

Chechnya: Fleeing Villagers Protest

Author: [Musa Musayev](#)
[Natalya Estemirova](#)

The plight of a thousand Dagestani villagers fleeing Chechnya has stoked trouble between the two republics.

Tensions between the Chechen and Dagestani authorities remain high as hundreds of ethnic Avars who fled their village in Chechnya for the neighbouring republic say they are too afraid to go home.

The villagers belong to a tiny minority in Chechnya, but in Dagestan where they have sought refuge, the Avars are one of the major ethnic groups.

A pro-Moscow Chechen special forces battalion raided the village of Borozdinovskaya on June 4, and described the operation as a success. Police officials said 11 “guerrilla sympathisers” were rounded up and two guerrillas killed during the fighting.

However, villagers who fled Borozdinovskaya say the unit, which reports to the Vostok special battalion of the Russian defence ministry, has often been involved in kidnappings for ransom and abuses against local people – and that this operation was no different.

Eyewitnesses said a well-known commander in the battalion, who goes by the nickname of “Beard”, was present during the raid. Locals say Beard is a local activist in the pro-Kremlin United Russia party.

One Borozdinovskaya resident, told IWPR, “Those people are scum and they are former rebel fighters. Hamzat [alleged to have led the raid] extorts money from the locals. They have kidnapped our people before, then they let them out for a ransom. It was Beard who collected the money. Everyone knows that in our district. The Dagestani government knows it; we’ve complained many times.

“The federal government knows it, too, assuming our complaints got through. We’ve been writing to the Kremlin for two years.”

The incident was explosive enough to attract the attention of Dmitry Kozak, President Vladimir Putin’s special representative for the North Caucasus.

“If Borozdinovskaya residents are telling the truth, what happened there is an outrageous act of sabotage against Russia, Dagestan and Chechnya,” said Kozak. “If the perpetrators thought they could terrorise peaceful civilians and get away with it, they were dead wrong.”

Aizanat Magomazova, the daughter of a 77-year-old Borozdinovskaya resident who was killed in the raid, told IWPR how she received a telephone call the night her home village was raided, “A friend of mine who’s a schoolteacher called me in Kizlyar in the middle of the night, saying there was another Beslan going on at their village school.

“All the villagers had been brought to the school building at gunpoint and ordered to pull their shirts over their heads. Then they started beating people and robbing their homes. She told me my father had been taken away and his house was on fire.

"The house was still burning when I came to the village. A neighbourhood boy went in to retrieve a gas cylinder that might explode, and he found my father's body. We could hardly recognise him. He had bare bones for legs."

Magomazova said tensions had grown since Chechen authorities began resettling displaced persons from the Nozhai-Yurt district in Borozdinovskaya. "A few families came," she said. "There were fights with the locals and people complained. But the complaints were always ignored. Some masked people came and threatened violence if the villagers didn't retract their complaints."

But Isa Nutayev, the head of Shelkovskoy district, told IWPR that the authorities had simply been battling illegal armed gangs in the area. "A criminal group we call the Avar jamaat [Islamic group] made Borozdinovskaya its home after August 1996," he said.

"Back then the group numbered between 50 and 60 and was headed by the infamous warlord Mitabov, who is accused of numerous murders and kidnappings, including the kidnapping of an Armenian boy from... Stavropol province. Mitabov was killed in a gangland shooting before the second Chechen war."

The displaced persons, who say the raid on their village left several homes burned to the ground, have set up a tent city along the border between Dagestan and Chechnya. The refugees built basic huts covered with polythene sheeting, and have been living there for more than two weeks. They brought their own food, which they cook over fires. Among the more than 1,000 people in the tent camp near Kizlyar, some 150 are children under the age of seven.

"We've been roughing it for two weeks now with no help from anyone," said Magomed Magomedov, a history teacher and father of eight. "The emergency rescue workers wouldn't even give us any tents; each family had to buy its own. The Red Cross people said they couldn't help because we don't have the status of forced migrants. Only individual Dagestanis are helping as much as they can. The heads of Khasavyurt and Kizilyurt municipal administrations have sent us flour and sugar."

Magomedov denied the men rounded up by the Vostok special forces were "criminals" or "guerrillas". He and other villagers want them to be released before they will agree to go home. "Our representatives met with Dmitry Kozak in Khankala," he said, referring to the main Russian military base in Chechnya. "He promised us safety, but people are afraid to go back."

Leading Dagestani opposition politicians from the newly formed Northern Alliance which opposes the government have visited the camp and criticised the Chechen and Dagestani authorities for not helping the refugees more.

The Dagestani authorities want the refugees to go home. They fear the smouldering crisis could spark broader interethnic tensions between Chechens and Dagestanis.

In 1999, relations between Chechnya and Dagestan spiralled downwards after Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev led an incursion into Dagestan – an operation that helped trigger the second war in Chechnya.

According to Magomedov, the raid on Borozdinovskaya is just the latest in a long string of violent incidents against Avars there, and he claims 18 Dagestanis have been killed in the village since 2000.

Chechnya's most powerful figure, first deputy prime minister Ramzan Kadyrov, has now been made head

of a commission to resolve the issue of the villagers' return. However, he does not enjoy good relations with the Dagestani authorities.

Zaid Abdulagatov, a Dagestani political analyst, said he feared trouble ahead. "Things have taken an ominous course," he said. "Now everything depends on what the Dagestani and Chechen governments decide."

"If they just leave everything as is, the problem will only grow worse," Abdulagatov said. "On the one hand, the refugees are Chechen citizens and their problems are an internal matter for Chechnya, but on the other, violence was used against ethnic Dagestanis. That does not augur well for this ethnically tense region."

Natalya Estemirova works for the Memorial human rights centre in Chechnya. Musa Musayev is a reporter for the Severny Kavkaz newspaper in Dagestan.

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