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Uproar Widespread Over Chechnya Trip

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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A visit to Chechnya by two right-wing lawmakers from Austria has drawn outrage from human rights activists and is triggering a political scandal in their homeland.

Johannes Hübner, a deputy of the Free Democratic Party in the Austrian parliament, said Wednesday that he intended the two-day trip earlier this week to find out whether returning refugees would face political repression in the North Caucasus republic.

"I do not have the impression that returnees would face prison or persecution," he said by telephone from Vienna.

Hübner and his colleague Johann Gudenus, leader of the Free Democrats' faction in Vienna's City Council, held talks with Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov in Grozny last week.

Gudenus said the meeting was a success because Kadyrov told him that he shared his opinion about Chechen refugees in Austria.

"He agreed that most of them come for economic rather than political reasons," Gudenus said in a separate telephone interview.

Austria has seen a massive influx of refugees from Chechnya over the past decade following two brutal wars with separatists and Islamist insurgents, and experts believe that up to 50,000 Chechens currently live there.

Human rights activists say most of them should fear for their safety if they return because many fought on the side of the rebels, who are persecuted by Kadyrov to this day.

Alexander Cherkasov of the Memorial human rights organization expressed dismay at the trip.

"To say the situation is safe is rather strange. It strikes me as schizophrenic," he said.

Cherkasov pointed to the murder trial of Chechen refugee Umar Israilov, who was gunned down three years ago in downtown Vienna.

A court in the Austrian capital last year handed lengthy prison sentences to three Chechens for organizing the murder, but said the killer and those who ordered the crime remain at large.

"Didn't the court name Kadyrov as the one most likely to have ordered the killing, and isn't the killer living quietly in Chechnya today?" Cherkasov asked.

Gudenus said the Israilov trial was not discussed during talks with Kadyrov but that the lawmakers did raise the subject of human rights.

Both described the trip as "private," saying they did not inform parliament or the Austrian Embassy in Moscow.

Peter Pilz, a prominent Green Party deputy in the Austrian parliament, called the visit outrageous and said it should be discussed at a special session of the foreign police committee, of which both he and Hübner are members.

Pilz noted that Kadyrov and Chechen Prime Minister Magomed Daudov were both named in the court papers in connection with Israilov's murder.

"By sitting down with them, you become accomplices with murderers," he said by telephone from Vienna.

But Gudenus disagreed.

"The fact that I talked to Kadyrov does not mean that I support his views," he said.

He also said it was a tradition in his party to meet with controversial leaders. The former leader of the Free Democrats, Jörg Haider, met with Saddam Hussein and Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

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