

Caught in a Vicious Circle

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Maskhadov's latest appeal for peace talks meets with icy disdain

Russian human rights activists are calling on the Kremlin to respond to a letter from Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov proposing unconditional peace talks.

The letter was delivered to the Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities and the Declaration of Peace in the Chechen Republic which is headed by Duma deputies Sergei Kovalev, Yuri Rybakov and Sergei Yushenkov.

It came as a direct reply to an appeal sent by the committee to Putin and Maskhadov calling for peace negotiations. The Kremlin's response has not been forthcoming.

In his letter, Maskhadov writes, "No one has or can profit from this war. People are dying on both sides. It's a vicious circle which we simply can't ignore.

"But I am convinced that we are capable of resolving this conflict in the common interests of our peoples. All we need is a genuine desire to do so and the patience to hear one another out."

The former Chechen president concluded, "I sincerely believe that there is a future for the Chechen and Russian peoples and I officially declare my readiness to enter into peace talks with the Russian leadership."

Maskhadov's appeal is reminiscent of similar letters sent by Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudaev to President Boris Yeltsin.

One such letter, dated December 31, 1994, written a few hours before the Russian storm of Grozny, read, "I repeat once again that I am personally prepared to lead a peace delegation" and went on to implore Yeltsin to withdraw his troops and avoid "an all-out war".

In his recent book "Kremlin Morals", former government press official Dmitri Shevchenko claims that Dudaev inundated the Russian government with similar missives in the build-up to the 1994 military campaign.

However, according to Shevchenko, Yeltsin's press secretary, Vyacheslav Kostikov (who was later named Russia's ambassador to the Vatican) simply consigned Dudaev's letters to the waste-paper bin.

Last week, Russian's human rights cabal made every effort to ensure that Maskhadov's letter didn't suffer a similar fate.

However, their publicity campaign floundered after a low-key press conference in which Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya asked Sergei Kovalev, "Who's going to organise and hold these talks?"

"That's not our business," said Kovalev, explaining limply that the human rights committee had no mandate to hold peace talks and that these issues should be addressed by the Kremlin's representatives in Chechnya.

Apparently, Kovalev is happy to look to the West for support in the belief that "only foreign powers can put pressure on Putin to get behind the negotiating table".

But the human rights veteran acknowledges that Western leaders are unwilling to spoil their relationship with Russia merely to bring the Chechen conflict to a rapid conclusion. And he went on to accuse Lord Judd - the PACE heavyweight who called for Russia to be stripped of its voting rights last year - of having confused "the truth with politeness".

Most analysts agree that only a crisis such as the retaking of Grozny or a rebel incursion into Russian territory could spur the Kremlin to sue for peace - as was the case in 1996. And while the federal army pursues its hardline tactics in Chechnya and the rebel leadership remains divided, such a possibility seems increasingly remote.

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North Ossetia
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