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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Chechen Poet Killed in Moscow

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Akhtakhanov

A pro-Russian Chechen poet was gunned down in Moscow, possibly by the same hitman who shot dead Colonel Yury Budanov, a veteran of the Chechen campaign and convicted war criminal, investigators said.

The unidentified attacker wounded Ruslan Akhtakhanov, 58, with several shots before finishing him off with a bullet to the head shortly before midnight Tuesday, Izvestia reported.

The suspect escaped in a Ford Focus, which was later found burned in the city's south. The murder weapon, an air gun modified to shoot real bullets, was found inside the car, the report said.

The killer unleashed the deadly fusillade from a blind spot in the street surveillance system and was not captured on video, an Investigative Committee spokesman said Wednesday, Interfax reported.

He added that the shooting looked like a contract hit.

The attack was done almost the same way as the shooting of Budanov in June, which suggested that the same person or people may be behind both deaths, a source at the committee told Interfax.

In 2003, Budanov was sentenced for killing a Chechen girl who he believed was the daughter of a female sniper attacking his troops. He maintained in the courtroom that he acted in a fit of rage during her interrogation. Budanov was pardoned in 2008 despite protests from Chechen authorities and kept a low profile until his death.

A Chechen native was arrested in August in connection with Budanov's murder, but the case has since stalled, and media reports have cited numerous holes in the investigators' version of events.

The dead poet Akhtakhanov was known for his pro-Russian stance, teaching at a Moscow college and writing most of his works in Russian.

He was captured by Chechen rebels during the first war in 1997, but released for ransom after 47 days in captivity, Novaya Gazeta war correspondent Vyacheslav Izmailov told Dozhd television on Wednesday.

Akhtakhanov promised "to pay back" the rebel leaders involved in his kidnapping, which might have prompted his murder, Izmailov said. Many of them have since been pardoned and work in the Chechen government, he said.

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