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Yekaterinburg Court Places 6 Azerbaijanis in Pre-Trial Detention Amid Cold-Case Probe

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Shahin Lalayev. **Donat Sorokin / TASS**

A court in the city of Yekaterinburg on Wednesday placed six ethnic Azerbaijani men in pre-trial detention over a decades-old murder case, days after the deaths of two Azerbaijani detainees in Russian custody sparked a bitter diplomatic row between Moscow and Baku.

Law enforcement authorities initially arrested more than 50 people on Friday in connection with the unsolved murders of Azerbaijani businessmen in Yekaterinburg dating back to the early 2000s, according to local media.

Russian investigators said six ethnic Azerbaijani men with Russian citizenship — four of them with the last name Safarov — were ultimately arrested. They claimed one man died of a heart attack during the mass arrests and that the second death remained under investigation.

The bodies of the two deceased men, brothers Ziyaddin Safarov, 55, and Huseyn Safarov, 60,

were flown to Baku. An Azerbaijani autopsy concluded both had died from severe blood loss and shock caused by extensive physical trauma.

Azerbaijan's Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal investigation into what it described as their "cruel and deliberate murder."

On Wednesday, the Leninsky District Court in Yekaterinburg placed the sixth and final defendant of the murder case, Shakhin Lalaev, in pre-trial detention until July 19, according to the Kommersant business newspaper.

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Kommersant, citing anonymous sources, previously reported that an "ethnic criminal group" had allegedly engaged in racketeering, drug trafficking and prostitution in Yekaterinburg since the late 1990s.

According to the newspaper, that organized crime group is thought to be linked to the 2001 stabbing death of local businessman Yunus Pashayev, the 2010 attempted murder of businessman Fehruz Shirinov and the 2011 shooting death of vegetable warehouse owner Ikram Hajiyev.

Meanwhile, on Tuesday evening, armed law enforcement agents in Yekaterinburg violently arrested the head of a local Azerbaijani diaspora group, with video on social media showing security agents smashing the windows of his SUV and dragging him from the vehicle.

Local media reported that the diaspora leader, Shakhin Shykhlinsky, was interrogated as a witness in the ongoing cold case murder investigation and subsequently released from police custody later that night.

Moscow on Tuesday summoned Azerbaijan's ambassador and accused Baku of "taking deliberate steps to dismantle bilateral relations," Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

Baku said its ambassador had expressed "serious concern" about the "illegal" actions of Russian police and the "use of torture" during the detention of Azerbaijani citizens.

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