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Russian Federation, Ingushetia: Detention and beating of human rights activist must be investigated

Amnesty International deplores today's reported arbitrary detention and beating of human rights activist Zurab Tsechoev, in Ingushetia.

According to reports, around 50 armed men, thought to be Russian federal law enforcement officials, arrived in three armoured personnel carriers and three "Gazel" minibuses, at Zurab Tsechoev's family home in the village of Troitskaia, in Ingushetia's Sunzhenskii district, at about 6am. Zurab Tsechoev opened the gates to the home, and was made to lie on the ground before being forced through the house, at gunpoint, while the law enforcement officials conducted a search of the premises. The search was reportedly carried out without a warrant and without independent witnesses. During the course of the search two mobile telephones and a computer were seized. The law enforcement officials then placed Zurab Tsechoev in one of the armoured personnel carriers and drove him away, without informing his family where they were taking him to.

Enquiries by the family at the prosecutor's office and the Ministry of Internal Affairs as to who had detained him and where he was did not yield any information.

Several hours later a passer-by is reported to have found Zurab Tsechoev, badly beaten, at the side of a road near the village of Ekazhevo, near to Magas, capital of Ingushetia. The two mobile phones and computer had been left with him. He was later hospitalised, with multiple injuries and bruising.

Zurab Tsechoev is alleged to have been taken to the building of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in Magas, where he was detained in the basement. There he was allegedly beaten and ill-treated by law enforcement officials. During the beating the officials referred to his work at the non-governmental organization MASHR, and accused him of being involved in passing a list of names and other details of law enforcement officials, allegedly involved in organizing abductions and killings in Ingushetia, to opposition website *Ingushetiya.ru*, which recently published the list. Zurab Tsechoev denied any involvement. Allegedly, the officials checked the computer and mobile phone.

When the detention of Zurab Tsechoev became widely known, the officials released him. However, on releasing him, the officials allegedly threatened that they would kill him and his family, should he complain about the detention, should he not resign from his work at MASHR, and should he not leave Ingushetia until September.

Amnesty International calls on the authorities to ensure a prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation into the alleged arbitrary detention, ill-treatment and threats against Zurab Tsechoev, and ensure anyone responsible should be brought to justice.

The Russian authorities should respect and protect the right of human rights defenders to conduct their work without hindrance, intimidation or harassment, in line with the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Background

MASHR reports on and campaigns against serious human rights violations in Ingushetia, in particular against enforced disappearances and abductions. Zurab Tsechoev works as the editor of the organization's website.

Since 2006 MASHR has undergone numerous inspections into its activities by the tax inspectorate, the Federal Registration Service, the Office of the Prosecutor of the Republic and the police. The head of the organization, Magomed Mutsolgov, has received threats because of his human rights work, and believes he has reason to suspect that he and his office are under surveillance.

Other human rights defenders have also been targeted in Ingushetia. In November, head of the Human Rights Centre Memorial, Oleg Orlov and three *REN TV* journalists were abducted, beaten, threatened and left in a field, in an apparent attempt to prevent them from reporting on an opposition demonstration planned later that day.

Zurab Tsechoev has submitted an application to the European Court of Human Rights, in connection with the enforced disappearance of his brother, Tamerlan Tsechoev, who was abducted on 11 March 2004, from the village of Verkhnie Achaluki in Malgobek district. Tamerlan Tsechoev was travelling in the same car as deputy prosecutor Rashid Ozdov, when both men were detained in the village of Verkhnie Achaluki, by men who were believed to work for the FSB of Ingushetia. Their fate and whereabouts since are not known. Amnesty International has campaigned for an effective investigation into the disappearance of Rashid Ozdov (see AI Index: EUR 46/059/2004).

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