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**Memorial blames Chechen president for Estemirova's murder**

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**Human rights organisation Memorial says Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov is responsible for the abduction and murder of prominent rights activist Natalia Estemirova on Wednesday.**

Estemirova (50), a close friend of murdered Russian journalist Anna Politovskaya, worked for Memorial in the Chechen capital Grozny. She documented abuses by law enforcement agencies and conducted investigations into abductions, unlawful killings and public executions. As a result of her work she had received warnings and threats from the Chechen authorities.

Oleg Orlov is the chairman of Memorial. He holds the Chechen president, a former rebel turned Kremlin loyalist, responsible for the killing. "Ramzan already threatened Natalia, insulted her, considered her a personal enemy", Orlov said in a statement published on Memorial's website late on Wednesday.

Estemirova was abducted Wednesday morning in Chechnya. Her body, with two gun shot wounds to the head, was found shortly afterwards in a forest in neighbouring republic of Ingushetia.

The murder is the latest in a series of internationally condemned of journalists and human rights activists in Russia. Politovskaya's murder in October 2006 can be considered the first in a series of assassinations of high profile critics of the Chechen leadership and their human rights practices. She was shot dead in an elevator in her apartment block.

Human rights lawyer and journalist Stanislav Markelov (then 34), who campaigned most notably for Chechens, was shot in January this year on a Moscow street along with 25-year-old journalist Anastasia Baburova. To date, no one has been convicted of these three murders.

Estemirova was awarded the first Anna Politovskaya Award in 2007 by the charity Reach All Women in War.

The United States officially condemned the killing of Natalia Estemirova on Wednesday. "We call upon the Russian government to bring to justice those responsible for this outrageous crime and demonstrate that lawlessness and impunity will not be tolerated", White House National Security spokesman Mike Hammer said.

Russian President Dimitri Medvedev has expressed "outrage" at the murder and has ordered an inquiry, but Estemirova's sympathisers are unlikely to be impressed by his statement.

At the funeral of Markelov in January 2009, Estemirova was quoted as saying "The State has entered into combat with us. All sorts of legal proceedings have been instituted against us, but there is never any sign of a serious investigation when one of us is killed. Therefore I have written that the State must now decide to choose sides. I really am convinced that the murder of Stanislav is a declaration of war."

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