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Statement delivered by Tanya Lokshina, Russia Program Director at Human Rights Watch, at the January 24, 2016 meeting of the Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Esteemed Chairperson, Esteemed Members of the Committee,

Human Rights Watch has been documenting human rights violations in Russias turbulent North Caucasus region for close to two decades. There has been very little accountability for such egregious abuses as extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and cruel and degrading treatment. Lasting impunity has served to perpetuate these abuses. It has also contributed to the gradual loss of trust in domestic and international law by victimized local communities.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe represents one of the few international fora that has been regularly exposing and debating egregious abuses in the region. The Assemblys support has been very important in this respect for human rights organizations, like ours. Unfortunately, the suspension of consideration by the Assemblys Plenary of the April 2016 report by the Legal Affairs and Human Rights Committee on continued human rights violations in the North Caucasus could negatively reflect on accountability prospects. We deeply regret the lack of participation by the Russian delegation with the work of the Assembly and understand the reservation of the Assembly about having a debate on the North Caucasus in absence of the Russian delegation. However, when non-cooperation of a government is essentially rewarded by less scrutiny of its human rights record, the victims of abuses are left with even weaker protections.

In this regard, we would like to urge this Committee to:

- do its utmost to ensure that the North Caucasus report is put on the Assemblys agenda in its Plenary sitting for debate at the earlier convenience, and not only in its Standing Committee;
- supplement the North Caucasus report with a substantive written addendum reflecting key human rights developments in the region since April 2016. It would be of concern to us if PACE can decide to suspend the consideration of a report for almost one year, without complementing it with a written update before this report is actually debated.
- do its utmost to ensure that the Assembly adopt a strong resolution on the lasting impunity and deteriorating human rights situation in the region, in particular the human rights crisis in Chechnya, and address detailed recommendations to the authorities of the Russian Federation, including on the urgent need to bring perpetrators to justice and put a resolute end to attacks on human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists working to expose and eradicate abuses in the region, and decide to continue to pay particular attention to the human rights situation in the North Caucasus region, especially in the Chechen Republic.

The human rights situation in the North Caucasus has particularly deteriorated in the Chechen Republic (Chechnya) and in the Republic of Dagestan. Based on the agreement with my esteemed colleagues from Memorial Human Rights Center and Norwegian Helsinki Committee who will also deliver their presentation at this session, I will now aim to draw your attention to the human rights developments in Chechnya.

For close to a decade now, with the blessing of the Kremlin, Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Russias Chechen Republic, has steadily tried to eradicate all forms of dissent and gradually built a tyranny within Chechnya. The repression has become especially staggering over these past two years. Local authorities are viciously and comprehensively cracking down on critics and anyone whose total loyalty to

Kadyrov they deem questionable. These include local residents who express dissenting opinions, critical Russian and foreign journalists, and the very few human rights defenders who challenge cases of abuse by Chechen law enforcement and security agencies.

The Chechen Republic is part of [Russia](#) and its authorities are required by law to uphold Russias domestic legislation and international human rights obligations. Russias leadership is clearly aware of the extent to which Chechen authorities have violated human rights, but it has done little more than issue rare slight rebukes.

Please allow me to draw your attention to a [recent report by Human Rights Watch, Like Walking a Minefield](#). The report documents the unlawful, punitive detentions and other attacks against critics, including through abductions and enforced disappearances, cruel and degrading treatment, death threats, and threats against and physical abuse of their family members in 2015-2016.

In that sweeping wave of repression, Chechnyas authorities first and foremost targeted local residents. In one case documented in this report, a man died after law enforcement officials forcibly disappeared and tortured him. In another, police officials unlawfully detained, threatened, and ill-treated a woman and her three children in retaliation for her husbands public remarks criticizing the authorities. Police officials beat the mother and the eldest daughter, aged 17, and threatened them with death, in an effort to force them to persuade the father to retract his critical comments. In another five cases documented in this report, law enforcement and security officials, or their apparent proxies, abducted people and subjected them to cruel and degrading treatment; four of those individuals were forcibly disappeared for periods of time ranging from one to twelve days.

The authorities subjected five of the people, whose cases are documented in this report, to public humiliations, in which they were forced to publicly apologize to the Chechen leadership for their supposedly false claims and renounce their actions. In Chechen society public humiliation and loss of face can lead to exclusion from social life for the victim and his or her extended family.

