The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Rights Groups File Syria Torture Case Against Russian Mercenaries

By Jonathan Brown for AFP

March 15, 2021



Wagner has been linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a powerful ally of President Vladimir Putin. **Bulent Kilik / AFP**

Three campaign groups announced on Monday a landmark legal case in Moscow against Russian mercenary group Wagner over the torture of a detainee in Syria, aiming to hold to account a murky fighting force with Kremlin links.

The legal push against private military contractor Wagner Group follows a wave of torture-related cases in Europe against Syrian regime officials a decade into a punishing war whose tide was turned by Moscow's military intervention in 2015.

Related article: Russian Press Names Wagner Mercenary as Likely Perpetrator in Gruesome Syria Beheading

Three prominent advocacy groups from France, Russia and Syria filed the criminal complaint against alleged members of the contractor outfit over the 2017 beheading of a man believed to have deserted from the Syrian army.

Wagner has been linked to a powerful ally of President Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin and the case probing potential "war crimes" is unlikely to lead to any convictions.

Prigozhin, 59, who has been hit with U.S. sanctions for meddling in the U.S. presidential election in 2016, denies any association with Wagner.

'Wave of impunity'

But the proceedings represent a rare attempt to bring Wagner out into the open, several years after reports of their deployment in conflicts across the Middle East and Africa first emerged.

"This complaint is important because we aren't just dealing with a single crime. This is a whole wave of impunity," Alexander Cherkasov, a senior member of Memorial — one of the groups bringing the claim — told AFP.

"People who escape punishment after carrying out crimes like this are given the opportunity to repeat them in places like Chechnya, eastern Ukraine and Syria. In the end they come back to Russia and walk on the streets among us."

Although private military companies are illegal in Russia, Wagner has in recent years played an increasingly important role in buttressing and realising the Kremlin's ambitions abroad, observers say.

Members of the group were reportedly dispatched alongside Russian war planes and ground troops following Moscow's intervention in the Syrian war in September 2015 on the side of President Bashar al-Assad's army.

Moscow has never confirmed reports of Wagner mercenaries but on Monday said that since its operation launched in Syria 112 Russian troops had died in combat operations.

Wagner's presence there was forced into the spotlight in 2018 when independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta reported that several Russian-speaking men who executed and mutilated a detainee on video in the eastern Homs province were Wagner fighters.

The complaint brought Monday on behalf of the victim's family aims to force Moscow to bring criminal proceedings against the alleged members of the private contractor group, in what NGOs say is the first case of its kind.

In a statement, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Memorial and the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression said they had filed evidence that clearly links at least one defendant to Wagner.

'Moral responsibility'

"The Russian government must assume its legal and moral responsibilities for the violations

committed by its army, including the private entities involved in external military operations under its command, such as the Wagner Group," said Mazen Darwish, director general and founder of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression.

Ilya Novikov, one of the Syrian family's lawyers, said Russia is obliged under its constitution to investigate crimes carried out by Russian nationals abroad.

But, he added, "the Investigative Committee has not, to date, initiated any investigation of the crime in question."

The Kremlin said Monday it was aware of the complaint but that it was "an issue for the Investigative Committee, not the presidential administration."

It follows dozens of other cases brought in Germany, Austria, Sweden and Norway against officials in Assad's regime by around 100 refugees, backed by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), a Berlin-based group.

Across Europe, activists are joining forces with police and UN investigators in collecting testimonies, sifting through tens of thousands of photos, videos and files of one of the best documented conflicts in history.

European officials have also taken note of Wagner's role in conflicts beyond Syria, slapping sanctions on Prigozhin last year for destabilizing Libya.

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