

Chechen Leaders' Relatives Seized

Author: [Umalt Dudayev](#)

How, during the Beslan siege, 40 family members of Chechen rebel leaders were arrested and forced to denounce their relatives

At dawn on the morning of September 4, residents of the Ingush village of Troitskaya near the border with Chechnya were woken by the roar of heavy vehicles. Two army trucks carrying masked soldiers stopped just inside the village, followed by two armoured personnel carriers.

The soldiers surrounded a house where the Masuyev family were living as refugees from Chechnya, and sealed off the street. All six members of the family – 73-year-old Turko Masuyev, his wife Zaman, their son Badruddin and three daughters Kulsum, Khava and Petimat were forced out on to the street, pushed into one of the lorries and taken away.

“No one explained anything to us,” Badruddin Masuyev told IWPR later. “We didn’t know why we’d been detained.”

Things became clearer when they arrived at Khankala, the Russian military base outside the Chechen capital Grozny. “Then I understood what it was about. Our mother Zaman is the sister of Doku Umarov and the soldiers decided to use this fact for their own ends,” said Masuyev.

Doku Umarov is a Chechen rebel commander who runs operations in western Chechnya, and appointed security minister by Chechen pro-independence leader Aslan Maskhadov. Initially, Umarov was named by Russian officials as one of the leaders of the Beslan terrorist group, but his name has not figured since the end of the siege.

When the Masuyev family arrived at the Russian base they met relatives of Maskhadov and his wife Kusama, as well as of notorious Chechen warrior leader Shamil Basayev. Among them were Maskhadov’s sister Zhovzan, his father-in-law Khavazhi Semiev along with his entire family including young grandchildren, and his cousins Ramzan and Ruslan Maskhadov. Basayev’s family was represented by his father-in-law Umar-Ali Gudayev and his uncle by marriage Nasir Sidev. In all there were around 40 detainees.

The arrested group were told to make statements condemning their relatives for the hostage seizure in North Ossetia, said Masuyev. These were then shown on local television on Chechnya.

“We were told that Maskhadov, Basayev or Umarov was in charge of the terrorists who took the schoolchildren hostage in Beslan,” said Masuyev. “To refuse to give a statement would have meant that either we’d die or we’d simply disappear.”

Maskhadov’s sister duly called on her brother “to cease crimes against peaceful civilians” and his cousins told him to “be a man, and end terrorism”.

Zaman Masuyeva said she publicly rejected her brother Doku Umarov and accused him of causing suffering to fellow-Chechens.

The next day, September 5, the Masuyev family was loaded into a military helicopter - again without any explanation - and flown back to Ingushetia. All the other detainees were also released.

“Our neighbours were very surprised when they saw we were alive and unharmed,” said Badruddin Masuyev. “Usually abductions like these finish with the people who’ve been carried off either disappearing, or at best returning beaten and tortured.”

“The military didn’t beat or torture us, but other people such as the relatives of Aslan Maskhadov’s wife got it very badly. They were beaten up when they were arrested and on the way to Khankala.”

A Chechen human rights activist who works for the organisation Memorial strongly condemned the mass seizure as an “act of terrorism” carried out in parallel with the Beslan siege.

“Hostage-taking is a crime,” said the activist, who preferred to remain anonymous. “It doesn’t matter who does it and with what goal in mind. The soldiers rounded up relatives of Maskhadov, Basayev and Umarov, all the way from the village of Znamenskoye in the north of the republic to Kurchaloi and Vedeno in the south. And Doku Umarov’s sister and her family were taken in Ingushetia.

“It reminds me of 1937 and the most terrible phase of the Stalinist era. Back then, people were forced under threat of physical elimination to renounce their loved ones and praise the regime. But that was a totalitarian regime and now Russia is supposed to be a democracy.”

General Ilya Shabalkin, the chief spokesman for Russian security forces in Chechnya, responded to these accusations by denying that the seizures amounted to hostage-taking.

He told the Moscow-based newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta, “The information here has been given back to front. We brought them in not to arrest them, but to guarantee their safety, because the fighters were planning a terrorist act against those of their relatives who are now helping the federal authorities.”

Shabalkin said that Maskhadov, Basayev and Umarov were planning to kill their own relatives and then pin the blame on the Russian and pro-Moscow authorities.

His explanation has been greeted with some incredulity in Chechnya.

“It’s complete nonsense to say that Maskhadov, Basayev, Umarov and any of the other Chechens were planning to kill their own relatives,” exclaimed Umarbek Isayev, a 57-year-old Grozny resident. “And even more so to say that the Russian military hid women and children from retaliation at a military base.

“So why did they let them go, then? Did Maskhadov decide not to kill his loved ones after all, and Basayev the same? That kind of rubbish can only come from people who know absolutely nothing about Chechens and understand nothing of their mindset, traditions or customs.”

Zalina Khajieva, a law student in Grozny, expressed indignation. “Of course the seizure of the children by the terrorists in Beslan was a despicable crime and there is no justification for it. But it’s no less despicable for the security forces to take women and children hostage for their own ends.

“Terrorists are terrorists, we all understand that. They are bandits, beasts, criminals and enemies of humanity. But what can you say when soldiers and security personnel do practically the same thing in the name of the authorities and the state?”

Umalit Dudayev is a pseudonym used by a Chechen journalist and IWPR contributor

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