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Novaya Gazeta journalist Yelena Milashina after the attack on human rights defenders that took place in Chechnya on their way to the announcement of the verdict against Zarema Musayeva / Photo: Anna Artemyeva, Novaya Gazeta / Collage: OVD-Info

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Information on Human Rights Defenders Working in Remote and Rural Areas of the Russian Federation

Information on Human Rights Defenders Working in Remote and Rural Areas of the Russian Federation for the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders provided by OVD-Info

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INTRODUCTION

This input is prepared by the independent human rights group OVD-Info for the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders.

OVD-Info is an independent human rights group that monitors political persecution in Russia and provides legal assistance to victims of such persecution. OVD-Info was

founded during the mass protests of December 2011 as a volunteer initiative to publicise information on arrests of protesters. Today, OVD-Info operates a 24-hour federal hotline to collect information on all forms of political persecution and coordinate legal and other assistance for its victims. It also provides legal education to activists, researches political persecution in Russia, conducts advocacy and strategic litigation campaigns.

1. PHYSICAL ATTACKS ON HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WORKING IN REMOTE OR ISOLATED AREAS

Have there been any cases of human rights defenders working in remote or isolated areas physically attacked, including killed, in your country between 1 May 2020 and 30 June 2024? What action has been taken to bring the perpetrators to justice?

The Chechen Republic of Russia can be considered an isolated area due to measures taken by Chechen authorities to undermine the rule of law, expel and target human rights defenders, including physical attacks and killing, with complete impunity.

Russian NGO «Crew Against Torture» investigates and litigates cases of torture in Russia. Crew Against Torture's work, especially in Chechnya, has been recognized by multiple awards, including the Front Line Defenders Award in April 2011 and the Martin Ennals Award in 2013. Nevertheless, the organisation had to close its office in Chechnya after it was attacked in 2015. Members of the Crew Against Torture are regularly subjected to physical violence, both by Chechen police officers and unidentified individuals. Relatives of one of the Crew Against Torture's members, human rights lawyer Abubakar Yangulbayev, were kidnapped, and authorities imprisoned his mother on false,

politically motivated charges in **retaliation for Yangulbayev's work**. In sections «a» and «b», we will examine two of the most well-known cases of physical violence against Crew Against Torture members.

a. The beating of Sergey Babinets, Oleg Khabibrakhmanov and Natalia Dobronravova in Nizhny Novgorod

Sergey Babinets and Oleg Khabibrakhmanov are human rights lawyers working with the Crew Against Torture. Natalia Dobronravova is a woman human rights defender and attorney who collaborates with the Crew Against Torture on a regular basis.

On 20 January 2022, Babinets, Khabibrakhmanov and Dobronravova arrived at a safe house in Nizhny Novgorod, having been alerted by their clients about Chechen officials trying to break into the shelter. The human rights defenders arrived on site and entered the safe house to provide legal support and protection for the clients. When Natalia Dobronravova exited the apartment premises to question the Chechen law enforcement officers about why they were trying to enter the premises outside of their regional jurisdiction, the Chechen officials forcefully entered the safe house. They hit Natalia Dobronravova in the face, beat up Sergey Babinets and Oleg Khabibrakhmanov, and locked them up in a spare room to prevent them from protecting their clients.

Chechen officials proceeded to abduct Zarema Musaeva from the safe house. Zarema Musaeva is the mother of Abubakar Yangulbayev, a human rights lawyer who formerly worked with the Crew Against Torture.

b. The beating of Alexander Nemov and Elena Milashina in Chechnya

Alexander Nemov is a prominent Russian human rights lawyer who has represented victims of torture and high-profile political prisoners, particularly in the North Caucasus, including Chechnya.

On 4 July 2023, Alexander Nemov and investigative journalist Elena Milashina arrived in Grozny, the Republic of Chechnya, to attend the sentencing of political prisoner Zarema Musaeva, when their taxi was blocked by three cars. Masked, armed men dragged them out, severely beating them with kicks, punches, and PVC pipes. The unidentified men pointed guns at Nemov and Milashina's heads and promised to kill them. They also broke all their equipment; Alexander Nemov used the taxi driver's phone to report the attack to his colleague. The attackers left Elena Milashina with broken fingers, a shaved head, and chemical burns on her face, while Alexander Nemov suffered a deep knife wound. They were later hospitalised with severe head injuries. Alexander Nemov had trouble walking and talking; while Elena Milashina systemically lost consciousness, and couldn't sit up straight. Both refused to file complaints against perpetrators to Chechen law enforcement officers, citing a proven record of impunity in the region. Authorities never brought the attackers to justice.

c. The beating of Fail Alsynov in penitentiary colony no. 29 in Perm Krai

Attacks against the members of the Crew Against Torture are not the only example of attacks against human rights defenders working in remote or isolated areas. Here is another example of an attack which happened in Perm Krai.