Human Rights Watch is aware of other similar cases of abuse against local critics but did not include them in this report because victims or their family members specifically requested us not to publish their stories or because we could not obtain other evidence such as video material to corroborate their accounts. There is also little doubt that some abuses against local residents in Chechnya may never come to the attention of human rights monitors or journalists because the climate of fear in the region is overwhelming and local residents have been largely intimidated into silence.

The Chechen leadership also intensified its onslaught against the few human rights defenders who still work in the region and provide legal and other assistance to victims of abuses. In the wake of the 2009 murder of Chechnyas leading human rights defender, Natalia Estemirova, only one human rights organization, the Joint Mobile Group of Human Rights Defenders in Chechnya (JMG) had been able to stay on the ground in Chechnya to provide legal assistance to victims or their family members in cases of torture, enforced disappearances, and extra-judicial executions by law enforcement and security agencies under Kadyrovs de facto control. However, towards the end of 2014 the Chechen leadership seemed determined to push JMG out of Chechnya. Between December 2014 and March 2016, local law enforcement officials or their apparent proxies ransacked or burned the JMGs offices in Chechnya on three occasions, thugs who appeared to be acting as Chechen authorities proxies physically attacked JMGs activists numerous times, and the pro-Kadyrov Chechen media engaged in a massive smear campaign against the group. Eventually, JMG had to withdraw its team from Chechnya last year for security reasons.

Chechen authorities have also been making it increasingly difficult for journalists to work in Chechnya. They have fostered a climate of fear in which very few people dare talk to journalists, except to compliment the Chechen leadership. And journalists who persevere with Chechnya work also find themselves at greater risk. This report documents a recent case of a journalist receiving threats, including death threats, another of a journalist who was arbitrarily detained while investigating a story, and a third case of a violent attack against a group of visiting journalists.

In March 2016 a group of masked men attacked a minibus driving a group of Russian and foreign journalists from Ingushetia to Chechnya, dragged the journalists from the bus, beat them, and set the bus on fire. The attack was so shocking that it triggered an immediate, unprecedented reaction from President Vladimir Putins press secretary, who called it absolutely outrageous and said that law enforcement should ensure accountability for the crime. However, the investigation into the attack has not yielded any tangible results.

The situation has continued to deteriorate since the drafting of the report.

In September, following an unfair trial, a court in Chechnya sentenced a 23-year-old local journalist, [Zhalaudi Geriev](#), to three years in prison on fabricated drug possession charges, apparently in retaliation for his work for Caucasian Knot, a Russian media portal covering current developments in the Caucasus and well-known for its reporting on abuses by Chechen authorities. On January 7 this year, Magomed Daudov, the speaker of Chechnyas parliament widely known as the right-hand man of Ramzan Kadyrov, publicly [threatened](#) Gregory Shvedov, editor-in-chief of [Caucasian Knot](#). On his Instagram account, Daudov mockingly described Shvedov as a mongrel dog Shved and threatened to tame his tongue to a standard size and pull his wisdom teeth out. He titled the designated post [How to untie the Caucasian Knot?](#) Notably, last year Daudov posted to his Instagram account a photograph of Kadyrov with a fierce Caucasian sheepdog, and wrote that the dogs [fangs are itching for opposition activists, journalists](#), and human rights defenders. He provided disparaging descriptions of several people the Chechen leadership apparently thought particularly irritating, portraying them as dogs. Approximately two months later, a group of mobsters who appear to be acting as Chechen authorities proxies physically [attacked](#) one of those people, a prominent Russian human rights defender, when he was in Grozny, the Chechen capital, on a work trip.

Chechnyas leadership also continues to exercise collective punishment by targeting family members of alleged insurgents. These unlawful retaliation tactics include punitive house-burnings by local law enforcement and security officials and expulsion of insurgents relatives from Chechnya the lawless measures that Ramzan Kadyrov has personally ordered.

It is the duty of the Russian government to ensure that Chechen authorities fully comply with Russias legislation, including Russias obligations under international human rights law, and put an immediate end to the crackdown on free expression in the pre-election period and beyond. Russian authorities need to provide effective security guarantees to victims and witnesses of abuses and bring perpetrators of abuses to justice.

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should include the crackdown on free expression as well as the use of collective punishment and public humiliation practices in the agenda of its ongoing monitoring and reporting on the North Caucasus, with a view to holding, as soon as possible, a public debate on the situation.

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