

## **Memorial, International Human Rights Groups Return to Chechnya**

Five months ago the human rights community in Russia and beyond lost a friend and colleague, Natalya Estemirova, Memorial's lead researcher in the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation. After her murder on July 15, 2009, Memorial suspended its work in the republic. Since that time, the authorities in Chechnya have continued to intimidate and persecute human rights defenders and those who seek justice for abuses; several were forced to leave Russia due to threats to their lives.

As a result, victims of human rights violations in Chechnya have nowhere to turn. There continue to be reports of human rights abuses such as enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment, and extrajudicial executions. Houses of families of alleged fighters are being burnt down. The perpetrators of such crimes continue to enjoy impunity.

The vacuum of human rights monitoring and reporting in this situation is significant and painful. In November, a letter sent by more than 80 Russian human rights organizations urged Memorial to return to Chechnya and pledged to support Memorial in whatever way they could. Several of these organizations have joined together to form a Monitoring Mission in Chechnya and recently began to work in the Chechen Republic.

Today, 16 December 2009, Memorial, represented by Oleg Orlov and Sergei Kovalev, as well as Ludmila Alekseeva of the Moscow Helsinki Group, received the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of thought, awarded by the European Parliament. We can only be saddened that our friend and colleague Natalia Estemirova is no longer alive to receive this honor.

In his Nobel Prize speech, Andrei Sakharov said "we must today fight for every individual person separately against injustice and the violation of human rights. Much of our future depends on this."

We, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, FIDH, Memorial, Civil Rights Defenders and Moscow Helsinki group will work jointly with Russian and other international human rights organizations to monitor the situation in Chechnya. We consider monitoring and reporting on human rights violations in the Chechen Republic as our common responsibility. We will continue our work to end human rights violations in the republic and ensure that perpetrators are held accountable. People in Chechnya must not be left without access to justice and redress.

*December 16, 2009*