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EU-RUSSIA: STEP UP HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS

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(Brussels, 16 March 2006) Russia's deteriorating human rights record must be addressed by the EU, says Amnesty International, as President Barroso prepares to meet with Vladimir Putin in Moscow to define a new strategic partnership with Russia.

As Russia's role in the international community grows, through the presidency of the G8 and as the future chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, it is even more important that Russia makes significant steps in improving its human rights record.

In a letter to the President of the Commission, Amnesty International pointed out that the EU can be an important catalyst in this process but it can also send the wrong message if it chooses not to confront Russia with its concerns.

"Russia's long-standing problems with human rights violations have persisted and in some respects worsened because Russia has been allowed to get away with it," says Dick Oosting, director of Amnesty's International EU office. "As it assumes a prominent role in the international community, Russia should be made more accountable and subject to closer scrutiny, not the opposite," says Oosting.

Recently the Russian authorities have taken steps which indicate a lack of acknowledgement of their responsibilities:

- Under new laws, civil society organisations face dramatically increased government oversight over their work and are left vulnerable to arbitrary decisions by the authorities due to the vague terms of the new provisions. The changes come at a time when many NGOs are under sustained attack from the Russian authorities through the media or through legal proceedings.
- There are growing concerns about the practices committed under what Russia terms its "counter-terrorism" operation in the North Caucasus, with regular reports of "disappearances", torture and arbitrary detentions. Impunity seems to reign as very few perpetrators are ever identified or brought to justice.
- Far from normalising, the conflict in Chechnya not only continues but is spreading violently to Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Thousands of people remain internally displaced in the region but despite this, certain EU Member States have recently returned Chechen asylum seekers to the Russian Federation.

Faced with this grave picture of widespread human rights violations, Amnesty International considers it urgent for the EU to pressure Russia in a way that is convincing and which produces credible signs of good faith from its partner.

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