

Chechens Rub Salt in Old Wounds

Author: IWPR

Up to 15 Russian officers could be disciplined for sending a unit of OMON troopers to their deaths. Worsening relations between the police and the military are threatening to split the high command

Deep-rooted rivalries between the Russian army and interior ministry troops are being blamed for a string of humiliating federal defeats in Chechnya. And rebel forces are thought to be exploiting the running feud in a bid to destabilise the federal high command.

With the campaign officially moving into its "police phase", units of the notorious OMON special police are coming to their own, staging "mopping up" operations in captured rebel villages after the regular army has moved on.

But, following a bloody ambush last week which claimed the lives of 32 OMON officers, police chiefs are openly claiming the army refuses to provide their units with proper air and ground support.

It is the culmination of several months of conflict between the two services. The military complain they are constantly made to suffer for OMON brutality in "occupied territories" while the police begrudge the army its superior fire power.

In fact, the situation has become so volatile that Russia's interior minister, Colonel-General Vladimir Rushailo, flew to Chechnya on April 4 to investigate the latest allegations.

Last week's scandal surrounds a squad of 41 OMON troops from Perm, who blundered into an ambush near the mountain village of Zhani-Vedeno on the morning of March 29. The column, consisting of an armoured personnel carrier and two trucks, was attacked by several hundred rebel fighters under the Jordanian-born field commander Emir Khattab.

In an exact re-enactment of Khattab's notorious attack on the 245th Motorised Infantry Regiment back in 1996, the separatists knocked out the vehicles to the front and rear of the column before pinning down the OMON troopers in a withering hail of gunfire.

To their horror, the beleaguered policemen then discovered they were unable to call up air support, as no one had given them the radio frequencies needed to contact an airborne unit stationed just a few miles down the gorge.

Their calls for help were, however, picked up by the interior ministry headquarters in Vedeno and a second column of Perm OMON, including two APCs and 107 troopers, was sent to the rescue.

But the relief force was ambushed on Height 817, just 500 metres away from the first engagement. After a three-hour fire-fight, they were forced to retreat, leaving the embattled unit to its fate. The last radio communication from Zhani-Vedeno was intercepted at 4.45pm: "Any of you who can still fire, make every shot count. Over and out."

The strained silence that fell over the Vedeno Gorge that night spread across the whole of Russia. At first, press spokesmen claimed that one soldier had been killed, four wounded and the rest were missing. A

concerted operation was mounted to search for the survivors who were said to have broken through the encirclement in small groups.

The families waiting outside the OMON base near Perm's famous Goznak factory steeled themselves for the worst -- but no one was prepared for the shattering news that came on March 31. It emerged that the OMON unit had been virtually annihilated while nine badly wounded troopers had been taken prisoner by Khattab's Islamic Regiment

The recriminations came thick and fast. Mikhail Labunets, commander of the interior ministry troops in Chechnya, promptly pointed an accusatory finger at the airborne regiment which had failed to come to the rescue.

He went on to say it was almost impossible for OMON units to secure air support during routine operations because of the long-standing enmity between the federal army and the police.

One OMON officer, who gave his name as Konstantin, said that the airborne troops had deliberately failed to pass on details of communications frequencies to the police unit in Vedeno. "And the Chekists [the FSB] had intelligence that Khattab's fighters were moving around Vedeno, but they didn't bother to tell our lads," he claimed.

The Ministry of Defence has been typically defensive. Army officials blamed the OMON for not observing standard operating procedure in hostile territory. The vehicles, they said, were too close together while the column advanced "as if on parade".

Colonel Vladimir Krymsky, spokesman for the Airborne Divisional Headquarters in Chechnya, said, "There should have been artillery spotters attached to the column. The commander of the paratroop unit didn't have a proper map with conventional coordinates which would have allowed him to call in fire support."

Col. Krymsky added magnanimously, "Of course, this doesn't detract from the personal courage of those who did their duty to the very end and died like heroes."

Col.-Gen. Rushailo ordered a full investigation on March 31 while Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev blamed "a lack of firm, centralised command" for the tragedy. A preliminary report pins the responsibility on 15 different officers in the Vedeno district who are accused of "irresponsibility and laxity".

Meanwhile, the Chechen rebels added insult to injury by claiming to have executed the nine OMON prisoners on the morning of April 4. The men were killed, they said, because the Russians had refused to hand over a tank commander, Yuri Budanov, accused of raping and killing an 18-year-old Chechen girl.

Here the story goes round in circles. The arrest of the highly-decorated Colonel Budanov has already enraged army commanders who say their colleague has been victimised by old enemies in the Ministry of the Interior. The OMON, in turn, are incensed that nine of their comrades may have died to save the life of an army officer.

At this juncture, three Alpha Group officers leading the search for missing OMON troopers were killed by a land-mine. Relations between police and military reached boiling point.

These relations have always been cautious at best. One military analyst commented, "It's like trying to get

a swan and a crab to move in harmony."

Set up in 1988 as a special riot squad within the interior ministry, the OMON earned its reputation for senseless brutality in April 1989, when officers wielding sharpened shovels killed 19 demonstrators in Tbilisi. Two years later, at least 14 protestors were killed in Vilnius and another six in Riga when OMON units were deployed in the Baltic States.

In Chechnya, the OMON's main task is to flush out rebel fighters hiding amongst the civilian population. Most units take the easy way out, treating every civilian as a potential separatist and launching vicious "mopping-up" campaigns through the liberated settlements. The bulk of war crimes recorded by international organisations in Chechnya are thought to have been committed by the OMON.

The federal army has good grounds for hostility. The OMON are "contract" soldiers, who enjoy relatively high salaries and better living conditions. More importantly, regular troops usually take the brunt of revenge attacks staged by the Chechen rebels in the wake of OMON excesses.

It is likely the rebel forces have made every effort to rub salt into these wounds. But their attacks on OMON columns may also have a psychological edge.

The police units are raised in specific locations. They are the sons of local families. When 32 troopers from Perm or 31 from Sergiev-Posad die in a single ambush, the sense of loss is shared by an entire community. The impact is far greater than the deaths of 300 conscripts recruited from different parts of the Russian Federation.

The rebels hope that the bereaved communities will turn against the Russian government and call for a halt to the fighting.

Federal press centres are well aware of this tendency. In the wake of the ambushes, journalists have been banned from citing the names, regimental numbers and hometowns of soldiers killed in action. Reporters who break the rules will automatically lose their accreditation.

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