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Russia Launches Criminal Probe After Award-Winning Reporter Attacked

By AFP

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Yelena Milashina. **Anna Artemyeva / Novaya Gazeta**

Russian investigators on Wednesday said they had launched a criminal investigation after award-winning journalist Yelena Milashina was badly beaten in Chechnya.

Milashina, 45, covers rights abuses in Chechnya, the Caucasus republic ruled for years by Ramzan Kadyrov, a former warlord.

Milashina, who reports for Russia's top independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta, and Alexander Nemov, a lawyer, were badly beaten this week in the restive republic of Chechnya.

She is in a "difficult" condition in a Moscow hospital, her editor told AFP earlier in the day.

The Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said in a statement it opened a criminal inquiry into the intentional infliction of "moderate" bodily harm and "light" bodily harm.

The top investigator in Chechnya, Vitaly Volkov, told the head of the Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, that the investigation had been launched following a preliminary probe.

Genuine official investigations into rights abuses are very rare in Chechnya.

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International media advocates and rights groups voiced concern after Milashina said she had been battered and held at gunpoint with Nemov during a work trip to the volatile region in southern Russia.

"Milashina is in Moscow in hospital. Her condition is, frankly, difficult: she was really severely beaten," Dmitry Muratov, the editor of Novaya Gazeta, told AFP reporters.

Novaya Gazeta published a video of Milashina in hospital with her head shaven and her hands bandaged. Nemov received a knife wound in the assault.

In a video interview, the journalist said around 10 to 15 attackers had beaten her with plastic pipes.

'It really hurt'

Milashina said that authorities routinely used such pipes to attack detainees in Chechnya. She said she had written about the practice before and now experienced it for the first time.

"It is a powerful weapon," she said in the video, smiling. "It really hurt."

The attackers, who demanded she reveal her phone password, also threatened to break her fingers.

She said the assault was linked to her work with Nemov, adding she heard the attackers telling the lawyer: "You defend too many people here."

She also said they shaved her head and poured a green-colored dye over her.

The Kremlin and the strongman leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, said those responsible should be identified.

On Wednesday, Vladimir Putin's spokesman said it would take time for a full probe to be conducted, and that investigators were carrying out their work.

"Let's just wait. The reactions have all been voiced and now all actions are being taken," Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Muratov said Milashina's fingers were also injured, adding that "her condition is what you'd expect."

Since 2000, Novaya Gazeta has seen six of its journalists and contributors killed, including

investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya, who was shot dead in Moscow on President Vladimir Putin's birthday.

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