

Violence in Muslim region disturbs Russian "ant-hill" sect



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By Nastassia Astrasheuskaya

KAZAN, Russia (Reuters) - When Russian police came crashing in on a secretive Muslim community in the city of Kazan last month, they were hunting weapons and violent suspects following attacks on leading clerics in the mainly Muslim region of Tatarstan.

What they found, in their own words, was an "ant-hill" of tunnels and chambers delving eight stories deep below a modest brick house where dozens of people, including 20 children, had been living peaceably hidden from the world for years, in thrall to a self-styled prophet in his 80s called Faizrakhman Satarov.

What they did not find, however, after removing the children to great fanfare in the local media and accusing their parents of neglect, was any evidence that the "Faizrakhmanists" have any role in the kind of militant rejection of Kremlin-approved Islam which the Russian authorities say threatens state security.

Somewhat dazed by the global attention - and angry that their children are now in orphanages and hospitals - residents of the community, including their aged leader, are still living sequestered lives in the compound and vow to stay on in what they insist is their own, independent micro-state.

"Whatever they do to us, whatever charges they impose on us, we will not go to any court," said a tall, dark-bearded and green-turbaned man called Gumar Ganiyev, Satarov's deputy, who spoke to Reuters at the metal gate of the enclosure one day last week after evening prayers. "We will ask only God for help.

"They came, robbed us, took away children, took away books and call us a sect," he added, describing himself as "caliph of this state". "We are no sect; we are a community of God."

Content to restrict such demands for an Islamic "state" to the immediate confines of their scruffy suburban home in Kazan, Satarov's followers, critics of the police say, have been made scapegoats in an effort by officials to show, first, that there is a local Islamist threat and, second, that they can crush it.

"All that's happening now is an ideological campaign, they need to prove that they are fighting against something," said Alexei Malashenko, an expert on religion at the Carnegie Moscow Centre. "They have a report to file."

ASSASSINATION

The drama began last month when a man named Ildus Faizov was wounded in a car bombing on July 19 and an associate was shot dead the same day. Faizov was last year named mufti, or chief cleric, of Tatarstan and won praise from the Kremlin for taking a strong line against radicals Moscow fears may bring to the oil-rich region the kind of mayhem seen in the Muslim Caucasus.

Police are now hunting men they call terrorists from a group named the "Tatarstan mujahideen". They have proclaimed loyalty to a rebel Chechen Islamist and condemn Faizov for betraying the faith by working with Russian officialdom - though the mufti also seems to have made enemies of Tatar businessmen, over a lucrative local concession to fly pilgrims to Mecca.

But the fact that authorities both in Tatarstan and Moscow, 800 km (500 miles) away, have now largely let Faizrakhmanists be - as they had for many years until this summer - appears to reflect a common view that their eccentric lifestyle is simply a manifestation of the extreme religiosity to which some Russians turned when Soviet Communist ideology evaporated 20 years ago.

The white-bearded Satarov faces a possible charge carrying a maximum jail sentence of six months, and some followers could be jailed for up to three years for parental neglect. But none have been arrested and most remain in the compound, spending long periods closeted away underground and rarely seen by neighbors.

Some of the children taken away in the raid, some just a few months old, were born in the warren-like haven of the community where rules were set by Satarov, whose age is variously given as between 83 and 86 and who pronounced himself a prophet half a century ago, at time when Soviet rulers stifled religious faith.

Said by his followers to hear the voice of God in his sleep, Satarov presides over a brick house at the heart of the compound, topped by a somewhat makeshift minaret. But what police had not expected when they stormed in on August 1 was the jumble of narrow corridors, steep stairs and small rooms, some windowless, which extended deep below ground level.

"ANT-HILL"

Inside they found, among the babies and children a 17-year-old girl who was discovered, after being taken to hospital, to be pregnant. Without medical care or schooling, the youngsters, officials said, had had no contact with the outside world.

"The place consists of cells without natural light or ventilation, located in the basement of the building and dug out from the ground," said Kazan Deputy Prosecutor Irina Petrova, who also described the compound shown in police footage of underground rooms and corridors as an eight-level "anthill".

"The Faizrakhmanists live in conditions that are not suitable for normal human life."

Mainstream Muslim leaders in Tatarstan have also disparaged Satarov's group and say it is time to stop "negative elements" they fear are harming the region's reputation for moderation.

Neighbors of the compound, who reckoned they saw about 10 adults outside fairly regularly, saw little threat, however:

"They walk by every day, they go through trash bins," said one man working at a taxi firm next door. "They may be dirty but they are never aggressive, they are very kind. What goes on behind their fence I don't know - and I don't care."

And those residents willing to talk vehemently disputed the most unflattering descriptions of life among the Faizrakhmanists and spoke of bending or breaking rules of the sect with ease.

Yunus Ibragimov, 63, said that members in principle needed Satarov's permission to venture outside the gate but that children had been allowed outside into the yard. Ibragimov added that he personally no longer followed Satarov's rule, but still chose to go on living in the compound, along with his son.

Shamil Ibragimov, 29, said he too had often ignored Satarov and absconded in the past to go and work on construction sites. But he was now planning to leave in order to reclaim custody of his four children, taken away by the authorities two weeks ago.

Yet Satarov's deputy Ganiyev insisted the community would hold fast: "We'll lie under the bulldozer, we'll lie under the tank, if they blow us up," he said.

"We will all be blown up together if they do that to us, but we will not give up a single piece of this land."

(Editing by Steve Gutterman and Alastair Macdonald)

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