to intense pressure by the Ingush authorities. First they were forced out of the camp to a temporary settlement, and a few days later they were sent back to the camp to live in worse conditions than previously. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees described the manner in which they were treated as "aggressive and unacceptable". The population of Bella Camp has dropped dramatically in recent months which could be an indication of a deliberate effort by the authorities to close yet another tent camp as was the case with Aki Yurt camp in December 2002.

The acting head of the Chechen administration, Anatoly Popov, recently stated that all tent camps -- housing approximately 12,000 of the 80,000 IDPs in Ingushetia -- would be dismantled by 1 October, four days prior to the planned presidential elections in the republic. Such statements spread fear among the IDP population, the vast majority of which list security concerns as their main reason for not wanting to return and who remain unconvinced by repeated promises from the authorities that no one will be forced back to the Chechen Republic.

Amnesty International strongly urges the Russian authorities to live up to its human rights obligations and stop putting pressure on the IDPs to return.

"Russian and Ingush authorities should cooperate with international organizations working in Ingushetia to ensure that those Chechens who feel unsafe to return have a safe haven in Ingushetia as long as necessary," Amnesty International concluded.

Background

The renewal of hostilities in the Chechen Republic in 1999 and the gross human rights violations which accompanied it resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. At least 80,000 Chechens remain in tent camps, temporary settlements and private housing in neighbouring Ingushetia, and while many of these IDPs would like to return home, they do not yet find the conditions in the Chechen Republic sufficiently safe to do so.

The Russian authorities have made repeated threats to close the remaining camps while promising that this should happen on a voluntary basis. Thousands of Chechens have returned in recent months, but it appears that many have done so because they felt that they had no other choice.

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