

Anna Poitkovskaya (Moscow)

The GRU Case That Could Not Be Hushed Up

The “Novaya Gazeta” newspaper, February, 2002

Ten GRU¹ men have been arrested for killing peaceful Chechens. Thanks to the Prosecutor’s Office, for the first time since the start of the Chechen war the incident of this magnitude has not been hushed up.

On January 11, 2002, on the road connecting two small villages of the Chechnya’s Shatoy district, Dai and Nokhchi-Keloy, under the bright mountain sun, ten servicemen of the GRU’s special forces unit killed and burned to ashes six people. The people were coming home to Nokhchi-Keloy in a shuttle UAZ van from the district’s central town.

Later, the military called this arbitrary execution the “operation to capture a wounded rebels’ leader, Khattab”. However, no reports of capture or killing of Khattab followed the”operation”, and its only results has been the fresh graves at the cemeteries of three villages and 28 children becoming orphans. And also fury, hatred, curses, emptiness...

The last photograph

“Are they children?” asks everybody shown a photograph of the four white cocoons lying on the floor. Two of the cocoons are very small, as if of toddlers swathed in white, and the other two are bigger, the size of an adolescent.

This picture was taken moments before the remains were buried at the Nokhchi-Keloy cemetery. Another two cocoons were buried in the villages of Dai and of Starye Atagi.

One on the left is Zainap Dzhavatkhanova, a 40 years old women. The mother of seven, she was expecting the eighth. As we know today, the soldiers of the elite unite on whose training the country had spent a fortune tortured the pregnant woman, knowing that she was pregnant. And

¹ GRU is the abbreviation for the Main Intelligence Directorate (of the General Staff), the army intelligence.

when they dragged her, still alive, over the snow, they knew it too. And knew it when they were killing her. And when they were burning her they knew that they were burning two.

Perhaps somebody with stronger nerves could explain what kind of men they have in these special units, and what these men, burnt by the war as they were, thought and felt. But I cannot. Maybe because I was once pregnant too.

Emotions aside, the bare fact is that what had been left of Zainap was her foot, and that is how her remains were identified: by the shoe the foot was in.

“We buried ashes”, says Larisa Shabazova, Zainap’s sister-in-law, as she tells me about the children Zainap left behind: Jabrail, 15, Seda, 7, the oldest and the gravely ill boy is 17, and the youngest, a girl, is just two.

“But the next one is surely a child?” people ask about the second cocoon in the picture.

But this is not a child either. This is what has been left of the 69 years old Said-Magomed Alaskhanov, director of the village school. He taught every one of the villagers, generation after generation.

On January 11, together with his deputy, Abdul-Vakhab Satabaev, he was returning from a teachers’ conference in Shatoy. Shakhban Bakhaev, a forest warden, also was visiting Shatoy, being summoned by the district administration. The word is that Zainap had been to Grozny to see a gynecologist, and on her way back stopped to visit her relatives in Starye Atagi. Her nephew, Magomed-Emin Musaev, 22, then had volunteered to accompany her home.

Magomed was the only one who offered resistance when the *spetsnaz*² began to torture the passengers after taking them out of the van. This is probably because he was young. Already wounded, he tried to escape death, but did not get further than the river bank, rolling down the steep slope, where they shot him dead.

This is why Magomed’s body was the only left intact: the *spetsnaz* did not care for getting down to the river bank, through the wet snow, to fetch it. So they did not burn Magomed, the only

² special forces

man in the family. What is left of it are his three unmarried sisters, now in the state of shock and confusion, and the old mother.

The sixth executed was Khamzat Tuburov, the van driver from the village of Dai. He was well known in the district, because each and every day he had been driving local people from their villages to Shatoy and back. All that is left of Khamzat, the father of five, are a few blackened bones.

Who will help?

Already for more than a month Nokhchi-Keloy is in shock. This small village of 60 homesteads scattered among the mountains, where the life is mostly the struggle with poverty and tuberculosis, have never experienced anything like it. On January 12, messengers from Dai, which is 7 kilometers away, came to the village: “Your people have been killed on the road near us. The military have towed the car with the bodies to Shatoy and left it where the park used to be. Everybody is coming by to gape at it. You need to be there for identification.”

They went. Then they took the bones to Vladikavkaz, to the forensic lab of the Ministry of Health for the North Ossetia. There they were told that what they had were remains of six people, not five, as the village elders had decided having gone through the bones.

