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VOA Russian Service's reporter Fatima Tlisova's testimony on disappearances in the North Caucasus

Thank you Chairman Smith, and the members of the Helsinki Commission for the honor to speak here today. I appear before you today in my professional capacity as a reporter for VOA's Russian service and not as a private citizen. I will testify honestly and from the best of my knowledge.

At the VOA Russian service we run a special section called "Caucasus Today". In this series of reports we are aiming to present interviews and opinions of experts who are focused on the situation in this region, as well as giving voice to the people from the North Caucasus, among whom are journalists, lawyers, and human rights activists, members of the government forces and victims of the human rights abuses.

As a journalist responsible for the Caucasus section at VOA Russian I personally am in direct contact with representatives of society in the North Caucasus on a daily basis. To give you an impression of the extent of those connections I can tell you that the night before yesterday a Skype call woke me up at 3 in morning. It was a human rights activist from tiny republic of Ingushetia begging me to spread information on the latest disappearance – 23 year old Rustam Aushev was kidnapped. His relatives were able to collect a video-recording from security cameras that show how Rustam was taken by men in civilian clothes. Relatives also have eyewitness testimony from the local highway patrol officers who said that upon the request to remove a vehicle from a restricted area the person in the van presented them the ID of an FSB officer. This was the same car that, as recorded on the video, drove away with Rustam Aushev. The human rights activist who called me that night said – Rustam might still be alive. With days passing the chances that his family will ever see him again are vanishing. Usually after two weeks people start collecting money to bribe officials to buy back the body of their loved ones. This is a story of not just one particular person, this is a story of hundreds of families and thousands of young men and women.

I am not referring to the statistics in my testimony; the numbers are available in the regular reports of the major Human Rights organizations. As impossible as they sound, according to the information from the local NGO's they do not represent the real data, which is much larger. My testimony is based on an observation of the latest reports performed by the VOA's Russian service. I will address main issues by quoting certain stories.

The role of law

The special amendment to Russia's criminal code introduced by Vladimir Putin, puts the FSB – former KGB in a special position, which gives them unlimited authority in initiating and performing KTO – Counter-Terrorism Operations.

In his video interview to VOA the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism Martin Sheinin underlined the main problem with Russia's definition of terrorism: "it is often used against political opponents, giving the authorities to expand the usage of the antiterrorism law against persons and groups who do not employ terrorist methods; based on the

current law the Russian security services are able to create “black lists”, which do not imply any legal mechanisms for the people who are on those lists to defend their lives and their reputations”.

The role of the security services

In a Skype interview to VOA Nazir Evloyev, the former officer of the Police in the North Caucasus confirmed that “the Federal Security services are directly involved in forced disappearances. Kidnapped persons are being subjects of brutal torture and posthumously labeled as members of terrorist/extremist groups. The bodies are disposed and thousands of families have never granted a luxury to properly bury their loved ones”.

The role of the Judiciary system

Anzor Sasikov was kidnapped in Nalchik; for two weeks his family did not know anything of his whereabouts. Then his name appeared among detainees accused in an attempt to overthrow the Russian government. In his letter from prison Anzor wrote: “For a very long time I was beaten brutally in a perverted manner. After I signed empty sheets of paper they brought me to the judge naked and covered in blood. I do not remember the face of the judge, who gave them a warrant for my arrest, without even asking a single question about my condition”.

In her interview to VOA an independent lawyer from Kabardino-Balkaria Larisa Dorogova said, that kidnapping is followed by detention, in which the victim is tortured to the point when he signs blank papers. After that he can be accused in any crime. Her colleagues from Dagestan and Chechnya Sapiat Magomedova and Magomed Abubakarov when interviewed by VOA, said that detained persons are denied the right to an independent lawyer. They have to accept the lawyers appointed by the state. The three of them independently made a statement that “the Judiciary system in the North Caucasus is fully under the control of the security services; decisions are politically motivated, predetermined by the orders from the FSB and do not represent justice”.

A former member of the Russian presidential commission on human rights and a well-known journalist, Maxim Shevchenko, when interviewed by VOA underlined that the “Kremlin's brutal policy towards the North Caucasus is the very source of radicalisation and alienation of the Caucasus”. He said that people are forced to live with the knowledge that for this state their lives value zero. Violence committed by the government forces produces hatred and vengeance. Without a fundamental change of policy, this region is doomed to become a threat not only to Russia but to Europe in whole”.

There are many other aspects to this problem. To the best of my ability I gave you a few major issues that support the system where forced disappearances are not only possible but represent a very basic and a common tool for mass violations of human rights in the North Caucasus.

Thank you for your attention.