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PRESS RELEASE

Russia: Chechen Human Rights Advocate Murdered

ARTICLE 19 is shocked and deeply saddened by the killing on 15 July 2009 of Natalia Estemirova, a Chechen human rights activist and representative of the Memorial Human Rights Centre in the Chechen capital Grozny.

Estemirova was abducted outside her home earlier today; according to the reports of Russian officials, her body was later found near Nazran, the capital of neighbouring Ingushetia, showing signs of a violent death.

Estemirova had worked at the Memorial Human Rights Centre since 2000 on a number of sensitive cases documenting human rights abuses in Chechnya. A well-known and respected defender of human rights, she had been awarded the Anna Politkovskaya Award by RAW [Reach all Women] in WAR, an organisation supporting women in armed conflicts, as well as the European Parliament's Robert Schuman medal in 2005.

This killing is just the latest in a prolonged series of attacks, abductions and murders targeting media workers, journalists and human rights defenders in this troubled region. It also highlights the failure of Russian government to abide by international human rights laws, which stipulate that the state should protect its populace and create an environment which encourages pluralism and political debate. Instead, a climate of intimidation pervades Russia and such killings are all too frequent a way of dealing with opponents of the regime.

"We at ARTICLE 19 express our sincere condolences to Natalia's family, friends and colleagues," says Dr Agnès Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director. "The global human rights community has lost one of its most courageous members. Her loss, however, does not weaken our resolve to stand in solidarity with those people suffering human rights abuses in Chechnya and to continue acting with principle and determination to expose abuses and bring perpetrators to justice."

ARTICLE 19 calls upon the Government of the Russian Federation to:

- Immediately open a full and impartial investigation into the murder of Natalia Estemirova, and to ensure that both the perpetrators and instigators of this murder are found and prosecuted; and
- Take all measures necessary to protect members of its population against acts of violence, threats and intimidation, and to insure that those reporting on human rights violations in Russia, and especially in the North Caucasus, are not targeted for attack.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information please contact Anoush Begoyan, Programme Officer for Europe at anoushb@article19.org or tel +44 20 7324 2500.
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.