These are quotes from the death certificates:

Shakhban Bakhaev, a forest warden (his cocoon on the picture is the largest, because there was more of his body left), the certificate #37-37, signed by Shamil Tauiev, a forensic expert: “CAUSE OF DEATH: a) smashing of the brain tissue; b) fracture of the vault and the base of the skull; c) perforating bullet wound of the skull”. Which means that he had been tortured, or how else this “smashing” can be explained?

Zainap Dzhavatkhanova, the mother of seven, the certificate #38-38, signed by Kakhaber Tekhov, a forensic expert: “CAUSE OF DEATH: a) not determined b) charring of the body”. Meaning: burned down to ashes.

A few words aside about Zainap. Both about her as a peasant woman from the mountains and in the context of the intensification of the Kremlin's efforts to win immediate "return home from Georgia of the Chechen refugees".

The Shatoy tragedy speaks louder than the propaganda of the Russian official. The matter is that Zainap has been one of these refugees. She has returned to her home village of Nokhchi-Keloy just recently, having spent most of the war in Georgia, together with her husband and children. Did she return to die? Did she return to be burnt, so that her foot is all that is left of her? Would you want your sister, or daughter to suffer the same fate? What would you advise the Chechen refugees who are still in Georgia?

We are standing in the yard of the poorest house in Nokhchi-Keloy. This is where the history teacher, Abdul-Vakhab Satabaev, lived. (His cocoon is on the extreme right, headless. The head was never found.) Standing with me is Baysark, his widow. His five teenage daughters do not participate in the conversation of the adults. They are inside, watching us, glued to the small window. The girls in the black kerchiefs gaze at me heavily, with scorn, as if killing me with their eyes. For them, I represent the world that manifests its existence in nothing but tragedies. They watch Baysark telling me about the funerals. She spreads her hands apart a little, as if she were holding a bowl of soup: she has not had much to bury, just two charred bones.

Glancing at her daughters hiding behind the window, Baysark said, "We have the custom to wrap the dead with a lot of fabric. Well, so our elders did a lot of wrapping to make it look more like a body".

Baysark weeps under disapproving sighs of the village elders who have begun to gather in the Satabaevs' yard: a widow is not supposed to weep when speaking of the late husband.

Reminded of her duty she gets a grip on herself and asks in a calm voice, "What am I to do? How do I get justice? Who will help?"

The-powers-that-be

Who indeed? A simple question that seemingly has a simple answer: the powers-that-be, the civil authorities, the so-called new Chechen administration.

Unfortunately, the-powers-that-be have proved once again their worthlessness. Nobody, not the government chairman Stanislav Ilyasov, nor the head of the republic Akhmat Kadyrov, nor any one of his deputies or sycophants, ever came to the Shatoy district, to Nokhchi-Keloy or Dai.

We are not even talking financial support for the families. Who cares about money? The families were waiting for condolences, for words. But not a word came.

It is said that Kadyrov now dreams of having elections in Chechnya. He is running with this idea all over Moscow, lobbies the Kremlin, assures the President that, not to worry, he, Kadyrov, is the man for whom the people will vote.

Sorry to disappoint him. "No. Never", said the Nokhchi-Keloy villagers. "He despises us, as he has shown. The leader who despises his people, what do we need him for?"³

A note aside. One hears the threatening talk emanating from the government in Grozny, where they are getting ready for the elections, that "some journalists" are wrong to be looking in Chechnya "only for the negative" and not noticing the lots of good the Ilyasov – Kadyrov administration is doing. A agree: "the lots of good" are hard to notice. The matter is that the upbeat reports on the new prison built among the ruins of Grozny and on the bountiful harvest of corn are constantly overshadowed by reports of killings, torture, and abuse. These latter reports are coming almost daily. And I have more sympathy for the victims of the-powers-that-be than for Kadyrov who is eager to become the power.

"But what struck us the most is that the Grand Mufti of Chechnya, Shamaev, has not come either", say the Nokhchi-Keloy village elders. "Because he used to be our Mufti, the Mufti of Shatoy. We were very proud to have him run for the Mufti of the whole Chechnya, we did so much for him: wrote letters, went to meetings in his support...".

³ In October of 2003, Kadyrov was elected President of Chechnya. Officially, the voters' turn out was 80%, he received 80% of the vote.

On January 28, having despaired of getting any attention from the authorities, the Nokhchi-Keloy villagers published, in the newspaper “Marsho”, an open letter to Kadyrov and Ilyasov. Here are some quotes:

“...they were being cruelly abused with making use of sophisticated torture: tearing out fingers with pliers, and their throats then were cut with a knife, the pregnant woman was violated...”

