

## A LIGHT GOES OUT IN CHECHNYA

During the 1990's, there was a steady flow of news coming out of Chechnya, that tiny region of southwest Russia that for years has been struggling for independence. Since then, news from this war-torn corner of the world has been scant, suggesting that the violence there has been quelled and that Chechnya is now a stable region. According to Natalia Estemirova, a prominent Chechen human rights activist, there is a deliberate effort to build a façade of calm for the outside world. In her own words: “[The government] controls the media and prevents the voice of the people, the truth, from being heard.... Without knowing who to trust, Chechens rarely speak about the conflict”<sup>1</sup>.

Under the callous regime of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who has led the country for the past two years, anti-government protests have been stifled through executions, kidnapping, and torture. In the past twelve months alone, six Russian activists and journalists with ties to Chechnya have been brutally murdered. Natalia Estemirova, who worked for the human rights organization Memorial, and Tanya Lokshina, a Moscow-based Chechen activist, were friends who were among the last remaining thorns in the side of the Russian regime. They were together in Chechnya working on unsolved abduction cases on Tuesday the 14<sup>th</sup> of July of this year. The next day, Natalia Estemirova was abducted in broad daylight from her home in Grozny. She was found dead with two bullet wounds to the head, her body left on the side of a road in a nearby town. A 40-year old single mother, she is survived by a teenage daughter.

During the Chechen conflict, Natalia Estemirova worked tirelessly to bring real news of the conflict to the outside world. Since that time, she carefully researched and documented cases of human rights abuses with the hope that one day, those records would help to bring the perpetrators to justice. According to the *Telegraph* (UK)<sup>2</sup>, “Along with a small but dedicated team, it was [Estemirova’s] work more than anyone’s that held the Kremlin-backed regime to some account.” Friends and colleagues remember her “not as a rabble-rouser,” but as someone who tried to work within the framework of existing law. Nevertheless, according to Anna Neistat of Human Rights Watch<sup>3</sup>, “Powerful women can sometimes shame even the most shameless official into doing something, and Natalia was definitely an example.”

Perhaps Estemirova’s most important contribution to the plight of Chechens was her work with the European Court of Human Rights, to which she took specific cases of human rights abuses in Chechnya. As a result of this work, the Court has demanded more than one dozen reparations from Russia. For her steadfast work on behalf of Chechen civilians, Estemirova received the

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<sup>1</sup> Natalia Estemirova, in a speech delivered at a Human Rights Watch award ceremony on November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2007, where she was honored as a leading human rights defender.

<sup>2</sup> Miriam Elder and Adrian Blomfield, 7/19/2009, *Telegraph.co.uk*.

<sup>3</sup> 2007 Natalia Estemirova Tribute Video, Human Rights Watch, [www.HUMANRIGHTSWATCH.ORG](http://www.HUMANRIGHTSWATCH.ORG).

first ever Anna Politkovskaya Award, as well as awards from several organizations and governments, including, Human Rights Watch, the Swedish Parliament, and the European Parliament. In the European Parliament's biography of Estemirova<sup>4</sup>, they call her "an emblematic moral figure in the non-violent Chechen resistance."

At the Urgent Action Fund, we condemn the Chechen human rights abuses that continue with impunity and denounce the slaying of human rights workers with ties to Chechnya. In Natalia Estemirova, we have lost a hero, a courageous woman human rights defender and a friend.

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<sup>4</sup> Biography of Natalia Estemirova posted on the EPP Group (European Parliament) website: [www.eppgroup.eu](http://www.eppgroup.eu).