



## European body denounces Chechnya "climate of fear"

*\* Council of Europe says rights workers still disappearing*

*\* Says perpetrators of kidnappings go unpunished*

*\* Moscow backs report, says more balanced than those in past*

By Gilbert Reilhac

STRASBOURG, France, June 22 (Reuters) - The Council of Europe on Tuesday denounced a "climate of fear" in Chechnya, a decade after the Kremlin regained control of the mainly Muslim region in southern Russia from separatist rebels.

Kidnappings of opponents of Kremlin-appointed leader Ramzan Kadyrov regularly go unpunished, families of suspected fighters are targeted and the media and civil society are intimidated, the pan-European human rights watchdog said in a report.

"The authorities put in place continue to maintain a climate of widespread fear, despite the undeniable success in the field of reconstruction and significant improvement infrastructure," a Council of Europe statement said.

The situation in Chechnya is "the most serious and most delicate from the point of view of protection of human rights and the affirmation of the rule of law throughout the geographical area covered by the Council of Europe", it said.

Despite the criticism of its actions, Russia backed the resolution, saying it was an improvement on earlier reports because it criticised the tactics of the rebels and gave the Kremlin credit for achieving economic and social progress.

"The report was of high enough quality. In any case it is better than past reports from the assembly," said Konstantin Kosachyov, head of Russia's parliamentary delegation at the Council of Europe, speaking on Russian news channel Rossiya-24.

After two wars since the mid-1990s, near-daily attacks by Islamist rebels plague Chechnya and nearby provinces in Russia's North Caucasus, a border region adjacent to the energy transport routes of the South Caucasus and nearby Turkey.

Russian and foreign human rights groups say poverty, exacerbated by high unemployment and endemic corruption, is a major factor fuelling tension and pushing young people to join Islamist insurgents.

But the actions of authorities are in some cases aggravating the situation, the report said.

"The disappearances of government opponents and defenders of human rights remain largely unpunished, " said the report submitted by Swiss Liberal Democrat Dick Marty and passed by a majority in the Council's Parliamentary Assembly.

At least 536 people disappeared in Chechnya between 2006 and 2009 of whom 287 were never found, he said.

Marty, a former prosecutor, said Russia had to assume its responsibility, while recognising its need to fight terrorism.

The 47-nation Council of Europe was the only international body to punish Moscow over the 1999-2000 war in Chechnya, suspending the Russian delegation's right to vote, although it was restored in 2001 to promote dialogue.

The resolution reiterated that Russia had been sanctioned more than 150 times since 2005 by the European Court of Human Rights for the death, disappearances or torture of Chechens often attributed to its armed forces.

The Council called on Russia to continue to prosecute violators of human rights and urged its member states to "provide adequate protection to exiled Chechens".

Kadyrov, largely credited by the Kremlin for rebuilding the republic after years of war, has vowed to continue pursuing Islamist fighters until they "are completely destroyed".

The Council said there were strong indications that the Chechen authorities, or people close to them, were directly implicated in the murder of Umar Israilov in Vienna. Chechen exile Israilov was shot dead on the street in January last year after shopping for groceries.

(Additional reporting by [Conor Humphries](#) and [John Irish](#); Writing by [John Irish](#); editing by [Paul Taylor](#))