“Are the federal bandits any better than the mercenaries of the bandit armed formations⁴? Who are our defenders? From whom are we being defended?”

“The 69 years old director of our school and his deputy, and teachers are never involved in politics, what they were guilty of? ...”

Today is already February 9. Have an answer from Kadyrov or Ilyasov come?

“No”, the Nokhchi-Keloy elder bowed their heads. “Not a word. And they have not sent us new teachers, either”.

Now the responsibilities of the school director and his deputy have passed to the school building keeper. We are driving in the village and he points to the cottage housing the school.

“But I cannot teach”, says the keeper. “What is now the use to have the school?”

“For Nokhchi-Keloy the loss is irreplaceable “, says the head of the village administration, Mutalipp Atamirzaev. “Now, there will be nobody to teach our children.”

I ask Mutalipp if any of the 28 orphans are recognized as an aggrieved party in the case. Are the children and widows getting the government assistance payments, as provided by law?

“No, no, and no”, answers Mutalipp. “No assistance”.

“Who are the authorities here you can rely on?”

“Nobody. We have been forgotten. We can rely only on ourselves. Do you know what that Colonel Plotnikov shouted at the village meeting, the one who says he was in charge of the operation on January 11? He was not even ashamed to say it before the orphans and widows

⁴“Bandit armed formations” is yet another official Russian term for the Chechen rebels, and the official line is that they include mercenaries from Muslim countries.

who were there, he yelled, ‘What is this hue and cry about? Because of some meager six bodies? I have iced 92 in Argun recently, and so what? Nothing!’. Him, Colonel Plotnikov, he is the authorities.”

Lastly, I talked with the villagers about the roots of the tragedy.

“Why did it happen? What does the village think?”

“This was a provocation. The military don’t want the war to end.”

A chance witness, almost.

Major Vitaliy Nevmerzhitskiy, the head of army intelligence for the Shatoy district military command, is convinced it was not a provocation but a logical turn of events. The Major, as it happened, is the main witness in what concerns the tragedy of January 11. He is now in a difficult situation: he has testified against his "mates", as he puts it. The 29 years old major is courageous and well educated, he understands everything, and what he understands troubles him.

“On January 11 we got a telephoned message from Khankala⁵ that “15 Arabs are evacuating wounded Khattab from Dai”, that we were to take part in this cleansing operations, and were to report to a Khankala representative, whom we were to meet on the ground, on the road near Dai, which is 23 kilometers from Shatoy.

"When we arrived and I found the “Khankala representative”, this Colonel Plotnikov, I told him from the start that there was no “wounded Khattab” there, that we were in full control of the situation, and they should better fly back to Khankala. But the Colonel was behaving strangely...

“Was he drunk?”

“No, not that... He was war crazy. Spoiling for a fight. He said he came straight from battles, or maybe from cleansing operations, in the Nozhai-Yurt district. He was like on fire. Said that in seven days he will cleanse and weed out everybody. About 3 P.M., helicopters brought ground forces, including the GRU *spetsnaz*. The main forces were put around the Upper Dai: the units were guarding exit points of the village. Though we were positive there was no Khattab there,

⁵ The main army base and headquarters of the Russian forces in Chechnya.

we drove to the bee yard at the little village of Zindoy: should Khattab come, he would not show himself up in the village, and nobody in the village would give him shelter.”

“Leaving Dai, we saw, by the ruins of a farm, a UAZ van. The GRU men were checking the passengers’ papers. I noticed four Chechens and recognized one of them. I asked the officer in charge, a Captain, to move the vehicle so we could pass.”

It was already around 5 P.M, as we were passing again by this spot coming back from the bee yard. The Captain jumped on the road in front of our armored carrier. The UAZ van stood there already sprayed with bullet holes, with nobody inside. The Captain said nervously, “We have lost contact with the senior, with Plotnikov. If you see him, tell him”. I asked the Captain, “Are you having problems with the UAZ?”. “Well, kind of...”, he answered. I knew immediately that they had shot somebody dead.”

“What did you mean by your question, ‘Are you having problems...’?”

“Exactly what I told you: that they had shot somebody and they did not know what to do next.”

“And what could be done next?”

