

Chechnya: Blasts Signal New Campaign

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Two suicide attacks in three days indicate a shift in tactics by Chechen guerrillas.

Two bomb attacks in three days which took the lives of at least 75 people have underlined that the war in Chechnya goes on, now pursued with even more ruthless tactics.

On May 14 two suicide bombers struck during a religious festival in the village of Iliskhan-Yurt in eastern Chechnya. The Russian interior ministry said that the attackers - both women - were trying to make their way to the platform where Chechnya's pro-Moscow leadership was gathered.

The women were stopped by bodyguards of Akhmad Kadyrov, leader of the pro-Moscow Chechen administration. One blew up herself. The explosives strapped to the other failed to detonate, but she died in the first blast. By May 15 the death-toll had risen to 16, with more than 140 people wounded.

The week began with an even more deadly bombing in the northern village of Znamenskoye, deep inside what is usually regarded as the most pro-Russian and peaceful part of Chechnya. At least 59 people died.

The day after the Znamenskoye bomb blast, a huge crater in the centre of the village had already been filled in. Workers from Russia's emergencies ministry were picking through the ruins of destroyed buildings, hoping to save someone or at least recover some bodies.

Malika Yusupova from the local administration of Nadterechny Region, of which Znamenskoye is the centre, was lucky. She was at the far side of the building from the explosion and suffered only light injuries. "If I had stayed in my office I would have died," she said.

The blast happened when a truck turned onto the central street of the village, tore through a roadblock and exploded. The force of the explosion, which experts estimated came from about one tonne of explosives, was so strong that eight buildings on either side of the street were destroyed, including the offices of the local authorities and the security agency, the FSB. Witnesses said they saw two women and a man in the truck.

Local officials said that 23 women and 12 children were among the dead.

Both these attacks were followed by the now customary accusations and denials. The Russian federal authorities accused separatist president Aslan Maskhadov of complicity in the explosions, while his spokesmen abroad condemned the blasts, blamed them on extremist elements, and said that Maskhadov had nothing to do with them.

At the very least, the attacks show that radical fighters who have adopted suicide tactics more familiar in the Middle East than Chechnya are now setting the agenda.

The two attacks followed a lull - by Chechnya's standards - since another suicide attack in Grozny killed 72 people on December 27.

Many had expected that the Chechen fighters would try to disrupt the March 23 referendum on a new constitution for the region, as a way of demonstrating that Moscow's declared "normalization" of the situation was not going to plan. However, there were no major incidents on referendum day. Several polling stations came under fire the night before, and schools where voting was supposed to take place were burned in the villages of Valerik and Chiri-Yurt. But the heavy security operation conducted by the federal authorities mostly worked.

The same scenario recurred on May 9 - Victory Day in Russia. "We had information that 200 kilograms of nitrate used for fertilizer, but also a potential explosive, was being moved across Ingushetia into Chechnya," FSB major Gennady Sapozhkov told IWPR. Police were unable to track the cargo, but there was no bombing.

May 12, the day of the Znamenskoye truck bomb, was also a symbolic date in Chechnya - the sixth anniversary of the signing of a peace agreement in the Kremlin. On that day in 1997, Maskhadov and President Boris Yeltsin promised "to reject forever the use, and threat of the use of force, in resolving any disputed questions".

The Znamenskoye attackers now make that declaration look more ironic than ever, especially as they did not choose a military target. Two FSB employees were probably the only security-related victims of the blast.

Recently the rebels have been concentrating on laying mines. In April for example, five FSB officers in a car were killed by a mine in the centre of Grozny, even though sappers had already disabled an explosive device on the very same spot the same day.

Military spokesmen in Chechnya estimate that ten cars or armoured vehicles are blown up every week in the republic and that around 100 explosive devices, including 20 land mines, are defused. Soldiers with mine-detectors in their hands are a common sight moving slowly along the roadsides of Chechnya. An armoured personnel carrier, APC, generally crawls along behind them. Cars and minibuses try to pass by quickly in case they get caught by a sudden blast.

According to Aburan Ismailov, deputy police chief in Grozny's Oktyabrsky region, the fighters generally lay their mines at night, in places where military columns are due to pass. "They place them just on the off chance - anyone who passes by will get blown up," he told the news website strana.ru. "They are rarely hunting for someone in particular."

Most of the explosive devices are home-made. "Often they use ordinary 122- or 152-millimeter artillery shells," explains Alexander Gorelov, commander of a platoon of engineers. "The explosive force of these is enough to blow up an APC." The fighters often add pieces of metal to the device to create more shrapnel, and put a plastic bucket on top to thwart the mine-detectors. "Sometimes an ordinary bucket with explosive and nails inside is enough," said Gorelov.

A teenage boy who introduces himself as Abdurakhman Ilyasov says that he has planted mines on many occasions on behalf of the fighters. Abdurakhman said it was easy, as he had done it since childhood and a good way of making money.

"There was one occasion when I laid the mine and waited for an APC," Abdurakhman said. "Then I saw a de-miner who found it and began to defuse it. I thought 'I don't want the mine to be lost, so at least I'll blow up one soldier'."

He said that he was paid between 30 and 100 US dollars for laying a mine, and the reward was increased three or fourfold for a direct hit.

The Russian military claims that the "war of mines" proves that the rebels are getting weaker and are now avoiding open military clashes. Yury Kostrovets, deputy commander of federal forces in Chechnya, told IWPR that the separatists were taking heavy losses, and mine-laying was "the means of resistance which is best paid for by foreign sponsors."

Kostrovets said that the separatist commanders had given orders to carry out attacks in places where people were concentrated. The aim was to trigger protests from the civilian population.

Akhmad Kadyrov, the acting president of Chechnya since the March referendum, said, "The separatists want to prove any way they can that they are still strong and ready to continue their pointless war."

For their part the rebels are promising to launch a new conventional offensive this summer.

"We are undergoing reorganization and choosing the general line of our activity," said one rebel commander in a videocassette widely distributed in Chechnya.

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