

Critique of Chechnya Provokes Attack on Chief of Russian Anti-Torture NGO

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Head of the Committee Against Torture NGO Igor Kalyapin could have avoided an attack in the Chechen capital of Grozny if he had come to the Russian republic with good intentions, Chechnya's human rights ombudsman Nurdi Nukhazhiyev told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

"We could have protected him from attacks. We would have sat down and talked, held the event that he wanted to hold, shown him around," Nukhazhiyev said. If that had happened, the Chechen people would have understood that he came with good intentions and no one would have wanted to throw eggs at him, Nukhazhiyev added.

Kalyapin was attacked on Wednesday evening at the entrance of the Grozny City Hotel, located in the heart of the capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, Dmitry Utukin, a lawyer for the Committee Against Torture NGO, said in a Twitter post.

Utukin reported that about 15 attackers wearing black masks attacked the chairman of the

NGO, beating him and throwing eggs.

Prior to the attack, Kalyapin was evicted from the hotel by management for allegedly criticizing Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

"The director told me that because I criticized the head of the republic of Chechnya and the Chechen police, and he is very fond of Ramzan Akhmatovich [Kadyrov], I had to leave the hotel," Kalyapin wrote on his Facebook page on Thursday.

Kalyapin was meant to have a meeting with media representatives and the Chechen human rights activist Kheda Saratova at the hotel.

The Chechen police has launched an investigation into the incident.

Nukhazhiyev said that Kalyapin was attacked by hooligans who were unhappy with his behavior in Chechnya.

"Kalyapin must understand that if he constantly slings mud at the Chechen republic, the young people here will not give him a warm welcome," Nukhazhiyev added.

Chechnya's human rights ombudsman said the attack could wind up being profitable for Kalyapin — the attack could draw negative attention to the republic prior to forthcoming elections.

Kalyapin's visit to Grozny followed an attack on a group of Russian and foreign journalists and human rights activists in Russia's republic of Ingushetia near the border with Chechnya last week. The unidentified attackers wearing masks severely beat the journalists and set fire to their vehicle. Four people have been hospitalized as a result of the accident.

The Kremlin reacted to the incident, calling it "absolute hooliganism" and ordering the Interior Ministry on Thursday to recover control.

The activities of Kalyapin's anti-torture NGO have been repeatedly criticized by the Chechen authorities. The office of the organization and its staff have suffered regular attacks by groups of unidentified individuals in Chechnya. Over the past two years, the office of the organization in Grozny has been attacked at least three times.

Commenting on the latest incident, the Kremlin linked it with the attack on journalists in Ingushetia and called it "a dangerous tendency." Presidential aide Dmitry Peskov said the incident would not affect decisions regarding Kadyrov's tenure as leader of the republic.

Kadyrov's term expires on April 5. Thus far, Putin has not publicly commented on Kadyrov's reappointment but Kremlin sources told The Moscow Times earlier this week that Kadyrov would have another term.

Despite the Kremlin's admonishment, Kalyapin believes that human rights activists and journalists who publish reports that Chechen authorities dislike, will continue to endure attacks.

"The only way to prevent future incidents would be for Putin to tell Kadyrov directly to cease

and desist, and I don't understand why he hasn't done so yet," Kalyapin told The Moscow Times.

As Chechnya becomes an increasingly dangerous place for the anti-torture committee to operate, Kalyapin says they might consider closing the permanent staff offices in the republic — but would carry on their work nevertheless.

"Our lawyers will continue to participate in criminal cases in Chechnya, but whether they will continue to reside in the republic will be under discussion," Kalyapin said.

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