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Austria: Bring Killers of Chechen Exile to Justice; Man Who Fled to Vienna Had Accused Chechen President of Torture

(Moscow) The Austrian government should act swiftly to bring to justice those responsible for the killing of a Chechen man who had alleged he had been tortured by Ramzan Kadyrov, who is now the Chechen president, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Memorial Human Rights Centre said today.

According to news reports, assailants shot and killed 27-year-old Umar Israilov on January 13, 2009, as he left a grocery store in Vienna, where he lived in exile. Israilov had stated publicly that he had been tortured by Kadyrov and had filed a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in 2006. Several days prior to the killing, Israilov complained to Austrian police authorities that he was being followed by unknown individuals.

“We are deeply alarmed about what appears to be another politically motivated killing of a critic of high-level Russian government officials,” said Oleg Orlov, director of the Memorial Human Rights Centre. “In light of the brutal retaliation inflicted on those who speak out on abuses in Chechnya, Israilov’s actions were particularly courageous, and his killers and those behind them need to be promptly held to account.”

An article that appeared in the New York Times about the killing says that Israilov had been detained in 2003 as a rebel fighter, was amnestied, and then briefly served as a bodyguard for Kadyrov. The article cites an interview with Israilov in which he said that during his detention Kadyrov had tortured him, including using electric shocks. He was also quoted as saying that he had witnessed beating, kicking, and other torture of detainees by Kadyrov and his subordinates. Israilov eventually fled to Austria, where he was granted asylum.

“We’re familiar with the case, and find Israilov’s torture allegations entirely credible,” said Rachel Denber, director of Human Rights Watch’s Europe and Central Asia division. “Torture is a long-standing problem in Chechnya that the Russian authorities have failed to stop, even in the face of credible evidence from victims like Umar Israilov.”

Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented persistent ill-treatment and torture in Chechnya by both Russian federal forces and pro-Moscow Chechen forces under the effective command of Kadyrov (<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/11/13/widespread-torture-chechen-republic> and www.amnesty.org).

“We have credible reports of people in Chechnya being threatened or killed for filing an application with the European Court of Human Rights,” said Nicola Duckworth, director of Amnesty International’s Europe and Central Asia program. “We cannot exclude the possibility that Umar Israilov was killed because he sought justice at the court.”

News reports also stated that after Israilov fled Russia, his father was abducted, tortured by Kadyrov, and held illegally for more than 10 months, apparently in an effort to force the son to return home. A person claiming to be an emissary from Kadyrov had visited Umar Israilov in Austria last year and reportedly pressured him to withdraw his ECtHR application and return to Chechnya.

In August 2008, another alleged victim of torture in Chechnya, Mokhmadalakh Masaev, was abducted in Chechnya several weeks after the publication of an interview in which he described his torture in an illegal detention facility. In the interview, Masaev said that in 2006 he had been held in inhuman conditions in a secret prison in Kadyrov's home village in Chechnya for over four months and subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment. He had filed numerous complaints with the prosecutor's office of the Chechen Republic in which he alleged that his detention occurred with the acquiescence of Kadyrov. Six months after his abduction, Masaev's whereabouts remain unknown (<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2008/08/05/russia-torture-victim-abducted-chechnya> and <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR46/025/2008/en>).

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