

Captured Chechen Linked to Executions

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Azerbaijan hands over two suspected Chechen kidnappers to the Russian authorities

Russian investigators are questioning a captured Chechen warlord over the murders of four Western telecommunications workers who were kidnapped and beheaded in the breakaway republic.

Ruslan Akhmadov, who is currently being held in the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, has already been charged with a total of 34 kidnappings and possession of forged documents.

The brother of Chechnya's foreign minister, Akhmadov was arrested in Baku together with fellow countryman Badrudi Murtazaev, who is believed to be a close ally of the rebel leader Shamil Basaev.

Orudzh Zalov, Azerbaijan's deputy minister for internal affairs, said both men were detained for carrying forged passports and were handed over to the Russian authorities on the same day.

The Russian interior ministry stated that the men were seized as part of a joint operation between federal special forces and the Azeri prosecutor's office.

The Kremlin was quick to parade Akhmadov on national television, claiming that, together with his brothers Ramzan, Alti and Rezvan, he was the leader of a gang based in Urus Martan which specialised in "hostage-taking and illegal incarceration for financial gain".

Akhmadov's victims allegedly included three Britons -- Darren Hickey, Peter Kennedy and Rudi Petschi -- and a New Zealander, Stan Shaw, who were installing a mobile telephone system for Surrey firm Granger Telecom.

The four men were abducted from a Grozny suburb in October 1998, then executed two months later after a botched rescue attempt by the Chechen authorities. Their decapitated corpses were found 25 miles from the Chechen capital.

According to Sergei Yastrzhembsky, the Kremlin's spokesman on Chechnya, Akhmadov had approached officials at the British embassy in Moscow and demanded a ransom for three of the hostages.

The investigators say they also have evidence linking Akhmadov to the kidnapping of two Polish biologists, Zofia Fisher-Malanovska and Eva Markvinsku-Wyrwal, both members of the International Ecological Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The women were seized in Dagestan in the summer of 1999.

Murtazaev, 36, is suspected of the murder of a Russian serviceman who was abducted and executed in 1996. The Russian authorities say they have a video-tape which shows Chechen fighters - including Murtazaev and other members of Basaev's entourage -- torturing and killing the soldier.

The arrest of Murtazaev and Akhmadov shows that Azerbaijan - once considered a safe haven for Chechen fighters - is making increasing efforts to ingratiate itself with the Moscow government. At the end of last

year, Baku handed over seven Chechens suspected of planning the September 1999 terrorist bombings in Buinaksk.

Most observers agree that this gesture effectively saved Azerbaijan from the visa regime slapped on neighbouring Georgia last December. Georgia had defied the Kremlin over claims that Chechen fighters were taking refuge in the Pankisi Gorge.

However, President Heidar Aliev has run into heavy criticism from the Azeri general public, which traditionally sympathises with the Chechen cause.

Last week, the Azeri president justified his actions on Russia's NTV, "Over the last five years, Russia has extradited around 300 criminals to Azerbaijan and we are grateful to the Russian authorities for this. We are doing what we can to fulfil our obligations under a mutual cooperation treaty between our two countries."

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