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Russia: Raids on Rights Defenders in Dagestan

Stop Assault, Intimidation of Activists

(Moscow) – Police in southern Russia (<https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/russia>) on February 13, 2020 raided the homes and office of activists who provide legal and psychological assistance to survivors of domestic violence, Human Rights Watch said today. The raids took place in Makhachkala and Khasavyurt, two cities in Dagestan, a republic in Russia’s Northern Caucasus region.

The activists targeted are partners of Stichting Justice Initiative (SJI), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) representing victims of grave human rights abuses in the North Caucasus and survivors of domestic violence in Russia. Police seized computers and electronics containing documentation pertaining to their work.

“These outrageous police raids show the poisonous climate for NGOs in Russia, and particularly in the North Caucasus,” said Hugh Williamson (<https://www.hrw.org/about/people/hugh-williamson>), Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “These are overt attempts to suppress independent civic activity, instill fear, and keep activists in a perpetual state of uncertainty.”

The court order sanctioning the search and seizure, which Human Rights Watch reviewed, contains no information about any specific alleged offense that would have justified the action. Instead, it quotes generic provisions of the Law on Law Enforcement Operations and the need to check allegations of involvement with organizing mass riots and financing of extremist activities, although without reference to any factual grounds necessitating the searches.

SJI told Human Rights Watch that during the search, police informally told their partners’ staff that law enforcement was inspecting all organizations “working in the field of violence.” SJI heard unconfirmed reports of similar searches of other independent groups in Dagestan and Ingushetia that work on humanitarian issues, including those working with orphans. These groups, SJI said, are refraining from speaking publicly about the searches for fear of repercussions.

Raids on organizations working on domestic and other violence against women can have a significantly chilling effect, preventing victims from seeking help or accessing potentially life-saving services. Violence against women, including domestic violence, is already an underreported crime (<https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2014/unreported-violence-against-women-masks-true-extent-problem>).

The searches on February 13 were the second time in six months that police have targeted SJI and its partners. In August 2019, police and security services raided (<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/russia>) and searched the group's Moscow and Nazran (Ingushetia) offices. In Moscow, the authorities did not show a search warrant and claimed that the raid was in conjunction with the search in the adjacent offices of an audit company.

However, police who stormed the Nazran office of Pravovaia Initsiativa Foundation, one of SJI's two operational partners, said they were investigating alleged foreign funding of unsanctioned protests. At the time, SJI was working on a submission to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) of a group of cases pertaining to protests in Ingushetia (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/16/russias-north-caucasus-unprecedented-peaceful-protest>). They said that they could not rule out the possibility that the raid sought, unsuccessfully, to impede the group's work.

In December 2019, the Ministry of Justice listed (<https://minjust.ru/ru/novosti/nekommercheskaya-organizaciya-fond-pravovaya-iniciativa-vklyuchena-v-reestr-nekommercheskih>) Pravovaia Initsiativa Foundation Ingushetia as a foreign agent under the 2012 “Foreign Agent” law (<https://www.hrw.org/russia-government-against-rights-groups-battle-chronicle>), which aims to tarnish independent groups that engage in advocacy and receive foreign funding.

In July, SJI was the successful litigator (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/29/chilling-inaction-domestic-violence-russia-endangering-womens-lives>) in the European Court's first ruling on a domestic violence case in Russia (<http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-194321>). The court concluded that domestic violence and the official inaction the applicant faced was not an isolated incident, but rather the result of a systemic, ongoing failure on the part of the Russian authorities to properly address domestic violence.

SJI has been an irritant for the Russian authorities for years through its successful European Court litigation, Human Rights Watch said. Since 2001, the organization has submitted more than 450 cases to the ECtHR, United Nations Human Rights Committees, and the International Criminal Court, representing about 1,800 applicants. It has won over 250 cases at the ECtHR pertaining to enforced disappearances in Chechnya and other abuses. Russian authorities have had to pay over 25 million euros in compensation to the victims.

Russian authorities for years have sought to hinder SJI's work, Human Rights Watch said. The Justice Ministry denied the group's application for re-registration in 2006 (<https://www.srji.org/en/news/2006/11/23/>) and 2007, including shortly after it won its first case concerning torture in Chechnya (<https://www.srji.org/news/2007/01/26/>). The organization was finally registered on its third attempt in February 2007. Thereafter, in 2011, the Justice Ministry excluded SJI from the list of accredited foreign organizations, effectively banning their human rights work in Russia.

The organization spent over a year in litigation with the government, and after repeated failed attempts to receive the accreditation, established two Russian nongovernmental groups to act as its operational partners. SJI's leadership considered (<https://www.svoboda.org/a/24513006.html>) their registration problems a sign of the authorities' annoyance at the group's successful work.

SJI and its partners told Human Rights Watch they firmly intend to continue their work.

“Activists and independent groups in Dagestan and elsewhere in the North Caucasus are helping the most vulnerable and unprotected members of the community, yet they constantly face great risks to their safety,” Williamson said. “Instead of wasting time hindering activists' work, the authorities should foster a safe atmosphere so that the most vulnerable get the assistance they need.”

ecoi.net summary:

Dagestan: Police raided offices and homes of activists working for an NGO that represents victims of domestic violence and human rights abuses



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