

The killing ground



- 1 Death squad bundles suspects into car at gunpoint
- 2 Prisoners questioned, tortured and forced to endure mock execution
- 3 Victims tied up and left in car filled with explosives but two of them escape

Victims of violence

A wave of killings has hit the Caucasus

Nearly 90 abductions this year



Killed
Human rights campaigner, Natalia Estemirova, kidnapped and murdered



Bombed
Ingushetia's president, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, narrowly avoids death in car bomb



Assassinated
Dagestan's interior minister Adilgeri Magomedtagirov, shot by sniper

Dirty war rages on Russia's doorstep

Islamic bombers and police death squads are clashing across the north Caucasus, Mark Franchetti writes in Makhachkala, Dagestan

WHEN Arsen Butayev was seized on a street in broad daylight last month and held captive with four other men, including his younger brother, he must have known a terrible fate awaited them. The witnesses to his abduction knew it too. Nobody intervened.

Butayev, 23, and his comrades had fallen into the hands of a death squad operated by the security services in Dagestan, a small, mountainous republic of 3m souls riven by growing conflict in the southernmost part of Russia.

In Dagestan — it means "the country of mountains" — such abductions follow a pattern as grim as it is familiar. The men were bundled away at gunpoint in the capital, Makhachkala. First their heads were covered with hoods. Then they were driven to an interrogation centre to be tortured as suspected Islamic militants.

They were beaten. One was subjected to a mock hanging, another to electric shocks. Finally, like other young men before them, they were taken to a wood, bruised, bewildered and terrified.

There, they were bound with duct tape and placed inside a car that had been wired with explosives and doused in petrol. Their captors sprayed chloroform into their hoods and abruptly departed. The men, who have never been charged with any crime, were left waiting to be blown to bits.

It is usual for the security forces to claim that terrorist bombers have inadvertently triggered their device before they were able to plant it.

On this occasion, however, Butayev and his friend Islam Askerov, 21, were not rendered

helpless by the chloroform. They freed themselves, removed the explosives and placed them in a nearby field. But they were unable to wake the rest of the group before the death squad returned. They fled, leaving Butayev's 22-year-old brother Artur and the other two behind. Days later, the three men were found dead at another spot, their bodies charred. The survivors are still hiding.

Their ordeal is described in witness statements which suggest that local police, backed by Russian special forces, are behind the death squads. The incident illustrates the brutality of an underground war that is being waged in the northern Caucasus region, encompassing Chechnya and its neighbouring republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan.

On one side are Muslim extremists who want to break away from Moscow's rule and set up an Islamic state. On the other are the Kremlin-backed forces hell-bent on stopping them. Caught in the middle are countless civilians.

It is unreported in Russia and virtually unnoticed by the rest of the world. Yet just five months after the long war in Chechnya was officially declared to be at an end, the northern Caucasus has seen a big upsurge in violence. Five hundred people have been killed so far this year, double last year's toll. It has become the Kremlin's most pressing problem after the economic crisis.

In Chechnya itself, where security forces commanded by its 32-year-old president, Ramzan Kadyrov, have been accused of numerous atrocities, there have been nearly 90 ab-



Gulbenis Badurova's husband, Sirazhudin Umarov, was beaten and killed by a death squad

ductions this year. The targets included Natalia Estemirova, a leading human rights campaigner who was kidnapped and murdered in July.

Yet the repression has failed to end a wave of suicide bombings. After the latest one last week, Kadyrov claimed that security in Chechnya was improving. "Yes, they bomb," he said. "And in London they bomb and in America — everywhere they bomb. We have cornered the bandits and soon we'll finish them off."

In Ingushetia, a suicide bomber drove a lorry packed

with explosives into a police station last month, killing 20 people. A car bomb nearly killed Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, the republic's president, in June. Still recovering, Yevkurov has admitted he cannot guarantee anyone's security.

Following that attack, the Kremlin permitted Kadyrov's security forces to carry out counter-terrorism operations inside Ingushetia. Reports of kidnapping and extrajudicial killing swiftly followed.

"Violence is spreading across the entire region," said one former Kremlin adviser. "It's

embarrassing but above all it's alarming because clearly the heavy-handed tactics used so far are not working."

In Dagestan, home to more than 50 ethnic groups, clan warfare and bitter political rivalries have compounded internal conflict. The interior minister responsible for security, Adilgeri Magomedtagirov, was killed by a sniper as he attended a wedding in June. Two dozen policemen have been murdered in the past year.

Russian special forces carry out almost daily raids against those they suspect of being

Islamic terrorists. Earlier this month Sirazhudin Umarov, 32, was kidnapped by masked men after being summoned to a meeting with a policeman. The following day his badly mutilated body was discovered. The security forces claim he had been killed in an anti-terrorist raid.

"His face was so badly smashed from beating that I had difficulty recognising him," said Gulbenis Badurova, 33, his wife. "His eye was missing and both hands had been broken."

In June the death squads

came for Ulyan Umbatov, 50, and his son Khakim, 24. The two were kidnapped after leaving home to attend prayers. Their bodies were found in a burnt-out car. The police claim they were terrorists killed by their own explosives, and there were no witnesses to challenge the official version.

