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Human Rights Ombudsman Speaks Out After Arson Attack on Activists in Grozny

By Allison Quinn

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‘There will be a new, better [office], and we will be able to help even more residents of Chechnya,’ Babinets said.

The head of the Kremlin's council on human rights, Mikhail Fedotov, has spoken to the Chechen government about ensuring the safety of the republic's human rights activists after a group of masked men set fire to their headquarters in Grozny on Saturday, as at least two of the activists fled the republic on Sunday after briefly being detained.

The arson attack, the latest in a string of incidents as fallout from the Dec. 4 terrorist attack on the city continues, comes days after another group of masked men burned down at least six homes of the relatives of suspected militants, according to Memorial rights activists.

Fedotov on Saturday warned Chechen officials that "if something happens to the human rights activists, it would be incredibly stupid," Novaya Gazeta reported. It was unclear which officials he had spoken to.

Fedotov's warning, apparently in reference to the arson attack, came shortly after a sanctioned rally in Grozny against terrorism, reportedly attended by 50,000 people. The ouster of Igor Kalyapin, the head of the Committee Against Torture and a member of the Kremlin's human rights council, was one of the demands made by demonstrators at that event.

After Kalyapin appealed to Russia's prosecutor general last week over Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's statements calling for relatives of militants to be held responsible — a statement that resulted in their homes being burned down — Kadyrov accused him of supporting terrorism, writing on Instagram on Friday that Chechen authorities had information "that Kalyapin had carried dollars from [deceased terrorist leader] Doku Umarov's brother to Chechnya and transferred them here."

Kadyrov later went further and said Kalyapin's entire organization was collaborating with terrorists.

The offices of Kalyapin's group were then set ablaze on Saturday evening. Sergei Babinets, a lawyer for the Committee Against Torture, posted photos of the group's building on fire to Facebook and confirmed that employees had to be evacuated.

"It's true that we were being monitored and were chased out by people in masks," Babinets wrote.

Kalyapin took to Facebook to describe three men with an object that appeared to be a gun trying unsuccessfully to break into the group's office before it was set alight later that evening.

Babinets and Dmitry Dmitriyev, another member of the group, were detained briefly on Sunday before being let go. By Sunday evening, they had left Chechnya and "would at least for one night be staying outside the territory," Dmitry Utukin, a lawyer for the rights group, wrote on Twitter.

Kadyrov's outspoken statements on Instagram have seemed to serve as a catalyst for much of the pandemonium embroiling Chechnya since the Dec. 4 attack, with the homes of militants' relatives burned to the ground just a day after he urged that they be held liable for failing to stop the terrorist attack.

The accusation that Kalyapin was supporting terrorism, which Kalyapin himself has refuted, may also have triggered an attack on Kalyapin's press conference on Thursday, which was crashed by unknown men who threw eggs at participants.

Babinets said in comments on Facebook on Saturday that the group would continue their activities despite the destruction of their headquarters.

"Well, our office burned down ... no big deal. There will be a new, better one, and we will be able to help even more residents of Chechnya," he wrote.

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