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Intrigue Thrives in Kalashnikov's Town

By Irina Filatova

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Kalashnikov meeting federal officials visiting Izhevsk earlier this month.

Regional authorities might have orchestrated recent accusations by arms maker Izhmash employees against the company's management in order to get control over the company, two people familiar with the matter said.

The letter reportedly sent by Izhmash veterans, including legendary assault rifle designer Mikhail Kalashnikov, to President Vladimir Putin last month might have had fake signatures, the sources said. In the message, the workers said the factory's management was inefficient and outlined problems like low wages and struggles in producing equipment commissioned by the government.

The very fact that Kalashnikov, who turned 93 this week, discussed some such letter, let alone signed it, is a fiction based on an absence of information about the details of Kalashnikov's life, a source in Putin's administration said Monday, referring to the designer's health problems.

"No one has even seen the original [letter]. There is a text, typed on a computer, where there is simply a list of names, as if they had signed a real document," said the source, who declined to be named since he was not authorized to speak to the press.

The letter is an example of a broader outcry around the plant, which is based in Izhevsk, 1,200 kilometers east of Moscow.

About 200 Izhmash workers organized a spontaneous protest at the factory last month after getting a meager monthly salary of 5,000 rubles ($158), Interfax reported at the time, citing Grigory Chernykh, chairman of the regional branch of the All-Russia Labor Union of Defense Industry Workers.

Following the reports, the regional Prosecutor's Office started an investigation that didn't reveal any legal violations by the factory's management, according to a statement posted on the office's website last week. The media reports about the protest were not confirmed during the probe, the statement said. The source in Putin's administration said no such protest actually took place.

"The goal of all this disinformation is to influence who will be chosen as the next CEO of Izhmash," the Kremlin source said, referring to a contest to appoint a new chief executive of the plant announced by its parent company Russian Technologies earlier this year.

A person close to Izhmash echoed that thought last week, calling the claims "a political move" by Udmurtia's authorities seeking to appoint their protege as head of the company. The source was not authorized to speak to the media and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Izhmash spokeswoman Yelena Filatova declined to comment on the issue.

Russian Technologies learned about the letter from media reports, said a spokeswoman for the state corporation, which owns Izhmash. She added, however, that there are no wage delays at Izhmash at the moment, and the average salary increased from 12,000 rubles in 2010 to 17,500 rubles this year.

Viktor Chulkov, a spokesman for Udmurtia President Alexander Volkov, on Monday called the rumors of regional government involvement in the matter an "absurdity."

He couldn't confirm that the letter was authentic, saying that he had only seen an online copy, not the original document. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov couldn't be reached for comment.

Volkov made headlines earlier this year when a local blogger posted a photo of a billboard in Izhevsk depicting the regional president wearing a Breguet watch worth more than $120,000. The billboard was later updated, media reports said, with a photo of a different watch being glued on top of the previous picture.

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