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**RUSSIA: CIVILIANS HELD HOSTAGE BY CHECHEN FIGHTERS SHOULD BE
RELEASED**

Amnesty International today condemned the actions of a group of Chechen fighters who have taken hostage an estimated 150 civilians, and threatened to kill them unless Russian forces withdraw from the disputed Chechen Republic.

“Hostage-taking is not an acceptable action to exercise pressure on the Russian authorities. The lives of innocent civilians that may not have any responsibility in the situation are put at risk and their rights simply ignored. The hostages should be released immediately and unharmed,” the human rights group said.

Hostage-taking is in violation of the Geneva Conventions. Amnesty International is also calling on President Dudayev to condemn publicly the actions of those Chechens holding civilians hostage, to use all available influence to help ensure the swift and safe release of all of them, and to ensure that no forces under his control engage in hostage-taking.

The hostages were seized when a group of Chechens calling itself "Lone Wolf" entered the southern Russian town of Kizlyar in Dagestan early on 9 January, and took over the local central hospital and an adjoining maternity home. Civilians from apartment blocks surrounding the medical complex are said to have been forced into the hospital, which is now reported to be ringed by Russian troops.

The group's leader, Salman Raduyev, has been quoted as telling Russian officers by radio that civilians would be shot unless troops were withdrawn from the Chechen Republic. Russian forces entered the territory in December 1994 and an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 people, mainly civilians, have died in subsequent fighting.

Salman Raduyev is reportedly related by marriage to Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev, a focus of Chechen opposition who is in hiding, although it is currently unclear whether the group's actions have any direct connection to President Dudayev. Last year over 100 people died in June when Chechen fighters took some 1,000 people hostage in the town of Budennovsk, again in an attempt to force Russian troops to withdraw.

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