

Chechen Civilians Perish in Russian Bombing

Author: [Ruslan Isaev](#)

Chechen families sheltering in basements fall victim to the latest Russian onslaught on Grozny.

Dozens of Chechen civilians are reported to have been buried alive after a blizzard of Russian rockets pummelled central Grozny.

Rebel leaders say the tragedy took place Tuesday, January 25, during the build-up to a two-pronged armoured attack mounted by federal troops.

The civilians were sheltering in basements near Minutka Square when the Russians launched salvos of Grad and Uragan rockets at surrounding Chechen strongholds. Entrances to the cellars were blocked by huge slabs of reinforced concrete from collapsed buildings. Attempts to dig through the rubble proved futile.

The use of multiple-rocket systems at this stage in the fighting reflects the Russian army's growing frustration at the loss of momentum in its all-out attack on the city centre.

A barrage of 40 Grad ("Hail") rockets is capable of destroying an entire block whilst 16 Uragan ("Hurricane") missiles fired simultaneously have a saturation area of 400,000 square metres.

Launched from federal positions on the Tersky and Sunzhensky ridges, the weapons are notoriously inaccurate. Chechen sources claim that Russian front-line positions were shattered by friendly-fire while Moscow puts rebel losses at a record 500 during the missile attack.

Said Abumuslimov, aide to Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, reported in a telephone interview that the rocket strike had failed to break the deadlock on Minutka Square.

The strategically important position was still held by rebel units, Abumuslimov claimed - although Moscow has been boasting that it controlled the city centre since January 23.

The presidential aide said it was impossible to estimate how many civilians had been buried by the rocket blasts: some cellars were home to as many as 40 people who survived on siege rations or by bartering their possessions for food during lulls in the bombardment.

Just over two metres deep, the basements are damp and airless. To reach trapped occupants, rescuers have to run the gauntlet of Russian mortar-fire and artillery shells. Often the rubble is too heavy to move by hand.

The rocket attack was the prelude to two concerted armoured assaults on Minutka Square. In the evening of January 26, around 300 federal troops made a cautious advance from the east, moving through streets choked with debris and shattered vehicles.

Abumuslimov said the rebels allowed the armoured personnel carriers (APCs) to reach the Yuzhnaya

("South") bus station before strafing them with machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

Five APCs were destroyed and 60 Russian servicemen killed, according to Chechen estimates, although the attacking force is said to have retreated, dragging wounded soldiers from the battlefield.

The rebels say they lost five men during the assault, which continued until the early hours of Thursday morning.

Fighting raged from building to building and even from floor to floor, with combatants pouring machine-gunfire down stairwells and lift-shafts.

Meanwhile another thrust towards Minutka was launched from the north of Grozny, cutting through the Kalinin district. Chechen field commander Aslanbek Ismailov reported that the force of around 100 Russians was beaten back after crossing the River Sunzha.

He went on to say that the vital bridge across the river was still not wholly controlled by the federal troops and soldiers venturing into open ground were easy targets for Chechen snipers concealed in nearby buildings.

But despite their street-fighting skills, the Chechen units defending Grozny, believed to total between 2,500 and 4,500 men, are hard pressed.

City Hospital No. 9 in the Leninsky region is operating in desperate conditions, with wounded fighters crowding the filthy cellars and power provided by decrepit generators. The rows of graves in the makeshift cemetery at the Kirov Park of Culture grow longer by the day.

Ismailov announced that the Grozny defence force had finally been purged of Wahhabi extremists. The militants, trained in Emir Khattab's secret camps before the war, are "better suited to mountain warfare", Ismailov explained.

However the Chechen leadership will no doubt be relieved that the "Islamic Cossacks" - who have previously threatened to divide the Chechen ranks - have been banished to the hills.

It was a dismal end to a dismal week for Russian generals, who, by Wednesday, were forced to reveal that overall casualty figures for the five-month campaign were much higher than previously reported - 1,055 rather than just over 500.

They have also grudgingly admitted that resistance is still fierce in the Staropromyslovsky and Zavodskoy regions, around the Lenin and Anisimov oil refineries and west of the chemical factory. Heavy snowfalls have slowed down progress on the ground and made aerial bombardment problematic.

Bislan Gantamirov, former mayor of Grozny and leader of the pro-Russian Chechen militia, said that consolidating federal gains in the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th districts was proving to be tougher than anticipated. He claims that rebel units are using a network of underground tunnels to outflank his troops and attack them from the rear.

According to Gantamirov, militiamen "liberating" the 3rd and 4th districts last week discovered thousands of civilians who had been hiding in basements since the beginning of the federal assault on Grozny.

They were escorted through the settlement of Staraya Sunzha to the Nadterechny region and to Urus-Martan.

Ruslan Isaev, a freelance Chechen journalist who has reported for Radio Free Europe and Vremya MN, is a regular contributor to IWPR.

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