

## **Bomb Blasts Claim Heavy Toll**

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A spate of rebel bombings in occupied Chechnya has forced the Russian generals to rethink their tactics

Lowland Chechnya has been hit by a wave of terrorist attacks including a devastating booby-trap car bomb which claimed 22 lives - many of them children.

Particularly hard-hit were police headquarters in the shattered capital, Grozny, where a series of well-coordinated attacks sparked fears that the rebels were attempting to take the city by storm.

And, in the wake of the raids, Russia's generals have wearily announced plans to change their strategy in Chechnya - deploying small garrisons throughout the republic in a bid to cut the rebel supply lines.

The week began with a massive blast outside the mosque in Alkhan-Yurt where a large crowd of children and elderly people had gathered around a burning Moskvich car.

Earlier, police had removed a radio-controlled device and 300 grammes of plastic explosive from the vehicle before destroying it with two rocket-propelled grenades.

The explosion is thought to have been caused by a 155mm artillery shell concealed under the car bonnet - a similar booby-trap device had been used in a bomb attack on the Gudermes police headquarters in the previous week.

The blast killed 18 people instantly and a total of 42 casualties were taken to the hospital in Urus-Martan. Chief surgeon Ruslan Visarigov and his team operated all night but were unable to save four of the wounded villagers.

On the following day, General Valery Manilov, chief of the federal general staff, said that security forces had already arrested four men in connection with the bombing - including a member of the local Chechen OMON police unit.

Chechen rebels then launched a string of attacks on key positions across Grozny, including the military commandant's headquarters, police stations and the offices of the emergencies ministry.

A total of seven servicemen and two officers were wounded in the bombings while other booby-trap devices were defused in a school in the Staropromyslovsky district and on Mansur Street.

Meanwhile, Anatoly Kvashnin, the armed forces chief-of-staff, announced a change of strategy in the embattled republic, bringing troops out of the lowland army bases and taking the war into the mountains.

Small garrisons would be posted to more than half of Chechnya's 350 towns and villages, ensuring that rebel units would no longer be able to blend into the civilian population.

Kvashnin added that special forces units would target the leading Chechen field commanders including Shamil Basaev, Emir Khattab and Ruslan Gelaev

The Chechens have been quick to dismiss this move to tighten the noose around the rebel mountain strongholds. In an official announcement on December 14, Basaev - who recently married for the third time -- said, "It is the Russian aggressors who have reached a dead-end, not the Chechen mujahideen."

And Movladi Udugov, the Chechen propaganda minister, commented, "The Russians find themselves in a situation which is utterly alien to their theory and practice. They are clutching at straws."

Udugov went on to say that the rebels' ultimate aim was to retake Grozny, as they did in the 1994-1996 war, but the exact details of the plan were only known to top commanders.

He was quick to blame the Alkhan-Yurt bomb blast on the Russians and claimed that, "The mujahideen promised to avenge the explosions and were able to fulfil that promise with a series of successful operations."

Russia's deputy interior minister, Valery Fedorov, dismissed the allegation as, "lies deliberately spread by Chechen terrorists to discredit the local police and administration."

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