

Dagestan Terror Suspects 'Tortured'

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Defence lawyers say three suspects were coerced into confessing to bomb attack that left 44 dead.

As the second anniversary approaches of a bomb attack that killed dozens in the Dagestani town of Kaspiisk, relatives of three men held on suspicion of carrying out the blast say they have been scapegoated and tortured to ensure a political win for the authorities.

The explosion occurred in 2002 during the traditional May 9 victory parade, commemorating the Soviet Union's triumph over Hitler. (See CRS 129 May 17 2002) Forty-four people died, chiefly soldiers serving in the Caspian Sea flotilla and pupils from two schools in the small seaside town. A further 138 people were injured.

Dagestan has experienced many acts of violence in recent years, but everyone was shocked by the savagery of this one. On June 16, 2002, Vladimir Kolesnikov, deputy prosecutor general of Russia, declared on television that the authorities had identified who was responsible and it remained only to detain them.

"It has been determined that the terrorist act in Kaspiisk was carried out by a group of 10 men, sent from Chechnya under the command of Rabbani [also known as Rappani Khalilov]," said Kolesnikov. He then leafed through a photograph album, displaying pictures of the men he said were behind the attack.

In October 2002, Kolesnikov said that court proceedings would start within a month. Several top Russian officials, including the prosecutor general and the head of the intelligence service, the FSB, announced that the culprits had been found.

However, it was not until April 26 this year that the trial of two men accused of carrying out the bombing opened only. Proceedings against a third have been postponed while he undergoes psychiatric treatment.

The relatives of the three men accused of the crime - Abdulkhalim Abdulkarimov, Murad Abdurazakov and Khanali Umarmhanov - are mounting a stout defence both inside and outside the courtroom.

Usman Abdulkarimov, father of one of the three, is defending his son in court. "I am ready to bring to court numerous witnesses who will give my son a complete alibi for the act of terror on May 9, 2002," he said. "We don't deny that Abdulkhalim had fake documents and weapons, but the case for his involvement in the Kaspiisk events has been fabricated."

Abdulkarimov said the Dagestani authorities were over-keen to show the public they had solved the case, and simply concocted cases against the three.

It has been impossible for journalists to discover how the men were detained and on what legal basis, because all the leading security officials and lawyers involved in the case have refused to speak not just to reporters but even to newspaper editors.

It appears that most of the evidence used in court will consist of statements given in detention. Information from relatives and defence lawyers suggest that these were obtained under torture.

The detainees do not deny their involvement in other crimes, but continue to reject involvement in the Kaspiisk bombing.

The mother of Khanali Umarmkhanov, who was arrested last November, told IWPR that her son – accused of being a key plotter in the blast – has been so abused in detention that he is now physically incapable of giving testimony. “He doesn’t speak any more, practically doesn’t walk and doesn’t think,” said Patimat Umarmkhanova.

Umarmkhanova said that her son had told his lawyer that after he was brought back to Dagestan from Moscow, he was held for a time at interior ministry offices. He reported that while handcuffed with his legs chained to central heating radiators, he was kicked and beaten, hit on the head with a plastic bottle full of water, stifled with a gas-mask sprayed with vinegar, verbally abused and threatened with rape.

He was also held at the FSB building, where he says he was handcuffed to a radiator and his feet tied to a stool, and given electric shocks which made him lose consciousness and start to lose his mind.

The mother said she herself was witness to her son’s sufferings when she saw him behind the gates of a police station where he was being held in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala.

“He was being dragged into the courtyard with a sack on his head, where he began to scream ‘Mama, help me! Help me, people!’ When I heard his screams I rushed through the gates into the courtyard, shouting ‘Don’t beat my boy, I beg you!’”

But, said Umarmkhanova, her son was dragged away and she herself was attacked and beaten unconscious by two policemen, and taken to hospital with heavy concussion.

She then wrote a formal complaint about her own treatment, which was rejected by the authorities. Furthermore, “the employees in the prosecutor’s office accused me of illegal acquisition and possession of firearms, and I was arrested and put in pre-trial detention, and only on the twelfth day was I freed without any apology”.

As for her son, she said, “He told his defenders that he was unable to withstand any more savage torture by the law enforcement agencies and that he was ready to confess not only to the explosion in Kaspiisk but to the September 11 attacks in America.”

When Patimat Umarmkhanova finally got to see her son last September, she said, he had lost a lot of weight, he could barely walk and was covered in cuts and scars.

Worst of all, he was so severely traumatised that he did not recognise her. “Any movement by me seized him with fright and he covered his head with his hands as though defending himself from blows,” she recalled.

Repeated attempts by IWPR to obtain an official response to these allegations of mistreatment have been unsuccessful. Seifutdin Kaziakhmedov, head of the investigative group in the local prosecutor’s office, said that any public comment would prejudice his enquiry. The press office of the prosecutor’s office refused to meet IWPR reporters.

Umarkhanov is currently receiving psychiatric treatment after having been declared mentally unstable.

Of the two men who appeared in court on April 26, Abdulkhalim Abdulkarimov is alleged to have filmed the explosion on camera to report back to Rappani Khalilov, who is said to have masterminded the attack. The other, Murad Abdurazakov – known as “Abkhazsky” because he fought with the Abkhaz against the Georgians in the war of 1992-93 - is accused of having laid the explosives in Kaspiisk.

Both deny the charges. Abdurazakov said that he confessed to the crime under physical duress, and after the security forces had abducted his younger brother and said his life was “in his hands.” He said he signed his name “because I had to survive and wait for the trial”.

“I am not saying I am a fully law-abiding citizen of the Russian Federation,” Abdurazakov said in an appeal to the chief prosecutor of Dagestan. “I fought for my beliefs both in Abkhazia and in the first Chechen war with the fighters, but I freely laid down my weapons. What they are trying to accuse me of is filth and a brutal and unjustifiable act.”

The lawyers have achieved one success so far by ensuring that the trial is by jury rather than by a panel of judges alone. It is expected to last for another few weeks at least.

Sergei Kvasov, Abdurazakov’s lawyer, said that, “they don’t have a single lead that proves the guilt of my client.” And he warned against the prosecution taking the moral high ground in such an emotive case.

“I arrived on the scene of the explosion 20 minutes after it happened and saw it all with my own eyes,” Kvasov said. “People ought to know the truth and that’s why I advised my client to trust in the jury, the people.”

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