

Chechen leader campaigns on bride kidnaps, supports headscarves

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Moscow, November 8 (ENInews)--Chechnya's leader Ramzan Kadyrov has launched a campaign to end the practice of kidnapping brides in the restive southern Russian region, while also saying he favours headscarves and modest clothing for women.

"This practice must be rooted out of our society," Kadyrov said on 1 October about the kidnapping of brides, during a meeting with Sultan Mirzayev, the leader of Chechnya's Spiritual Administration of Muslims.

At a gathering of imams several days later, Mirzayev said Muslim clergy who pressure the fathers of kidnapped girls to agree to such marriages will no longer be recognised.

But an investigation into the first abduction case since the announcement of a fine of 1 million roubles (US\$32 000), and prison sentences of up to 20 years against perpetrators of the practice, has collapsed.

Kadyrov, for his part, continues to say he favours headscarves and modest clothing for women, who have faced mounting pressure to adopt Islamic dress in recent months.

The Stavropol edition of Komsomolskaya Pravda, a national newspaper, reported on 2 November that investigators had closed the case against a 19-year-old man alleged to have kidnapped a 14-year-old girl from her school. A Chechen police investigator told the newspaper that the girl asserted after questioning that she left with the young man voluntarily.

The practice of kidnapping brides is widespread in Chechnya, neighbouring Ingushetia, as well as other regions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It can trigger blood feuds between families, or "honour killings". Kidnapped women who attempt to flee are considered stained if they have spent the night at the man's home, and

that fear often forces them to remain.

At a meeting with officials and Muslim clergy on 17 October, Kadyrov and other speakers described such kidnappings as a crime against Islam.

"Women have a special place in our religion," said Adam Shakhidov, director of "Put" (Path), which publishes Islamic books in Grozny. "Islam not only made equal the rights of men and women, but raised the role of mother and sister in society. The abduction of young women is one of the biggest sins in Islam. This is violence against a person, and the Prophet Muhammad called for resisting evil."

Russia has waged two wars against Chechen separatists in the past 16 years. Kadyrov's father, Akhmad, a former rebel leader and mufti who switched sides to support the Kremlin, was installed as leader by Moscow and was credited with staving off Islamic fundamentalism.

After the elder Kadyrov was killed by an assassin's bomb in 2004, his son, who turned 34 in October, succeeded him. He has built a mosque in Grozny billed as the largest in Europe and named the Akhmad Kadyrov Heart of Chechnya Mosque. Both Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev have visited the mosque.

Kadyrov is credited with rebuilding Chechnya. New York-based Human Rights Watch said in August, however, that women's rights were being violated by efforts to impose an Islamic dress code. It said women without headscarves or in immodest dress had been attacked with paintball guns in Grozny.

Tanya Lokshina, a researcher in Human Rights Watch's Moscow office who travels regularly to Chechnya, said the situation of women had deteriorated under Kadyrov. In 2007, Kadyrov said that women employed by the government must cover their heads at work.

"For all practical purposes, a very rigid kind of Islamisation is being imposed in Chechnya," Lokshina told ENInews.

Kadyrov told Chechen television in July he approved of the paintball attacks. "Even if it was done with my permission, I wouldn't be ashamed," he said. "It turns out that the girls who were sprayed with paint had been warned several times previously."