“The Captain did not know how to cover their tracks, what to do with the bodies. This is what is called ”problem”. He asked me to explain the situation to Plotnikov, “Let him make the decision”. What I want to say is that, from the outset, nobody of those who had flown in from Khankala had any idea of the situation in the Shatoy district. I realized immediately that they knew nothing about the situation here. Neither the Colonel, nor the Captain. To these boys in Khankala it means nothing what I am telling them from Shatoy. I had a chat with the Captain, and I realized how much fear they had put in them in Khankala: “Everybody in the mountains is a bandit. Topple anybody on sight. We will cover for you.”

In other words, the Khankala advice was: shoot anything that moves and we will write it off as catching bandits. Mythical bandits in this case, because the January 11 operation in the Shatoy district was undertaken based on some “field intelligence” and not confirmed by investigative measures. Incidentally, this was what the Khankala press-center had distributed through the major news agencies: 6 gunmen were killed on January 11, in the Shatoy district

“The Captain was scared out of his wits by these Khankala fears they had put in him”, continued the Major. “He was not adequately assessing the situation, and because of that he simply toppled the first people he came across. I climbed in the carrier up the road to the village and reported the situation to Plotnikov. I also told him to get out of there in a hurry.”

“Why did you tell him that?”

“Because they fly in and they fly out, while we are left to clean the mess, and the longer they stay the more mess there is to clean. This is exactly what happened next. We stayed the night in Dai, in a ruined house, and about 9 in the morning a villager came in running and said there was a car burning just outside the village, help! I put him with us in the armored carrier and we soon were there, and that was that same UAZ van. I understood that the *spetsnaz* had put the bodies in the car, poured gasoline, and set it on fire.

“When did they set it on fire, in the morning?”

“No, I think they did it the around 9 P.M., on the 11th of January. I got on the radio to our district military command and told them we need the prosecutor sent here. There were no more individual bodies, just a heap of charred bones.”

“What is your assessment of what the Captain and his men did?”

“On January 13th they took me to Dai to identify the *spetsnaz* men. I said then to the Captain, “Got in a fix, mate?”, and he answered, “I sure have”.

“What did you mean by ‘fix’?”

“It means he has carried out an order from above and is now paying for it. They promised to cover for him, and they did not. The Captain was shaking all over. I understood: he knew he had ruined his whole life. I told him, “Sorry, I cannot do it any other way”. I think he would not have burned the bodies, if he had not been given the order.”

“You think, or are you sure?”

“I am sure”.

“But however you look at it; it was him who did it. Who could have issued the order?”

“Only Colonel Plotnikov”. But he is walking free, and the Captain is under arrest.”

“Who, in your view, is to blame for this tragedy?”

“The situation we are in today is that Khankala has some 60% grasp of the real situation in Chechnya, not a full grasp. And they make their decisions accordingly.”

“To what extent the decisions made in Khankala are tragic for the development of the situation in Chechnya? I mean the tragedy of our military armada not being able to catch the terrorists’ leaders, while methodically killing off the civilian population? How tragic are the 40% that are beyond their grasp?”

“Very tragic. On January 11 we got what we had coming.”

“What is to be done to avoid these tragedies in the future?”

“I pass on this one. This is clear enough...”

Yes, it is clear. The Major have said it all, succinctly, as people of his background do. In Chechnya, there is “Khankala” and there are “field units”. “Khankala” in quotation marks is not just the name of the place near Grozny where the main army base in Chechnya is located. “Khankala” came to mean dozens of high ranking officers spending their days and nights behind three concentric security perimeters and among tons of all kinds of weapons, telling each other what deadly dangers await everybody venturing outside Khankala. This scare mongering could have been dismissed as inconsequential, if it were not playing the role of a fuse: the moment the Khankala people, especially those with little Chechnya experience, find themselves outside Khankala, they become a depressing sight. Just like Plotnikov or the Captain. “Khankala” means that one day, on some Chechen district, out of the blue will descent big shots and, without consulting officers permanently stationed in the area, will start smashing everything around them and firing in every direction, without taking the local realities into consideration.

The end result is dead bodies, which means that unless there are new people in Khankala, the war will never end. And this war will not be against bandits. This is the main thing.

The prosecutor

In this “meat grinder”, who still has got a chance to stand up to “Khankala”?

Undoubtedly, the Prosecutor’s Office: it can when it wants to and is not afraid to. As regarding the tragedy of January 11, the hero of the operation against “wounded Khattab” walks free and is back in Khankala, but those who have carried his orders are not.

