

**PUBLIC STATEMENT**

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***Afghanistan: Russian warning of air strike evokes memories of massive human rights violations***

*Amnesty International is concerned there will be a further escalation of war in Afghanistan resulting in further human rights violations following a recent warning from Russia's Defence Minister and other senior officials that Russia will resort to aerial bombing of Afghanistan to crush suspected Chechen armed opposition training camps.*

*The warning evokes memories of massive human rights violations during the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 which resulted in the deaths of thousands of defenceless women, men and children and an exodus of one fifth of the population. Russia's aerial bombing of Chechnya, which included the targeting of civilian convoys marked with white flags, demonstrates a continuing disregard for civilian life.*

*Countries in the region and elsewhere which reportedly have close ties to the Afghan warring factions are already effectively fuelling the human rights catastrophe there. The Taliban are believed to have the backing of the Pakistani government while Iran and Russia are believed to be supporting the anti-Taliban factions. These countries have denied sending weapons to Afghanistan but it is now common knowledge that without their backing, Afghan warring factions could not have sustained their military operations for such a long time.*

*Amnesty International is also concerned that the Russian threats might give further excuses to some of the countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States to engage in human rights*

violations under the pretext of national security. Uzbekistan for instance has used fear of so-called religious extremism to clamp down on the non-violent opposition - secular as well as religious. The recent Taleban statement that they would hold their Central Asian neighbours responsible for any air strike against their positions in Afghanistan could be used by Uzbekistan as an excuse to intensify persecution of the banned Islamic opposition.

While there are differing views on whether the Russian threat would ever materialise - and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov has denied any plans to carry out such strikes - the mere fact that the threats have been made is cause for alarm in view of their human rights implications. Amnesty International is urging the Russian authorities to refrain from any military activity that could result - as has done in the past - in the indiscriminate killing of non-combatants and other human rights violations.

Furthermore, such statements by Russian authorities should be a warning to the international community that Russian military action of the type which was carried out in Chechnya and which resulted in massive human rights violations there could be repeated elsewhere. It is therefore imperative that the international community -- members of the United Nations and the Council of Europe -- remind the Russian authorities of their responsibilities not to engage in any military activity that would cause human rights violations.

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