

Chechen End Game

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Chechen commanders hope to grind down Russia's fighting spirit by drawing its forces into an exhausting war of attrition.

History is turning full circle. On February 29, Russian state television showed pictures of federal troops raising the tricolour over Shatoy - billed as the last rebel stronghold in southern Chechnya. The reports then flashed to footage from the 1994-96 war - a powerful moment of *deja vu*, as armoured personnel carriers rolled through the same village in June 1995 and the Russian generals declared total victory over the separatist forces.

Then, as now, their elation was premature. Shatoy itself is a tiny mountain outpost consisting of three dirt streets and a cluster of desiccated houses. Its Chechen commander, Hamzat Gilaev, claims his units left the village on the night of February 26, retreating to mountain bases. "We did not consider the defence of Shatoy to be a military necessity," he said glibly.

Now, the Chechen leaders are only too aware of their military priorities: to bog down the federal army in a war of attrition until they can rally their forces, gather new supplies from sympathisers abroad and mount a concerted offensive - probably in the early summer.

Last week, rebel vice-president Vakha Arsanov told his men, "A hard and bloody struggle with the enemy stands before us. Remember what Dzhokhar Dudaev [Chechnya's first president] said: 'Freedom is a precious commodity and we must pay dearly for it.'"

What goes around, comes around. Generations of Chechen leaders have appealed to their fighters in much the same way - from Sheikh Mansur, defeated by Catherine the Great in 1791, to Imam Shamil who resisted the Russians for 25 years. In August 1839, Shamil and 4,000 Chechens were trapped in the fortress of Akhulgo. When they realised they were defeated, the fighters threw themselves on the Russian bayonets while mothers killed their children with their own hands.

Now the Russian generals have once again driven the Chechens into a corner and left them with few options. On Friday, Russia's acting president, Vladimir Putin, rejected a proposal for peace talks from Chechnya's Aslan Maskhadov, on the grounds that Maskhadov was wanted as a war criminal.

Although an amnesty for rebel fighters to voluntarily hand over their weapons has been extended to April 1, tales of summary executions and savage brutality at the Chernokozovo "filtration" camp will serve to dissuade any war-weary fighter from throwing himself on Moscow's mercy.

Instead the Chechen commanders are searching for the means to continue the war indefinitely. Significant numbers of rebel fighters are already thought to have escaped into Georgia, where fortified bases have long been established in the mountains around Shatili. Unmarked helicopters carrying medical supplies and weaponry are said to fly regular missions across the Georgian border.

Meanwhile, the Jordanian-born field commander Emir Khattab has been attempting to whip up support amongst Dagestani Wahhabis - members of his own Islamic sect. During a meeting with Dagestani commanders last week, he outlined the second phase of Operation Hamzat-Bek - the campaign to create an independent Islamic state in the North Caucasus.

For the meantime, it is the region around Shatoy that will become the focus of continued Chechen resistance. Here echoing ravines and rocky fastnesses conceal dozens of caves and natural hangars where the Chechens have established their bases. The rebel fighters move freely across the mountainous terrain, their camouflaged trails snaking west out of the Veden Gorge.

Here the Russian army is faced with its own worst nightmare: sending in elite paratroops and marines to flush out the rebels while their Uragan and Grad multiple-rocket systems remain silent and their warplanes grounded. In the first Chechen conflict, the partisan war dragged on for more than a year, before a surprise rebel counter-attack recaptured Grozny and forced the Russians to sign an uneasy peace.

Already, guerrilla tactics are being employed with deadly effect. On March 1, separatist "mujahideen" attacked an armoured column near Itum-Kale and reportedly destroyed five APCs and three trucks. They also claimed a successful ambush near Ulus-Kert during which two APCs were knocked out before the Chechen attackers melted into the surrounding forest.

On Thursday, a surprise raid was staged in Grozny's Staropromyslovsky district, the first since the capital fell at the end of January. The Russian army has admitted that 37 OMON (Special Police Unit) servicemen were killed in the ambush, with another 12 wounded.

The current state of the rebel forces remains the butt of increasing propaganda from both sides. The Russians claim only 2,000 fighters remain in the mountains and estimate Chechen casualties at 12,000 dead and 4,000 wounded. The separatists say they have 5,000 armed guerrillas scattered across the republic as well as 10,000 more "sleepers" who have taken refuge in occupied villages.

More importantly, the most influential and respected Chechen commanders are still thought to be alive and fighting fit. These include Ruslan Gelaev, Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, Vice President Vakha Arsanov and Turpal-ali Atgeriev, head of Chechen security. Even badly wounded leaders such as Shamil Basaev continue to elude the federal forces. "These invalids hobble around the republic at such speed that it's impossible to keep up with them," commented one Russian officer.

Most observers say the leadership will soon decamp to the Nozhay-Yurt area, in north-eastern Chechnya, said to be a virtual no-man's land where Russian control is largely symbolic. This will allow them to regroup and oversee operations both in the mountains and in occupied territory.

However, the rebel government maintains it has no plans to take the war on to Russian soil. In an interview circulated amongst the local population on videocassette, Arsanov says, "We are preparing serious manoeuvres, not diversionary tactics."

The Russian army, however, is preparing to combat the latter. "The police phase" of the "anti-terrorist operation" will focus on mopping up shattered rebel units rather than fending off a concerted attack. The Russian Ministry of Defence is planning to pull 60,000 troops out of Chechnya - 60 per cent of its total force - and hand over control to the Ministry of Internal Affairs which controls around 15,000 servicemen in the region.

In a televised interview last week, the deputy commander of the Northern Army Group, Major-General Vadim Timchenko, ruled out the possibility of a partisan war because "the rebels lack the support of the local population".

But the Russians may well have overestimated the extent of their control over occupied Chechnya. Rebel propaganda minister Movladi Udugov commented last week, "The Russian army is like a huge ship which has ploughed through the Chechen republic, leaving nothing in its wake. As soon as it passes, the waters simply close behind it."

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