

Azerbaijan and Georgia Sweat Over Chechnya

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Baku closes a Chechen envoy's office while Tbilisi fears a new Russian backlash.

Moments before Russian special forces stormed the Nord-Ost theatre complex in southeast Moscow, rebel leader Movsar Barayev was speaking on the phone to Ali Asayev, Chechnya's special envoy to Azerbaijan.

Asayev had been in regular contact with the hostage takers over the previous days. On Friday he even arranged an interview between one of them and journalists from local newspaper Zerkalo, who were assured that all Azerbaijanis - who share the Chechens' Muslim faith - would be released.

"The rebels tell me that it's terrible that the Muslims don't come forward and identify themselves," Asayev was quoted as saying. Four Azerbaijanis - one the wife of the republic's state airline - were freed late on Friday, just before the raid.

The telephone exchanges between Baku and Moscow vividly demonstrate that the attitude to Russia's ongoing military campaign in Chechnya is not a simple one.

Ever since Russian forces entered the breakaway province immediately to their north eight years ago, Azerbaijan and Georgia have had to tread a fine line between the two warring parties.

However, as their reactions since the theatre crisis have shown, the two countries now differ in their approach to the Chechen problem as well as in their relations with Moscow.

Both Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Heidar Aliiev, were quick to condemn the terrorist attack and offer their condolences to Russia.

Azerbaijani officials went one step further and closed the Baku office of Chechnya's rebel president Aslan Maskhadov, and even a school serving mostly Chechen refugees.

This follows a general warming in relations between the two countries over the past two years. Shortly after President Vladimir Putin's January 2001 visit to Baku, Azerbaijan extradited two Chechens who were wanted in Russia on charges of murder and kidnapping.

Late on the evening of October 31 Iberia television in Georgia reported that the Georgians had also closed down the Chechen rebel office. However, Georgia is clearly more reluctant to cooperate with the Russians: after extraditing five Chechen militants arrested earlier in the year, the Georgians are delaying handing over the remaining eight.

Georgia is in a particularly sensitive position since the country is more politically unstable than Azerbaijan, and shares a border with Chechnya.

Moscow's new even harder line on Chechnya could turn attention back to Georgia's Pankisi Gorge, which Russian claims is being used as a base by Chechen militants. Tbilisi may be now asked to produce more

evidence that it has cleared the rebel groups militants from the area, as it claims to have done in a security operation.

Putin's comments about "foreign terrorist centres" being involved in the theatre attack has caused further worries in Georgia.

Local western observers agree that pressure will be placed on Tbilisi once again. "It's hard to imagine how [the terrorist attack on the Moscow theatre] is going to make things any easier," said one senior European diplomat in the region.

The leaders' choices are further complicated by the fact that there is still considerable sympathy for the Chechen cause within Georgian and Azerbaijani society.

Azerbaijanis have been reported to be fighting alongside the rebels, while wounded Chechens are also believed to have received treatment in Baku hospitals.

This used to extend to the leadership as well. When Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov congratulated President Aliev on his 75th birthday four years ago, he presented the Azeri leader with a gun he had carried with him all the first stage of the conflict from 1994-1996, as a sign of his deep gratitude.

Now the two countries wait nervously to see what Moscow's next move be. Observers believe that it could be possible that the Caucasus states will finally be forced to choose sides in the conflict.

Some officials in the Caucasus are likewise concerned that they could be swept up in Russia's fervour to deal with the Chechen problem once and for all, given the psychological shock of a terrorist attack in the centre of Moscow.

There are estimated to be two million Azerbaijanis alone in Russia - the single largest ethnic group from the former republics living there.

It is feared that, in the short term, a crackdown from Moscow could mean added hassles at the hands of Russian authorities or even mass roundups and deportations.

Russian authorities seem to make little effort to distinguish among the dozens of, to the untrained eye, seemingly similar ethnic groups. "Individuals of Caucasian nationality" is a catchphrase often used to lump together all dark-complexioned people from the south, many of whom do not share the same religion or language.

More ominously, Caucasians worry they could become targets in violent attacks against all visitors from the south, despite Russian officials pleading with the public not to give into anti-ethnic excesses.

Already Russia has seen an upsurge in skinhead violence, often directed against Caucasus natives, in recent months. Two Azerbaijanis are reported to have been badly beaten in the days following the theatre siege.

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