



human rights *first*

FORMERLY THE LAWYERS COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

President Vladimir Putin
c/o H.E. Ambassador Yuri V. Ushakov
Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United States
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March 1, 2005

Dear President Putin:

On behalf of Human Rights First, an independent non-governmental human rights organization, I am writing to express our grave concern about the recent serious physical attack on Mr. Emanuel Polyakov, an employee of the prominent human rights organization Memorial. Human Rights First urges you to ensure that the Russian government will do all in its power to put an immediate stop to violent attacks on human rights defenders.

On February 18, 2005, Mr. Polyakov answered a knock on the door of the Memorial St. Petersburg Research Center. Three unknown men rushed in and beat Mr. Polyakov unconscious with a heavy object. He was found the next day in critical condition having lost one eye and sustained a broken jaw, among other injuries to his head.

The assailants also destroyed some of Memorial's office equipment, searched the director's office, and turned over its files. It appears likely that the attackers were searching for documents relevant to the human rights work of Memorial, and for information about its members. Memorial employees have been threatened and assaulted in the past, and we are alarmed that the promotion and protection of human rights is becoming an increasingly risky occupation in Russia.

The beating of Mr. Polyakov is but the latest in a series of recent attempts to silence human rights defenders in Russia. On June 20, 2004, Nikolay Girenko, a leading minority rights activist also from St. Petersburg, was murdered by unknown gunmen in his apartment.

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According to the 1998 U.N. Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 12 (2) “the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration.” In cases where physical attacks occur at the hands of unidentified assailants, the Russian government must effectively investigate and prosecute those responsible to prevent future attacks on human rights workers.

Human Rights First strongly urges you to ensure that human rights defenders and the organizations with which they work are not targeted for physical attack, intimidation, threats, and persecution. The government should recognize and facilitate the important work of human rights defenders in all parts of Russia, and in so doing, should promote respect for international human rights standards.

Thank you for your attention to these most serious matters.

Sincerely,



Neil Hicks
Director of International Programs