

Breaking Through the Grozny Siege

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While Russian bombardments continue, Chechen commanders and fleeing refugees claim that guerrilla fighters have scored key victories around the capital, destroying several Russian tanks and providing a route in and out of the city.

A crack Chechen unit has punched a hole through the Russian forces besieging Grozny, contradicting reports from Moscow that the guerrilla's resistance is crumbling.

Refugees flooding over the Ingushetian border claim field commander Arbi Barayev, whom Moscow says was killed in an air attack near Georgia, led a force of 500 men into the Kirov district of Grozny. From there they seized the settlements of Alkhan-Kala, Alkhan-Yurt and Krasnopartisansk, driving a narrow corridor into the city's south-western suburbs, according to refugee reports.

Luisa Amkhadova told IWPR how she was woken by sustained bursts of heavy machine-gun fire. "I ran outside and saw Chechen fighters racing down the street in captured armoured personnel carriers. I immediately realised that a battle was imminent and I got my things together and ran off to my relatives." Amkhadova fled Chechnya with four women, five children and her young nephew.

Other witnesses say that several Russian armoured vehicles were destroyed on Sunday, January 2, during heavy fighting, with federal troops suffering heavy losses. Chechen casualties have been estimated at four dead and seven wounded.

Mumadi Saidaev, of the Chechen high command, said that the operation had far-reaching tactical implications, proving that rebel forces were capable of offensive as well as defensive manoeuvres. The corridor would provide a "cat-flap" to Urus Martan and the mountains beyond.

Russian soldiers in Nazran have confirmed that the guerrillas had been quick to make use of the corridor, striking at federal supply routes as far afield as Achkhoy Martan and Sleptsovsk. They said that roads to the west of Grozny had been mined and strafed with automatic rifle fire.

Meanwhile, around 150 refugees from the battle-scarred region arrived on the Ingushetian border last week. One man showed me video footage of the fighting which continues to rage around the three settlements. Another, Ali Akhmadov, recounted his terrifying escape across the Sunzha River as Russian armoured columns carrying elite Interior Ministry troops thundered towards Alkhan-Kala.

Reports of the Sunday attack come in direct contradiction to Russian claims that Chechen resistance is crumbling. Field commanders such as Aslambek Izmailov, currently entrenched in the Chernorechie suburb, defiantly boast that rebel forces in Grozny have enough ammunition and supplies to hold their positions until the spring. Then they can take advantage of natural cover to take the fighting into the mountains.

Over the New Year period, the Russian general staff loudly trumpeted a series of victories in Grozny's devastated suburbs. However, two districts they say are under federal control - Leninsky and Novopromyslovsky - do not actually exist. Chechen commanders are admitting only one breach of the city perimeter - in the eastern suburb of Staraya Sunzha, where small reconnaissance teams of around 10 men have probed Chechen positions before calling in heavy artillery and mortar bombardments.

Nearly a month into the siege of Grozny, the battle-lines have been etched out in a scrawl of twisted pylons and shattered concrete. In the north, beyond Staraya Sunzha, rebel defenders have taken up position in a phalanx of multi-storey apartment blocks which enjoy a commanding view over the Russian lines.

While Chechen fighters man machine-gun emplacements on rooftops and balconies, hundreds of civilians have taken refuge in the cellars beneath. During lulls in the bombardments, these residents can be seen emerging from their makeshift shelters in a bid to beat out fires raging through the buildings and salvage their possessions from the rubble.

Nearby, the Chechen line of defence passes through the canning factory, now in ruins and offering poor protection against relentless Russian shelling. Rebels defending the factory claim to have beaten off repeated ground assaults, luring the advancing Russian troops into so-called "boilers" - enclosed areas where the attackers are caught in heavy cross-fire.

Similar tactics are being employed in the Staropromyslovsky region in the south-east. Here a long road leading out of the city is dominated by two ridges - Sluzhensky and Tersky. Federal troops control the ridges and the 36th District, enabling Russian artillery to pound Staropromyslovsky around the clock.

Rebel forces are said to be holding their ground although the front-line is in a constant state of flux. A similar deadlock exists in the nearby suburb of Michurin, shelled by federal batteries in the village of Khankala and around the 56th district, four kilometres from the city limits.

Almost untouched by the ravages of the 1995 war, the Chernorechie suburb, to the south-west, has become the scene of vicious street fighting over the past few weeks. In mid-December, Chechen fighters abandoned their positions in the face of repeated Russian air raids. However, 24 hours after local residents were persuaded to leave the suburb, rebels staged a concerted counter-attack, driving Russian troops five kilometres to the west.

The neighbouring Zavodskoy Region, in western Grozny, is another notorious Chechen stronghold, criss-crossed with communication trenches, bomb shelters and bunkers. The rebels have dug deep into the foundations of dozens of factories and oil refineries - built in Soviet times to withstand both natural and man-made disasters.

In the long-term, the Chechen high command hopes to wage a war of attrition from their mountain strongholds, attacking isolated federal outposts and motorised infantry patrols. By cutting off supply lines and avenues of retreat, the rebels can effectively annihilate individual units advancing into the foothills.

These tactics were used with devastating effect in late December when the Russian army attempted to thrust armoured units into the Argun and Vedeno gorges. In Serzhen-Yurt, on the road to Vedeno, Russian and Chechen forces clashed in a deadly gunfight, firing at a range of less than 150 metres. Both sides subsequently claimed a major victory.

As the rebel troops continue to mount counter attacks, the Russians have resorted to carpet bombing both regions with Su-25 fighters and Su-24 fighter bombers. My own house outside Serzhen-Yurt, and finished shortly before the war, has just been flattened.

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