

Dagestani Leaders Stand Trial

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Witnesses refuse to play ball as Dagestan's High Court hears the case of two Lak brothers standing trial for causing a revolt

Machine-gun nests and rooftop snipers surround the High Court in Makhachkala. The immediate area is cordoned off by police checkpoints; nearby buildings are searched daily.

These spectacular security measures provide the backdrop for the so-called "Trial of the Century" - the sensational case of two brothers accused of bringing Dagestan to the brink of civil war.

Magomed and Nadirshakh Khachilaev, both leaders of the minority Lak community, face charges of organising mass riots in 1998 when their supporters seized the republic's government building and demanded the resignation of the ruling cabal.

The High Court has already heard how the rioters looted buildings on the city's central square, stealing anything "from stockings and shoes to hard currency and weapons". Dozens of people were injured, including leading members of the Dagestani political elite.

The Khachilaev brothers have been wallowing in the blaze of publicity which surrounds the event. Despite the heat, Magomed arrives at the courthouse in a designer suit, waving cheerfully to his supporters in the foyer. His brother, Nadirshakh, who is in police custody, greets relatives and friends from behind iron bars.

As the trial opened in an atmosphere of high security and mounting anticipation, Magomed Khachilaev pleaded not guilty to all charges, while Nadirshakh claimed he was the victim of a political conspiracy. "I'll tell you why later," he promised mysteriously.

Judge Buta Uvaisov told the court that the crisis had begun in May 1998 when both brothers travelled by car to the Chechen border to negotiate the release of hostages seized by Chechen fighters. On the return journey, the car was stopped by Dagestani police who discovered a small arsenal of weapons concealed in the boot.

When the border-guards attempted to arrest the brothers and their bodyguards, a firefright broke out and one police officer was shot dead. Uvaisov said the remaining four were subsequently taken hostage and driven to Nadirshakh Khachilaev's Makhachkala home.

Hours later, the house was surrounded by armed police and an angry crowd of Laks who accused the authorities of deliberately provoking their leaders. A protest meeting was promptly called on the central square and it was then that widespread violence spilled across the city centre.

Lak demonstrators burst into the State Assembly buildings, Uvaisov told the court, smashing government property and breaking open safes with dumb-bells. They stole 1,388,000 roubles in cash as well as \$85,000 and DM5,000. The judge also read out an extensive list of other items which had gone missing during the debacle.

At this point in the proceedings, hecklers from the public gallery demanded to know why there was so

much money on the premises in the first place. "It's the deputies who should be on trial," shouted one. "Is this a State Assembly or a shop?"

Uvaisov said that several prominent deputies had been injured by protestors who had threatened to stage a coup d'etat. At this point, the then interior minister, Sergei Stepashin, arrived from Moscow and arranged a meeting with the Khachilaev brothers. Stepashin persuaded them - with guarantees of immunity - to intervene and call an end to the violence.

However, as soon as the protestors had left the streets and the hostages had been freed, both Lak leaders were arrested by Dagestani police. Uvaisov concluded by saying that the bodyguards who were thought to be responsible for the death of the policeman had evaded capture, although two had later died in mysterious circumstances.

In the event, the first witnesses called by the prosecution did little to strengthen the case against the Khachilaev brothers. All four policemen taken hostage on May 20, 1998, told the court how they were surrounded and disarmed by the bodyguards but their lives were saved by the intervention of Magomed Khachilaev.

The police officer in charge, a captain, said that they were held in a garage under Nadirshakh's house. After a short while, he recalled, Magomed came in person to apologise for their predicament and for the murder of the policeman - which he described as a consequence of deliberate provocation.

Magomed promised to return their weapons and release them as soon as the situation calmed down. The hostages were given food and tea, then freed at 11am on the following day.

The four police officers infuriated prosecutors by refusing to complain of harsh treatment at the hands of the Khachilaev brothers. An exasperated Uvaisov asked, "Didn't you even ask why you were being held? Why didn't they let you go earlier?" The policemen were unable to answer these questions.

The judge then lashed out at the police captain, "What are you up to? You're a person who understands responsibility. If we can't expect you to behave properly, what can we expect from ordinary citizens?"

This is a question that will be answered over the next month, with an impressive list of witnesses scheduled to take the stand. Star witnesses include Madomedali Magomedov, chairman of the State Assembly, and Khizri Shikhsaidov, chairman of the Dagestan government.

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