

## **Chechnya Servicemen Demand Backpay**

Former soldiers complain the Russian state is cheating of wages they're owed from their time in Chechnya

The mysterious murder of the aide to a North Ossetian military judge has focussed attention on the potentially explosive issue of a backlog of pay for ex-servicemen in the North Caucasus, stretching back ten years.

Valery Tishchenko, aide to the chairman of the Vladikavkaz garrison's military court, was attacked in his apartment by unknown assailants on October 6. He died in hospital the next day.

Public prosecutor Aslan Cherkeshov, who is dealing with the case, informed IWPR that his office was studying four motives for the killing, but said he could not be more specific as this would prejudice the investigation.

However, in a front-page article, the local government newspaper *Severnaya Ossetia* alleged that Tishchenko had been at the forefront of a sustained campaign by ex-servicemen to extract overdue "battle pay" from the federal authorities and that investigators considered this to be the most likely reason for his murder.

"In recent years, the military court has been one of the legal organs defending the interests of servicemen, who were working in battle zones," the newspaper wrote, suggesting that officials had been embezzling the unpaid salaries. "The small sums of money allocated to them for service in emergency zones have been ending up in many financial structures, for various reasons, some of them artificially created."

Tishchenko's boss, court chairman Alexander Sukhorukov, told IWPR, "There's nothing to link Tishchenko's murder with his work, and there were no complaints against him." Sukhorukov said his murdered aide did not have decision-making powers.

Vast sums of money owed to Chechnya veterans based in North Ossetia and Ossetian policemen who have served in the disputed Prigorodny region since 1992. In some cases, the latter are due as much as 20,000 US dollars - their maximum monthly wages are never more than 150 US dollars.

Several thousand servicemen have applied for their money through the courts. But information given out by the Federal Exchequer Directorate for North Ossetia show that on October 1, only 16 out of 3849 army plaintiffs had received their money, while just nine out of 3137 police complainants had won compensation.

Sources in the interior ministry, who wish to remain anonymous, say that all nine of the successful police petitioners were senior offices with top-level connections and included a colonel, who had been head of the ministry's own financial-economic directorate.

Meanwhile, ex-servicemen who risked their lives in Chechnya, now say they are facing financial ruin.

Viktor, who served in the interior ministry for 28 years, had not been paid for service in the second Chechen campaign. "Just recently an interior forces soldier met President Putin as part of a delegation of 50 people from all over Russia," he said. "He said openly that payments would be suspended, since he

does not possess the seven billion roubles (225 million dollars) needed to cancel public debts. And after this will they give us orders to guard the borders and to guarantee the public security of citizens? Only who will be carrying them out when they behave so badly?"

Alla, a military doctor who served for a year in Chechnya said, was refused "battle pay", despite a court ruling that he was entitled to it. " I applied to the head of finance in Chechnya, but he said there was no money. So where is this money going if they're not going into the pockets of the bosses?" he said.

The federal government is now officially refusing to pay the overdue wages of service in North Ossetia's Prigorodny Region. Moscow sent troops into the area in the autumn of 1992 after a flare-up of violence between Ingush and Ossetians and thousands of soldiers have served there in the past ten years.

On August 24, Russian interior minister Boris Gryzlov signed a decree, which overruled the orders issued by the local interior minister in North Ossetia, Kazbek Dzantiev, allowing his policemen to go to court to claim their back pay.

North Ossetian police who served in the Prigorodny Region complain that their colleagues from the rest of Russia who worked there have been paid the extra money, while they have not.

The issue is straining relations between the interior ministry in Vladikavkaz and Moscow.

"On the information I have, the interior ministry of Russia has not allocated a single kopeck to the employees of the interior ministry of the Republic of North Ossetia," said Nikolai Koliev, a senior financial official in the ministry.

Nikolai Samsonov, a judge with the Vladikavkaz military garrison, said that the prospects of anyone receiving compensation looked very slim.

Samsonov said that middle-ranking commanders and the heads of financial departments were creating problems for the courts, by not turning up at the cases adjudicating on the unpaid wages.

Anzhela Suanova is a reporter with the North Ossetian weekly, Narody Kavkaza.

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