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Prisoners Strike en Masse to Protest Fellow Inmate's Death

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Inmates praying at a religious service in Bashkortostan's Penal Colony No. 4.

Up to 900 prisoners are refusing food, and five slashed their forearms in a high-security prison in Bashkortostan after an inmate was beaten to death, rights activists said.

The inmates took the step to draw attention to prison authorities' refusal to grant medical assistance to Sergei Lasko, who died after a severe beating by prison employees on the night of July 17, activists from the Public Monitoring Committee, an organization that defends prisoners' rights, told the Gulagu.ru human rights portal.

Activists said 900 of the roughly 1,100 inmates at Bashkortostan's Prison Colony No. 4 were refusing food, while the Federal Prison Service gave a figure of 118, stressing that the inmates were only refusing food prepared on the prison's premises.

Almira Zhukova, a member of the local branch of the Public Monitoring Committee, said

activists learned about Lasko's death and the ensuing hunger strike only by chance after a lawyer visited the prison on a separate issue.

"Then we discovered the beatings; we found proof," Zhukova told Gulagu.ru. "It was terrifying. They beat [prisoners] till they were blue. All the rooms were covered in blood."

An inmate told Zhukova that while Lasko was being beaten, guards played loud music over prison speakers to mask the victim's shouts. "Whenever the music starts, we know that they are going to beat someone," the unidentified inmate was quoted as saying.

Activists now fear that prison authorities could refuse to give up Lasko's body for burial in order to hide the cause of his death.

Both Zhukova and Gulagu.ru head Vladimir Osechkin have written to the Investigative Committee and Federal Security Service with requests to open criminal cases into the death.

On Saturday, the Bashkortostan arm of the Federal Prison Service denied Zhukova's comments in a statement on its website and justified prison employees' use of force against Lasko by the severity of his conviction.

"Prison Colony No. 4 houses criminals who have committed especially grave crimes. They are repeat offenders," the statement said, adding that the inmates on strike had behaved extremely badly over the course of their incarceration.

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