

Secretary General Ahmed Khalif, 53, of the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) died, 24 January 2003, in an air crash in Western Kenya; he was also the minister of labour and manpower in the newly inaugurated government of President Mwai Kibaki that had dislodged from power, the 25-year-long rule of Daniel Arap Moi.

Ahmed Khalif entered parliament in 1979 to represent the predominantly Muslim Wajir West constituency. Throughout his political career, he stood up for the rights of Muslims in Kenya who formed a third of the population of 32 million. In 1984, the government forces killed thousands of Muslims in the northeastern province on the pretext of fighting Somali insurgents. Khalif bravely and single-handedly stood against the central government in Nairobi and brought the massacre of the Somali Muslims to international attention.

Again, in 1988, he was at the forefront against the mandatory but discriminatory requirement of the government that all adult Muslim Somalis undergo screening to determine their nationality. Khalif's

vigorous campaign for their rights led to his suspension from his position as secretary general of SUPKEM, but he regained it soon after.

Soft-spoken, studious and resolute, Ahmed Khalif acquired the reputation of being 'one of the rare' honest and principled politicians in Kenya. As an assistant minister in the Moi government, he always went out of his way to champion the cause of Muslims in the country generally and the region particularly, to the chagrin of the administration. He focused on issues concerning Muslims and Islam, often at the risk of his ministerial career.

Ahmed Khalif graduated from the University of Nairobi's School of Journalism and then studied at the University of Wagenigen, Netherlands, for a diploma in Print Media. He then worked with the Kenyan ministry of information and broadcasting; later with the British Broadcasting Corporation Monitoring Service (1978-79); and entered politics thereafter.

Besides being an able and articulate politician, he was a key member of the inter-faith initiative that pushed the Moi government to undertake a comprehensive review of Kenya's constitution. The review remains on track and Kenya is expected to have a new constitution by June this year.

During his term of office as the secretary general of Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims, he initiated many projects in the field of education and social and communication sectors. Difficult as it was dabbling in politics and religion in a secular country, Khalif's devotion to *da'wah* was unparalleled. He was instrumental in setting up the first Muslim media organisation in Kenya, the Iqra Broadcasting Network, which runs a 24-hour Islamic radio channel 95.1 Iqra FM.

Ahmed Khalif is survived by his wife and 11 children. ■

Mustafa Yusuf Ali

Ahmed Khalif 1950-2003

Fearless champion of Kenyan Muslims

The legendary Chechnyan Commander, Ibn al-Khattab, was killed two weeks ago, said an announcement by the 'Mujahideen Military Command Council' on 27 April 2002. The Russian state television network RTR claimed he had been 'liquidated' on 19 or 20 March by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSS) agents. A jubilant **President Vladimir Putin** said the liquidation of Khattab was 'one additional blow to terrorism'.

The communiqué signed by **Shamil Basayev** said: al-Khattab was being sent a letter from another Arab commander two weeks ago and he had sent a messenger to receive the letter, but this messenger turned out to have been a hypocrite working for Russians. He laced the letter with some lethal poison and as soon as al-Khattab had touched it, it took less than five minutes for his soul to depart his body and accepted as a martyr (Insha-Allah).

Neither a Chechen, nor Ibn al-Khattab was his original name. Born **Samir Saleh Abdullah al-Swaylam** in 1969 in the Saudi town of Arar, he had as his ideal the second righteous (*raashid*) Khalifa 'Umar ibn al-Khattab; hence his *nöm de guerre*. A bright student and ambitious child, he had wanted to go to the US for higher studies, be rich, own a castle with 'a garage big enough for five cars'.

A jolly young man, barely 18, he joined

the Americans in 1987 to fight the jihad in Afghanistan and took a direct hit in the abdomen from a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun. He also lost two fingers when a grenade exploded in his hand.

In 1993, he moved to Tajikistan and from there to Chechnya about which he knew very little. He had become curious watching a programme in Afghanistan on satellite TV. He went to Chechnya as a TV reporter. He visited his home only once but used to call his parents whenever he could - the last he called was four or five months before his death.

Ibn al-Khattab was brave and he led from the front. According to Chechen accounts, he and his units, 'had carried out a number of daring operations against Russians inside Chechnya, (Khartashoi, 1995; Shatoi, 1996; Yashmardy, 1996) as well as in Dagestan (1997 and 1999).

The Shatoi ambush at the head of a group of 50 mujahideen on 16 April 1996 was one of his most daring operations. Official Russian military sources say that 223 Russian soldiers were killed, including 26 senior officers, and all [50] vehicles destroyed.

Conscious of the 'media jihad' against Chechnya, he would video-tape most of his operations, giving away, perhaps, vital information to the Russians, about their logistics, tactics and formations.

After Russia's withdrawal from Chechnya in 1996, al-Khattab was declared a national Chechen hero, decorated with a medal of bravery and promoted general. Dhokhar Dudayev held him in great esteem but after his assassination, the Chechen political scene began to fragment and weaken, leading to a second invasion and re-occupation by Russia.

Although **President Aslan Maskhadov** tried to keep the resistance alive, it seems to have splintered and, was at times, following mutually contradictory tactics.

Ibn al-Khattab was driven by an intense passion to free all Muslim lands, from the Caucasus to the Central Asian Republics. He never forgot what a Chechen had told him, 'we want them [the Russians] to quit our land so that we can return to Islam' in freedom.

Ibn al-Khattab is survived by a Dagestani wife and three children. ■

Ibn al-Khattab 1969-2002

Saudi young man had not heard of Chechnya