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Veterans Slam Serdyukov in Video

By Alexander Bratersky

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An influential union of former paratroopers criticized Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov in a video Monday for ordering a provincial commander to demolish a church built on the territory of his academy.

The criticism is the latest setback for Serdyukov, a former tax chief whom then-President Vladimir Putin tapped in 2007 to bring order to the military's finances and undertake a massive reform — including heavy reductions of the officers corps.

Analysts say the military brass have never accepted Serdyukov, who only served a mandatory two years in his youth. A number of senior generals have been forced from their posts for opposing Serdyukov's reforms.

“Insulting Krasov is an insult to all defenders of our fatherland,” Vladislav Achalov, a Soviet-era commander of the paratroopers and leader of the All-Russia Paratroopers Union, said in the video statement on the group's official web site.

He was referring to Colonel Andrei Krasov, a popular paratroopers commander. Krasov was awarded the Hero of Russia medal, the country's top combat award, for operations during the 2008 war with Georgia.

During a Sept. 30 visit to a paratroopers academy in the Ryazan region, Serdyukov ordered Krasov to demolish a wooden church, saying military funds should not be spent on religious buildings, Kommersant reported Monday. He also yelled at Krasov and used a number of profanities, the paper said.

Krasov reportedly defended the construction, telling Serdyukov that it was financed by former paratroopers and locals. Serdyukov then ordered his subordinates to "fire the insolent colonel."

Achalov and other former commanders signed a statement calling on President Dmitry Medvedev to investigate the incident, which they also said "insulted the religious feelings" of paratroopers.

The All-Russia Paratroopers Union has some 35,000 members, including Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov.

The paratroopers' senior spokesman, Colonel Alexander Cherednik, was traveling on Monday and unable to comment on the situation, his office said.

Father Dmitry Smirnov, head of the Russian Orthodox Church department that oversees military chaplains, told Interfax on Monday that “all of the sides need to calm down.”

“We don't need any conflicts within the country,” he said.

The church's growing ties with the military — including a decision earlier this year to have chaplains in all military units — have been a sore point for some.

In 2008, the military said 70 percent of troops identified themselves as religious, 80 percent of whom were Orthodox Christians. The second-largest group was Muslims, who accounted for 13 percent of those who said they were religious.

Union member Pavel Popovsky, a former head of paratroopers' intelligence unit, told The Moscow Times that the group decided to go public because they had not received an apology during a meeting with Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov.

“We will use all the possible means to express our negative feelings toward Serdyukov,” he said Monday, without elaborating.

“The defense minister is not popular within the military and not respected by the public,” Popovsky added.

The paratroopers — also known as the Blue Berets — are the most prestigious part of the armed forces and are independent of other branches, such as the Ground Forces and the Air Force.

Some military experts and paratroopers say Serdyukov's reforms could cost the paratroopers

their privileged status within the military.

Serdyukov's name was among those mentioned in the Russian media as a possible candidate to replace Mayor Yury Luzhkov.

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