

Ex-Colonel Who Killed Chechen Shot Dead

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A disgraced Russian army colonel convicted of murdering a Chechen teenage girl was gunned down in a brazen, contract-style killing in downtown Moscow on Friday, investigators said.

Yury Budanov was sentenced to 10 years in jail for kidnapping and strangling to death 18-year-old Heda Kungayeva in 2000 during a war between Islamist Chechen separatists and the federal government. His 2009 release on parole sparked protests in Chechnya, but was cheered by Russian ultranationalists and neo-Nazis.

An unidentified assassin fired six shots at Budanov as the 48-year-old ex-colonel walked out of a notary office on a central Moscow street, Russia's top investigative agency said. Four of the shots hit him in the head, killing him instantly, and his body was found on a sidewalk next to a playground.

The assassin left a gun with a silencer in a half-burned car that was found several blocks away from the murder site, the Investigative Committee said.

Human rights defenders have accused Russian security forces and their pro-Moscow Chechen allies of widespread abuses against residents of Chechnya, including kidnapping, torture and extrajudicial killings. Thousands of civilians were killed or went missing during and after the conflict.

Budanov was one of only a handful of Russian officers to be prosecuted over what rights groups say were widespread atrocities during two wars in Chechnya.

During the trial, Budanov said he strangled Kungayeva in a fit of rage, believing she was a rebel sniper. Lawyers for the woman's family also accused him of raping and torturing her, but the charges were later dropped.

Investigators said no evidence of involvement of ethnic Chechens in the killing was found. "The murder could have been a provocation," Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said in televised remarks.

The father of Budanov's victim made a disparaging comment about Budanov's death, but said it was not related to his daughter's killing.

"A dog's death for a dog," Visa Kungayev, who lives with his family in Norway, told RIA Novosti. "Other people don't need to avenge my daughter and they won't."

Kungayev compared the killing to the 2009 contract-style murder of a prominent human rights advocate who defended his family's interests in court.

"I think investigators will sort it out," Kungayev was quoted as saying. "They did sort out the killing of my lawyer."

Shortly after Budanov's release on parole, prominent human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov was gunned down in central Moscow along with Novaya Gazeta reporter Anastasia Baburova. Two Russian neo-Nazis convicted of the murder said during their trial that they hoped the murder would be blamed on Budanov's supporters.

A respected human rights group said a vendetta was one of the possible reasons behind the murder. "It could have been revenge for other crimes Budanov committed while serving in Chechnya," Memorial's chairman Oleg Orlov said.

His group has long claimed that Budanov, who headed a tank regiment operating in central Chechnya, was involved in the kidnapping of at least seven other Chechen civilians. Four of them were found dead with hands bound and traces of torture, it said.

"We have serious evidence to think that he was implicated in those murders," Orlov told The Associated Press.

A 2009 trial cleared Budanov of those charges.

Chechnya's Kremlin-backed leader Ramzan Kadyrov said at the time that Chechens will "find a proper way" to get their revenge against him.

Rights groups said Budanov received more lenient treatment than some people convicted

of nonviolent crimes, showing authorities' tacit acceptance of human rights abuses in Chechnya and neighboring provinces in the Caucasus region.

After Budanov's arrest in 2000, a military court ruled that he was temporarily insane at the time of the killing and not criminally responsible. But a Supreme Court ruling ordered a new trial that ended with Budanov's conviction in 2003 after which he was stripped of his rank and awards.

The leader of a banned neo-Nazi group claimed that ethnic Chechens organized Budanov's murder and that his death will trigger racist violence.

"If Chechens solve their problems with guns, why would (ethnic) Russians solve theirs with whining and courts?" said Dmitry Demushkin, who headed the Slavic Union, one of the most influential and radical groups of Russian ultranationalists.

Moscow police officials said they dispatched patrols and riot police to prevent possible ethnic violence at a square near the Kremlin where Russian nationalists clashed with Caucasus natives in December.

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