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RUSSIA: Detained and tortured for faith, Kabardino-Balkaria Muslims claim

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Some young Muslims facing trial for a militant attack on the state security services in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria three years ago were in fact arrested due to their active faith, Forum 18 News Service has been told. As frequent mosque-goers, they and relatives say they were already listed as Islamic extremists by police, who used torture to extract confessions. These claims are "lies" and "rubbish", Forum 18 was told at the detention centre in Nalchik where they are currently held by that institution's assistant head. Unproven suspicions of Islamic militancy resulted in the arrest of one detainee, former Guantanamo Bay inmate Rasul Kudayev, his mother told Forum 18.

Detained for almost three years, some young Muslims accused of instigating a bloody 2005 uprising in the North Caucasus city of Nalchik were arrested due to their active faith and have undergone gruesome torture to extract confessions, Forum 18 News Service has been told.

In the failed 13-14 October 2005 attack, some 200 militants targeted state security departments in Nalchik, capital of the southern Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. Subsequent street battles led to the deaths of 95 attackers and 35 government forces. Fourteen civilians were killed and over 100 wounded in the crossfire.

Further to some 2,000 arrests in the wake of the events, 59 suspects are currently detained in Nalchik, their trial adjourned.

"What right do they have to label people terrorists, Wahhabis?" the mother of detainee Rasul Kudayev implored to Forum 18 in Nalchik on 24 July. Fatima Tekayeva insists many of those detained were arrested solely because they follow Islam. Hundreds of pious young Muslims were entered onto police "Wahhabi lists" before the 2005 uprising, she and other relatives of the accused explained to Forum 18 (see F18News 20 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1173).

"Wahhabism" is a loose term for Islamic extremism commonly used in Russia and Central Asia (see F18News 8 August 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004).

One detainee, Zaur Tokhov, did not take part in the uprising, he claims in a 17 June 2008 statement passed to Forum 18. Held at Kabardino-Balkaria's organised crime police department on 14 October 2005, he was beaten and given electric shocks through the back, hands and feet until on the point of losing consciousness, "but when they attached the wires to my ears, that was real torture." Police then moved to throw him from a balcony – where Tokhov says he saw one detainee lying dead having apparently already been thrown onto the ground below – but instead began shooting close to his head with a pistol. When two officers then began to interrogate him, he at first refused to say what they demanded, but more beat him again and insisted that he say, "kafirs [infidels] should be killed and cops are kafirs." After several days of this treatment, says Tokhov, "they forced me to say everything."

Transferred to Nalchik's Detention Centre 7/1 on 16 October 2005, Tokhov found treatment of detainees by prison staff – including a woman – such that he "began to think they were not people, but satans in uniform." One, for example, struck him with a broken glass ashtray, laughed that pieces of flesh remained on the ashtray and demanded that he ate them.

Tokhov was then taken to a cell where he was told his cellmates would beat him, as "everyone hates you Wahhabis." Instead, however, two who were Muslims washed his wounds and prayed with him; "I prayed sitting down, as I couldn't stand." Surprised that Tokhov continued praying, one of the guards entered the cell the following morning and beat him, saying, "He's still daring to pray." The female prison guard questioned whether Tokhov might also be fasting - it being Ramadan - and forced him to drink water to break the fast. He subsequently had to hide the fact that he was praying by praying lying down, and fasting by pretending to drink.

During further interrogation, Tokhov says he was given prepared answers to questions, beaten when he refused to repeat them and forced to sign statements he had not read. While ill-treatment carries on in different forms, he concludes, it is no longer as severe.

Briefer accounts by detainees Eduard Mironov and Zalim Ulimbashv published by Regnum Information Agency on 23 June 2008

also describe repeated beatings and torture using electric shocks. Rasul Kudayev has similarly been kicked, beaten and given electric shocks until in a semi-conscious state, according to Amnesty International.

Azamat Akhkubekov was also badly beaten and tortured using electric shocks during the initial months of his detention, his wife Alyona told Forum 18 on 24 July. A few weeks ago Akhkubekov's lungs required drainage, as they were two-thirds full of fluid due to being punctured by ribs broken during beatings, she maintained. Insisting that her husband had not participated in the 2005 uprising, Akhkubekova told Forum 18 he turned to Islam while in prison in 2002, and began to pray five times a day there. "Anyone who does that automatically goes on a Wahhabi list."

Declining to be named, the camouflage-uniformed assistant head of Detention Centre 7/1 insisted to Forum 18 that reports of torture were "lies" and "rubbish": "We don't touch them – that's the law." He refused Forum 18's request to see inside the prison complex on 27 July, however. "I have no right to show you anything," he remarked. "This is a closed institution." Asked about conditions for detainees, the assistant prison head described them as "ideal – like this," and pointed to a whitewashed exterior wall.

Those detained in 2005 intended to stage a coup, Mufti Anas Pshikhachev, who heads Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate, maintained to Forum 18 on 25 July. "Some went to mosque, of course (..) but religion doesn't call on people to take up guns and start shooting. You don't resolve problems like that in a civilised society."

A deputy representing the pro-Kremlin United Russia party in the Nalchik suburb of Khasanya was even detained by organised crime police in the wake of the uprising, he told Gazeta national daily newspaper in October 2005. "Masked men flew at me, swearing, as if I were a criminal," Ramazan Tembotov recalled. "Unlike the others, they didn't beat me though – they led me through offices and cellars and showed me what they do with other detainees: torture as in the Gestapo." Tembotov believes a phone call to his contacts in the FSB security service saved him from ill-treatment.

"Thank you, President Bush!" Fatima Tekayeva sighed to Forum 18 with an ironic smile. "America did us such a great favour." After two years' incarceration at Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre, the finger of suspicion inevitably pointed at her son following the 2005 Nalchik uprising, even though the United States found no case against him, she explained.

Kabardino-Balkaria's junior wrestling champion, Rasul Kudayev travelled to Central Asia in 2001 to pursue his sporting career and religious education, according to Tekayeva. Suspected as a Russian spy, he was imprisoned in Afghanistan until the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, when he was handed over to the United States by Northern Alliance forces. In February 2004 the US extradited Kudayev to Russia on assurance that he would not be tortured.

Tekayeva insists that her son was not involved in the Nalchik uprising. On the morning of 13 October 2005 she was due to appear as a witness at a court hearing in central Nalchik, she pointed out to Forum 18. "We discussed this over tea the night before – if Rasul was the leader, as they say, or even a participant, he should have known that something was going to happen and said, 'Mum, why don't you stay at home tomorrow?'" Tekayeva also queries why her son was not detained until 23 October. "The federal forces sent for him also wondered about that. 'Are they idiots,' they asked, 'waiting ten days before apprehending an international terrorist?'"

Kudayev denies any link with the 2005 Nalchik uprising instigators to Russian state TV news reporters in an interview recorded shortly after the events and viewed by Forum 18. Asked what he believes Islam to be, he replies, "Not killing people and living in peace."

Magomed Abubakarov, Kudayev's lawyer and an ethnic Chechen, believes the authorities' methods in Kabardino-Balkaria parallel those in his native region, "except in Chechnya a person would never be persecuted for going to mosque frequently." First, he told Forum 18 on 24 July, "they get a person on whom they don't actually have anything, he's just a suspect." Then, "torture, torture, torture – confession." (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <http://www.samstar.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>.

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