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Maria Danilova

## Ukraine claims link between Tymoshenko, contract murders

KIEV, Ukraine--A Ukrainian prosecutor charged Wednesday that a firm controlled by jailed former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko paid for the contract-style killing of a lawmaker and two others in 1996.

Prosecutor General Renat Kuzmin's comments during an interview with The Associated Press further decrease the likelihood that Tymoshenko will be released from jail any time soon.

Tymoshenko, 51, is serving a seven-year sentence after being convicted of abuse of office in negotiating a natural gas contract with Russia in 2009. Her lawyer denied Kuzmin's claim.

The West has condemned Tymoshenko's trial and sentence as politically motivated, and the European Union has halted the implementation of a key partnership agreement with Kiev over the case.

Tymoshenko, the top opposition leader, has accused President Viktor Yanukovych of orchestrating her imprisonment to prevent her from running in parliamentary elections this fall. She had lost to Yanukovych in the 2010 presidential election.

Kuzmin charged that companies controlled by Tymoshenko and former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko transferred money to pay the killers of Yevhen Shcherban, who was shot to death at an airport with his wife and an aide. Lazarenko is serving a nine-year sentence in the United States on charges of extortion and corruption.

"It has been established that the killer received money from Tymoshenko and Lazarenko's firms," Kuzmin said, adding that Shcherban had opposed their business interests. "Their money was used to pay for the murder."

Kuzmin said prosecutors are studying the case to determine whether to formally implicate Tymoshenko in the murder, but to do this they need to question Lazarenko, who is in a California jail. He expressed anger that U.S. authorities have refused their requests to do that for more than a year.

Tymoshenko lawyer Serhiy Vlasenko dismissed Kuzmin's statement as untrue, calling it an attempt to further tarnish her image among Ukrainians.

"Now they are trying to brainwash everybody into believing that she was involved in Shcherban's murder," Vlasenko told the AP. "Their only goal is to politically kill a political opponent."

In convicting Tymoshenko in October, the court sided with prosecutors who argued that she was not formally allowed to order the signing of the gas contract, considered burdensome for the Ukrainian economy.

Kuzmin dismissed Western criticism of the case, saying officials in the United States and the European Union did not understand the specifics of the trial.

"How can you politically condemn a trial whose legal side nobody knows?" Kuzmin asked.