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Prison Guard in Shooting Spree

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Raising new questions about the fairness of the legal system, a prison official who opened fire on customers in a Kamchatka store, injuring three, has been accused of simple hooliganism after local investigators mitigated more serious charges Sunday.

The drunken prison guard, identified by news reports as Alexander Zainulin, 37, entered a grocery store in the village of Razdolny on Wednesday, the eve of International Women's Day, to buy more alcohol but became irritated by fellow customers who were speaking loudly, the Kamchatka region's branch of the Investigative Committee said in a statement Sunday.

Zainulin lifted up his gun "and opened fire at the ceiling and insulted the people around him, demanding that they stay still and shut up," the statement said.

Then Zainulin fired at one man, injuring him in three places, including his liver.

When the other customers fled outdoors, Zainulin chased after them, opening fire again. As a result, two more people, aged 22 and 23, suffered hand injuries, the statement said.

Zainulin was arrested on charges of attempted murder motivated by hooliganism, and a conviction would have carried a maximum prison sentence of 20 years.

But investigators classified his actions as simple hooliganism Sunday, meaning that he faces up to eight years in prison if charged and convicted.

Zainulin has pleaded not guilty.

"He doesn't admit that he is guilty of hooliganism, saying he was defending himself," said local Investigative Committee spokeswoman Yelena Matafonova, Gazeta.ru reported.

She said none of the witnesses confirmed Zainulin's claims.

Zainulin has been released on a written pledge not to leave town.

The case contrasts with the arrest of two purported members of female punk band Pussy Riot, also charged with hooliganism for an unsanctioned performance at Moscow's Christ the Savior Cathedral. Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, both mothers of young children, face up to seven years in prison, but a court has ordered that they be held in custody until at least April 24, despite a loud public outcry calling for their release. Russian law softens punishment for mothers of young children.

But the Orthodox Christian Church said the suspects were getting what they deserved, after Pussy Riot called on the Virgin Mary to help get rid of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during their five-minute concert.

Church spokesman Vsevolod Chaplin wrote on his blog Sunday that the church "doesn't plan to back down under the pressure of an aggressive public calling for mercy."

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