



Kirill Kudryavtsev/Agence France-Presse

Epiphany holiday in St. Petersburg took a chilly plunge Monday.

Gunman kills 'lawyer in Chechnya case

Journalist also dies in 'Moscow attack

By Michael Schwartz

MOSCOW: The lawyer who recently fought against the early release of a former Russian tank commander imprisoned for murdering a young Chechen woman was shot and killed Monday in a brazen daylight assassination by a gunman in central Moscow, officials said.

The lawyer, Stanislav Markelov, had attempted a last-minute appeal against the release of the former commander, Yuri Budanov, a decorated Russian Army colonel before he was stripped of his rank, who was freed Thursday.

Anastasia Baburova, a journalist who was with Markelov, was also shot and killed, according to a spokeswoman for Novaya Gazeta, a newspaper highly critical of the government, where Baburova, 25, worked as a freelancer. Officials say they do not believe she was a target.

"Investigators are looking into various theories, including that the murder was linked to the victim's professional activities," Vladimir Markin, a spokesman for the investigative wing of the Prosecutor General's Office, said of Markelov.

Contract killings ordered by politicians and business interests are not uncommon in Russia, but even so, the audacity of Markelov's killing surprised some commentators.

"Even when organized crime in the 1990s was rampant; such a killing would have been considered bold and horrific," said a correspondent from Vesti television.

And Markelov, 34, appears to have compiled a long list of potential enemies in a decade-long legal career focused mainly on human rights and social justice cases. In 2004, he was attacked by a group of young men in the Moscow subway and was hospitalized.

Most recently, he had gained prominence representing the family of Elza Kungayeva, an 18-year-old Chechen woman, whom Budanov admitted to strangling in his quarters in March 2000, just as the second post-Soviet war in Chechnya was beginning to rage. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison, but given early parole for good behavior.

Markelov was shot near the building in central Moscow where he had just told reporters at a news conference that he might file an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights against Budanov's early release.

In an interview last week with The New York Times, Markelov said he might also file a lawsuit against the administration of the prison where Budanov was held.

The decision to release Budanov has reignited long-simmering tensions after nearly a decade of intermittent war in

the restive southern Russian republic of Chechnya, sparking street protests and outrage among both human rights groups and the Chechen leadership, two groups that are often in conflict.

But Budanov was also revered by nationalists as a Russian hero who helped wage a bloody but necessary war against separatist rebels in Chechnya. Some now see Markelov's murder as payback for his efforts against the former colonel.

"The murder of Markelov I consider a bold open warning by the 'party of war' to democratic Russia," Nudri Nukhazhiev, Chechnya's human rights ombudsman, said in a statement.

Lela Khamzayeva, another lawyer for Kungayeva's family, was adamant, however, that the murder could not be linked to his connection to Budanova, since his role during the actual proceedings against the former colonel was, by her words, "insignificant."

"If someone is trying to link this murder with Markelov's participation in the Budanov case, well, that's just ridiculous," she said.

Markelov has been involved in many other contentious cases.

He worked closely with Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist with Novaya Gazeta, who was both revered and reviled for her strongly critical coverage of Russia's policies in Chechnya. He often defended the interests of those, like Kungayeva, who became ensnared in the violent and often arbitrary military justice of the Chechen conflict or the tyrannical rule of Chechnya in the war's aftermath.

"He handled almost every case opened as a result of the work of Anna Politkovskaya," said Nadezhda Prusenkova, a spokeswoman for Novaya Gazeta.

Politkovskaya was killed in her apartment building in October 2006.

The trial against three men charged with organizing her killing is ongoing. Her killer has yet to be detained.

■ Inquiry urged in Austria

A human rights group is urging the Russian and Austrian authorities to investigate the murder of a Chechen man who, they say, claimed that the Kremlin-backed leader of Chechnya personally tortured him. The Associated Press reported from Moscow.

Umar Israilov, a former bodyguard of the Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov, fled to Austria and was gunned down in Vienna last Tuesday.

Tatyana Lokshina of the Moscow office of Human Rights Watch said Friday that an "urgent and detailed" investigation was needed to bring Israilov's killers to justice.

The Vienna public prosecutor's office said it had no proof that Israilov was killed by a hit man or that the killing was political.

Mideast dreams

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been hampered by on the conflict. And, in an interview Monday layers are becoming tant.

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channels between Israel and Syria over the future of the Golan Heights, which Israel captured during the 1967 war.

Turkey wants to engage Hamas to achieve a long-term peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians, so the EU sees Ankara as an important line of communication with Hamas leaders.

Speaking in Brussels on Monday, Solana defended the European role in the crisis. "I think the EU has been engaging from the very beginning in trying to find a solution," he said. "In the end, the cease-fire was in cooperation with Egypt, which is a country that had a very important role to play and we supported them."

The EU, Solana added "will be willing to help in any manner necessary: humanitarian and reconstruction assistance, but also on the ground."

But that is far from easy for Europeans who have reduced infrastructure aid in the region after much of their previous efforts was turned to rubble in past Israeli assaults.

The EU spent €550 million, or \$720 million, to support the Palestinians in 2007, the last full year for which figures are available, but it has refused to deal with the Hamas government in Gaza. It spent nothing on infrastructure for the Palestinian Authority in 2003, 2004 and 2006, and only €40.5 million in 2005.

European diplomats said Monday that they expected a donors' conference would take up the challenge of rebuilding the Gaza Strip after the massive destruction wrought by the Israelis. But