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Human Rights Activist Arrested on Drug Charges in Chechnya

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Oyub Titiyev / Odnoklassniki

The head of the Memorial human rights group in Chechnya was arrested on Tuesday for unlawful drug possession — a charge his supporters say is fabricated.

Memorial is one of Russia's oldest human rights organizations and has reported on forced abductions, torture and other human rights abuses by local authorities in the North Caucasus republic.

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Oyub Titiyev, 60, was arrested after police reportedly found 180 grams of marijuana in his car during a traffic stop, the investigative Novaya Gazeta newspaper reported Tuesday.

Human rights activists and Titiyev's long-time friends have called the charge "a deliberately

false accusation" that contradicts his religious beliefs and athletic lifestyle.

Titiyev took up the position as head of Memorial's Chechen office after the murder of his colleague, Natalya Estimirova, in 2009.

He has received increasing threats in recent years over his work, Human Rights Watch said in a statement on Tuesday, calling the latest effort an attempt to finally push Memorial out of Chechnya.

"Framing people for drug crimes has become an increasingly frequent tactic used by Chechnya's authorities to punish and discredit their critics in the eyes of conservative Chechen society," Human Rights Watch said.

Two cases involving fabricated drug charges previously targeted activist Ruslan Kutayev and journalist Zhelaudi Geriyev in 2014 and 2016, Novaya Gazeta reported.

"This is a common way to punish dissenters, independent journalists and human rights activists in Chechnya," the newspaper wrote.

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