

Ethnic Tensions Flare in the Military

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Seven military conscripts from Dagestan landed in prison last year for forcing fellow sailors in the Baltic Fleet to spell out the word "Caucasus" with their bodies.

The military's top prosecutor warned in February that ethnic tensions were a main reason for hazing — acts of abuse among soldiers that are occurring at least 11 times per day in army units.

Then a senior regional military officer broke the news that the General Staff in Moscow had banned conscripts from the North Caucasus for the spring draft, which started this month.

The General Staff kept mum about the conscription drive Tuesday, and lower ranking military officials denied that a ban had been ordered. But officials acknowledged that many North Caucasus natives were being kept separate from other conscripts in an indication that matters are far from calm in the ranks.

North Caucasus conscripts are sent to Interior Ministry units in their own regions simply

because they are of more use there, Igor Korotchenko, a member of Defense Ministry's public council, said by telephone.

"It is more useful when people who know the language and local customs are used to fight armed gangs," he said. The Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus is largely countered by Interior Troops, not the army.

But Korotchenko conceded that the army is plagued by ethnic violence, which he ascribed to the weak leadership of commanders on the ground and a lack of military police to tackle the issue.

Ethnic tensions have flared in Moscow and other parts of Russia in recent months, leading to violent attacks and unprecedented rioting outside the Kremlin in December.

Tensions in the military broke into the spotlight last week when Nikolai Zakharov, head of the Chelyabinsk region's conscription department, [told](#) local news web site MediaZavod.ru that the General Staff had ordered a ban on North Caucasus conscripts.

The order, which Zakharov said was issued verbally during a meeting in Moscow attended by conscription department heads from the regions, aimed to decrease ethnic violence caused by conflicts in army units.

The Central Military District's press office dismissed Zakharov's comments when interviewed by MediaZavod.ru. Unidentified Defense Ministry representatives also denied the statement, Komsomolskaya Pravda [reported](#) Monday.

Zakharov and Defense Ministry officials were unavailable for comment Tuesday, and the General Staff issued no statement on the matter.

But a Dagestani conscription official told The Moscow Times that no restrictions were in place.

The conscription office in Makhachkala was actually ordered to step up the number of conscripts to 6,000 this spring, compared with 4,200 last fall, the official, Yanus Dzhambalayev, said by telephone.

"People from the North Caucasus are citizens of the Russian Federation, and they are obliged to serve like anyone else," he said.

He said local teens — unlike their peers in many other regions — are eager to join the army, seeing it as a vehicle for social promotion.

But Dzhambalayev acknowledged that "most" conscripts would serve their mandatory 12 months in Interior Ministry or Emergency Situations Ministry units, not the military. He also said they would serve in units across the country, not just in Dagestan.

Timur Makoyev, who is overseeing the spring conscription in another North Caucasus republic, Kabardino-Balkaria, also said he was not aware of any ethnicity-based bans, the Regnum news agency [reported](#) Tuesday.

But how to deal with ethnic tensions is a hot issue within the armed forces. The problem was singled out in a February report by chief military prosecutor Sergei Fridinsky, who said ethnic tensions were among the primary causes of some 500 hazing incidents reported from Jan. 1 through the time the report was compiled.

"Servicemen of various ethnic groups ... attempt to impose their own rules in military communities," Fridinsky said.

Several of the incidents have hit the media spotlight, sparking outrage. Among them was the decision of the seven Dagestani conscripts to force their comrades in the Baltic Fleet to arrange their bodies on the ground to spell out "Kavkaz," the Russian word for "Caucasus." A military court convicted them of hazing and sentenced them to prison terms of 18 to 21 months.

Independent military analyst Alexander Golts blamed the ethnic tensions on a breakdown in order in the armed forces following clumsily implemented reforms aimed at establishing a corps of professional sergeants to keep order among the troops.

The ethnic problem dates back to Soviet times, Golts said. Military officials were previously able to solve it by distributing conscripts from ethnic republics among units nationwide, thus preventing them from forming large groups, but this is becoming increasingly harder to do because their numbers are growing due to higher birthrates in the North Caucasus than the rest of Russia, he said.

"Earlier, the demographic factor was different and ethnic Slavs prevailed within the units, but the situation is different today," Golts said.

Desperate officials have even looked to tsarist Russia's experience to solve the problem, proposing the creation of "monoethnic" units comprised solely of North Caucasus natives. The practice was popularized during World War I when the Caucasus-based "Wild Division" distinguished itself on the front.

Nothing has come of this idea so far, though the modern Russian army has had its own history of "monoethnic" divisions with the Vostok and Zapad battalions comprised of ethnic Chechens. The battalions performed well during the second Chechen campaign and the war with Georgia in 2008 but were dissolved shortly after the Georgian conflict, purportedly because of a conflict between their commanders and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

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