

AI Index: PRE 01/146/2009
16 April 2009

Russian Federation: Normalization in Chechnya must bring accountability

Normalization in Chechnya is not possible without full accountability for the grievous human rights violations that have taken place in the region ravaged by two wars in the last 15 years, Amnesty International said today in response to the Russian authorities' declaration of ending its "counter-terrorism operation" there.

"The true benchmark of a return to normality is to give people what they have been wanting for over a decade - they want the truth, and they want justice. They want to know the fate and whereabouts of relatives and friends who are among the disappeared, and they want those responsible brought to account" said Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

"Only thorough and independent investigations into past and continuing human rights violations can bring normalization and security in Chechnya. Such investigations will be a deterrent to future violations."

"Opening the region to independent observers and journalists would be a signal that the authorities there are ready for transparency, but a change of status is absolutely meaningless without the political will to change reality."

Over the years Amnesty International has consistently investigated cases of human rights abuses, including war crimes, committed by both the Russian federal forces, forces under the present government of President Ramzan Kadyrov and Chechen armed groups. They include indiscriminate killings, excessive use of force, deaths in custody, torture and ill-treatment in custody, alleged unlawful killings, arbitrary detentions, secret detention, abductions, enforced disappearances, threats to human rights activists, the targeting of relatives of suspected fighters, and the forced evictions of internally displaced people.

The organization has repeatedly called for impartial investigations and for those found responsible to be brought to justice. The investigations carried out so far by the authorities are ineffective and have led to entrenched impunity in regards to abuses committed by law enforcement agencies.

As far as is known to Amnesty International, only one person has been convicted in relation to a case of enforced disappearance and the fate of his victim remains unknown. Investigations into crimes committed by armed fighters have been marred by allegations of torture and ill-treatment of suspects and a blatant absence of respect for international standards of fair trial.

Not being able to obtain justice in the Russian Federation, people turn to the European Court of Human Rights for redress. Many of those submitting cases face reprisals ranging from threats and intimidation to disappearances. To date the European Court of Human Rights has made rulings in about 100 cases

concerning human rights violations committed in the course of the conflict in Chechnya. In most of these cases the Court found Russia responsible for the death, torture or enforced disappearances of people in Chechnya or for the failure to investigate such crimes.

“It is vital that Russia takes steps to fully implement the rulings of the European Court, in particular in terms of investigations of proven violations and measures to prevent violations in the future,” Irene Khan said.

“Without true respect for the rule of law from all sides, and a genuine commitment to address the festering legacy left by the blatant failure of political will at all levels to prevent and punish a catalogue of grievous abuses there can be no stability and security for the people in Chechnya as well as in the rest of the Russian Federation.”

“Victims of human rights abuses in Chechnya and in Russia as a whole have been waiting for years for justice and for the authorities to reveal the truth about crimes committed during the counter-terrorist operation. Now is the time to restore their rights.”

Background

Chechnya declared independence from Russia in 1991; there followed two major armed conflicts, the first, from 1994-1996, which ended in de facto independence for Chechnya, and a second, which began in 1999 and ended with the installation of a pro-Moscow government in the region in 2003.

During the second armed conflict, between 3,000 and 5,000 people were subjected to enforced disappearance and many more were killed during indiscriminate bombings, large-scale raids on settlements or died after being taken hostage or as a result of explosions. No full investigation, on the either national or international level into these crimes has ever taken place.