

# Grocery Store Slavery Case Opened

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The Investigative Committee said Tuesday that it had opened a criminal case into allegations that Uzbek nationals were held captive at a Moscow grocery store and forced to work as slaves for a decade.

The committee summoned the store's owners — Saken Muzdybayev and his wife, Sulu Dzhan Istambekova — as well as two Uzbek accusers to meet on Tuesday evening, but the proprietors didn't show up, said a spokeswoman for the Rights of Labor Migrants activist group.

Because the store's owners had not been charged, they were not legally obligated to attend the meeting and could have even fled to their native Kazakhstan, spokeswoman Anastasia Denisova said by phone.

The two female accusers told police on Oct. 30 that they and at least 11 other migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan were held at the store and that the management used beatings and sexual violence to command subservience.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry acknowledged on Monday at a press briefing that the Kazakh consulate regularly receives information about Kazakh citizens forced to work under slave-like conditions in Moscow, Interfax-Kazakhstan reported.

"According to our information, the owners of a Moscow grocery store chain, natives of southern Kazakhstan who are now citizens of the Russian Federation, are directly linked with multiple instances of exploiting Kazakh citizens for unlawful labor," ministry spokesman Altai Abibullayev told the news agency.

He emphasized that if the evidence were confirmed, Kazakhstan would oblige Russia to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Although the Investigative Committee has begun an official investigation into "deprivation of freedom," according to its statement, activists and a lawyer representing the accusers believe that other allegations should be brought.

"At least five other points, including abduction and physical violence, must be added to the accusation," activist Olga Korovina said by phone Tuesday. According to the Criminal Code, the "deprivation of freedom" allegation entails a maximum punishment of only five years in prison.

"The instances recounted by the victims can be considered slave labor," said Emil Taubulatov, a lawyer representing the two Uzbek women who told authorities about the store on Novosibirskaya Ulitsa in eastern Moscow. A slave labor conviction would entail up to a decade behind bars.

But Taubulatov noted that it was unlikely the Investigative Committee would consider a slavery charge because that article of the Criminal Code had never been used before.

Yevgeny Zimin, a civil activist who helped the accusers leave the store, said that more than the proprietors should be accused. "It's an organized criminal group," he said. Activists have said there were at least 14 other local businesses owned by Istambekova and Muzdybayev that were likely to have used illegal labor.

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