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RUSSIA: Kabardino-Balkaria mosque-goers blacklisted as extremist

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18

Names of those detained or wanted for Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria were culled from "Wahhabi lists" - police records of regular mosque-goers, local Muslims have told Forum 18 News Service. The republic's late President, Valeri Kokov, in 2002 announced the compilation of a list of 400 Islamic extremists and the authorities' readiness "to take any measures against them, including physical elimination." At the top of the list were the three leaders of the main rival organisation to Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate, all of whom have since gone missing. A state representative denied the existence of the "Wahhabi lists" to Forum 18. The head of the Spiritual Directorate acknowledged to Forum 18 the possibility that some ordinary Muslims may have been targeted by police, but added that, "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"Everyone who went to mosque was noted down and targeted as extremist," the widow of Anzor Tengizov suggested to Forum 18 News Service in Nalchik on 23 July. Tengizov was shot dead on the street by police in unclear circumstances on 27 June 2007. Names of those detained or wanted for extremist activity in the southern Russian republic of Kabardino-Balkaria were culled from "Wahhabi lists" - police records of regular mosque-goers - compiled during a 2003-5 state crackdown on local Muslims, relatives believe (see F18News 19 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172>).

"Wahhabism" is a loose term for Islamic extremism commonly used in Russia and Central Asia (see F18News 8 August 2007 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1004>).

Many of the 59 detainees now facing trial for participating in the bloody 2005 Nalchik uprising were also arrested solely because they follow Islam, the mother of one, Fatima Tekayeva, has insisted to Forum 18 (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171>).

Forum 18 is unaware of reports about state repression towards non-Muslim confessions in Kabardino-Balkaria.

"The law enforcement agencies have compiled lists of so-called 'adherents of Wahhabism', including practically all young mosque-goers," Anzor Astemirov, then Assistant Director of Kabardino-Balkaria Islamic Research Institute - an unregistered body in conflict with the republic's Muslim Spiritual Directorate - told a round table in Moscow, Gazeta Yuga regional newspaper reported on 5 June 2003.

Then Kabardino-Balkaria President Valeri Kokov announced the compilation of a list of extremists at a March 2002 briefing to the republic's Interior Ministry, local journalist Fatima Tlisova writes in a May 2007 paper "Kabardino-Balkaria: a view from within." "Every one of these 400 people is under round-the-clock surveillance, and the law enforcement agencies are ready to take any measures against them, including physical elimination," the President reportedly said.

The republic's Interior Ministry, "having lengthened the list many times, began an active campaign against completely innocent Muslims who frequented mosques, under the guise of battling against religious extremism," a 1 March 2006 open statement by their relatives maintains. "In this way, our truly believing, upright and selfless sons were recorded as 'Wahhabis'."

Ex-KGB officer Ruslan Nakhushiev, then Director of the Kabardino-Balkaria Islamic Research Institute and perceived as a bridge between the state and the independent Muslim community, was surprised to find himself No. 2 on the extremist list, he told Fatima Tlisova in a 29 September 2004 Institute for War and Peace Reporting interview. "I don't go to mosque, don't fast, don't practise daily prayers (..) It's absolutely clear to me that the people on this list have been 'registered' according to the principles of the NKVD [Stalinist secret police]."

Nakhushiev disappeared in mysterious circumstances on 4 November 2005. The Institute's assistant directors, Anzor Astemirov and Musa Mukozhev, were also at the top of the list and are still wanted by police.

Interviewed in "Attack at Dawn", a 31 October 2005 documentary on the Nalchik uprising by Russia's state Channel 1 TV channel, Junior Interior Minister Andrei Novikov pointed out that "so-called pure Islam, Wahhabism" was being propagated in the mosque in the Nalchik suburb of Volny Aul, closed down in 2004 (see F18News 19 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1172>).

"There are no Wahhabi lists," Boris Pashtov, head of Kabardino-Balkaria Parliament's recently formed Committee for Youth Affairs and Social Organisations - whose brief includes religious affairs, insisted to Forum 18 on 25 July. "And there were none. There were some local police lists - not of Wahhabis - unofficial documents." If police found weapons at a mosque, for example, they would "note down who was there and watch who goes there, as part of routine. And so people began talking about lists."

Asked whether he believed that those detained by police were truly engaged in Islam-inspired violence, Mufti Anas Pshikhachev of Kabardino-Balkaria's Muslim Spiritual Directorate said he did not want to judge. There may have been mistakes, he acknowledged, "but you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

One consequence of being listed as an extremist is loss of employment, local Muslims maintain. Former imam Arsen Tukov said his son Mansur could not find a job in any organisation when it became known that he prayed five times a day. "We were all on a list, so he ended up being a car mechanic," he told Forum 18 on 23 July. "Even then, the special services found out and told his boss to 'get rid of that Muslim unless you want problems'." Mansur Tukov was found "as if just killed" among alleged militants' corpses a month after the October 2005 uprising, his father recalled.

"Of course I'm on their list as a potential mujahid [Muslim warrior]," brother of detainee Rasul Kudayev, Arsen Mokayev told Forum 18 on 25 July. Following two years in Guantanamo Bay Detention Centre, the United States released Kudayev without charge in February 2004. His mother Fatima Tekayeva believes his status as a former Guantanamo Bay inmate is the reason for his arrest and current detention as an alleged participant in the 2005 Nalchik uprising (see F18News 18 August 2008 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1171>).

Mokayev explained to Forum 18 that as most current building work in Kabardino-Balkaria is on state security installations such as border guard facilities, access is barred to those noted by the police. When he obtained work earlier, he said, an "authorised person" would approach the employer and he would have to leave with no possibility for redress. "We have a saying in Balkar," Mokayev remarked to Forum 18. "If the mullah - who used to be the community judge in tsarist times - rapes your wife, who do you complain to?" (END)

For a personal commentary by Irina Budkina, editor of the <<http://www.samstar.ru>> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, see F18News 26 May 2005 <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570>.

For more background see Forum 18's Russia religious freedom survey at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=947>.

Reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <<http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>>.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at <<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=europe&Rootmap=russi>>.

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