

Gantamirov's Legacy

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Attempts to lure Grozny's residents back to the ruined capital have met with little success

Yakub Deniev -- the man set to take over from Bislan Gantamirov as mayor of Grozny - is poised to reap the whirlwind.

Not only does he face the monumental task of rebuilding the Chechen capital, but he will also inherit Gantamirov's legacy of political conflict.

Gantamirov announced his resignation earlier this month, just days after local civilian leaders unanimously condemned his hardline policies. During his time as head of the Grozny administration, he locked horns with both the Russian military and his ethnic kin.

But Deniev is under no illusions. He held the position of Grozny mayor until the Khasavyurt agreement of 1996 when he left the Chechen republic as a political refugee.

Shortly after the invasion of Chechnya in September 1996, Deniev was appointed head of the Temporary Administration under the Kremlin's representative, Nikolai Koshman.

However, when Koshman was replaced by the former Chechen mufti, