

Chechnya: Russia Counts The Cost

Author: [Timur Aliev](#)

Russia's biggest military disaster since war resumed in Chechnya in 1999 comes amid a new rebel offensive.

Russia's prosecutor general Vladimir Ustinov has said that a rebel rocket probably downed a Russian Mi-26 helicopter in Chechnya on August 19, although the exact cause of the crash has yet to be established.

Whatever the final explanation, the death toll, 116 on August 23, now approaches that in the Kursk submarine tragedy two years ago, and is Moscow's single biggest loss of life in Chechnya in a day since war resumed there three years ago. It shows that the conflict is continuing with unabated ferocity.

The helicopter plunged into a minefield near the Russian military base at Khankala outside Grozny. Built to carry just 80 people, it was holding almost twice that number - an indication in itself that the Russian military is reluctant to travel by road, even in areas like northern Chechnya far from the rebel heartlands.

Many in Chechnya had been expecting an offensive by pro-independence rebels on August 6, the sixth anniversary of the storming of Grozny, which led to the rout of federal forces and peace negotiations. Checkpoints around the capital were strengthened and put on alert, and the border with Ingushetia was closed.

In the event, August 6 passed without incident. The anticipated rebel attack began on August 14-15 after Russian forces had been lulled by ten days of quiet.

A large number of fighters began to infiltrate villages in the Urus-Martan and Achkhoy-Martan regions in western Chechnya. Fighting lasted until the evening of August 16 in the villages of Shalazhi, Gekhi-Chu, Martan-Chu, Yandi-Kotar, Stary Achkhoy, Tangi-Chu and Roshni-Chu, when the fighters left the villages and retreated into the hills.

The rebels said they scored big successes and inflicted heavy casualties, destroying command posts and armoured vehicles. They also claim to have attacked the mountain village of Vedeno in south-east Chechnya.

A press release issued by the Russian military in Chechnya called what had happened a "bandit raid typical for Chechnya", which, according to the main Kremlin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky, was repulsed by a "planned operation by special forces".

The rebels called the attack a "dress rehearsal". "It is only part of a military plan, adopted by the Chechen field commanders," rebel spokesman Rizvan Arsanakayev told the Chechenpress news agency. "We needed to test the level of cooperation between different units of the Chechen armed forces."

During the second Chechen campaign, the rebel fighters have been much more dispersed and disorganized. Prominent warrior Shamil Basayev, who has been in charge of recent operations, said that their actions had now become "much more coordinated". Indeed, in the last three months, there's been clear evidence of the various factions burying their differences.

In May rebel president Aslan Maskhadov made peace with his predecessor, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev. In July, the guerrillas' website kavkaz.org announced that Maskhadov and Basayev had met and agreed a new division of powers. While Maskhadov remained president and commander-in-chief, Basayev was proclaimed head of a newly created "defence council", making him de facto in charge of military operations.

At the same meeting, Maskhadov attempted a reconciliation with commander Khamzat Gelayev, whom he had earlier condemned as a traitor. He also created a new "information committee" to be headed by another veteran Chechen politician, Akhmed Zakayev, charged with coordinating all the information on the rebel side.

There are two explanations for these developments. Either Maskhadov is abandoning his aim of seeking a political solution for Chechnya and relying on violence alone. Or, as seems more likely, he is using renewed fighting to try and frighten Russia and force it to conclude that the cost of continued war is too high.

The second explanation is supported by the recent meeting in Zurich between Zakayev and the former secretary of the Russian Security Council, Ivan Rybkin.

The rebels are using the summer season to threaten a new offensive. Basayev has claimed that the fighters are strong enough to "organise wide-scale military operations throughout the whole territory of the country".

The federal military say that the Chechen guerrillas are a spent force, with only a few hundred men at their disposal, set against an estimated 80,000 Russian soldiers in Chechnya.

Ordinary Chechens are worried by the prospect of an upsurge of fighting in their republic. Many, who left refugee camps in Ingushetia earlier this year to return to Chechnya, are now leaving once again.

Milana Ilayeva is one of those who has returned to Ingushetia recently. "A lot of armoured personnel carriers came into our village, Staraya Sunzha, on the edge of Grozny," she said. "If fighting starts again, it will be civilians who will suffer."

More fighting was reported from the village of Golsonchu on August 21, with the rebels claiming to have destroyed a Russian armoured column.

Timur Aliev is a freelance journalist based in Nazran, Ingushetia

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