Fail Alsynov is a Bashkir activist. From 2008 to 2014 he was a member (from 2010, deputy head) of Kuk-Bure movement (translated as «Blue Wolf»), which advocated for federalism, secular nationalism, development of the Bashkir language and democracy. After the breakdown of Kuk-Bure in 2014,

Mr. Alsynov founded Bashkort, a nationalist Bashkir movement. The movement held rallies in defence of the Bashkir language, **opposed mining the Kushtau Hill** in 2018–2020, and supported the Indigenous Peoples of Bashkortostan. Russian authorities declared the movement «extremist» in 2020.

On 17 January 2024, the Baymak District Court of the Republic of Bashkortostan sentenced Fail Alsynov to four years in prison for «inciting hatred» (art. 282 of the Criminal Code) at an April 2023 Ishmurzino village rally. In his speech, Mr. Alsynov spoke in Bashkir about problems in the region and the war against Ukraine. The activist used the phrase «kara khalyk», which can be translated as «ordinary people», but was **construed** as offensive by investigators. The court had to postpone the announcement of the verdict due to mass demonstrations: thousands of people gathered outside the Baymak court to support Alsynov, chanting «Freedom!» and «We are the ordinary people!». «Political Prisoners Support. Memorial» **recognised** Fail Alsynov as a political prisoner.

On 24 June 2024, Fail Alsynov's attorney **confirmed** that the activist had been beaten by prison guards in the penitentiary colony where he is currently serving his sentence.

In her first thematic report to the General Assembly, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, Mariana Katzarova, **notes** that several Bashkir protesters were hospitalised with severe injuries and at least one dead in police custody (see para. 33).

2. LACK OF INVESTIGATION OF ATTACKS, INTIMIDATION AND HARASSMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS WORKING IN REMOTE OR ISOLATED AREAS

Have cases of attacks, intimidation and harassment of human rights defenders working in remote or isolated areas been investigated and prosecuted?

Although the authorities formally allow victims to file complaints with the police, investigations often remain perfunctory. Furthermore, in Chechnya, representatives of the authorities **openly threaten** human rights defenders and their families.

a. The beating of Sergey Babinets, Oleg Khabibrakhmanov and Natalia Dobronravova in Nizhny Novgorod

The case was not investigated and the perpetrators were not prosecuted.

b. Attack on Alexander Nemov and Elena Milashina in Chechnya

In July 2023, the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, said he had **ordered** to identify the attackers. The head of the Russian Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, **instructed** the head of the Chechen investigative department to conduct an investigation. The Investigative Committee's office in Chechnya opened a criminal case of intentional infliction of light and moderate harm to health (part 2, art. 115, part 2, art. 112 of the Criminal Code), followed by a **second** case under six more articles of the Criminal Code. However, more than a year later, the investigation did not lead to finding or prosecuting the perpetrators.

c. The beating of Fail Alsynov in penitentiary colony no. 29 in Perm Krai

Fail Alsynov's attorney said that he had submitted multiple complaints to Russian authorities. Both the Federal

Penitentiary Service and the attorney said that an investigation into the attack had been **opened**. However, to this day, the perpetrators have not been identified and punished.

3. DIFFICULTIES HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS FACE DUE TO GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION

Have defenders working in remote or isolated areas in your country experienced any difficulties in accessing digital communication, financial resources, consultations and decision-making domestically or internationally, due to being geographically less connected?

Difficulties in accessing financial resources are critical. Russian law requires an attorney status for the defence counsel in criminal cases. This status is crucial not only for criminal proceedings but also for protecting the rights of prisoners in detention, including political prisoners, such as ensuring proper conditions of detention and upholding their right to medical care.

Each regional bar association in Russia sets its own admittance fee, often making it prohibitively high. This situation is typical for many remote regions. For example, in the Republic of Bashkortostan, a lawyer must currently **pay a fee** of 155,000 rubles (US\$1,596), six times higher than the established minimum wage. In the Bar Association of the Republic of Altai, this fee is 500,000 rubles (\$5,151), twenty times higher than the **minimum wage**. In the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, **the fee** is 300,000 rubles (\$3,087).

These fees are then passed on to clients making legal representation less affordable.

Meanwhile, in Moscow, the most economically developed region of Russia, these **figures** differ by only three times.

A lawyer from Moscow, despite having a higher income, spends less money on obtaining accreditation to handle criminal cases. At the same time, the legislation prohibits them from regularly travelling to remote regions to represent a client's interests without accreditation from the local bar association, for which a significant fee is also imposed. As a result, lawyers from distant regions often do not have the opportunity to become criminal defence attorneys, and it is precisely these attorneys who make up a significant portion of human rights defenders. On average, there is 1 lawyer for every 2,000 people in Russia. However, there were **only 54 lawyers** in the Republic of Altai Bar Association, as of 2023. With a population of about 210,000 people, this equates to approximately 1 lawyer for every 3,800 people. The Nenets Autonomous Okrug Bar Association had only 8 lawyers, and with a population of about 42,000, this equates to approximately 1 lawyer for every 5,250 people.

The financial burden is also significant when lawyers visit political prisoners in remote colonies to check on their condition and to report the news (which is important since communication of political prisoners with the outside world is limited due to censorship). Since many Russian correctional facilities are situated far from populated areas (for example, the infamous IK-3 in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, located above the Arctic Circle), each attorney's visit incurs significant costs, a burden that falls solely on the relatives of political prisoners.