The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Kremlin Reacts to Attack on Journalists in Ingushetia

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March 10, 2016



An attack on a group of journalists and human rights activists at the border of Russian North Caucasus republics of Ingushetia and Chechnya on Wednesday has prompted international outrage and a response from the Kremlin.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the country's Interior Ministry to take the case under control. He asked the ministry to probe into the circumstances of the incident and report on what happened. His statement came several hours after presidential aide Dmitry Peskov called an attack on the journalists "absolute hooliganism," expressing "hope" Ingush law enforcement agencies would take "effective measures" to find those responsible.

On Wednesday evening, a group of eight journalists and activists were attacked by 15-20 masked men while returning in a minibus from a day trip in Ingushetia to the Chechen capital of Grozny. Two foreign nationals were among those injured in the attacks.

According to journalist Aleksandrina Yelagina, who was on board of attacked vehicle, the men

called the journalists and human rights activists “accomplices of terrorists” and took their mobile phones. They then set the minibus on fire. Yelagina said all those on board of the minibus were injured, but the most severely beaten were the driver and the two foreign correspondents. Four people were hospitalized at the Sunzha district hospital following the incident, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

Oeystein Windstad was one of the two foreign correspondents to be hospitalised. “It was awful, I thought I was going to die,” he is reported as telling the Norwegian Aftenposten newspaper on Thursday. He had teeth knocked out and a broken leg as the result of the incident.

The journalists were in Ingushetia on a tour organized by the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, a group that monitors human rights abuses in the region. During the tour, the journalists met torture victims and their families. The journalists reported that they were followed by cars with Chechen numbers from the very first day of their tour.

Tatyana Lokshina, Russian program director at Human Rights Watch, draws a straight line between Chechen authorities and the attack.

“It is meant as a signal to journalists, including international reporters, asking them to think twice about whether it's really worth working with this organization, and going to Chechnya,” she said.

Chechen authorities deny involvement in the attack. Chechnya's human rights ombudsman Nudri Nukhazhiev said the attack was a “publicity move” designed to promote the activities of the Committee for the Prevention of Torture.

The headquarters of the Joint Mobile Group in the Ingush town of Karabulak was attacked by an unidentified group of armed individuals on the very same day.

It is not the first time that the Group has been attacked, says Lokshina, but previous cases weren't properly investigated. This time, given the fact foreign nationals are involved, it will be more difficult for the Kremlin to not to react.

Yet others doubt federal authorities will intervene. “Kadyrov has an absolute right to act as he wants in any Russian region and even in Ukraine and Syria,” said Grigory Shvedov, editor-in-chief of Caucasian Knot, an online outlet specialized on Russia's North Caucasus.

“Only, perhaps, if some of the foreigners were killed, would this become a serious case,” Shvedov said.

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