

Human Rights Watch

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With disappearances continuing on a wide scale in Chechnya, the practice has now reached the level of a crime against humanity, Human Rights Watch said today.

The European Union, which had in previous years introduced a resolution on Chechnya at the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, has declined to do so at this years Commission, which is now in session.

It is astounding that the European Union has decided to take no action on Chechnya at the Commission, said Rachel Denber, acting executive director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia Division. To look the other way while crimes against humanity are being committed is unconscionable.

Under international law, a widespread and systematic pattern of enforced disappearances constitutes a crime against humanity, an act that outrages the conscience of humankind. Any state may prosecute the perpetrators of such crimes, including responsible government officials and heads of states.

Thousands of people have disappeared in Chechnya since 1999, with the full knowledge of the Russian authorities, Denber said. Witnesses now tell us that the atmosphere of utter arbitrariness and intimidation is worse than a war.

The 57-page [briefing paper](#) documents several dozen new cases of disappearances based on Human Rights Watch's recent research mission to Chechnya. Most occurred in the past months, as the Russian government claimed to the international community that the situation in Chechnya was steadily normalizing.

Disappearances are a signature abuse in the six-year conflict in Chechnya, said Denber. The Commission on Human Rights must adopt a strong resolution to send the message that Russia's continuing practice of disappearances will have consequences.

Local human rights groups estimate that between 3,000 and 5,000 people have disappeared since the beginning of the conflict in 1999. Russian governmental statistics put the figure at 2,090 persons. All of these people are either civilians or otherwise unarmed when taken into custody. Russian authorities deny all responsibility for their fate or whereabouts.

Human Rights Watch said that the vast majority of the disappearances are perpetrated by government agents, either Russian federal forces or, increasingly, local Chechen security forces who are ultimately subordinate to Russian authorities. In the last five years law enforcement agencies have opened more than 1,800 criminal investigations into the disappearances, but not a single case has resulted in a conviction.

The Russian government is fully aware of the scale of the problem, said Denber. It simply isn't committed to bringing the perpetrators to justice. And this perpetuates the cycle of abuse.

Among the victims whose cases are detailed in the briefing paper are:

The relatives of the disappeared have no redress and no hope of finding their loved ones, said Denber. They are also increasingly reluctant to even report the disappearances to the authorities, fearing for the safety of their remaining family members.

Human Rights Watch urged Russia to invite key U.N. thematic mechanisms, particularly the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and the Special Rapporteur on Torture to visit Chechnya. Human Rights Watch also urged U.N. member states to press Russia to issue the invitations.

The conflict in Chechnya, now in its sixth year, has brought untold suffering to hundreds of thousands of civilians, who have fallen victim to abuses perpetrated by both Russian forces and Chechen rebels. Chechen fighters have committed unspeakable acts of terrorism in Chechnya and in other parts of Russia. In addition to enforced disappearances, Russias federal forces, together with pro-Moscow Chechen forces, have also committed numerous other crimes against civilians, including extrajudicial executions, torture, arbitrary detention and looting. The overwhelming majority of these crimes remained uninvestigated and unpunished.

In both 2000 and 2001, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights passed resolutions calling on the Russian government to stop abuses, establish a meaningful accountability process and invite the U.N. monitoring mechanisms to the region. Human Rights Watch said that Russia has defied the resolutions and failed to comply with the majority of their recommendations.

Testimonies from the Human Rights Watch briefing paper *Worse Than a War: Disappearances in Chechnya Constitute a Crime Against Humanity*.

We were sleeping. They broke down the doors, burst in, yelling, and pointed their submachine guns at us, [shouting], Everyone get down! Well shoot! I leaped up, started showing them our papers, asking whom they wanted, and why, and who they were they were all in masks. I was begging them, Why are you [doing this]? They did not explain anything, just handcuffed [Rasul], put a T-shirt over his head, and drove him away. An investigator [then] came and questioned us, and looked for footprints in and outside the house, but we still do not know where [Rasul] is.

A relative of Rasul Mukaev (b. 1982), disappeared from the village of Duba-Yurt on December 3, 2004.

I thought they were taking my son away. I ran out and shouted, Where are you taking him? I couldnt really see--they just clustered around her. But the children started crying, They are taking mommy away! I ran up with her passport, but they did not take it. As they were leading her away, I rushed [toward them], but they threw me off. [One of them] pointed his gun at me, and I told him, Go ahead, shoot me if you are that kind of a man. He did not shoot, they just dragged her away. We went to the local administration, to the Federal Security Service, to the military commandants office but they also say they dont have her and do not know where she is.

Mother of Khalimat Sadulaeva (b. 1967), disappeared from the town of Argun on September 12, 2004.

They burst in and just asked, Where are your men? They pushed all women and children into a corner here, and went to the bedroom, and started beating [the men] mercilessly. Everything was [covered] with blood in that room, their beds, and the curtains. They did not even ask for their names or documents. They took the money and jewelry, and a spare tire and a car battery the found in the yard. Then [the soldiers] walked all four of them out of the house and drove them away in the APCs [armored personnel carriers]. The deputy minister of interior [of Chechnya] told us in October [2004], The APCs were identified, we know who took [the men away], we know [who they are]. Ill call and the [detainees] will be released. But we still do not know where they are.

A relative of Adlan Ilaev (b. 1987), Inver Ilaev (b. 1982), Rustam Ilaev (b. 1974), and Kazbek Bataev (b. 1983), disappeared from the village of Assinovskaia on July 3, 2004.

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