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Russia must stop persecution of rights activists

The Russian authorities must stop persecuting human rights activists and instead channel their efforts into investigating those responsible for their murders, Amnesty International said ahead of Human Rights Day.

“The continuing failure of the Russian authorities to respect and safeguard the work of human rights defenders as an integral part of a functioning society is in breach of their international obligations. Furthermore, it puts defenders’ lives at risk,” said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director.

Amnesty International calls for the immediate release on bail of Alexei Sokolov, head of a Russian non-governmental organization (NGO) campaigning against torture or other ill-treatment in places of detention.

Alexei Sokolov was also investigating cases of possible corruption among regional law enforcement officials but was detained in May 2009 on suspicion that he had taken part in a 2004 robbery.

Amnesty International considers that he is a possible prisoner of conscience who may have been prosecuted for his lawful activities and is concerned that he may not receive a fair trial.

Oleg Orlov, head of the Russian NGO Human Rights Centre Memorial, could also be named a prisoner of conscience if he is imprisoned on charges of defamation after he made a statement following the murder of fellow activist Natalia Estemirova in which he referred to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov.

“Public officials should be prepared to be under close scrutiny, they have to take responsibility for their actions and statements,” Nicola Duckworth said.

“While the right to freedom of expression can be limited by law, the persecution of Oleg Orlov is a wholly disproportionate infringement of this right.”

Oleg Orlov has already been fined after being convicted on civil charges of slander arising from the same statement.

“These latest cases characterize the climate in which many human rights defenders in Russia have to work. They illustrate the lengths to which the authorities are prepared to go in order to stifle any criticism from human rights defenders directed at them,” Nicola Duckworth said.

“In the meantime, the murders of human rights defenders such as Natalia Estemirova and Zarema Sadulaieva, who both worked in Chechnya, remain unresolved.”

On 31 October, Zarema Gaisanova, a staff member of a humanitarian organization, was abducted from her home in Grozny at the time of a security operation reportedly overseen in the area by President Kadyrov. She has not been seen since and there are serious concerns for her safety.

“Persecuting human rights defenders or independent journalists for their criticism of the authorities amounts to harassment and contradicts Russia’s commitments made as a party to international human rights treaties.”

“We want to see a strong and real commitment from the Russian authorities to end attacks on human rights defenders and humanitarian workers. It depends on their political will to create a climate where those responsible are brought to justice.”