

Chechen-Ingush Battle Shocks North Caucasus

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Neighbouring republics braced for reprisals after bloody shootout. An unprecedented crisis has erupted between the security forces of Chechnya and Ingushetia after a clash between policemen from the two republics ended in heavy casualties.

The September 13 battle near the village of Ordzhonikidzevskaya left eight policemen dead and many more wounded.

The leaders of both Chechnya and Ingushetia said called the incident a “tragic mistake” and said they hoped it would not lead to a worsening of relations between the two republics, whose people are close ethnic kin.

But police officers on each side are blaming the other for the deaths of their colleagues, and are talking of revenge.

According to the Chechen version of events, officers from an OMON special police unit were fired on without warning from an Ingush traffic police post as they were returning home after carrying out a special operation to detain a local Ingush.

“The group went to the village of Yandare to arrest a local resident, a notorious criminal kingpin named Temurzayev, who is responsible for a series of crimes in Chechnya,” a Chechen policeman named Magomed told IWPR.

Magomed said that when they returned to the police checkpoint through which they had first entered Ingushetia, their three cars bearing the official blue number plates of Chechnya’s interior ministry came under automatic weapons fire. He said the attackers were Ingush policemen and civilians wearing masks, who later left by bus for Ordzhonikidzevskaya.

The Ingush version of events is entirely different. They say the Chechens fired first after an Ingush patrolman asked their vehicles to stop. They said the armed men inside the car refused to present their documents, and after the Ingush officers discovered two men inside the vehicles wearing handcuffs and with sacks over their heads, the Chechens began shooting.

A firefight then broke out, only ending when senior police officers from both republics and Russian military officers arrived on the scene.

Six Chechen OMON men, including deputy commander Buvadi Dakhiev, died. Two Ingush were killed, including a senior police captain, Magomed Khadziev. Five Chechens and nine Ingush were wounded.

Ingush president Murat Zyazikov and Chechnya’s prime minister and de facto leader Ramzan Kadyrov called the shootout a “tragic accident” and called for calm. However the incident has set nerves jangling in both republics.

“No one has abolished the laws of blood revenge in Chechnya and Ingushetia,” said Said Suleimanov, a 55-year-old resident of Grozny. “Even the Soviet authorities could not solve this problem. The dead and wounded Chechen and Ingush policemen have relatives, comrades and friends. So anything is possible.”

Isa Kostoyev, who represents Ingushetia in the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament, was much more outspoken. He said the battle was the inevitable result of years in which Chechen security officers has acted with impunity in Ingushetia.

“I am speechless,” he told Ekho Moskvu radio. “I am fed up with this utter humiliation of our whole republic, of our people. For several years now, hundreds of law enforcement officers from the Ingush republic have been dying as a result of unsanctioned and uncoordinated sorties both from Ossetia and Chechnya. It’s time to put a stop to it. By my reckoning, around 300 interior ministry officers have been killed in these sorties.”

Kostoyev told his fellow Ingush, “If anyone comes and searches you or detains you without members of the Ingush law enforcement agencies being present, I urge you to resist them in every way you can – physically; involve the whole village, the whole street.”

Bashir Aushev, secretary of Ingushetia’s security council, was equally blunt, saying on the day after the tragedy, “We will not allow them to throw their weight around in our republic. There will be no Kadyrov syndrome in our republic.”

Aushev was referring to the armed men under Prime Minister Kadyrov’s control, the so-called “Kadyrovtsy” whom critics say are accountable to no one and are guilty of human rights abuses.

The reaction from Chechnya’s pro-Moscow president Alu Alkhanov was equally indignant. Alkhanov came from the same village, Urus-Martan, as the dead commander, Dakhiev, and fought alongside him and other pro-Moscow forces during the first Chechen war.

Speaking after the funeral on September 14, Alkhanov said Dakhiev and his comrades had been betrayed. “Know and remember just one thing,” he said. “Buvadi Dakhiev and his comrades were doing their professional duty in this republic. What happened to them was treachery.”

Anna Politkovskaya, the well-known Russian journalist and expert on the North Caucasus, said a Chechen-Ingush row has been brewing for some time.

“Relations between Ingush and Chechen security officials didn’t worsen overnight,” she said. “It just wasn’t talked about for a fairly long time. Now it has stopped being a matter for a small circle.”

Politkovskaya said Chechen security forces had long been coming into Ingushetia and detaining people without the consent of the Ingush police.

“After the Kadyrovtsy were so arrogant on September 7 as to brutally beat up several Ingush policemen,

the Ingush agreed amongst themselves that next time they found Kadyrovtsy, they would not let them in, but would beat them and drive them out of the republic.”

The Russian general prosecutor’s office is now investigating the shootout and has formed a special investigative group, which includes neither Chechens nor Ingush.

The authorities in both republics have promised to assist the wounded and the families of the dead. Few believe this is the end of the matter.

“I want to believe that it won’t happen again,” said Markha Isayeva, whose Chechen policeman son was killed two years ago. “It is terrible when law enforcement officers, who are meant to protect people from bandits and criminals, shoot at one another. The guilty parties, whoever they are, must be punished.”

Others are thinking about revenge.

“Our comrades were treacherously murdered while doing their professional duty,” said a Chechen OMON officer who did not want to be named. “And it doesn’t matter where it happened: Chechnya, Dagestan or Ingushetia.

“We are still waiting for the results of the investigation. If all those guilty for these murders aren’t severely punished under the law, then we will punish them ourselves – but by the laws of our ancestors.”

Umalt Dudayev is the pseudonym of a Chechen journalist and IWPR contributor.

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