

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: EUR 46/1804/2015
3 June 2015

Russia: Attack on Rights Group in Chechnya

Investigate Mob Violence; Protect Activists

Joint Statement by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders

The Russian authorities should take urgent steps to protect human rights defenders working in Chechnya from attacks and harassment, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders said today. Unidentified people in masks forced their way into the office of the human rights nongovernmental organization Joint Mobile Group (JMG) for Chechnya, in Chechnya's capital, Grozny, on June 3, 2015, destroying its contents and forcing its staff to evacuate. The authorities should immediately conduct an effective investigation of the incident, capable of identifying those responsible and bringing them to account in a fair trial.

This outrageous attack is the latest in a series of incidents of intense harassment and intimidation of the group of human rights defenders, who have continuously fought for years for the protection of the rule of law in Chechnya.

At about 10:30 a.m. on June 3, an aggressive mob surrounded the building in which JMG has its office, smashing JMG's car in the courtyard with metal crowbars, before forcing their way into the building entrance. They broke down the door and stormed into the JMG office. Several people also climbed onto the office balcony and tried to break in through the window. JMG staff - Albert Kuznetsov and Daniil Chendemirov - escaped through a window on the other side of the building. The mob ransacked the office, then broke down the door of the apartment rented by the JMG staff on the same floor of the building.

Local and Moscow-based human rights defenders repeatedly called the police in Grozny asking them to intervene, but their phone calls went unanswered. Witnesses said police officers joined the crowd but did not intervene. According to Human Rights Center Memorial said that members of the Investigative Committee, a stand-alone agency responsible for investigation of serious crimes in Russia, arrived at the scene around noon. An Investigative Committee official told Memorial that over 40 people were detained, but there has been no independent confirmation, nor were any further details made available.

Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are concerned that this attack took place against a backdrop of increasingly hostile rhetoric by the authorities against the group and that there had been no effective investigation into a previous attack on JMG in Grozny, in December 2014. The organizations call on the Russian authorities to ensure that human rights defenders can continue their lawful work in the Chechen Republic without fear for their lives and well-being.

In the lead-up to the previous attack, on December 13 a public demonstration took place in Grozny with banners labeling JMG “supporters of terrorism.” Later that day, the JMG office was destroyed by fire in a suspected arson attack. The next day, Chechen police entered the apartment rented by JMG in Grozny and, without providing any explanation or a search warrant to the two JMG staff members present, ransacked the apartment and confiscated mobile phones, several cameras, laptop computers, and other electronic equipment. They also conducted body searches of the two JMG staff members and searched their car. The two members, Sergei Babinets and Dmitry Dimitriev, were held by police for several hours before being released without charge.

In December, Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders and Human Rights Watch called on the Russian authorities to investigate the suspected arson, ensure protection was provided to JMG staff, and honor Russia’s commitment to foster a normal working climate for human rights defenders. Since then, the situation has worsened for independent human rights defenders and journalists who work in Chechnya. Pressure on local journalists and public figures has increased and independent journalists have been threatened.

The authorities had announced a meeting for June 2 to protest a “propaganda war against Chechnya and Russia,” waged – according to the Chechen authorities – by human rights defenders and such independent media outlets as Novaya Gazeta, Kommersant, radio station Echo of Moscow and the information platform OpenRussia. Kommersant and OpenRussia recently published allegations about severe corruption and nepotism in Chechnya. Novaya Gazeta and Echo of Moscow have regularly reported on human rights violations in Chechnya.

The authorities in Chechnya have repeatedly ordered public servants, students and other civilians to join demonstrations against independent media and human rights defenders.