

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

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Russian troops on the Georgian border are caught between embattled Chechen fighters desperate to break out and fresh reinforcements eager to break in

The weather around Itum-Kale changes without warning. In the morning, the summer sun shines brightly; by midday a cold, dank mist swoops down from the peaks, suspending the mountain settlements in limbo.

The Mi-8 helicopter lands cautiously on the Tuz-Kharoi plateau, scooping thick curds of mist from the surrounding hollows. Soldiers fan out across the perimeter and stare intently into the forests.

Nearby, the ruins of a tiny mosque bear witness to the fierce battles which raged around the plateau during the winter. The rebel fighters turned the mosque into a small fortress which they defended with heavy-calibre machine-guns. Itum-Kale was eventually taken by a force of Russian paratroopers who landed on the neighbouring heights. Now the federal tricolour flies defiantly over the mosque.

"The border guards are here to stay," says Colonel Victor Chuprakov, commander of the Itum-Kalinsky detachment of the FPS (Federal Border-guard Service). "The most dangerous area at the moment is the Sharoargunskoe," he adds, pointing to the mountain peaks visible through the mists. "That's where most of the rebel units are."

But it is impossible to say anything with certainty. The surrounding mountains hide a myriad of deep ravines and caves, screened from the air by thick forests. The rock formations house extensive rebel bunker complexes, camouflaged and protected by mines, tripwires and snipers.

Against this menacing backdrop, the task faced by the border-guards seems impossible - to prevent the rebels from escaping into neighbouring Georgia and to thwart any attempts to bring fresh fighters and supplies across the mountains.

Col. Chuprakov believes there are around 1,500 Chechen rebels waiting in secret bases across the border - "not to mention the rebels who are living in the mountain villages, posing as civilians," he said.

The colonel's most effective weapons are the skill and experience of his "Green Berets" - the special forces of the FPS. This handful of soldiers and officers grows thinner and greyer with each operation. They comb through the mountain passes for days on end, gathering intelligence, staging ambushes, aware that any mistake or momentary lapse of vigilance will cost them their lives.

We fly to Veduchi, the nearest inhabited settlement from Tuz-Kharoi. As the helicopter makes its final descent, the villagers hurry out of their homes. A crowd of schoolchildren quickly gathers around the aircraft and their expectant faces are rewarded with a consignment of school-books which the border-guards have flown in for the local school.

Life here is hard. There is no electricity and little contact with the outside world. The villagers live off the land. They grow potatoes -- the only vegetables that can survive in the unpredictable mountain climate - and herd cattle and sheep in the surrounding meadows.

"We're starting to live differently now," says Akhmed Magamedov, the head of the local administration. "We're putting the life of the village back in order."

But they have come to rely on the border-guards more than they might have wished. "The government makes promises but the border-guards are closer," says Magamedov. It is a mutual dependency - without the good-will of the locals, the troops would be unable to do their job.

Since February, the military doctors have performed three complex operations as well as delivering several babies. But the barriers really came down when the conscripted medical orderly saved the life of the village's 107-year-old Mullah. Now the medic is treated with the utmost respect and the locals call him "The Doctor".

"We've a good relationship with the villagers now," says the officer commanding the border-guard post. "They're not afraid of us and we're not afraid of them."

But his words are swept away by the vast rotor-blades of the Mi-8, which is already trembling on the landing ground, the pilot unable to hide his eagerness to leave. Within seconds, the border post is just a dull speck on the mountain escarpment, then the mists close in thick and fast and it vanishes from sight.

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