

## **Dagestan Mountain Fighters on The Run**

Russian forces are pursuing a mysterious group of Islamist fighters in the mountains of Dagestan.

Russian security forces continued to pursue a shadowy group of fighters for a fourth day in the remote mountains of Dagestan, three days after the militants had killed a unit of local border guards.

The worst violence in Dagestan since the beginning of the second Chechen war four years ago was a reminder that the mountainous republic to the east of Chechnya is still unstable.

The Russian military sent helicopters in to seek and destroy up to three groups of militants, and reported that up to 12 fighters had been killed.

But there were divergent reports of who the militants were, and where they were heading.

What is certain is that several dozen fighters appeared in the south-western corner of Dagestan near the borders with Georgia and Chechnya on December 15, and took 11 local people hostage in the Tsunta district.

A group of eight border guards and a driver were despatched in a truck from the village of Mokok to track them down, but were ambushed. The entire group was killed, and the body of their leader was later found beheaded.

Akhmed Magomedov, controller of the local fire service, told IWPR by telephone that four Russian helicopters were attacking a group of fighters who were hiding in the forests.

As of September 18, the village of Khedba, the regional centre of the Shamil district, was a front-line position as the Russian military joined forces with Dagestani policemen to try to intercept the militants.

Local police chief Major Khaibula Ibnugajarov said that around 70 trucks and armoured vehicles had passed through his village into the Tsunta region, where the fighting has been going on.

Further along the road, an armoured transport carrier was sitting in the road being mended by a group of soldiers. Ten kilometres further along the dark narrow road was a column of six armoured vehicles. Even the soldiers conceded that this old equipment was not very useful in the mountains, but they said they were obeying orders.

Jappar Ibragimov, a villager from one of the spots in the Tlyarata region where the fighters were supposedly seen, said he thought it was all a false alarm. He said that the fighters had probably already disappeared down into the valleys of lower Dagestan.

"If they had stayed in the mountains, then they would have been found frozen," Jappar said. He speculated that the fighters were using the help of sympathetic local guides.

The outbreak of fighting immediately reminded Dagestanis of the mini-war in their republic in 1999, when a large group of Chechen fighters and their Arab allies crossed the border and seized several villages, eventually triggering Moscow's second military campaign in Chechnya.

But Dagestani leader Magomedali Magomedov has firmly rejected any parallels with four years ago, saying, "The events of 1999 were planned with the aim of seizing power and pushing Dagestan away from Russia. What is happening now in Tsunta region should be called a terrorist act."

Although the immediate assumption was that the fighters were Chechen radicals, this has not been confirmed. It is entirely plausible, as fire-chief Magomedov said roads and paths in the Tsumada district were not guarded at all at border points with Chechnya.

A doctor's assistant who visited the hostages said that they were treated well and fed the same food as the fighters themselves. He said there were around 20 fighters in the group and they spoke to each other both in Chechen and in Avar, the main language of Dagestan.

In the Dagestani capital Makhachkala many believe that the fighters are at the very least getting support from locals. The vehicles the fighters used must have come from local people, but no one has evidence that they were taken by force. And there are reports from freed hostages that the militants included locals who spoke in the local language.

Chechens are also pointing out that Dagestan has its fair share of home-grown Islamic radicals.

"In 1999 there were several large units fighting in Dagestan which had Wahhabi beliefs and came from the local communities," commented a Chechen police officer in Grozny. "They included a 'general' called Jeirullakh and the well-known Rappani Khalilov.

"The core of these bands was destroyed in Dagestan and Chechnya in 1999 and 2000 but some of them survived. It's quite possible that it's local Wahhabis operating in Tsunta region but our authorities, as always, put the blame on the omnipresent Chechens."

Moscow-based Dagestani scholar and analyst Enver Kisriev also said it was quite possible that at least some of the fighters were locals.

"A first quite well-founded scenario is that separatists have long lived in this region and have sympathisers and relatives there," said Kisriev. "These are very remote parts and the Dagestan jamaats [ethnic-based communities], especially the small ones high in the mountains, are a state within a state. They were resting there and hiding when they needed to. But this time apparently the authorities were tipped off and an order was given to intervene."

It was also possible, Kisriev said, that this fighting was a symptom of an unadvertised winter campaign by pro-Moscow Chechen leader Akhmad Kadyrov against pro-independence rebels in the mountains. Groups of them had been forced across the border into Dagestan and were hoping to break out into Georgia or Azerbaijan.

Both the Georgian and Azerbaijani authorities have strongly denied that their frontiers have been breached, saying out that they are virtually impassable in winter anyway because of snow.

In Dagestan, and in Russia as a whole, questions are being asked as to how this was allowed to happen.

"The tragic events happening now in Dagestan are a disgrace in front of the whole world," former paratroop commander Giorgy Shpak who has just been elected to the Russian parliament told Interfax news agency. "They dishonour the General Staff, which ought to coordinate this kind of operation."

In Dagestan, Alyuset Azizkhanov, who runs Nabat, a local charity for refugees, said, "I am worried by the level of professionalism of the operation against the attackers. So many people should not have been killed. The security forces should be ready for incidents like these but it turns out that can't even defend themselves. Our borders aren't defended against invasion by anyone at all."

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**Location:** Stavropol  
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