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Russian Orthodox Activists Say Charlie Hebdo Shooting Was 'Just Punishment'

By Anna Dolgov

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A woman places condolence flowers for the victims of the attack at the headquarters of French weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo, outside the French embassy in Moscow on Jan. 8, 2015.

Russian Orthodox activists rallied outside the French Embassy in Moscow with signs blaming this week's massacre at the offices of Charlie Hebdo on the newspaper's own practice of lampooning various religions — and on the French government for tolerating its satire.

While scores of Muscovites laid flowers outside the embassy to extend their condolences to the families of the 12 people killed in the attack and their grieving nation, a handful of Orthodox demonstrators from the God's Will movement showed up Thursday to condemn the victims instead.

See the Photo Gallery: Moscow Vigil Mourns Victims of Charlie Hebdo Shooting

"Blasphemers from France horribly slurred Jesus Christ — and received a just punishment,"

read one sign held by a young female protester.

Another sign read: "The responsibility for the tragedy lies with the French government. They did not protect the feelings of believers," according to photographs posted on social media.

"Although we do not approve of Islamism, we testify that the true terrorists are caricaturists [such as the Charlie Hebdo journalists]," one of the rally's organizers wrote on social media site Vkontakte.

The satirical French newspaper had ridiculed just about every religion in the world, but the attack was, by all appearances, prompted by its caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad.

A senior American official said Thursday that one of the suspects, 34-year-old Said Kouachi, received terrorist training from an al-Qaida affiliate in Yemen in 2011. Witnesses told the BBC that the gunmen shouted "we have avenged the Prophet Muhammad" during the attack.

The Russian Orthodox Church did not immediately respond to the attack, even as Russian President Vladimir Putin offered his condolences to the families of the victims and all Parisians.

Scores of Muscovites showed up at the French Embassy to lay flowers — an outpouring of sympathy that received significant coverage in Russia's state-run media.

Russian youth organizations plan to hold an "action of solidarity with the French people" near the embassy on Friday afternoon, news agency TASS reported.

However, the deputy chief editor of independent radio station Ekho Moskvy, Vladimir Varfolomeyev, said that Russians were deeply split in their reaction to the terrorist attack in Paris.

"Among my acquaintances, those who do not condemn the attack against the magazine are pretty much the same people with whom we have always argued about Putin, Crimea, Donbass and so on," Varfolomeyev, a critic of the Kremlin's policies, said in his blog on the Ekho Moskvy website Thursday.

"Today there is an abyss between us," he said.

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