In contrast, on September 9, dozens of onlookers watched masked men abduct Rashid Gasanov, 27, a bus driver and father of two, in Makhachkala.

Gasanov, whose elder brother joined Islamic militants seven years ago, is not believed to have

any links to radical groups himself. But he had previously been held several times by police seeking information on his brother and had once nearly choked to death when a plastic bag was taped over his head.

"The other times we were always able to find out where he was being held," said Gasanov's wife, Subigat. "This time we couldn't find out anything. We've no idea where he's being held and what he's being put through. All I can do is pray that he'll be returned to us alive, but I live in fear that he is already dead."

Deadly widows

The surge in violence across the Caucasus has seen a return of female suicide bombers known as "the black widows", writes Mark Franchetti.

Their name refers to the loss of a husband or brother for whom they seek revenge in the war between rebels and Russian-backed forces.

A week ago a young woman carrying grenades and a semi-automatic pistol was arrested in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan. Her two brothers are thought to have been killed by the security forces. Police said she was preparing a suicide attack.

In neighbouring Chechnya, a female suicide bomber blew herself up beside a police car in the capital, Grozny, last week, killing herself and injuring two officers.

Islamic militants used women as human bombs in the Moscow theatre siege in 2002.

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Candid Camera pranks smoke out US liberals

John Harlow
Los Angeles

A CONSERVATIVE student armed with a video camera and a wicked sense of humour is humbling some of the most hallowed liberal institutions in the United States using a technique described as "Candid Camera for the internet age".

In one of his video coups James O'Keefe, 25, telephoned the offices of Planned Parenthood in Columbus, Ohio, a pro-choice abortion group that is a target of the right, and asked to make a donation to pay for abortions for minorities.

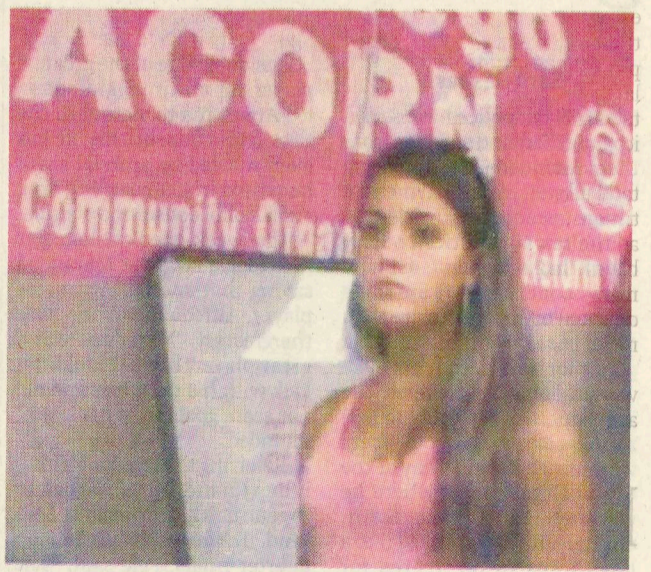
He added: "There's way too many black people in Ohio." The official simply laughed and agreed to his terms.

When he called its Idaho branch, a helpful member of staff told him he "absolutely" could restrict his donation to abortions of black babies, raising no objection even after he explained that his goal was to shield his son from future competition from minorities for university entry.

The organisation later issued a statement that the tapes, posted on YouTube were "heavily edited" and "unsubstantiated".

But O'Keefe's greatest triumph came last week after he teamed up with Hannah Giles, 20, a fellow-conservative, and they posed as a pimp and a prostitute seeking help from Acorn, a community activist group that is loathed by Republicans because it registered millions of poor voters for last year's presidential election.

A succession of well-meaning Acorn workers were filmed advising the pair on how to smuggle South American girls



The Acorn activist group was duped by a pretend prostitute

into the country, how to apply for a loan to buy a house that could be used as a brothel and how to claim that underage prostitutes were their dependants for tax purposes.

O'Keefe told officials at Acorn's Baltimore office he would employ 13-year-old girls as prostitutes "and they didn't care at all", he said. "No one was holding this organisation accountable," he explained last week. "No one in the media is putting pressure on them. We wanted to do a stunt and see what we could find."

Even he was surprised at how easy it was to obtain advice on how to break the law. "I'm a skinny nerd, the least convincing pimp in the world," he said.

With a budget of just £800 to pay his and Giles's travel expenses, he succeeded in set-

ting off a political storm. Heads rolled at Acorn, and the House of Representatives voted by 345 to 75 to cut off all federal aid.

O'Keefe, who calls himself a progressive radical, began his lampooning as a student at Rutgers where he satirised the college authorities' approach to race by complaining, as an Irish-American, about the racist depiction of leprechauns on cereal boxes.

His videos, which include one persuading liberals to adopt jailed terrorists as pen pals, have been picked up by Jon Stewart's usually left-leaning Daily Show and reached a national audience.

Liberal groups should be braced for more outrageous inquiries. Last week he warned that he had plenty more targets: "Frankly, I think I'm just getting started."