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Reporter Killings Give Way to Beatings, New Study Says

By Alexandra Odynova

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The trend in attacks on journalists changed in 2010, with murders giving place to savage beatings, but the overall situation remained dismal, according to a report released Wednesday.

The attacks are listed in an extensive database dubbed Partial Justice, an updated version of which was presented in Moscow by the Russian Union of Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists.

The database lists 12 fatalities among journalists last year, though the figure includes deaths not in the line of duty. There were also 55 assaults on journalists registered in 2010, with nearly none solved.

The data contradict an earlier report by the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists, which said in December that no journalists were killed in Russia for their activity in 2010.

Partial Justice's authors said at least three journalists were killed in Dagestan last year in what looked like retribution for their reports. None of the murders were solved.

The report is available online in Russian, with an English version forthcoming.

"Now the journalists are not murdered, they are beaten up, often with special iron rods," said Vsevolod Bogdanov, head of the Russian Union of Journalists.

He was referring, among others, to the attack on Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin, who spent days in a coma after being beaten near his apartment building in downtown Moscow in November. His attackers remain at large.

"Lots of public organizations have been created to protect journalists' rights ... but few changes can be seen," Bogdanov said.

He said more than 300 journalists have been killed nationwide since the 1990s.

Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies have failed to stem the tide of attacks, as most assaults on journalists go unsolved, said John Crowfoot, an analyst with the International Federation of Journalists and co-author of the report.

Official statistics claim that "four out of five murders are solved," but the remaining one "always happens to be linked to journalists," said Galina Arapova, a Voronezh-based lawyer defending journalists' rights.

Death threats also go largely ignored. The new study said 31 journalists reported receiving threats last year but the actual figure is likely much higher, with most cases slipping below the radars of police and rights activists, possibly due to a lack of faith in law enforcement.

Skeptics have reason to doubt because both Novaya Gazeta investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya and rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov, gunned down in Moscow in 2006 and 2009, respectively, reported death threats but received no help from authorities.

It remains unclear whether change for the better is possible. A representative for the General Prosecutor's Office attended Wednesday's presentation but kept silent and declined to speak to reporters afterward.

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