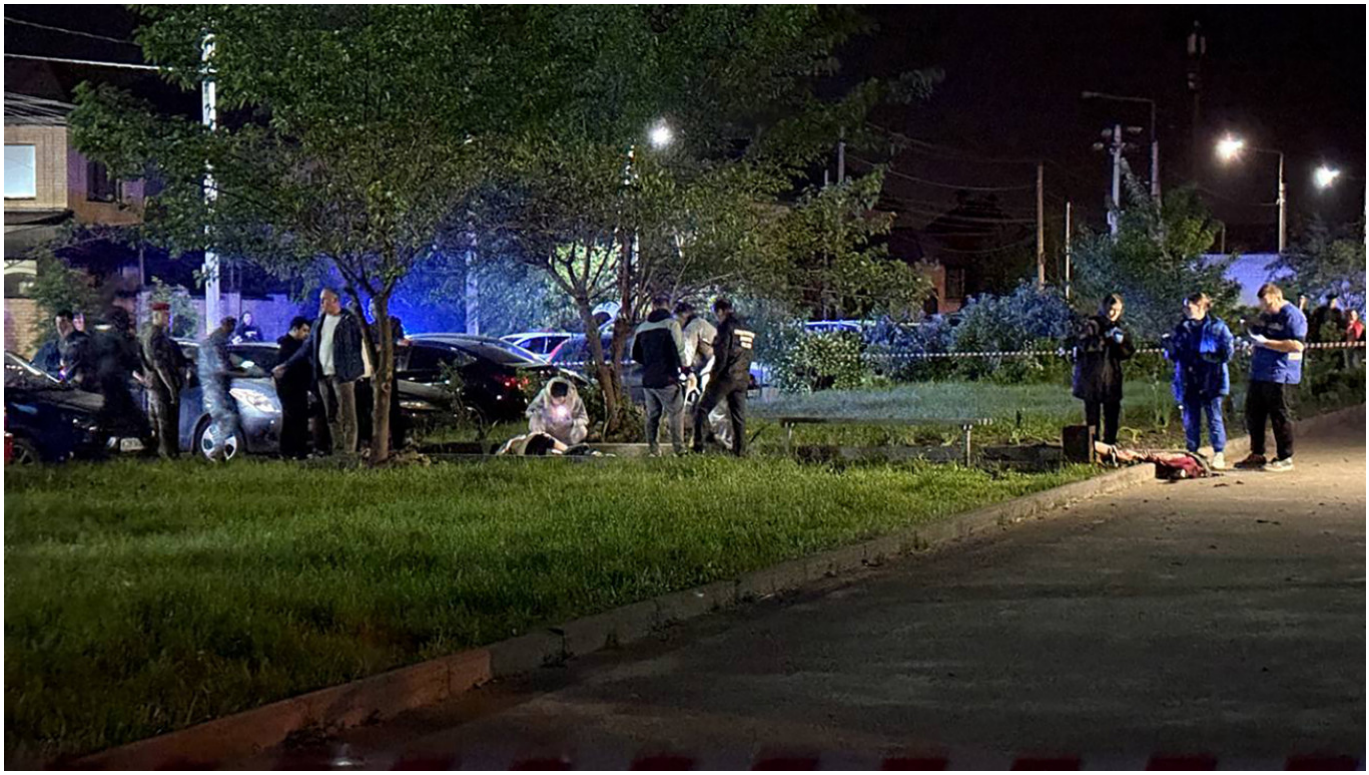
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Suspect in Apparent Assassination of Mariupol Siege Air Commander Arrested in Southern Russia

June 09, 2025



Irina Ambartsumyan / TASS

A Russian court has ordered the pre-trial detention of a person suspected of killing a former military officer who commanded air operations during the siege of Mariupol.

Major Zaur Gurtsiyev, who was serving as deputy mayor of the southern city of Stavropol at the time of his death, was killed along with an acquaintance, Nikita Penkov, in a bomb blast on May 28. An explosive device is believed to have been in a bag carried by Penkov.

Telegram news channels with links to Russian law enforcement authorities claimed that Penkov may not have been aware that a bomb was inside his bag. Friends of Penkov, a former police officer, told BBC Russia that he had shown little interest in politics or the war in Ukraine.

On Friday, the Leninsky District Court in Stavropol ordered a suspect identified only as "Kh."

to remain in pre-trial custody until at least July 29. The court did not disclose the full names of the suspect or the victims, referring to them only by their last initials.

The suspect faces charges of aggravated murder and illegal trafficking of explosive devices, according to a court statement. The Interfax news agency reported Monday that terrorism is being considered as one of several possible motives behind the attack.

Related article: Mariupol Siege Air Commander Killed in Bomb Attack

Gurtsiyev oversaw air operations during Russia's devastating siege of the southern Ukrainian port city of Mariupol. According to an official biography, he "implemented best practices in missile guidance technology," improving strike "accuracy and efficiency."

Human Rights Watch says that at least 8,000 people were killed during the siege of Mariupol, which lasted between March and May 2022. Since claiming military control over the ruined city, Russia has sought to rebuild homes and structures that its army damaged and destroyed.

Born in Vladikavkaz in 1990, Gurtsiyev joined the Russian Armed Forces in 2007 and graduated from the S. M. Budyonny Military Academy of the Signal Corps in 2012. He became Stavropol's first deputy mayor in September 2024.

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