

Gantamirov Demands Revenge

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Political loose cannon Bislan Gantamirov hits out at recent peace initiatives in Chechnya, calling for the total annihilation of the rebel forces.

Once mooted as the future president of Chechnya, Bislan Gantamirov angrily dismisses any talk of peace in the breakaway republic. The head of the pro-Russian Chechen militia, Gantamirov says that any moves to negotiate with the rebels would constitute a betrayal of the dead. He believes the remaining separatist units must be annihilated before there can be any hope of peace in Chechnya.

The hardline stance might seem strange coming from an ethnic Chechen, but the former mayor of Grozny, who commands a force of 2,500 militiamen, has proven to be a political loose cannon since the beginning of the seven-month campaign. And, in recent weeks, the Kremlin has had plenty of reason to regret its choice of champion.

Desperate to find an ally in the Chechen ranks, President Boris Yeltsin released Gantamirov from jail in November 1999, where he was serving a six-year prison sentence for embezzling \$5 million of government funds.

Under Gantamirov's leadership, the pro-Russian militia suffered heavy losses during the battle for Grozny, taking on policing duties in the capital after the rebel forces withdrew.

Last month, the Kremlin made moves to endorse Gantamirov as a suitable candidate for the Chechen presidency in the event of Aslan Maskhadov's political and military downfall. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel in the Russian army and officially thanked for "courage shown in the defence of the fatherland."

The gestures were undermined by Gantamirov's subsequent decision to resign as deputy to Nikolai Koshman, Moscow's official representative in Chechnya.

Gantamirov explained that he was opposed to the tactics adopted by OMON police units in the occupied territories and to plans to build a new Chechen capital in Gudermes. He also complained that his troops were poorly paid and threatened they might turn against the federal forces at any time.

Now, talk of peace negotiations with the Chechen rebels has dragged Gantamirov out of his self-imposed retirement and back on to the political stage.

Last week, the ex-mayor of Grozny hit out at proposals for forming a coalition government of pro-Moscow and pro-Maskhadov Chechens in the wake of the military campaign.

He told IWPR, "If such a government includes rebel leaders, then what did I fight for? What did my people die for? If Putin wants to bring order to Chechnya, then he must back a regime which has scored a conclusive victory over the rebel forces."

Gantamirov's outburst came in reaction to proposals mooted by fellow Chechen Yusup Soslambekov, the

president of the Federation of Caucasian Peoples. Soslambekov believes that any coalition government should be "headed by a neutral figure who cannot be accused of prejudice to either side". He points to recent events in Tajikistan where a coalition government rescued the republic from a bloody civil war.

But Gantamirov counters, "Soslambekov's idea is utopian. Does anyone really think that I could ever sit side by side with Shamil Basaev in such a government. Or that my militiamen could serve in the same ranks as their former enemies?"

He went on, "Chechnya is not Tajikistan. We need a very tough line: either we crush the vipers now or we let them recover their strength and flourish. Then in a year's time, I guarantee there would be another explosion of violence. A coalition government can only be formed by people who have blood loyalties and a single ideology. There is no other way." Most of Gantamirov's leading supporters come from his own family circle.

Gantamirov dismisses any notion of peace while Maskhadov's fighters still form a cohesive military force. "I believe the bandits should be annihilated, even if they surrender to the federal forces. In 1944, when the Soviet Army drove the Germans back from the Caucasus, there were a number of peace initiatives but all of the promises were broken. The time for peace initiatives is long gone."

Meanwhile, Aslan Maskhadov continues to assure the international media that talks with Russia's president-elect, Vladimir Putin, are imminent. His claims are strenuously denied by the Kremlin, which dismisses them as "bluff".

Following threats against his family from other rebel leaders, Maskhadov has launched a purge of his own forces. Last week, he released an official decree demoting three generals, 12 colonels and three majors to the ranks. These were predominantly commanders who had "surrendered their weapons, betrayed the interests of their people, disgraced their names and the military code of the officers of Ichkeria [the Chechen name for their homeland]."

Top of the list was Aпти Batalov, Maskhadov's own deputy, seized by Russian special forces last month and now in solitary confinement in Moscow's Lefortovo prison. Meanwhile, the Chechen president's immediate family were reported last week to have crossed the border into Georgia before making their way to Turkey. Safe, for the meantime, from the threats of his erstwhile comrades-in-arms.

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