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Mother Haunted by Conscript Son's Missing Organs

By Alexander Bratersky

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Bukharbayeva warning Polezhayev to “be afraid of people’s anger and mothers’ tears” at an Omsk rally in January.

It's been more than seven years since the border guards, a unit of the Federal Security Service, returned Alma Bukharbayeva's teenage son in a sealed casket.

Marat Burtubayev, 18, was serving with his unit in the Khabarovsk region, near the Chinese border, for his required two years of military service. He was eight months into his service when commanders said the young recruit hanged himself in January 2003.

But what they did not explain — and what Bukharbayeva has been trying to learn ever since — is what happened to her son's internal organs.

The FSB returned Burtubayev's body to his family in the Omsk region of West Siberia shortly after his death so he could be buried in accordance with Muslim traditions. But when the

family's imam examined the body, he found that most of the vital organs were missing and that his torso had been crudely resewn.

“The bridge of his nose was broken and there were stitches running up his body,” Bukharbayeva, a nurse by profession, said in a video appeal for justice posted on YouTube last year.

She also said her son's neck showed no evidence of the rope he allegedly used to hang himself. Her suspicion that the border guards were trying to hide something only grew after she received another letter from the commanding officer saying her son “tragically died in the line of service.”

An official examination of the body was not conducted. A military court in the Khabarovsk region later convicted private Ruslan Belonogov, who was just arriving to begin his service, of hazing Burtubayev and sentenced him to two years in prison.

But Bukharbayeva believes that Belonogov was innocent and has since said ultimate responsibility lies with Omsk Governor Leonid Polezhayev and even then-President Vladimir Putin.

On Tuesday, an Omsk city court sided with Polezhayev — regional boss since 1995 — in a civil defamation suit. Bukharbayeva was ordered to retract allegations she made during a rally outside the city's main recruitment office in June.

Joined by a group of mothers, Bukharbayeva had carried a sign reading: "Putin, Polezhayev are killers of our children. Kill us, mothers."

Polezhayev's office was not immediately available to comment on the ruling. But a spokesman for the governor, Roman Onopriyenko, told The Moscow Times on the eve of the decision that the suit was filed "only because incorrect information was widely distributed.”

The civil suit "was made as delicate as possible, since the governor understands the mother's grief,” Onopriyenko said. Polezhayev sued as a private citizen and was seeking only a retraction, he said.

The governor cannot be blamed for the death, as it happened in another region, Onopriyenko said.

But Bukharbayeva said Polezhayev — as chairman of the local draft commission — was responsible for soldiers drafted into the military or security services from the region.

“By suing, he didn't shame me, he just shamed himself,” she told The Moscow Times by telephone from Omsk, following the court's ruling.

Bukharbayeva, who said she planned to appeal, was joined in court by two other women who lost their sons in the same FSB border guard garrison.

Galina Bereluk, mother-in-law of Omsk native Roman Suslov, said she did not believe that her son hanged himself in May.

"He wasn't afraid to serve. He wanted to serve," she said by telephone.

Suslov's body contained the same stitch as Burtubayev's, she said, and the family believes that he was killed so his organs could be harvested.

An investigation into Suslov's death is ongoing, but chief military prosecutor Sergei Fridinsky has told reporters that investigators are not looking into the alleged organ theft.

According to Pamyat, an Omsk-based soldiers' mothers group, seven border guard recruits have died in the Khabarovsk region since 2003.

Valentina Aparina — whose son Alexei was also reported to have committed suicide after a year and a half of service in the same unit — said officials told her to be satisfied with financial compensation and a tomb to honor her son.

“They said to us, 'What else do you need?' But we just want to find the truth,” Aparina said by telephone from Omsk.

Khabarovsk regional prosecutors opened an investigation in 2004 amid allegations that a local hospital — in a district not far from the FSB garrison — had taken organs from patients without their approval.

More than 100 kidneys were taken from patients over several years, Interfax reported at the time, citing prosecutors.

But the case never reached court. A spokesman for the Khabarovsk regional branch of the Investigative Committee said Tuesday that the relevant materials had been archived and he could not immediately comment. The border guard service could not be reached for comment.

Presidential human rights ombudsman Vladimir Lukin made an appeal in the case in May 2006, asking Fridinsky, the military prosecutor, to conduct a probe into the investigation of Burtubayev's death.

Fridinsky's office said Belonogov's conviction for hazing — ultimately leading to the alleged suicide — was justified. The official response, based on photographs of the body, said there was no evidence that organs had been removed from Burtubayev's body.

“The traces on the body, believed to be damage, were post-mortem changes of the soft tissue,” Fridinsky wrote in a letter published by Novaya Gazeta in 2006.

Mother's Right, a group helping parents of soldiers who die noncombat deaths, has seen other cases where murky deaths have been presented as suicides. Violent deaths, including from hazing, are common in the military, which has since cut its mandatory service to one year.

"The key is having an independent medical evaluation, which would justify the parents' allegations," said Veronika Marchenko, the group's head.

Marchenko said her organization does not have any proven evidence that organs have been harvested from soldiers.

But the practice is not unheard of in nearby China. United Nations human rights officials have regularly investigated cases of alleged organ theft there, particularly from practitioners of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement.

Burtubayev's grandmother, Mariam Kunanbayeva, told The Moscow Times that she also did not believe that her grandson would have hanged himself.

A week before the death, Burtubayev was preparing to celebrate the New Year, she said. “He wrote a letter to me to send him some money to buy sweets for the holiday. I sent him 100 rubles," or about $3, she said.

Finding justice may be an uphill battle for the family, which is struggling to survive on Bukharbayeva's monthly salary of 14,000 rubles ($450) since her husband's death last year. The family lives in a three-room apartment on the outskirts of Omsk, leased from the city.

Despite Tuesday's setback, Bukharbayeva said she was ready to fight on for her son — and to help other mothers find justice.

"I've gone through hell and high water. No matter what, I'll take it to Strasbourg," she said, referring to the European Court of Human Rights.

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