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Jailed Komi Whistleblower Fears for Life

By Alexandra Odynova

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A jailed whistleblower said he feared for his life after coming under pressure from prison officials to backtrack on accusations that investigators jailed the wrong suspects in an arson case.

Grigory Chekalin, a former deputy prosecutor in the Komi republic city of Ukhta, voiced his accusations in an open letter over the weekend.

He said prison officials have sarcastically promised him a "good time," and he expressed fears that an accident might be staged to kill him and a fellow whistleblower, former policeman Mikhail Yevseyev, who was also jailed by local authorities.

"Mikhail and I may soon no longer be alive," Chekalin wrote in the message passed via his lawyer and released online.

Chekalin and Yevseyev made headlines in 2009 when they appealed to President Dmitry Medvedev to intervene in a high-profile arson case in Ukhta that they said led to the arrest

of two people on false charges.

Twenty-five people died when a shopping mall was torched in 2005. Two local 20-somethings were jailed for life by a local court after a second trial in 2009, but Chekalin and Yevseyev, who worked on the case, said they were scapegoats.

"Investigators just needed to report to their superiors that they have solved a huge case," Chekalin's lawyer, Viktor Kozlitin, said in a telephone interview from Komi on Monday.

The Kremlin ignored the appeal, and no inquiry into the accusations has been reported. Instead, both Chekalin and Yevseyev were soon jailed for the appeal.

Chekalin is serving an 18-month sentence on charges of false testimony in the shopping mall case, while Yevseyev got 15 months for leaking classified materials related to the investigation.

Moreover, Yevseyev, who served in Chechnya during the second war, was sent last month to the North Caucasus republic to face charges of assault, kidnapping and abuse of office over his tour there. The purported victim in one case is the father of a militant linked to warlords Shamil Basayev and Doku Umarov, Chekalin said.

Investigators promised that Yevseyev would only return from Chechnya in a "zinc coffin," Chekalin said in an earlier letter posted online. Incidentally, his statements are published by the web site Dymovsky.name, launched by supporters of fellow whistleblower Alexei Dymovsky, a former police officer who came under fire when he accused superiors of corruption in 2009.

Chekalin's lawyer Kozlitin told the news web site Gzt.ru that human rights activists had promised to track Yevseyev's situation. He did not elaborate.

In Chekalin's latest letter, he complained that he recently was given seven days in solitary confinement for using a $1 U.S. banknote as a bookmark. He said prison officials permitted him to use the bill but later punished him for it, citing a rule that bans inmates from possessing foreign currency.

One of the arson investigators implicated by Chekalin, Alexei Lyzhin, dismissed wrongdoing at a news conference last month, saying the claims amounted to "another PR campaign" aimed at "misleading citizens."

But he failed to dampen an uproar over the story on the Russian blogosphere.

Following the uproar, Komi prosecutors opened a check into Chekalin's claims — despite the fact that they were also accused of wrongdoing. No results had been made public by Monday, although a spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office promised The Moscow Times by telephone from Komi that a statement would be released later in the day.

Kozlitin said by telephone that he expected the check would reject his client's claims.

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