

Attack on NGO in Grozny Renews Concerns About Russian Control Over Chechnya

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Children playing near a car belonging to the Committee Against Torture that was damaged along with the NGO's offices during Wednesday's attack.

The attack perpetrated Wednesday on the Grozny office of the Committee Against Torture, a prominent human rights NGO, adds to the long list of recent incidents in Russia's republic of Chechnya that have rattled the country's legal foundations and sparked new fears that the once war-torn region could be falling out of the Kremlin's control.

Masked men who emerged from a crowd of protesters stormed the office of the Committee Against Torture after smashing up a vehicle belonging to the organization. Founded in 2000 by rights activists from the city of Nizhny Novgorod, the organization — one of few NGOs in Chechnya — monitors cases of torture and violent treatment in Russia, offering legal and medical support to victims of torture.

The masked men spray-painted the peephole of the office's door so that staff inside could not see out, and then broke the door down, the NGO wrote on its Twitter page Wednesday. Other members of a mob that had gathered near the office climbed onto its balcony and tried to break a window, the NGO said.

A video posted on YouTube shows a crowd of protesters cheering on a masked young man breaking a security camera above the office's balcony. Sounds that resembled those of gunshots could also be heard.

The vandals wrecked the office as the organization's employees escaped through a window, the NGO said.

The Committee Against Torture said on Twitter that it had appealed to regional and municipal police forces, as well as to the Chechen branch of the Investigative Committee while the attack was under way. No police units were dispatched to the scene, according to the organization.

The regional branch of the Interior Ministry could not be reached for comment on Wednesday afternoon.

Investigators told the Memorial human rights organization that more than 40 people had been detained following the rampage. Memorial said in comments on its Facebook page that it was unclear where and how the arrests could have been made, because no eyewitnesses had seen anyone being taken into custody.

Mob or Protest?

Ramzan Kadyrov, usually quick to react on events in his republic on his Instagram page, remained silent. Hours after the attack on the Committee Against Torture, Kadyrov posted a picture of himself posing behind an "I Love Kurchaloi" sign in the Chechen village of that name.

Kadyrov later claimed that the attack on the NGO could have been carried out by relatives of Dzhambulat Dadayev, a Chechen man who was shot dead in Chechnya this spring by law enforcement officers from the nearby Stavropol region, Interfax reported. Dadayev was wanted by the federal authorities, reportedly on suspicion of intentional grievous bodily harm.

Chechen authorities had announced that a demonstration would take place to show solidarity for Dadayev, replacing an earlier announced protest against the "information war" against Russia and Chechnya, the Novaya Gazeta newspaper reported.

Kadyrov claimed the mob was angry that the NGO was not investigating Dadayev's death, given that its activities are focused on torture carried out by law enforcement agencies.

The Chechen leader started by downplaying the incident, claiming that the voices of Dadayev's relatives should be heard before he insisted that law and order be respected in the republic.

"At the same time, any unlawful actions, whatever their motivation, are impermissible and will be stopped," Interfax quoted Kadyrov as saying Wednesday.

Lawyer Oleg Khabibrakhmanov, who works for the Committee Against Torture, told The Moscow Times in a telephone interview that the organization had not been working on any contentious issues that could have prompted the attack.

"We were doing our work as usual," he said. "We are being targeted because we are critical of Chechen authorities and shed light on their human rights violations. They are not happy with us."

Khabibrakhmanov said he did not think the rampage resulted from a spontaneous outburst of anger from a rowdy crowd.

"The protest took place right outside our office," said Khabibrakhmanov. "The crowd gathered to make television viewers believe that the population was angry, and that the attack came from the people. But everything was planned. Some of the men were carrying special tools to break down the door."

Turning a Blind Eye

Kadyrov has made headlines in recent months over a growing number of incidents that suggest the Kremlin no longer has full control over the republic.

Tasked by Putin in 2007 with stabilizing a republic that had been ravaged by two secession wars, Kadyrov was given seemingly limitless financial support to build his hard-line regime with no tolerance for criticism and dissent. The Kremlin has turned a blind eye to the rampant human rights violations committed by Kadyrov's militia, the guardians of his rule.

"I don't think the Kremlin sees what is going on in Chechnya as a huge problem," said Grigory Shvedov, the editor-in-chief of Kavkazsky Uzel (Caucasian Knot) news site, specialized on Russia's North Caucasus. "Moscow really does not care about violations of human rights in the republic. Other issues, like security for example, are deemed important, but human rights are not."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday afternoon that President Vladimir Putin was "likely unaware" of the situation in Grozny and that information about the incident at the Committee Against Torture would be relayed to him once more details emerged, the RIA Novosti state news agency reported.

Chechen authorities have launched reprisals against journalists, NGO workers and witnesses of human rights abuses that appeared in a recent documentary film alleging corruption and abuse by Kadyrov, the filmmakers have said. The documentary, produced by the Open Russia democracy group, was temporarily blocked Wednesday by YouTube over vague claims by the head of a film company that it violated copyrights.

Open Russia denied that it had used protected footage in its film. It was not immediately clear what the alleged copyright violation complaint was based on, and access to the film was unblocked again by Wednesday evening.

State Checkmate

Some political analysts have noted that Kadyrov's self-endowed prerogatives seem to have

grown out of control, prompting fear among the country's security apparatus that he might have become above federal legislation.

"We are witnessing a complex political game in Chechnya between the Kremlin, Kadyrov and Russian security forces," said Igor Bunin, director of the Moscow-based Center of Political Technologies think tank. "In some cases, the Kremlin is able to rein in Kadyrov and impose its will. This is Moscow's way of balancing the difference forces around it because the country's security forces are quite upset that Russian law enforcement is not systematically applied in the republic. But in other cases, the Kremlin has to let Kadyrov win because it does not want to alienate him."

In April, following Dadayev's death, Kadyrov gave his top law enforcement officers permission to open fire at policemen from other Russian regions if they were found to be on Chechen territory without authorization.

Kadyrov has also been accused of hindering the work of federal law enforcement over the murder of opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, who was gunned down steps from the Kremlin in February. Ruslan Geremeyev, a former member of Chechnya's Sever police battalion who has long been fingered as a suspect in media reports about the murder, is set to be put on a national wanted list over his suspected role in the murder, the Interfax news agency reported Wednesday, citing an unnamed source familiar with the case.

Geremeyev has reportedly been in hiding in Grozny, guarded by Chechen security forces, presumably with Kadyrov's knowledge, Novaya Gazeta investigative newspaper has reported. Opposition activist Ilya Yashin claimed in April that Geremeyev could have fled to Dubai.

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