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Thugs Clobber Rock Fans at Festival

By Alexander Bratersky

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A rock festival near the city of Miass in the Chelyabinsk region turned into a battlefield over the weekend as dozens of bare-chested thugs assaulted the audience with batons, baseball bats and air guns, leaving security guards too scared to intervene.

Initial reports blamed the assault on a gang of skinheads, but local authorities said Monday that the violence was the result of a restaurant dispute gone seriously wrong.

The clashes were organized by the restaurant's owner, an ethnic Armenian who quarreled with several customers, Alexander Voitovich, deputy prosecutor for the Chelyabinsk region, told reporters.

“He wanted to take revenge for the fact that he was not treated with respect,” Voitovich said, Interfax reported.

Sunday's concert brawl involved about 80 attackers who spent five to 10 minutes beating up everyone in their way. The well-known punk band Tarakany (Cockroaches), which performed

during the incident, had to flee the scene after several shots were fired at its members, Komsomolskaya Pravda reported.

The organizers of the festival, which was titled "Tornado" and attracted about 3,000 fans, described the attackers as “trained and tough guys.”

“I think that they were paid to do their job,” an organizer who only gave his first name, Kair, told The Moscow Times, without elaborating.

Nineteen concertgoers were injured, but only two remained hospitalized Monday, both with concussions, Miass Deputy Mayor Nikolai Kosheyev said.

He dismissed media reports that hundreds of people were injured during the incident.

The unidentified restaurant owner accused of ordering the attack has been detained along with 16 suspected attackers, Voitovich said. All 16 face hooliganism charges, punishable with up to seven years in prison.

Chelyabinsk Deputy Governor Oleg Grachyov complained that the concert organizers had failed to provide sufficient security and blamed Miass police for “bad preparations for the event,” RIA-Novosti reported.

Private security guards who tried to intervene were outnumbered, and police officers at the festival ignored the brawl, but were beaten up as well, Tarakany sound engineer Stanislav Poprzhedzinsky told RIA-Novosti.

Grachyov said the attackers represented various ethnic groups, a possible indication that they were not skinheads. Galina Kozhevnikova, an analyst with the Sova anti-extremist think tank, also said she considered the involvement of ultranationalists unlikely in this case.

Authorities have been wary of ethnically motivated conflicts ever since the 2006 riots in the Karelian town of Kondopoga, which broke out after a restaurant dispute between locals and Chechens killed two people.

Chelyabinsk regional police did not comment on news reports that Sunday's brawl might have been initiated by the backers of a rival rock festival overshadowed by the recently established "Tornado."

Local bloggers also surmised that the attack might have been an attempt to destabilize the region ahead of Chelyabinsk mayoral elections in October. But Andrei Talevlin, head of the regional Yabloko party branch, said by telephone that staging such an incident “would not be profitable” for local politicians.

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