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FSB Officers Go on Strike After Release of Chechen Cops, Report Says

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A group of Federal Security Service officers has gone on strike to protest the release of Chechen policemen who had been arrested on suspicion of kidnapping and torturing a Moscow resident, opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported Monday.

The FSB officers, who spoke to the newspaper on condition of anonymity at a Moscow cafe, said that practically all the members of their department had refused to go to work and were prepared to quit their jobs if the suspects manage to escape justice.

"They spit into our souls and put our families into a precarious position," an unidentified FSB colonel told the newspaper. "Why did we go to Chechnya to get all the evidence? We were followed by true criminals in uniform there. We almost became their hostages."

It would be highly unusual for operatives of the FSB, the powerful security service formerly led by President Vladimir Putin, to go on strike, and a security analyst questioned

the reliability of the information leaked by the officers.

But policemen working for Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov often have special permissions that allow them to travel around Russia with weapons and without many restrictions on their actions, said Andrei Soldatov, a well-known authority on Russia's security forces.

The Chechen men implicated in the case are members of a bodyguard regiment for Kadyrov that is permanently stationed at the President Hotel in Moscow and protects the leader on trips to the capital, according to the Novaya Gazeta report. The hotel is located in front of the Interior Ministry building and is managed by the Office for Presidential Affairs.

The men, who are supposedly led by Zelimkhan Israilov, a close Kadyrov ally, were suspected of abducting a victim identified by Novaya Gazeta by the pseudonym Grigory and extorting 3 million rubles ($100,000) from him under torture.

After failing to get the money, the men allegedly took him to a bus stop in the Strogino neighborhood in northwest Moscow, where he was picked up by an ambulance.

The assailants apparently did not expect the victim to survive, but he recovered and was able to identify them, leading to their arrest.

After the officers were detained, investigators received phone calls from "some visitors from Grozny" pressuring them to release the suspects, the newspaper said.

Kadyrov's spokesman, Alvi Karimov, denied the report, telling Dozhd television: "Kadyrov does not have any bodyguards. People from his entourage have never tortured anybody and never committed such crimes."

According to Novaya Gazeta, the case against the men was initially put under the personal supervision of Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin, but when he stopped overseeing the case, the suspects were released.

Kadyrov and forces loyal to him have been accused by human rights groups of numerous violations of human rights, including kidnappings and extrajudicial killings, allegations that Kadyrov denies.

Critics say Putin has given Kadyrov free rein in Chechnya in return for quashing militant activity in the formerly war-torn republic.

As for the FSB officers who allegedly went on strike, Soldatov, the security analyst, said discontent at the FSB was not widespread, but "the top leadership is not as concerned about Kadyrov as people in the field, who have to deal with them [Chechen police officers] more often."

Stanislav Belkovsky, director of the National Strategy Institute, said he was not surprised that the Chechen men were released. "Putin is more loyal to Kadyrov than to the FSB," Belkovsky said.

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