

# In the torture cell of Chechnya's tyrant



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Grozny

WHEN Akhmed Isayev was taken at gunpoint to a secret detention centre run by militiamen loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov, the pro-Kremlin strongman of the war-torn republic of Chechnya, he hoped to be released after only a few hours of rough questioning.

But the gruesome scene the middle-aged engineer witnessed as he was dragged into a gym converted into a makeshift torture chamber left no doubt as to what awaited him.

Six men tied to the walls or gym equipment moaned in agony. They had been beaten. One was half naked, his chest festering from scorch marks inflicted with a blowtorch. Another had a broken jaw. All were covered in blood and bruises. At least two were to be executed, Isayev discovered later.

Isayev's wrists were handcuffed to the leg of a billiard table in the middle of the gym. A rope was tied to his ankles then pulled and attached to some weights, leaving his body stretched on the floor. Six of Kadyrov's men began beating him.

"They punched and kicked me in my face and all over my body," recalled Isayev (not his real name). "They broke my nose and I lost three teeth. Then they clubbed me and struck me in the chest with the end of a billiard cue. My face was covered in blood. Every time I passed out they'd stop for a few minutes and then start again.

"They attached electric cables to my toes. Then they started giving me shocks, mild



Khasan Kaziyev

## Tensions are high between the 'Kadyrovtsy' militia and the president's bodyguards

at first and then more and more powerful until the current going through my body was so strong that I was jumping off the floor. It felt like all my nerves and muscles were being ripped apart."

A few hours later, as Isayev lay in anguish handcuffed to a radiator, Kadyrov — son of former Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov who was assassinated in May 2004 — appeared surrounded by armed bodyguards. Ginger-haired, bearded and stocky, he glanced at his men's latest quarry

and approached one of the prisoners hanging by his wrists. "He shouted abuse at the man and punched him," Isayev said. "Then he had the cables attached to his toes and personally gave him several shocks."

Isayev, 51, had been abducted to try to force his son Said back to Chechnya. Said, 26, is a former Islamic rebel who was captured and coerced into working for Kadyrov, then the republic's deputy prime minister. But he managed to flee abroad.

The torture Isayev endured in November 2004 was only the

start of his ordeal. He was held hostage for 311 days and released only when it became clear the blackmail had failed.

Last month Kadyrov, who enjoys the backing of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, was made prime minister of Chechnya. He is expected to become president soon after he turns 30 — the minimum age under the constitution — in October. Last year Putin, who is counting on Kadyrov to bring stability to Chechnya, gave him a Hero of Russia medal, the country's highest award.

Kadyrov has been widely accused of heading a militia of more than 8,000 men known as the "Kadyrovtsy". They are suspected of abducting, torturing and executing people thought to have links with Islamic rebels opposed to Moscow.

Isayev is one of the few Chechens to have suffered at their hands brave enough to accuse Kadyrov of personally torturing some of his victims. His claims have been backed by Memorial, a Russian human rights group with offices in Chechnya. It says it has corroborated his story by speaking to other eyewitnesses.

"Considering the evidence we have gathered, we have no doubt that most of the crimes



Kadyrov with his pet tiger. He is accused of personally torturing his abducted victims

which are being committed now in Chechnya are the work of Kadyrov's men," said a Memorial investigator. "There is also no doubt in our minds that Kadyrov has personally taken part in beating and torturing people.

"What they are doing is pure lawlessness. To make matters worse they also go after people who are innocent, whose names

were given by someone being tortured."

Similar allegations were made last month by the Society of Endangered Peoples, a respected German group which branded Kadyrov a "war criminal" who had personally taken part in the torture of civilians.

"He and his henchmen spread fear and terror in Chechnya," the group said in a report. "They travel by night as death squads, kidnapping civilians, who are then locked in a torture chamber, raped and murdered."

Ismail Mutayev, a suspected rebel currently on trial in Chechnya, has claimed that multiple burn marks on his body were inflicted by Kadyrov himself.

A keen boxer who owns a pet tiger and invited Mike Tyson, the former world heavyweight boxing champion, to visit the republic last year, Kadyrov initially agreed to be interviewed by The Sunday Times, then turned down the request.

He has vehemently rejected all charges directed at him and his men, and said yesterday that the Kadyrovtsy had been integrated into regular interior ministry battalions. Asked recently by a Russian newspaper about masked men abducting people in the middle of the night, Kadyrov said: "I have never seen such men."

On another occasion he said: "We have made Chechnya the safest place in Russia" — a strange claim in a place awash with weapons and where abductions are commonplace. "Soon it will be the safest place in the world," he added. "People will come here on holiday. We've just got a few more devils to kill and that will be it."

After two wars and nearly a decade of violence, more than 200,000 people have returned to Grozny, the capital, which suffered Europe's worst bombing since the second world war.

But guerrilla-style attacks are still launched by Islamic rebels and most people have come to fear the Kadyrovtsy's justice more than the 50,000 Russian troops based in the republic.

Kadyrov, who likes to demonstrate his skills at firing rocket-propelled grenades for the media, has denied claims that his militias run a network of secret detention camps.

But Isayev said the gym where he was tortured was at a Kadyrovtsy base in Tsenteroi, Kadyrov's home village southeast of Grozny. Fields around Tsenteroi are mined and all access routes are blocked by checkpoints where visitors, including the bodyguards of Chechen president Alu Alkhanov, are made to hand in their weapons. In a sign of mounting tension resulting from Kadyrov's giddy rise, a gun battle broke out last week between the president's and the prime minister's guards. Two were reported to have died.

Isayev said that during his imprisonment there was a constant flow of new hostages. "It used to be Chechens against Russians. Now it's Chechens against Chechens," he said.

"The Kremlin has handed the dirty work as well as the whole of Chechnya to Kadyrov and his thugs. But it won't end like this. For every single guy they tortured or killed, one day there will be a bloody vendetta."

## THE KADYROV AGENDA

❑ Spend £20m on compound containing new presidential palace and five-star hotel

❑ Smash gambling machines and crack down on alcohol in Muslim morality campaign

❑ Build grand mosque with capacity to accommodate 10,000 worshippers



❑ Encourage polygamy to boost Chechnya's birthrate, and promote wearing of headscarves by women