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Russian Federation: Attack on public dissent

Amnesty International is calling on the Russian authorities to investigate thoroughly and impartially all reports of police ill-treatment, including kicking and hitting with batons, during anti-government demonstrations in Moscow and St Petersburg on 14 and 15 April.

"The Russian authorities must investigate all complaints of police brutality. They have a duty to create a climate facilitating complaints by those who have suffered physical injury, as well as by those who have been harassed or intimidated," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

"The actions of law enforcement officials may have constituted a violation of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly which the authorities have an obligation to provide for, as well as a violation of the prohibition of ill-treatment."

Despite official declarations that demonstrators would be treated "politely" and in line with the law, made by law enforcement officials, according to what Amnesty International's delegates witnessed as well as information provided by a number of participants and monitors, the authorities did not keep their promise. Members of the special police unit (OMON) beat peaceful participants of the "Dissenters' March" in both Moscow and St Petersburg. According to medical staff in one of the hospitals close to the events in Moscow, 54 people sought medical assistance from them on Saturday with injuries sustained during the violent dispersal of the "Dissenters' March".

Amnesty International closely monitored the events in Moscow and noted a number of human rights violations committed by law enforcement officials during the day:

- Unlawful excessive use of force;
- Arbitrary detention of participants of the "Dissenters' March";
- Arbitrary detention of journalists covering the "Dissenters' March";
- Denial of the right to legal defence for those detainees being brought before a court.

Human rights defender Stanislav Dmitrievskii was amongst those detained. He was detained before reaching Pushkin Square in the centre of Moscow, where the organizers of the "Dissenters' March" had planned to start their meeting. He was only released after around five hours, which is in violation of Russian law. Several participants of the "Dissenters' March" in Moscow travelled overnight to St Petersburg to participate in a rally which had been sanctioned in St Petersburg by the city authorities. According to one of the participants, they were detained on arrival at the train station and prevented from participating in the rally for more than three hours, which is the maximum Russian law allows in these circumstances.

Amnesty International observers also witnessed two staff members of the German Television station *ZDF*, who were filming a sanctioned meeting on Moscow's Turgenev Square, being detained, despite them showing documents confirming that they were accredited members of the press. According to *ZDF*, the staff members were released an hour later.

According to Yuri Shmidt, a human rights lawyer in St Petersburg, several of the detainees in St Petersburg who were tried and sentenced for acts of minor hooliganism were denied legal representation. No witnesses confirming the alleged violations of the administrative code were present.

Amnesty International calls on the Russian authorities to investigate the abuses which occurred during the march and to respect and protect the right to freedom of assembly and freedom of expression.

Background:

During recent months riot police (OMON) have repeatedly used violence to disperse peaceful "Dissenters' Marches", as they are termed by organizers. In St Petersburg, Nizhnii Novgorod and Moscow, opposition groups and civil society activists have been prevented from expressing their dissenting opinion during peaceful marches and demonstrations. Hundreds of people have been detained, charged with violations of the administrative code and prevented from attending unsanctioned as well as sanctioned meetings.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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