Chechen Rights Campaigner Is Killed

MOSCOW — A prominent Russian human rights campaigner who worked to expose government-backed kidnappings in Chechnya is believed to have been murdered after being kidnapped herself there on Wednesday, Russian investigators said.

The investigators said they believed they had located the body of the woman, Natalia Estemirova, an employee with the Russian human rights group Memorial, according to a statement by the prosecutor general’s investigative wing. The body, found in neighboring Ingushetia, had gunshots to the head and chest. Ms. Estemirova’s passport was found at the scene.

An employee with Memorial’s Moscow office, Andrei Mironov, said that several men pushed Ms. Estemirova, 50, into a white car as she left for work in the Chechen capital of Grozny about 8:30 a.m. Wednesday. Witnesses said that she yelled out that she was being kidnapped.
Ms. Estemirova worked for years helping families uncover details about kidnapped relatives. She was the recipient of several international awards, and in 2007 was the first to win the Anna Politkovskaya Award, named for the Russian investigative journalist, who also worked to uncover abuses in Chechnya before she was shot to death in October 2006.

Ms. Estemirova’s work often ran afoul of the Chechen government, led by the Kremlin-backed strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, whom human rights groups have accused of personally torturing kidnap victims.
The Chechen Prosecutor’s Office was informed of Ms. Estemirova’s disappearance but had no other information, a spokeswoman said Wednesday. A Chechen police spokesman was not immediately available for comment.

Despite government claims that stability has returned to Chechnya after two wars and years of internecine fighting, violence above all appears to rule the southern Russian republic.

Shootouts between police and militants from a weakened, but still potent separatist movement are common. So too are kidnappings.
Since January there have been 50 reported kidnappings in Chechnya, more than in all of last year, said Usam Baisayev, a colleague of Ms. Estemirova’s at the Memorial office in neighboring Ingushetia. At least four of the victims have been found dead. Mr. Baisayev said that the number of kidnappings was likely to be much higher, since people often feared to report them.

While separatist fighters were partly to blame for the kidnappings, Mr. Baisayev said, government-backed forces were mostly responsible.
“In Chechnya, Ingushetia and other North Caucasus Republics the vast majority of kidnappings — those that we can prove — are committed by the armed services and law enforcement structures of the Russian Federation.”

A statement on Memorial’s Web site about Ms. Estemirova said, “The government of Chechnya has more than once expressed its unhappiness with her work.”

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