

Chechens 'Plan Summer Offensive'

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Basaev's videotaped appeal provides no shortage of grist for the Russian propaganda mill

Russian intelligence claims that around 1,000 Chechen fighters have massed on the Azeri and Georgian borders in preparation for a concerted summer offensive on the "occupied territories".

Federal sources say the rebel troops are responding to a call by warlord Shamil Basaev to "increase their activity" over the coming months.

The announcement comes as a diplomatic blow to both the Georgian and Azeri governments which have repeatedly denied reports that Chechen fighters are taking refuge within their borders.

The Kremlin's spokesman on Chechnya, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, announced last month that Russian security services had seized a videotaped appeal made by Basaev to rebel leaders scattered across the South Caucasus.

Appearing on Vladimir Pozner's Vremena programme, Yastrzhembsky said that experts had confirmed the tape was genuine and offered journalists a typed translation of the speech (Basaev spoke in Chechen).

The appeal was apparently addressed to the field commander Ruslan Gelaev who was asked to pass the word to "all the mujahideen currently in Georgia".

According to Yastrzhembsky's transcript, Basaev took the opportunity to confess to a catalogue of crimes including the January kidnap of American charity worker Kenneth Gluck and the execution of nine OMON prisoners in March last year.

The feared warlord also obligingly confirmed federal suspicions that Chechen fighters were encamped in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge whilst wounded rebels received medical treatment in Baku. "In Baku, our mujahideen had their own apartments which they arranged through the Arabs," Basaev allegedly said.

In effect, the transcript touched on all the well-worn themes of the Russian propaganda machine, with Basaev even admitting that rebel fighters were poorly armed, badly trained and dispirited. Plans to retake Grozny last autumn, he said, had been shelved due to a lack of combat readiness and the growing hostility of the civilian population.

Most importantly, the translation of Basaev's appeal hinted at plans for a summer offensive, explaining that the rebels had recently bought 1,500 mortar shells and a large consignment of rifle ammunition.

"In the republic today, there are many mujahideen who have the will to fight but there aren't enough weapons for them all. We have well-trained people who can work secretly in groups of seven to nine men. Many of these are waiting for the summer.

"In the autumn there were 300 foreigners who came to help us. We had to send them back after the storm

of Grozny was postponed but these people are ready to return at any time."

Finally, according to Yastrzhembsky's transcript, Basaev assured Gelaev that he had broken off all dealings with Chechnya's elected president, Aslan Maskhadov "who refuses to understand us". He also alluded to other rifts within the Chechen chain of command.

"I'm telling you all this in detail so that you know the truth. You're in Georgia, we're here and there are all sorts of rumours flying about."

Meanwhile, Shamil Basaev himself has angrily dismissed the transcript as "a pure fabrication and a distortion of everything that was said".

The Chechen warlord admits that he recorded an appeal to field commanders in February of this year but denies that it contained "defeatist talk".

He said "the idiotic FSB translation" had deliberately distorted "anything that touches on the situation in Chechnya, the people's attitude to the mujahideen, the kidnappings and the relations between the Chechen leaders."

Said Basaev, "Yastrzhembsky made one glaring mistake - if I had mentioned the Feds at all in my appeal, I'd have referred to them as the 'peds' [Russian slang for 'pederasts']."

The Chechen field commander described the Russian "fabrication" as a "desperate act which proves that the invaders have almost no ideological reserves left in their arsenal to conceal the genocide of the Chechen people".

Analysts have pointed out that the transcript has given the Russian authorities another excuse to increase pressure on Tbilisi which continues to deny the presence of Chechen rebels in the Pankisi Gorge.

Georgia is still squirming under a visa regime slapped on the former Soviet republic last year when the Tbilisi government refused to take decisive action.

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