

Inmates Scare Regional Leaders Into Giving Bribes

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Frightened by a fraudulent threat to be targeted in a criminal investigation, senior officials in the Southern Federal District paid 2.6 million rubles (\$81,000) in bribes to inmates masquerading as investigators, the Investigative Committee [said](#) Friday.

Three inmates in the Rostov region started extorting the bribes in July, calling the heads of district administrations by cell phone and demanding that they transfer money to one of several bank accounts if they did not want a preliminary inquiry to be opened into their activities.

Before starting the racket, the group's leader telephoned a regional resident, asking him to open bank accounts on his behalf and to pass the money through a middleman, a former convict, for pay of 30,000 rubles (\$930) a month.

The two associates of the group have been detained.

In their last blackmailing operation, the inmates telephoned four district heads in the

Volgograd region on Sept. 7. Two of the four officials transferred 300,000 rubles (\$9,300) each to the inmates' bank accounts within several hours.

The Investigative Committee did not say how many officials were targeted or identify any of them.

The inmates face up to six additional years in prison if charged and convicted of conspiring to commit large-scale fraud.

The group leader who introduced himself in telephone conversations with the blackmailed officials as the head of a regional branch of the Investigative Committee, is 42 years old and serving 15 years for murder, assault and robbery.

The two other inmates are aged 29 and 24 and serving four years for robbery. The former convict is 30 and had served a time for theft.

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