

Moscow – Stockholm, 22 April, 2011

Open Letter to the Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt

Dear Prime Minister Reinfeldt,

We write to urge you to use your upcoming meeting with Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to raise concern about the persisting hostility that continues to characterize the human rights climate in Russia, including in particular intimidation and attacks against human rights defenders, and rampant impunity for torture, enforced disappearances and other serious abuses in the North Caucasus.

Human rights defenders in Russia remain vulnerable to harassment and attacks, with those working to end impunity for abuses in the North Caucasus especially at risk. While Russia's leadership has spoken out about the importance of normal working conditions for nongovernmental organizations, it has failed to react to repeated and openly threatening statements about human rights groups made by Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov and other high-level Chechen officials. In summer 2010 a prominent human rights lawyer from Dagestan, Sapiyat Magomedova, was severely beaten by police in the city of Khasavyurt. Though the alleged perpetrators have been identified, they have not been brought to justice. There has also been no justice for the brazen murders in 2009 of human rights defenders working in/or the North Caucasus, including the July 2009 murder of Natalia Estemirova, the most prominent human rights activist in Chechnya, and it is unclear whether any of the investigations have examined possible official involvement or complicity in these crimes. Meanwhile, Oleg Orlov, chairman of Memorial Human Rights Center and one of Russia's most prominent human rights defenders, remains on trial on criminal slander charges for saying that Chechnya's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, bore political responsibility for Estemirova's murder.

The Kremlin's approach to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism in the North Caucasus continues to rely heavily on arbitrary detention, torture and collective punishment. High-level Chechen officials, including Kadyrov, have repeatedly stated that insurgents' families should expect punishment unless their relatives surrender, encouraging lawless actions by police and security personnel. Rampant impunity for abuses has served to antagonize the population in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan, and resulted in further deterioration of the situation on the ground.

Fuelling the climate of impunity is Russia's persisting failure to fully implement the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights on applications from Chechnya. The Court has to date issued over 165 judgments holding Russia responsible for grave human rights violations in Chechnya. While Russia has generally paid the required monetary compensation to victims, it has failed to implement the core of the judgments, which entails conducting effective investigations and holding perpetrators accountable. The authorities have also failed to take adequate measures to prevent the recurrence of similar abuses, with the result that a steady flow of new complaints are being lodged with the court every year.

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Violations of women's rights are another growing concern, with authorities in Chechnya unambiguously condoning the pelting of unveiled women on the streets with paintball guns, resulting in the hospitalization of at least one woman in summer 2010. In a July 2010 television interview, Kadyrov professed his readiness to "award a commendation" to the men engaged in this crime and said that the targeted women deserved such treatment for not being dressed with sufficient modesty. A March 2011 report by Human Rights Watch documents numerous cases of women being harassed in the streets of Grozny for not covering their hair or wearing clothes deemed too revealing. Chechen authorities have also banned women refusing to wear headscarves from working in the public sector or attending schools and universities. Moscow, meanwhile, has remained silent in the face of these blatantly abusive policies.

The above described concerns stand in stark contrast with the Kremlin's welcome rhetorical commitment to human rights and the rule of law. We hope you will seize the opportunity of your forthcoming meeting with Prime Minister Putin to convey a clear sense of concern about this inconsistency, along with an expectation that the Russian government takes concrete steps to address it. Such steps should include:

- Fostering a normal working environment for civil society organizations and activists and ensuring they are protected from persecution and harassment;
- Ensuring that the investigations into Natalia Estemirova's murder and the other murders of activists, are effective - thorough, independent and subject to public scrutiny – include the possibility of official involvement in these crimes and capable of leading to the identification and prosecution of all those involved in the murders;
- Dropping criminal charges against Oleg Orlov;
- Publicly disavowing unlawful counterterrorism/counterinsurgency practices, holding accountable those who engage in them, and acknowledging the role they play in destabilizing the situation in the region;
- Putting an end to local rules forcing women in Chechnya to observe an Islamic dress code and acting to protect women's right to private life and personal autonomy;
- Implementing fully European Court of Human Rights judgments on Chechnya, including conducting effective investigations and holding perpetrators accountable, and taking adequate measures to prevent similar abuses from recurring.

Thank you for your attention and with best wishes for a productive meeting.

Sincerely,

Lyudmilla Alexeeva, Chair of Moscow Helsinki Group

Svetlana Gannushkina, Chair of Civic Assistance Committee

Rachel Denber, Acting Director for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch

Martin Ugglä, Chair of Östgruppen – Swedish Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights