

Chechnya: Amnesty Fails to Inspire

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Only a handful of Chechen rebels have agreed to a Russian amnesty, just two weeks before it is due to expire.

Moscow's latest amnesty for Chechnya has had limited success, with very few rebels taking up the offer of laying down their arms.

The amnesty, signed by Georgy Boos, deputy speaker of the Russian parliament, the State Duma, on June 6, is due to expire on September 1, but so far only a little over 200 former members of "illegal armed formations", as Moscow calls the armed Chechen rebels, have taken up the offer to surrender.

The amnesty is a central plank of the Russian government's strategy to declare that the fighting in Chechnya is over and the situation there is "normalising". Presidential elections are to be held there on October 5, with the current pro-Moscow leader, Akhmad Kadyrov, the clear favourite to win.

Few of those who accepted the amnesty were holed up in the forests - many were living at home and some even working in the pro-Moscow security structures of Chechnya.

Implementation of the pardon has not been without problems, notably, on at least one occasion, resulting in recriminations between Chechen and Russian officials.

Zulai Visingirieva, the head of the village of Ulus-Kert in the southern mountains of Chechnya, collected all the young men in her village who had connections with the fighters and took them to the local office of the intelligence agency, the FSB. But instead of getting amnesties, five were charged with crimes and four of those were detained.

Visingirieva advised her counterparts in other villages not to act as she had done.

This year's amnesty follows at least two others. The most significant was the one proclaimed in March 1997, when all combatants in the first war, with the exception of fighters who had taken part in the hostage-taking raids on Budyonnovsk and Kizlyar, were amnestied.

Another pardon in March 2000, shortly after the second conflict began, was more controversial. Many of those who gave themselves up later regretted doing so.

Shamil from the village of Urus-Martan had spent a very brief period amongst the fighters in the mountains. Shortly after getting married, he was persuaded by the aunt of his wife to give himself up. As he had no gun, he had to buy one for 2500 roubles (around 80 US dollars).

However, a few days after he gave himself up, Russian soldiers burst into Shamil's house and took him away. He was beaten and tortured, asked for information about the fighters, then raped and abandoned outside the command post. He was too afraid to go to court.

Because of cases like this, very few people took advantage of the 2000 amnesty.

Asked if the new amnesty would offer more security, Rudnik Dudayev, head of the Security Council of Chechnya, said, "The situation today is not the one it was two or even one year ago, it's entirely different. Now we are getting ready for elections and after that it will be entirely different. But no one can give one hundred per cent guarantees in this republic."

Nurdi Nukhajiev, deputy human rights representative of the Russian president on human rights, said, "I think that all cases against Chechens, found guilty by the courts during this military campaign should be reviewed under the amnesty. Many of them were fabricated and many of those detained were forced under torture to confess to crimes they had not committed.

"Without this I am not convinced that this amnesty will play a serious role in stabilising the situation."

Many ordinary Chechens are angry about the second point of the parliamentary resolution, which grants a pardon to federal soldiers who have committed crimes against the civilian population in Chechnya.

Hopes were expressed that the amnesty might mean the return of the several thousand Chechens who have been listed as missing since 1999. However, no one has returned. Zeinab Jambekova, head of the human rights organization "Victims of War" recounted a conversation with the deputy prosecutor of Urus-Martan region about her missing son. He told her that the amnesty was not for "innocent people".

Those who have taken up the amnesty have been promised work – although in fact jobs are still thin on the ground in Chechnya.

The exception is Chechnya's pro-Moscow police force. Many who have given up their weapons are now getting them again, this time as police officers. There has been a proliferation of officially recognised armed groups in the republic and with the coming election several candidates are hiring armed bodyguards.

A number of these armed groups are already coming to blows. Recently, there have been clashes between men from the GRU security service and Kadyrov's guards and between the police in the town of Gudermes and the armed unit loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov, son of the acting Chechen leader.

Meanwhile, the violence continues in Chechnya. More than fifty people died in the recent suicide bombing in the military hospital in Mozdok, proving that the rebels, using different methods now, are still active and dangerous.

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