

Poland Vows to Arrest Chechen Rebel Envoy

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The  Moscow Times

Polish police said Wednesday that they would arrest exiled Chechen rebel envoy Akhmed Zakayev if he visits Poland as planned this week.

Zakayev, viewed by Moscow as a terrorist but granted political asylum by Britain in 2003, is due to attend an annual World Chechen Congress in Poland on Thursday and Friday.

The congress brings together Chechen exiles who want independence for Chechnya and oppose its Moscow-installed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov.

"There is an international arrest warrant on Akhmed Zakayev issued by Interpol following a request by Russia. It is the obligation of any country to detain such a person whenever he or she appears on the soil of that country," Polish police spokesman Mariusz Sokolowski said.

"The police later hand the suspect to the court, and the court decides on a potential extradition. But the police are obliged to arrest that person," he said, adding that the arrest warrant had been issued on the basis of terrorism charges.

Zakayev has said he wants to return to Russia to pursue Chechen independence through peaceful means.

Zakayev was not immediately available for comment on Wednesday on the Polish police remarks.

Danish police detained Zakayev in Oct. 30, 2002, while he attended a World Chechen Congress in Copenhagen. Russian authorities had issued an Interpol warrant accused him of involvement in the Oct. 23-26 hostage crisis at Moscow's Dubrovka theater.

Zakayev, who denied the charges, was held for five weeks and released because of a lack of evidence.

After receiving political asylum in Britain, he has visited Poland, Germany and France without being arrested.

Poland's Foreign Ministry said it would be monitoring this week's congress "closely and with concern" because it was likely to reaffirm demands for an independent Chechnya that would upset Russia at a time when Warsaw and Moscow are trying to mend long-frosty ties.

"When it comes to the Chechen congress itself, we would like to note that it is being co-organized [with Polish nongovernmental organizations] by representatives of the 'Chechen republic of Ichkeria,' which was never recognized by Poland or any other country in the world," ministry spokesman Marcin Bosacki said.

The Russian Embassy in Warsaw said this week that President Dmitry Medvedev would visit Poland later this year.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned Poland that the congress aimed to stir up trouble in the North Caucasus, not help normalize the situation there.

"According to information we have, several persons who are planning to take part in this event are wanted internationally," he said. "We believe that our Polish partners will treat the need to take this aspect into account responsibly."

But Bosacki said the fact that Britain, like Poland a member of the European Union, had granted asylum to Zakayev meant that there were no legal grounds to ban him from visiting Poland.

(Reuters, MT)

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