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Diplomats Fumble as Uzbekistan Jails Russian

By Alexandra Odynova

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Last summer, Russian authorities made a show of caring for its citizens, agreeing to a spy swap with the United States for 10 busted agents, including redhead media darling Anna Chapman.

But not everyone seems to enjoy such attention.

Relatives of a retired Russian colonel jailed on treason charges in Uzbekistan have spent almost four months campaigning for his release. But Russian officials say they can't intervene because they don't even know what exactly the man is accused of doing.

Yury Korepanov, 63, was detained on Oct. 30 as he was returning to his home in the Sverdlovsk region after a visit with one of two sons in Uzbekistan. On Jan. 11, an Uzbek military court jailed him for 16 years on murky treason charges delivered at a closed trial.

“I saw him off at the train station in late October and haven't seen him since,” Korepanov's son Maxim said by telephone from Uzbekistan on Wednesday.

“I don't know any details about the charges because the hearing was closed,” he added. “All I know are titles of the articles" in the Criminal Code.

The authoritarian Uzbek government has not commented on why Korepanov was charged with treason.

Korepanov spent almost 40 years in military service in the country, first with Soviet troops stationed in the republic and later in the Uzbek Defense Ministry, before returning to his native Sverdlovsk region in 2003. He obtained Russian citizenship and found employment at the Vodokanal water service company while moonlighting as a guard at the Yekaterinburg military commissariat, Maxim Korepanov said.

A possible reason for the charges might be that he has not formally rejected his Uzbek citizenship, said Alexander Burkov, a State Duma deputy with A Just Russia. The convoluted procedure to give up citizenship “takes several months” and requires approval from senior Uzbek officials, Burkov said by telephone.

A Foreign Ministry representative in Yekaterinburg told The Moscow Times that Korepanov possibly “had problems” rejecting Uzbek citizenship. He did not elaborate and asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to comment on the issue.

“But his Russian passport was issued legally and correctly in the Sverdlovsk region,” said Burkov, himself a native of the region.

Korepanov remains in a detention center, where he is not allowed to see anyone but his lawyer, his son said, adding that an appeal would be filed within days.

The retired colonel suffers from ulcers and arrhythmia, an abnormal heart rhythm, both of which have worsened in prison, Maxim Korepanov said.

But he said his father “feels OK and is treating the situation sarcastically,” saying he has finally gotten some well-deserved rest after years of work.

Meanwhile, the two sons have been busy campaigning against their father's arrest, appealing to, among others, the Russian Embassy in Tashkent, the Uzbek and Russian foreign ministries, Yekaterinburg's ombudsman, political parties and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev.

Russian officials in Uzbekistan and Yekaterinburg told The Moscow Times that they could not intervene because of diplomatic norms.

Uzbek diplomats have ignored four notes sent by the Russian Embassy between November and Wednesday in connection with the case, embassy spokesman Sergei Kochenko said.

“The first note asking about the case was sent on Nov. 18, after his relatives appealed to the embassy,” Kochenko said by telephone, adding that the most recent note was sent Wednesday.

He said the Uzbek Foreign Ministry's only reply was that it was working on a response.

Diplomats' hands are tied until “at least some kind of reply comes,” said the Foreign Ministry representative in Yekaterinburg.

“The Foreign Ministry can't be pushy but only ask politely,” the official said. “But the Uzbek side is hunkering down.”

The fuss appears to be finally reaching a boiling point, with Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, calling for tougher action Wednesday.

“An outrageous situation. Decisive interference is needed,” Rogozin wrote on Twitter.

A Just Russia's Burkov said the Duma also urged the Foreign Ministry to take action this week.

He complained about a lack of information on Korepanov's case. But the prisoner is nevertheless a “Russian citizen and must get help — even though he is an ordinary man, a pensioner and not an intelligence service agent,” Burkov said, referring to the spies returned to Russia last summer.

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