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Azerbaijan-Russia Rift Deepens After Deaths of Azeri Men in Police Arrests

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Ilya Moskovets / URA.RU / TASS

Diplomatic relations between Russia and Azerbaijan have hit a new low following the deaths of two ethnic Azerbaijani men during mass police arrests in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg last week.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry summoned Russia's chargé d'affaires, Pyotr Volokovykh, on Saturday to protest what it called the "brutal killing" of the two Azerbaijani men during Friday's raids. The ministry said several others were seriously injured.

Russian law enforcement authorities initially said the arrests targeted an "ethnic criminal group" linked to murders from the early 2000s, and confirmed the detainees were Azerbaijani-born Russian citizens. In total, around 50 people were arrested.

Police did not acknowledge any deaths until later, when Russia's Investigative Committee said Monday that one man appeared to have died from heart failure, while the cause of the second death was still under investigation.

Relatives of the victims, identified in Azerbaijani media as brothers Ziyaddin and Huseyn Safarov, said that an autopsy of the two bodies, which were reportedly sent to Azerbaijan, will be conducted in Baku sometime this week.

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In a sign of the diplomatic fallout, Azerbaijan's Culture Ministry on Sunday canceled all Russian-linked concerts, exhibitions and festivals, citing "demonstrative targeted and extrajudicial killings" carried out on ethnic grounds. Azerbaijan's parliament also pulled out of a scheduled bilateral meeting in Moscow, and the government canceled a visit by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk.

"The government of Azerbaijan does not consider it appropriate under the current circumstances for Overchuk or any other official representative of Russia to visit the country," the Azerbaijani news agency Report quoted officials as saying.

The Kremlin said it "sincerely regrets" the cancellation of Russian cultural programs in Azerbaijan.

Later on Monday, law enforcement authorities in Baku raided the office of Sputnik Azerbaijan, the local branch of Russia's state news network. Although Sputnik officially suspended operations in the South Caucasus country earlier this year after a new media law restricted foreign ownership, it continued publishing content online.

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry claimed the news outlet "continues to operate through illegal financing," while also confirming that arrests had been made during the police search.

Local news outlets reported that Sputnik Azerbaijan editor-in-chief Igor Kartavykh and deputy editor Evgeny Belousov were among those arrested on Monday. Several Azerbaijani outlets claimed that the two men are employees of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), but there was no official confirmation of that information.

A third Russian journalist was arrested on Monday while filming the police search, according to the Russian state-owned Ruptly video news agency.

Amid the reports, Russia's Foreign Ministry said Azerbaijan's ambassador in Moscow was summoned "in connection with the unfriendly actions of Baku and the illegal detention of Russian journalists."

Relations between Russia and Azerbaijan have grown increasingly strained since Russian air defenses shot down a passenger plane flying from Baku to Grozny in the republic of Chechnya in December. The plane ultimately crashed in western Kazakhstan, killing 38 people on board.

Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a rare apology to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev over the crash. Still, he stopped short of accepting responsibility, saying air defense systems in Chechnya were responding to a Ukrainian drone strike on the day of the disaster.

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