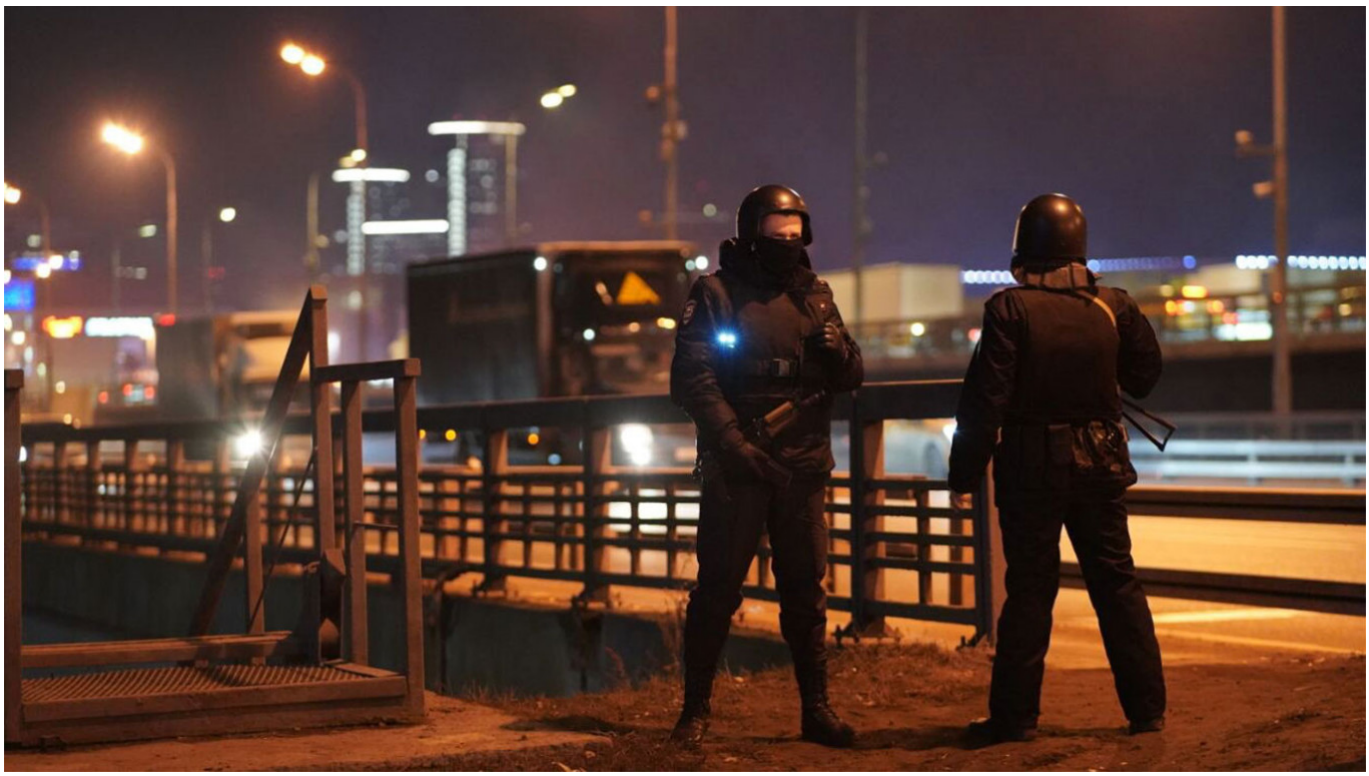
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Chechen Man's Death in Police Custody a 'Suicide,' Human Rights Official Says

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Police officers outside Crocus City Hall. **Alexander Avilov / Moskva News Agency**

A Chechen man committed suicide in police custody late last month, the republic of Chechya's human rights chief said Wednesday, after previous unconfirmed reports alleged the man was tortured to death by law enforcement agents.

Askhab Uspanov was found dead at a Moscow police station hours after being detained on March 22, his relatives said, the same day of the deadly Crocus City Hall attack that was claimed by Islamic militants.

"According to the official law enforcement version, Uspanov committed suicide," Chechnya's human rights ombudsman Mansur Soltaev said on the messaging app Telegram.

Soltaev is the first official to publicly comment on the man's reported death, nearly three weeks after it is said to have taken place.

Uspanov's mother told the investigative news outlet Agentstvo earlier this week that she does

not believe her son could have committed suicide because of his Muslim faith.

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According to Soltaev, the man's relatives said he had been detained "a few hours before" the evening attack on the Crocus City Hall concert venue outside Moscow. Previous unconfirmed reports claimed Uspanov was violently detained on suspicion of being involved in the mass shooting and then tortured to death.

Soltaev dismissed any links between Uspanov's detention and the concert attack as "provocations" by "pro-Western media and foreign agents."

"According to his relatives, Askhab could not have been involved in the terrorist attack on Crocus," the Chechen human rights chief said.

"We're using all legal means to uncover the truth and will seek a thorough procedural review," Soltaev said, though it was unclear whether he was referring to Uspanov's alleged suicide or "provocative" attempts to link his detention to the massacre.

The Chechen opposition group 1Adat, which first reported on Uspanov's death in police custody late last week, shared graphic footage of what was claimed to be his body after an autopsy. The person recording one of the videos said the man had a fractured skull, a broken ribcage and a broken spine.

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