

Baku Sides With Moscow Over Chechnya

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Azerbaijan's clamp down on suspected Chechen guerrillas seems to be an attempt to maintain good relations with Russia.

The Azerbaijan government appears to be seeking to strengthen ties with Moscow by prosecuting suspected Chechen rebels and handing others over to the Russian authorities.

Four trials have taken place in Baku over the past two years. The most recent ended this week and involved two Azerbaijani men accused of creating illegal armed formations and a third suspected of having links with such groups.

The men went on trial as Russia stepped up its efforts to deal with Chechen guerrillas it claims are infiltrating the North Caucasus region from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge region.

Although the verdict in the latest case was fairly lenient, the Baku authorities have clearly shifted their stance toward the Chechen insurgents and those associated with them.

During Moscow's first Chechen campaign between 1994 and 1996, Baku sided with the rebels and provided shelter for people uprooted by the fighting. Chechnya's rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov was even an honoured guest at Azerbaijan president Heidar Aliev's 75th birthday party in 1998.

But Baku began to steer toward Moscow in 2000, after Russia considered imposing visa restrictions on Azerbaijan and Georgia in a bid to curb migrants. In the end, immigration laws were passed against Tbilisi alone.

Aliev visited Moscow at the end of last month, lending support to the Russian campaign in Chechnya. "Baku fully backs the counter-terrorist operation conducted by Russia in its own territory," he said.

President Vladimir Putin, in turn, applauded measures Baku had taken to thwart the rebels. "We are assured that Azerbaijan has sealed its northern borders and, unlike Georgia, will not host guerrilla bases in its territory," he said.

Zardusht Alizade, political analyst and co-chair of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Azerbaijan, said the president's visit was an attempt to stem Russian criticism of his domestic policies.

"Aliev's agenda is all about power, and he won't stop at much to hold on to it. The purpose of his Moscow trip was to talk to his Russian counterpart and find out what would make Putin turn a blind eye to the repressive system in Azerbaijan.

"Putin and Aliev use very similar methods to rule their countries. The KGB colonel and general understand each other perfectly well. If need be, Baku can always round up a dozen Chechen guerrillas and hand them over to Russia."

The most recent trial involved Telman and Mushvig Gurbanov and an associate, Elnur Kiazimov. According to investigation files on the Gurbanovs, they were among a number of Azerbaijanis to receive military training in the village of Klebani, in the Pankisi Gorge, in 2001.

According to the indictment, the Gurbanovs were instructed in the use of explosives and firearms by Chechens alleged to specialise in subversive tactics, mountain climbing and street fighting.

It was further stated that the two received psychological training from the notorious Islamic fundamentalist Kenan Shabanov, who was sentenced to five years' imprisonment by a Baku court earlier this year.

While the government prosecutor was seeking long sentences for the accused, both Gurbanovs walked away with a suspended four-year prison sentence, and Kiazimov was acquitted.

The Gurbanovs' defence team has appealed against the sentence. "The charge of creating armed groupings is absurd," attorney Hidayat Suleimanov told the press.

Critics of the authorities claim that the recent trials - along with evidence that at around 10 Chechen guerrillas and sympathisers have been handed over to Russia - have all been about keeping Moscow sweet.

With Baku's apparently waning sympathy for the Chechen cause, there have been fears for the safety of several thousand refugees from Chechnya sheltering in the country.

Many have been complaining of rough treatment by the local police, but Didier Laye, local representative of the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, said there was no record of serious refugee rights violations. "We have only had to reissue refugee papers to Chechen migrants twice after they were withdrawn by the police," he said.

But with only a fraction of the displaced population claiming official refugee status, the real situation remains unclear.

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