

AI Index: PRE 01/028/2012
20 January 2012

Russia drops slander case against leading human rights defender

Today's closure of the criminal proceedings against the head of a well-known Russian human rights organization is a victory for human rights, Amnesty International said.

Oleg Orlov, head of the Russian human rights centre Memorial, was charged with criminal slander on 6 July 2010 after he publicly denounced Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov as bearing political responsibility for the murder of Memorial member Natalia Estemirova a year earlier.

Today's ruling by Moscow's Khamovniki District Court to close the case came about thanks to a welcome change in Russian legislation last month which no longer treats slander as a criminal offence.

"Decriminalizing slander at last brings Russian law in line with international human rights standards guaranteeing freedom of expression" said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

At the time Orlov was charged, slander was punishable by up to three years in prison. Amnesty International repeatedly called on the Russian authorities to drop the charges against him and insisted that he should not be criminally prosecuted for publicly expressing his opinion.

When his friend and colleague Natalia Estemirova was abducted and murdered in Chechnya in July 2009, Oleg Orlov publicly blamed Chechnya's Kremlin-appointed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, for fostering an extremely hostile environment for human rights defenders in the Republic.

Testimonies by defence witnesses in court indicated that Kadyrov regarded Estemirova as his personal enemy, and publicly threatened her on several occasions before her death.

"We do not know whether he ordered her killing personally or this was done by his closest aides in order to please their superiors," Oleg Orlov said at the time.

His statement was published on Memorial's website, and was widely cited in the Russian and foreign media.

Ramzan Kadyrov responded by filing a civil libel suit against Memorial and its head, which he won, and also initiated a criminal case against Oleg Orlov.

During the court hearings, Oleg Orlov and his colleagues presented a number of public statements made by Ramzan Kadyrov and his aides containing threats against human rights defenders and other critics of the Chechen leadership.

Before and after the killing of Natalia Estemirova, Amnesty International has repeatedly expressed concern over the human rights situation in Chechnya, including the safety of human rights defenders, who continue to face intimidation and harassment more than two years after Natalia Estemirova's unresolved

killing.

“The Chechen and federal authorities must ensure that justice is done in Natalia’s case and that human rights defenders in the region can operate freely and without fear. This must be Natalia’s lasting legacy,” said John Dalhuisen.