The Moscow Times
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4 Suspects Face Charges in Dijon Ethnic Unrest Blamed on Chechens

By AFP

June 20, 2020



Police stand near a burnt van in the Gresilles area of Dijon on June 15. **Philippe Desmazes / AFP**

Prosecutors said Saturday they would charge four men in connection with violence blamed on Chechens in the eastern French city of Dijon, as local people marched calling for the resignation of the top local official.

Three of the four suspects are Russians, while the fourth is French of Russian origin, prosecutor Eric Mathais told journalists.

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They were among six people arrested Thursday in connection with three nights of violence sparked by an assault on a 16-year-old Chechen boy.

Dijon was rocked by three nights of violence from last weekend, after the boy was assaulted by

inhabitants of the deprived Gresilles district, home to many people originally from North Africa.

Twenty people were injured in the fighting, two of them seriously, including one who was shot, Mathais said.

Two men, a Russian and the Frenchman, have been charged with criminal association and intent, and with gathering to perpetrate violence and damage property, he added.

They could be jailed for up to 10 years if convicted.

The other two suspects are to face the same charges in addition to aggravated violence and property damage, and could be held in custody.

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Many cars were set on fire and security cameras were destroyed during the clashes.

"These people acknowledge being present during all or some of the events but deny taking part personally in the violence or causing damage," Mathais said.

Chechens reportedly came from all over France and from neighboring Belgium and Germany to join the fighting.

Scenes of the unrest, including men who identified themselves as "Arabs" in videos posted on social media and who brandished what appear to be assault rifles as well as handguns and clubs, shocked France and prompted questions about whether police had lost control of the situation.

On Friday, police raids in the district seized hashish, a knife and petrol bombs, Belgian license plates, gloves and ski masks.

Mathais pledged an "active and determined" investigation into the violence.

Meanwhile, French authorities rejected a request by Chechen representatives to hold a rally in Strasbourg in eastern France on Sunday, owing to restrictions stemming from the coronavirus epidemic.

The head of a Chechen association said they sought to protest legally "and prove that contrary to what some say, we are not a bunch of delinquents."

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