

Chechens tell of prison beatings and electric shocks in anti-gay purge: ‘They called us animals’

Tuesday 16 May 2017, by [WALKER Shaun](#) (Date first published: 14 April 2017).

Up to several hundred gay men are feared to have been rounded up and some killed in ultra-conservative Russian republic.

At least once a day, Adam’s captors attached metal clamps to his fingers and toes. One of the men then cranked a handle on a machine to which the clamps were linked with wires, and sent powerful electric shocks through his body. If he managed not to scream, others would join in, beating him with wooden sticks or metal rods.

As they tortured him, the men shouted verbal abuse at him for being gay, and demanded to know the names of other gay men he knew in Chechnya. “Sometimes they were trying to get information from me; other times they were just amusing themselves,” he said, speaking about the ordeal he underwent just a month ago with some difficulty.

Adam’s testimony, as well as that of another gay Chechen man with whom the Guardian spoke, backs up reports that a shocking anti-gay campaign is under way in the Russian republic of Chechnya, involving over a hundred and possibly several hundred men. Some are believed to have been killed.

Adam was held in an informal detention facility with more than a dozen other gay men, who were all subjected to torture on a daily basis. A similar “mop-up” campaign by governmental security forces took place in towns across the republic.

Igor Kochetkov, a gay rights activist from St Petersburg, has helped organise an emergency contact centre which gay people in Chechnya can reach out to securely to get help with evacuation. He said “dozens” of people had got in touch to ask for help. Many are in hiding from both their families and the authorities.

“We are talking about the mass persecution of gay people, with hundreds of people kidnapped by authorities,” Kochetkov told the Guardian. “This is unprecedented not only in Russia but in recent world history. There is little doubt that we are dealing with crimes against humanity.”

Under the Moscow-backed local leader Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya has been rebuilt after two brutal separatist conflicts in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Kadyrov pledges allegiance to Vladimir Putin and a love for Russia, and in return the Kremlin turns a blind eye to human rights abuses. Critics say Kadyrov’s notorious battalions have long operated outside the law.

Putin and Kadyrov at a meeting outside Moscow in 2007.

Putin and Kadyrov at a meeting outside Moscow in 2007. Photograph: Dmitry Astakhov/AFP/Getty

Images

Journalists at the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta, which first reported the story, say they have incontrovertible evidence that at least three gay men have been killed since the operation started, and believe the full death toll could be much higher. Chechen society is extremely conservative and homophobic, and there are fears that some gay men may have been killed by their families after being outed by authorities.

"I don't know what has happened to the others. It's too dangerous to contact people, because everyone's phones are monitored," said Adam.

Due to the extreme sensitivity of the subject and the danger of reprisals both against the men themselves and against their families, the names in this article have been changed, and identifying details have been excised. Both men with whom the Guardian spoke are now outside Chechnya but asked that their current location not be revealed.

For Adam, it all started with a phone call from a gay friend.

"He called me, and in a very calm and normal voice suggested meeting. I've known him for a long time, so I didn't suspect a thing," said Adam. But when he arrived at the arranged meeting place, he realised it was a set up. There were six people waiting for him, some of them in uniform, and they shouted that they knew he was gay.

At first, Adam denied it, but when it became clear the men had read messages he had sent to others, he admitted he was indeed gay. He was put in the back of a van and taken to the detention facility, where the men were locked in a room and slept on concrete floors. "They woke us up at 5am and let us sleep at 1am. Different people would come in and take turns to beat us. Sometimes they brought in other prisoners, who were told we were gay and were also ordered to beat us."

Detainees held in multiple locations have reported similar stories of beatings and electric-shock treatment.

The captors seized mobile phones from the prisoners, scrolling through their contacts and demanding to know which men among them were also gay. "They called us animals, non-humans, said we were going to die there," Adam said. After more than 10 days, some of the men were released to their families.

"They said: 'Your son is a faggot. Do what you need to with him,'" he recalled. Adam still denied his sexuality to his family, but his father refused to speak with him, and threatened violence. One night shortly after, he collected a few belongings and left his home without saying a word to anyone, aiming to get as far away from Chechnya as possible. He has never lived outside Chechnya and is intimidated about starting life again from scratch. He is no longer in contact with family members.

