

Beslan Surgeon in Legal Fight

Doctor says his detention and suspension followed criticism of North Ossetian authorities. The hospital in the North Ossetian town of Beslan is a depressing sight, with its worn floors, leaking ceilings and plaster peeling off the walls. An elderly nurse, who did not want to give her name, showed IWPR the spot where President Vladimir Putin himself once fell into a hole.

“It’s not a legend or some made-up story,” the woman said. “The president nearly broke a leg when he came through here. And on the spot, he ordered that money should be allocated to repair the building. But the repairs just go on and on; there’s no end in sight.”

President Putin visited the hospital just after the school siege tragedy in Beslan in September 2004, when more than 330 people, more than half of them children, were killed and hundreds more were wounded.

Six million roubles (around 250,000 US dollars) was subsequently earmarked to restore the hospital where survivors were treated.

Hospital surgeon Savely Torchinov has made the funding issue a personal mission. Now, however, he has been prosecuted and suspended in what he says is a politically motivated campaign against him.

“Our money is being spent on other things,” said Torchinov. “We have professors and even a ‘deputy chief doctor in charge of construction’ on our staff. In the meantime, the ordinary doctors who perform operations every day are left on miserable salaries.”

Torchinov’s daughter Laima was among the hostages inside School No.1 when it was seized by the insurgents. She was among those who managed to escape just as Russian security forces began storming the building. After examining his daughter and seeing that she was only slightly hurt, Torchinov sent her home and went to attend to the more serious injuries.

“Things were completely different from the things they subsequently wrote in the press,” said Torchinov. “We had to operate on people in the corridors, improvising operating theatres as the wounded continued to arrive. The headquarters [set up to handle the crisis] proved totally unprepared. I can’t understand what they were discussing for those three days, or why.”

His colleague Khetag Kibizov agreed, saying, “Of course we had made arrangements to be able to receive the wounded. But later we had to set up more and more operating theatres. The conditions were awful. We operated on people right on the hospital trolleys. And it was ordinary staff and ordinary people who excelled themselves, whereas the plans that our leaders had made failed.”

Kibizov recalled, “One special forces soldier arrived badly wounded, but we couldn’t save him. He died in front of our eyes. We were short of medicines, doctors and operating-rooms. We found ourselves unprepared to cope with so many wounded. And we could have done so much! A young woman died because we had no spare breathing apparatus for her with, as we’d just given the last one to another patient in a critical condition. While we were rushing from one patient to another, she passed away. It’s terrifying to recall that, but we must be objective. We must speak of what really happened then. We shouldn’t mislead people.”

In August this year, Torchinov was sentenced to one year in prison after being convicted of professional negligence for allegedly contributing to the death of a patient, in a case unconnected with the Beslan tragedy.

“The accusation against me is that the patient died 35 days after being admitted to hospital,” Torchinov said.

The surgeon spent six weeks in pre-trial detention. His case went to appeal but rejected. Later the Supreme Court commuted his sentence to a suspended one, allowing him to go free. He was also suspended from his job for 18 months.

The prosecution accused Torchinov of having left a surgical dressing inside the woman’s abdominal cavity after operating on her. However, no forensic evidence to support this claim was presented.

“I don’t believe Savely could have left the dressing behind,” said Dr Kibizov, who is a trauma surgeon. “He’s a very responsible person. Besides, a dressing left behind in a stomach is not enough to cause death. The reality is that this patient was in an extremely grave condition.”

Valery Tsomartov, chairman of the North Ossetian commission for human rights, is supporting the surgeon as he continues to fight his legal battle.

“It’s exasperating when such a complex case is handled in this way,” he said. “The degree of the surgeon’s innocence or culpability should be evaluated by real professionals. As far as I know, the woman did not die, and it wasn’t immediately after she was operated on by Savely Torchinov.”

Torchinov believes his prosecution is politically motivated because he has publicly accused the authorities both of mishandling the healthcare response to Beslan crisis and of failing the hospital subsequently.

He says all the funding promised to the hospital has not translated into repairs and new equipment. Twelve million roubles were allocated for it in 2001 and six million more were pledged after the siege, and another 16 million was promised for a new maternity home.

“I am not plucking these figures out of thin air - they were cited in the newspapers and at meetings,” said Torchinov. “But where is the money? The repairs are still unfinished. The Revival organisation has provided 70 million roubles in support of the maternity home building project, but the construction has stopped half-way through. Where did the money go? These are the questions I was jailed for.”

His colleague Kibizov backs these claims, saying he has seen evidence that equipment was procured second-hand for the hospital and then fraudulently recorded as if it was new.

Two senior managers at the hospital rejected the allegations.

Head doctor Vyacheslav Karginov said that the hospital's budget was transparent and well-audited, and that Torchinov had failed to attend a recent meeting of doctors to discuss the financial position.

"I notify the relevant organisations about every kopek that's spent," said Karginov. "If Torchinov wants me to account personally to him, I'd say that there's a lot I want to ask him, too. He should be more serious.

"And what makes him think he is a political prisoner? His case was heard in court, wasn't it?"

Deputy head doctor Tamara Dzantieva described Torchinov's allegations as "fantasies."

"I can say with confidence that the money allocated for the hospital's needs is being spent as it should be," she said. "All that Savely is saying about a theft of some kind is completely untrue. There's no theft going on. Where's the money going? On the needs of the hospital - on repairs, patients and equipment. And where else could it go when there are constant checks?"

Torchinov is being supported by the non-governmental Beslan's Mothers Committee, which represents relatives of those who suffered in the siege.

"I am not a doctor and cannot judge whether he is responsible for the death of his patient or not," said the committee's co-chair Anneta Gadieva. "But I think it has to do with Savely's years of speaking out about the Beslan hospital and talking about the conditions they're forced to work in and about the long drawn-out repairs. He doesn't conceal anything from anyone. He's been digging too deep, and the criminal charge brought against him will only be the start of it.

"As an ordinary citizen, I can say the hospital was teeming with rats and cockroaches when I visited it a year ago. And they all talk about fabulous sums being allocated for Beslan. Was there any money? Or is it just a myth?"

Anton Zurabov is the pseudonym of a freelance journalist working in the North Caucasus.

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