All of the ten GRU *spetsnaz* men have been arrested, which is unprecedented: a large group of servicemen belonging to the “cream de la cream” of the Russian armed forces has been never arrested before, not in the history of the second Chechen war. They are now being dealt with by the Military Prosecutor’s Office. They have opened a criminal case against them on murder charges (Article 105 of the Criminal Code). Now, one cannot make it go away: the case files cannot be just burned and the ongoing investigation arbitrarily stopped. As the investigation continues and results of forensic examinations are coming in, the arrested are being presented with charges. The Captain is the first who has been charged, and he was already appointed a Vladikavkaz lawyer. Everything is proceeding as it should.

However, taking into account the Chechen realities, the question of the utmost importance is WHERE exactly are the arrested?

This time they are where they belong: in the jurisdiction where the crime took place, in the stockade of the 291st regiment quartered near the village of Barzoi, a few kilometers from Shatoy and from Dai, the place of the tragedy. The building housing the Military Prosecutor’s Office is also there, located on the grounds of the 291st regiment.

And the fact that they are there, and not somewhere else is the victory and an accomplishment of two prosecutors: the civilian prosecutor for the Shatoy district, Evgeniy Koba, who opened the case, and a military prosecutor, Colonel Andrey Vershinin. He took the case over from Koba, already on January 13, and did everything to keep it from being buried, as it had happened with

many other similar cases, first presumably opened and then closed under pressure from Khankala. In today's Chechnya, in what it became in the third year of the war, pursuing a criminal case against a serviceman requires from prosecutor courage and the knack of living everyday under the death sentence, expecting any moment a "stray bullet" from one of your own.

Colonel Vershinin who is in charge of the "GRU case" does not make the impression of a "tough guy", but it was him who made the decisive step in the prosecution of the case.

At first, the detained in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy were sent to Khankala, because that was what Khankala wanted. As every prosecutor working in Chechnya knows only too well, when this happens it means that the fatherly commanding officers will try, by every means available to them, whether legal and not, to send off their criminally liable subordinates from Khankala to Russia proper... And then good luck to anybody who would try and find them on the "limitless expanses of our Motherland". It could take years to find them again, and dozens of criminal cases are currently waiting to be brought to conclusion, while their subjects remain at large.

The usual story: the suspect is at large, the investigation has lost steam, the prosecutor has been told to shut up...

It was Prosecutor Vershinin who managed an impossible task (and this never happened since the beginning of the war): he made Khankala return the GRU men back to the 291st regiment, to be put under his round-the-clock supervision. This happened on February 9, while, incidentally, I was talking with the Colonel in his office.

I would say that the heroic deed of the Prosecutor Vershinin matches the heroism of Major Nevmerzhitskiy. However, in today's Chechnya, it is not the justice seekers who get medals and promotions, quite to the contrary.

"Do you understand why did it happen?" was my first and main question for Colonel Vershinin.

"Yes, I do. I am thinking about motives of this crime all the time, about who gave the order to kill." He gives his explanation, which is no different from what I was told by Major Nevmerzhitskiy.

“OK, what happened is what happened: people were shot dead. But why burn the bodies? The pregnant woman?”

“So far, all ten are categorically denying burning the bodies. They stonewall any questions on burning. The version they all stick to: yes, we killed, but we did not burn, it were Chechen gunmen who did.”

“What gunmen? Where did they come from, if all roads to Dai had been cut the day before and if the *spetsnaz* unit was staying ten meters from the place of execution? Do you believe it?”

“No. These are exactly my questions.”

“When will this scandalous case come to court?”

“The case is solved, in general. Six killed, ten arrested, some things are still to be done. We are waiting for the official ballistics results. The biological forensic examination of the remains has to be set up. It is important to establish whether the bodies had been touched, after they were shot. I think we will be ready in 3- 4 months.”⁶

The final curtains

How do wars end? How to end this war and all its horrors that torment us day after day, month after month?

There is not much hope, though not no hope. This is the thorn deep in me that I cannot remove: I am on my 39th field trip to Chechnya since the second Chechen war began, and from the first trip to the last my working in Chechnya feels like being a member of the "burial squad". Bodies, funerals, killings... This how it was in December 2001 and this how it is in February 2002.

What awaits us? What awaits us if we don't stop? The fate of inmates on death row is the fate of people who entrusted the future of the country to those who are not afraid of killing the innocents.

⁶ As of today, Captain Eduard Ulman and his men have stood two jury trials and have been acquitted in both. Recently, the Supreme Court sent their case for a new trial in a military court, with no jury.

Chechnya, Shatoy district.

English translation © Efrem Yankelevich, efrem@englishwriting.ru

[TO THE CONTENT PAGE](#)