

Amnesty International

Public statement

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Russia: There must be no more impunity for attacks on human rights defenders and journalists

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about yesterday's vicious attack on the Joint Mobile Group of human rights defenders (JMG) working in Chechnya and journalists from Norwegian, Russian and Swedish media. The attack happened at about 7 p.m. on 9 March not far from a check point on the administrative border between Ingushetia and Chechnya in the Russian North Caucasus. The group of 5 men and 3 women HRDs and journalists and their driver were on their way from the neighbouring republic of North Ossetia to the Chechen capital Grozny when their minibus was blocked by four vehicles and around 20 young masked men armed with baseball bats and batons attacked the minibus smashing its windows, dragged human rights defenders and journalists from the car and severely beaten them. Eight people were injured and had to go to hospital.

The attackers were shouting threats, demanding that human rights activists never come to Chechnya again and calling them "terrorists" and "defenders of terrorists". They torched the car together with the equipment and other possessions still in there. About a couple of hours later, the JMG office in Ingushetia was attacked by at least five armed masked men, which suggests that these were coordinated and planned attacks. The CCTV cameras installed outside the office and accessible online, had shown two armed masked men smashing the door and breaking into the office. They then destroyed the camera so it is not clear yet what kind of damage has been caused there. It was after normal office hours and no JMG members were there at the time.

This is the latest in a series of attacks and incidents of intense harassment that JMG has been subjected to over the last year. Criminal investigations opened into the attacks have so far not led to any prosecutions, even though some of the attacks happened in broad daylight and there are photo and video images available which could have helped identify the attackers. The authorities have opened an investigation into the 9 March attacks as "hooliganism" and "destruction of property", in spite of the serious nature of the attacks and significant level of violence towards the journalists and human rights defenders. These are lesser offences than the offence of obstructing the lawful professional work of journalists, which under Article 144 of the Criminal Code, if done with threat of or use of violence or destruction of their property, can be punished by up to six years in jail.

Presidential spokesperson Dmitry Peskov issued a statement calling the attack "absolute hooliganism" and "unacceptable". Amnesty International urges the Russian authorities to ensure prompt, impartial and independent investigation of these latest attacks with a view to identifying and bringing to justice not only those suspected of being the immediate perpetrators but also those suspected of ordering the attacks. More generally, Amnesty International is calling on the Russian authorities to ensure effective protection to all human rights activists and journalists working in Chechnya. It is high time to demonstrate that "right" words are reflected in right deeds and that there is no impunity in Russia for attacks on human rights defenders and journalists.

Background information

Joint Mobile Group of human rights defenders was set up in 2009 shortly after the murder of courageous Chechen human rights defender Natalia Estemirova. The group was founded and is coordinated by the Russian NGO Committee for Prevention of Torture, led by Igor Kaliapin. The group usually consists of three human rights lawyers from different Russian regions who go to Chechnya for a month at a time to take up cases of enforced disappearances, torture and other human rights violations, represent victims at all stages of criminal investigation, and monitor the progress of these cases through the Russian criminal justice system.

According to Igor Kaliapin, most recently almost every week the Chechen media would publish a smear article about him, the Committee for Prevention of Torture, the Joint Mobile Group accusing them of “serving enemies of the nation”, engaging in “terrorist activities” and “working for Western security services”. According to a Russian Novaya Gazeta journalist, in February, three Russian journalists were unlawfully detained in Grozny by Chechen police officers. They were later released but their equipment was confiscated and video and photo materials destroyed. Two days later, Chechen police officers tried to abduct a JMG staff member but he managed to alert his colleagues and the abduction failed.

Please see: *Russian Federation: The federal authorities must respond immediately and decisively to latest threats against human rights defenders, journalists and political activists* at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/3255/2016/en/>

Russia: Attack on Rights Group in Chechnya Investigate Mob Violence; Protect Activists
Joint Statement by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/1804/2015/en/>

Russia: End persecution of activists in Chechnya at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/12/russia-end-persecution-human-rights-activists-chechnya/>