

Basayev and Maskhadov Under Pressure

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Chechen warrior Shamil Basayev is a prime suspect in the Beslan attack. Rebel leader Aslan Maskhadov has condemned it, but is facing fury from the Russians.

The Russian authorities have signalled a toughening of their policy in Chechnya, accusing the two best-known Chechen rebel leaders, Shamil Basayev and Aslan Maskhadov, of being behind the Beslan school seizure. On September 8, Moscow offered a reward of 300 million roubles, about 10 million US dollars, for information leading to their capture.

Yet these two men have very different profiles: while Maskhadov and his spokesmen have consistently condemned the attack on the school, Basayev has kept silent.

Maskhadov and Basayev have been the twin poles of the Chechen rebel movement for the past eight years. They contested the internationally observed election to become de facto president of Chechnya in 1997 - which was won by Maskhadov. Since then they have collaborated in attacks on the Russian military, while disagreeing strongly about tactics.

Basayev's name figured as prime suspect for the hostage seizure from the moment School No. 1 in Beslan was seized on September 1. The style of the raid - meticulously planned, unexpected and ranging deep into territory outside Chechnya - was strongly reminiscent of his attack on the town of Budyonnovsk in June 1995. Basayev is also now believed to have organised the attack on Ingushetia in June this year that pre-figured the school seizure.

The supposition that he was involved was strengthened by a telephone call between the New York Times and the hostage-takers, when one of the group said they represented the Islamic organisation Riyadh as-Salihin (Gardens of the Righteous), whose formation Basayev announced after the Moscow theatre siege of 2002.

Basayev, long notorious as the most ruthless of the Chechen rebels, has become even more radicalised in recent months.

On August 27, IWPR received an emailed circular purporting to be from him and written in English, in which he threatened to attack Western targets. If it is genuine, this represents a new and dangerous escalation of Basayev's threats.

The letter read:

"By the will of Allah, the Almighty and Merciful, I, Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris, Amir of Islamic Brigade of Martyrs 'Riyadh as-Salihin', declare the third millennium the time of fulfilment of Prophet Mohammad's message, may he be in peace and all our good wishes may reach him. From now on and to the end of this world the holy banner of the Prophet will flutter above the countries of the unbelievers, for this is his will. The true Muslims have been suffering from the crusaders' oppression in Chechnya, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq for too long. But it was said: "The Unbelievers think that they will not be raised up (for Judgment)" (Quran: 64, 7). "Those who reject (Truth) will be in Hell-Fire. They are the worst of creatures" (Quran: 98, 6).

"Scoundrel Western crusaders, bogged down in lechery, and you, hoggish Jews, I have ordered my Muslim

brothers and sisters, the Chechens, staying in your filthy countries to annihilate you without taking any compassion on you. The Russians have felt Allah's just anger on their skins already. Now it's your turn. The flame of Jihad will burn your abominable world, the world of unbelievers, to the ground. We will blow up your houses, ships, airliners, we will be killing you right in the streets of your impious cities and towns, for the death of lecherous, loathsome unbelievers occurs in accordance with the will of Allah. The way of Jihad is the way of true Muslims. Allah Akhbar!

Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris Amir of Islamic Brigade of Martyrs 'Riyadh as-Salihiin'

This name is the one Basayev now uses in his public statements.

It is almost impossible to verify the authenticity of the letter but the email address -kavkaz@kavkaz.tv - apparently connected to the main Chechen Islamist website Kavkaz Center, suggests that there is a fairly strong likelihood it may be genuine.

In strong contrast to this, representatives of Maskhadov have been busy condemning the Beslan attack and even offering to mediate during the siege.

The pro-Maskhadov website Chechenpress published a letter on September 4, dated the day before, offering Maskhadov's condolences to the Ossetian people over the tragedy.

"There is not and cannot be any justification for people who raise their hands against the holiest thing for us - the lives of defenceless children," the statement read. "And there are no words to express the depth of our indignation at what has happened."

The letter also said that, "We very much regret that an echo of the inhuman anti-Chechen war has affected brotherly Ossetia so tragically."

Another longer statement the next day expressed similar sentiments, while laying the ultimate blame for Beslan on the Russian government.

Moscow counters by saying this is all a game, and that Maskhadov is culpable. The main Russian argument for his involvement was an interview given on Russian television by a captured hostage-taker, Nur-Pasha Kulayev, on September 6.

Kulayev, 24, was heard to say, "We were collected in the forest by a man who goes by the name of Polkovnik [Colonel, in Russian] and told that we have to seize a school in Beslan. They told us this order was given by Maskhadov and Basayev. When we asked Polkovnik why we were doing this, with what goal, he replied that we had to unleash war across the whole Caucasus."

In response to this, Maskhadov's representatives say they have doubts about the identity of Kulayev, and that he may have been tortured. They point to two articles published on successive days by Moscow journalist Alexander Shvarev in the Russian newspaper Vremya Novostei. Shvarev reported that Kulayev and his older brother Khanpasha, along with two other captured hostage-takers, had all been arrested by the Russian authorities in the course of the last three years.

According to Shvarev, Chechen law enforcement authorities were surprised to learn that they had been released. "We can't understand why these people are free," one security official told Vremya Novostei.

“They were arrested and they should still be behind bars.”

Umar Khanbiev, Maskhadov’s general representative for foreign countries, cited this to say he was suspicious about Kulayev’s role in the siege.

In an interview with IWPR by telephone Khanbiev, said, “the Kulayevs had already been arrested and it’s a big mystery to us who they came to be there”.

Khanbiev is one of three envoys of Maskhadov abroad. The other two, Akhmed Zakayev and Ilyas Akhmadov, have been granted political asylum in Great Britain and the United States, respectively.

Both men now say their main goal is not independence for Chechnya, but a cessation of the conflict. But the Russian foreign ministry said on September 7 that it would make new efforts to have them extradited to Russia.

This new call came after Zakayev had been briefly proposed as a potential mediator with the hostage-takers. On the second day of the school siege, he was telephoned by North Ossetian president Alexander Dzasokhov and former Ingush leader Ruslan Aushev, and he has told journalists he was ready to try to negotiate the release of the children.

Of the three men, Khanbiev, a former health minister of Chechnya, is in closest contact with Maskhadov. He told IWPR that they had been “in frequent touch” over the last few days.

Khanbiev condemned the Beslan seizure as a “terrible act,” saying, “Such terrible methods can’t win the sympathy of the international community and we are very sensitive to that. The president has often said that.”

He went on virtually to admit what has been obvious for some time: that Maskhadov has dwindling authority over most of the fighters in Chechnya. “For the first 24 hours we had absolutely no grasp of what was happening,” said Khanbiev. “No one can control the situation in the republic, which is out of control and no laws are functioning.

“There are very many desperate people who have lost relatives. We have always said that we feared this would happen.”

Khanbiev said of the hostage-takers, “The gang which did this was absolutely out of control. Otherwise we could have done something to stop them.”

All this strengthens the impression that it is the radical Basayev rather than the formal leader of the rebels who is now dictating the terms of the conflict with Moscow.

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