Alvi Karimov, spokesman for Kadyrov, has denounced the reports of anti-gay operations in Chechnya as "absolute lies and disinformation", insisting that there are no gay people in Chechnya to round up. "You cannot detain and persecute people who simply do not exist in the republic," he told Interfax news agency.

He added: "If there were such people in Chechnya, the law-enforcement organs wouldn't need to have anything to do with them because their relatives would send them somewhere from which there is no returning."

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said he had no information about the allegations and advised those with complaints to contact authorities: an unlikely recourse given the authorities themselves

are implicated.

In Chechnya's ultra-traditional society, based on strong codes of family and clan allegiance as well as Islamic faith, having a gay relative is seen as a stain on the entire extended family. Brothers and sisters of a known gay man would find it hard to get married as the family would be seen as tainted.

Many gay Chechens are married, and lead double lives or suppress their feelings, so as not to cause grief to their families. The men with whom the Guardian spoke said they had never told a single family member or non-gay friend about their sexuality. Meetings and even conversations with other gay men were carried out using extreme conspiratorial methods.

"These people have lived in a completely closed society and have spent their whole lives exercising absolute discretion," said Kochetkov. "Many of them are physically unable even to say the word 'gay'."

For years, Chechen authorities have blackmailed the republic's tiny, beleaguered gay community. Akhmed, whom the Guardian met in a different location to Adam, always knew he was gay, but forced himself to bury the feelings until a few years ago. His first date with a man ended in disaster, when the other man informed on him to the police.

It turned out that Akhmed's date had himself been previously "caught", and was working to identify and out other gay men in return for the police not telling his family. The police now demanded money from Akhmed, or threatened to post compromising material about him online. Many gay men were blackmailed in this way over a period of several years, but the events of recent months have taken the persecution to a whole new level.

Akhmed was outside Chechnya when he was called by family members. They passed the phone to police, who had shown up at his family home. The police told him they would hold one of his family members hostage until he returned.

Another relative spoke to him on the phone and rained insults on him. The police had told his family he was gay, and the relative ordered him to return immediately. "I have not the slightest doubt that my own relatives planned to kill me," he said. "It was an invitation to an execution."

Akhmed promised he would return the next day, but after mulling his options, turned his phone off and fled to Moscow. Later, he managed to escape from Russia and is now seeking asylum in a European country. At the time, he thought he had been singled out and cursed his bad luck, but he now realises this was the first wave of anti-gay round-ups and he was lucky not to have been at home.

He does not expect to ever visit Chechnya again, and has not spoken to his family since, as he has been told by an acquaintance that authorities are monitoring the family's communications in case their son gets in touch.

"Imagine knowing that you've ruined not only your own life but the life of your entire family," said Akhmed. "I've always just wanted to make my mother happy and proud. I was ready to marry. I would have taken all these problems with me to the grave. I could never have imagined in my worst nightmares that I would be sitting here in front of a journalist and saying: 'I'm a Chechen and I'm gay.'"

Human rights activists are attempting to get dozens of gay Chechens out of Russia, as they believe the men are not safe from potential reprisals from Chechen authorities or their own relatives even in Moscow or other Russian cities. However, European embassies will only grant asylum if a person has

already arrived in the country, and will not give any kind of visa to those planning to seek asylum on arrival. The foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, wrote on Twitter on Thursday that the situation in Chechnya was “outrageous”. However, the Foreign Office referred a question about whether Britain would agree to give refuge to any of the men on the run to the Home Office.

Akhmed has personally heard other stories of torture and seen photographs of torture-inflicted wounds sent by other gay Chechen men who managed to escape, but the fate of the majority of men is simply unknown, due to the extreme code of silence, and the shame of the families. In most cases, he has no idea if people are in hiding, still being held captive, or dead.

“Nobody knows how many people have been killed,” said Akhmed. “It’s just impossible to contact most people or to find anything out. But I would be amazed if it was only three.”

Shaun Walker

P.S.

* The Guardian. Thursday 13 April 2017 17.30 BST Last modified on Friday 14 April 2017 19.49 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/13/they-called-us-animals-chechens-prison-beatings-electric-shocks-anti-gay-purge>