

Chechen 'Spirits' Haunt Russians

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The Russian army's propaganda machine is misfiring as Chechens leaders it claims to have killed rise from their graves.

As Russia's war machine shifts its focus to Chechnya's southern mountains, its propaganda machine is homing in on the rebel high command.

Realising that cohesion within the rebel forces relies largely on the charisma of individual commanders, Moscow has been devoting considerable efforts to killing them off - if only on paper.

The trouble is the "spirits" - the federal army's nickname for the Chechens - have a habit of coming back to haunt the wishful-thinking Russian generals.

Vice-President Vakha Arsanov, declared dead by the federal press centre on February 1, rose from the grave a week later to declare, "Rumours of my death are greatly exaggerated" in an interview on the underground Chechen TV station, Kavkaz.

Ruslan Gelaev, who was on the official casualty list after the fall of Grozny, reappeared on February 2 to organise the defence of Katyr-Yurt where a large rebel force was surrounded by Russian troops and pounded by artillery.

Aslambek Ismailov, commander of the Grozny defence garrison, was resurrected by the Russians on February 7 when he was named as one of the field commanders who took part in the exchange of Radio Liberty reporter Andrei Babitsky for two Russian PoWs. Chechen sources had reported that Ismailov died in Alkhan-Kala during the retreat from the shattered capital.

It was, in fact, after the Alkhan-Kala bloodbath that the Russian generals started counting heads. It is thought that a force of 2,000 rebels blundered into a minefield near the village as they attempted to break out of Grozny on January 31.

With unusual candour, the Chechen high command announced that three top commanders died in the fiasco: Grozny Mayor Lecha Dudaev, Aslambek Ismailov and Khunkar-Pasha Israpilov.

The Russian media added that maverick warlord Shamil Basaev had lost both legs and his right eye. They eventually settled for the heel of his right foot.

Meanwhile, General Victor Kazantsev, commander of the Russian forces in Chechnya, declared that the Chechen high command had been effectively destroyed and "a number of ring-leaders are currently in captivity".

Kazantsev refused to name any of his high-ranking prisoners, although they are thought to include Chechen health minister Umar Khambiev, who was chief surgeon at Grozny's Hospital No. 9 throughout the Russian siege.

However, despite the bold assertions of the Russian generals, federal agents have reportedly been exhuming the corpses of dozens of rebel fighters in a bid to check their facts.

It is thought the bodies were removed by Russian army lorries in the dead of night so that experts from the Federal Security Service could later establish their identities and amend their Most Wanted list.

Villagers in Alkhan-Kala report that around 10 corpses were dug up in the first days of February, including the body of Lecha Dudaev, nephew of Chechnya's first president, Dzhokhar Dudaev. Similar incidents have been reported in the Michurina and Zavodskoy districts of Grozny.

Hopes that the feared warlord Emir Khattab might be among the casualties were dashed when the Jordanian-born militant appeared on Chechen TV to announce his plans to defend rebel mountain strongholds. Declared dead on two occasions by the Russian general staff, Khattab continues to inspire his followers by a reputation for invulnerability.

By turning humble mortals into living legends, the Russian propaganda machine may be doing the embattled military far more harm than good.

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