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COMMUNIQUE DE PRESSE – COMUNICADO DE PRENSA

17 July 2009

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Russian Federation: ICJ calls for action to protect human rights defenders following killing of Natalya Estemirova

Following the abduction and murder of Chechen human rights defender Natalya Estemirova, the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) today condemned this heinous crime and expressed its deep concern at threats to the safety of human rights defenders in Russia, in particular those investigating human rights violations in Chechnya. The ICJ stressed the need for the criminal investigation into the killing to be independent, impartial and exhaustive and to involve and inform the family of Ms Estemirova.

“With this latest murder, the pattern of killings and attacks on human rights defenders in Russia can no longer be denied,” said Róisín Pillay, Senior Legal Advisor for Europe at the ICJ. “President Medvedev’s condemnation of the killing, and his acknowledgment of the importance of human rights defenders’ work in Chechnya, is welcome. However the environment for human rights defenders has now deteriorated to such a point that serious and concerted political action is needed to restore confidence in their safety. This killing demonstrates the urgency of systemic change to re-establish the rule of law in Chechnya, end impunity for human rights violations, and ensure that human rights defenders can work without fear for their safety.”

Natalya Estemirova, head of the NGO Memorial’s office in Grozny, was a leading figure in the investigation of human rights violations in Chechnya, including torture, disappearances, and killings by the Chechen security forces. She had recently collaborated on a major report by Stanislav Dmitrievskiy, B.I Gvareli and Oksana Chelysheva on establishing an International Tribunal on human rights violations in Chechnya; the report is now under investigation by law enforcement authorities as “extremist”. The ICJ expressed its concern that colleagues and associates of Ms Estemirova may now be targeted, and recalled that Russia’s international human rights obligations require the authorities to take all appropriate measures to protect the right to life and physical integrity of persons at particular risk of violent criminal acts.

“Urgent steps must now be taken to protect colleagues and associates of Natalya Estemirova. This will require practical law enforcement measures, as well as political support and acknowledgment that investigation of violations of human rights in Chechnya, and debate on how to establish accountability for them, is both legitimate and necessary” said Róisín Pillay.

The ICJ is an international non-governmental organisation comprising sixty of the world’s most eminent jurists and has a worldwide network of national sections and affiliated organisations

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The ICJ further called on the Ombudsman, Vladimir Lukin, as a matter of priority, to review the protection of human rights defenders, including the relevant legal framework, and administrative and security measures. Working with human rights defenders themselves, as well as with international experts including the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, the Ombudsman should prepare recommendations on measures to protect human rights defenders' security. In addition, following this killing, the Russian Government should allow and facilitate full access to Chechnya by relevant UN Special Procedures, including the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Summary Executions, both of whom have outstanding requests for visits to Russia.

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