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Killers Target Healers and Soothsayers

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A series of killings of healers and fortunetellers in the North Caucasus have raised fears that Islamist militants are increasingly targeting civilians in the troubled region.

Two gunmen in the Dagestani capital, Makhachkala, killed a woman engaged in fortunetelling, alternative medical practices and lifting magic spells, Interfax reported.

The killers shot the victim in the head before fleeing the crime scene near her home late Tuesday, the local Interior Ministry said on its web site Wednesday.

Days earlier, two other healers and an ethnographer were murdered in the region amid speculation that the killings were carried out by Islamists who oppose traditional lifestyles.

Dagestani police said Tuesday that it solved the murder of well-known healer Magomedsaid Temeyev. A man detained after an attack on a police patrol in Makhachkala on Jan. 4 confessed that he took part in the shooting two days earlier in Temeyev's home in the city, police said.

Another healer, Amirbi Afaunov, was shot dead in Kabardino-Balkaria, another North Caucasus republic that has seen a surge in violence recently.

Afaunov was shot Jan. 3 by a group of men with automatic weapons outside his home in a suburb of the regional capital, Nalchik, Interfax reported, citing local law enforcement agencies.

On Dec. 29, gunmen killed local ethnographer Aslan Tsipinov in another Nalchik suburb.

His killing came two weeks after Kabardino-Balkaria's mufti, Anas Pshikhachev, was killed at the doorsteps of his home on Dec. 15.

Investigators have blamed Islamists for the murders, explaining that they saw the victims as enemies of a pure Islam.

The shootings come as fliers appeared in Kazan and Makhachkala denouncing New Year celebrations. Fliers in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, a Muslim republic on the Volga, warned that celebrating New Year amounts to shirk, the Islamic sin of worshipping anything else but the singular God.

The warnings, which were widely stuck up on fences, walls and houses, are most likely the work of Wahhabi extremists, Rais Suleimanov, a political scientist at Kazan State University told Interfax, which published a photo of the flier on its web site.

A pamphlet handed out in at least one mosque in Makhachkala contains a crossed-out New Year's tree with the warning "Night of sin and disobedience to Allah."

The leaflet, which was published by Komsomolskaya Pravda, contains a lengthy text explaining the pagan roots of New Year's, which in Russia is widely celebrated like Western Christmas.

Svetlana Anokhina, a local freelance journalist, said that while the pamphlet contained no direct threats, they carried a clear message that even exchanging New Year's wishes was forbidden.

She added that the pamphlet and killings of healers were clear signals that the Islamists are stepping up their campaign against anybody in society who disagreed with them.

"This feels like the advent of apocalypse," she said by telephone from Makhachkala.

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