

Face To Face With The Enemy

Author: IWPR

Wednesday night's street fighting in Minutka Square is a small taste of things to come from Grozny's defenders, who now have their chance to meet the Russians on the ground. Experience has shown that this is the kind of combat in which they excel.

With the threat of a full Russian onslaught hanging over Grozny, the Chechen high command is set to defend the city using all the meagre resources at its disposal.

Already bloodied in from Wednesday night's street fighting in Minutka Square, the city's defenders have their chance to fully lock horns with the Russians on the ground. Experience has shown that this is the kind of combat in which they excel.

The lessons of the 1995 campaign have been learned by both sides. Over past weeks, Chechen field commanders have adopted an active defence policy - engaging the enemy in the open before retreating to well defended strongholds.

These tactics were used to good effect during the two-month battle for Bamut where rebel forces were able to inflict maximum damage on the advancing Russians while suffering only minimal casualties themselves.

Chechen leaders say the new tactics have played a major role in delaying the Russian advance on Grozny. The campaign to reach the city has dragged on for over two months while, in 1995, the Russians achieved their primary objectives in just less than three days.

Despite heavy fighting in Urus Martan, Argun and Grozny, Chechen military commanders say they still have sufficient resources to wage a partisan war from the mountains.

They have stepped up surprise raids on the heavily armed Russian bunkers that litter the region: last week, rebels reportedly attacked a garrison of 50 Russian soldiers near the village of Agishty. Chechen sources claim that the surviving federal troops were taken prisoner while three armoured personnel carriers were destroyed.

However, Chechen military resources remain thin on the ground. On the eve of the 1999 offensive, President Aslan Maskhadov is thought to have had around 25,000 "fighters" at his disposal.

This force consisted of 6,000 members of the republic's National Guard, 500 presidential guards, between 10,000 and 12,000 Interior Ministry troops, around 3,000 border guards and a further 1,000 volunteers.

As the Russian war machine rumbled into the mountain republic, Maskhadov's government staged a concerted recruitment drive on Grozny's Svoboda (Freedom) Square. Officials claim that 10,000 "fighters" signed up for active service, eager to avenge relatives who had been killed in the Russian bombardments. It is thought that only a minority of these volunteers has since been involved in the fighting.

In the early days of the war, President Maskhadov delayed active measures to form further guerilla units, hoping to resolve the conflict by political means. The official decision to organise the defence of Grozny

was taken during a national congress held in the capital at the beginning of October.

Delegates voted to form a State Defence Committee (SDC), headed by maverick warlord Shamil Basaev and composed of deputy prime ministers, field commanders and religious leaders.

President Maskhadov subsequently divided the republic into three strategic sectors. The western front, commanded by Deputy Prime Minister Ruslan Gelaev, stretched from Bamut in the west through Samashki-Chyornovodskoye and on to the settlement at Goragorskoye.

The central, northern sector encompassed four towns in the Naursky Region and came under the command of Magomed Khambiev supported by forces led by Aslanbek Arsaev. The eastern front fell under the control of Shamil Basaev and covered the regions around Gudermes, Noshay-Uyrt and Vedenov.

For the most part, Chechen fighters are armed with hand-held weapons, ranging from Kalashnikov assault rifles to heavy-calibre machine guns taken from armoured personnel carriers and adapted for field use. Other gems in the Chechen military arsenal include flame-throwers, ground-to-air missiles, mortars, anti-tank weaponry and rocket-propelled grenades. It is thought the rebel forces also boast a small number of tanks and armoured personnel carriers seized during the 1995 campaign. The only aircraft available to the Chechen forces - a light Russian AN-2 - was destroyed during a Russian attack on Grozny's airport in October.

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