

Bloody Raid Stuns Ingushetia

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The Chechen conflict spills over into a neighbouring republic.

A night-time attack by around 200 militant fighters has left more than 90 people dead and struck a heavy blow against Ingushetia's pro-Moscow president Murat Zyazikov, sucking his republic into the Chechen conflict for the first time in a decade.

Late in the evening of June 21, practically all major police buildings in Ingushetia were subjected to simultaneous attack by armed men in masks and camouflage. They attacked all the interior ministry buildings in Ingushetia's largest town, Nazran as well as the border guard headquarters, a weapons warehouse in Troitskaya and police stations in Karabulak and Sleptsovskaya.

By the end of a night of violence the death-toll was nearing 100 - including many senior security officials - and dozens more people were wounded.

The raid that paralysed Ingushetia - supposedly a safe distance from the combat zone of mountainous Chechnya - starkly contradicted Russian president Vladimir Putin's assertions that a process of "normalisation" is taking place in Chechnya and that his military tactics have worked there.

Putin himself flew to Ingushetia and promised to redouble security for the republic.

It began on a quiet summer evening in Nazran, a town of 80,000 people. By 11 pm the children had stopped playing and gone indoors. The streets were empty but for a few cars - this town goes to bed early.

Around this time, automatic gunfire was suddenly heard on the edge of town, moving towards the city centre. Tracer fire crossed the sky, machine gun and grenade fire could be heard and windows began to rattle.

Locals, many of their windows shattered by stray bullets, fled their houses to go to relatives in safer parts of the town. "We had to leave Grozny in search of a safer place, and now we are getting the same thing," worried Sveta Gulieva, a mother of five daughters.

The shooting lasted three hours. Eyewitnesses said that a column of cars set out towards the official capital of Ingushetia, with the fighters shouting out "To Magas!" This was evidently a diversionary move: the column did not get as far as Magas and the militants disappeared into the foothills of Ingushetia.

People began returning home only at dawn to begin counting the cost. A helicopter circled over the town. At around 8 am, a column of around 20 armoured vehicles entered Nazran, apparently Russian border guards from Stavropol sent to reinforce their comrades.

The number of dead from the night of violence was hard to verify. Ingushetia's health ministry said that 32 people had been wounded and 60 killed, but that the real figures were probably higher as many relatives had collected their dead and wounded. The interior ministry said 19 of its employees had been killed and almost 50 badly wounded.

Amongst those killed were at least five leading officials including Ingushetia's acting interior minister Abukar Kostoyev. He, along with many of his colleagues, was killed just outside the interior ministry building, having been summoned from home by telephone.

It emerged that the attackers used deception as well as brute force. They seized all the police posts on the main road to Nazran and took the policemen guarding them hostage. Then they stopped passing cars on the pretext of checking documents. If someone showed an identity card belonging to the security service or FSB, the prosecutor's office, or the criminal police department, they were dragged out of their car and shot. Ordinary drivers as well as low-ranking policemen escaped with their lives.

"I was stopped at Ekhazhevo by a man in a mask," said 36-year-old Kureish. "Special raids like this happen quite often. I didn't suspect anything and handed over my documents. Later on I realised that my life was hanging by a thread and I was saved only because I was an ordinary policeman - the chief guard at a shopping centre. They just took my car and my pistol. They spoke to me in Ingush."

The fact that many of the fighters appear to have been ethnically Ingush will be particularly alarm the Russian authorities, as the Ingush, although ethnic kin of the Chechens, have generally stayed out of the conflict in Chechnya in 1994.

Officials say that most of the fighters came across the border from Chechnya. "We have established that a significant number of the fighters came from the east of Chechnya," said a source in the prosecutor's office in Nazran. "A group of bandits then joined them in Ingushetia."

Many in Ingushetia believe that the attack was organised by local Islamist radicals based inside the republic.

"It was immediately obvious that they were not Chechens," said Ruslan Tangiev, formerly from Grozny and practically the only driver to take up his position in the taxi-rank in central Nazran the next day. "How could [rebel president Aslan] Maskhadov or [militant leader Shamil] Basayev know Nazran so well? It was local people who did it. Of course there were Chechen Wahhabis with them and even some Arabs, they say."

Few people will say so aloud, but there is a widespread feeling that the attacks were planned well in advance in response to a wave of arrests and abductions of young people that has taken place in Ingushetia over the last year. (See "Ingush Disappeared" by Timur Aliev, CRS 224, 27 March 2004)

The human rights organisation Memorial has recorded almost 100 abductions over the last year in Ingushetia. "These methods have pushed Ingush into the arms of Shamil Basayev," said Alexander Cherkasov of Memorial.

Chechnya's pro-Moscow interior minister Alu Alkhanov - who looks likely to be Moscow's candidate for president in elections on August 29 - said that the operation had been planned by Basayev with the help of his deputy in Ingushetia, Magomet Yevloyev.

President Putin, flying to Ingushetia after the attack, said that, "Judging by everything that is happening here, the federal centre is not doing enough to defend the republic." He said plans were going ahead to deploy an interior ministry regiment at the airport.

In political terms, the biggest loser of the midsummer night's violence was Ingush leader Murat Zyazikov.

A career FSB officer, Zyazikov was elected in April 2002 to steer Ingushetia much more firmly into line with Moscow. He was instrumental in implementing Moscow's policy of shutting down of camps for Chechen refugees, the last of which closed earlier this month.

Now Zyazikov is facing criticism for having sown dissent in the republic. The contrast is being drawn with his predecessor, Ruslan Aushev, who was much more independent from Moscow.

"A conflict whose settlement is still far off is basically crossing over to Ingushetia," said political analyst Murad Nashkhoyev. "Murat Zyazikov was put in place by the Kremlin to replace Ruslan Aushev, whom Moscow could not control, so as not to let something like this happen.

"But he proved unable to change the situation. In fact the opposite is happening. His coming to power as a result of invalid elections has made things much worse. The forcing of refugees out of tent camps, the more frequent instances of kidnapping and disappearances have led to a backlash from the rebels."

A Nazran resident's reaction was typical of a widespread view on the streets. "If Ruslan Aushev had stayed as our president, he would not have allowed this to happen."

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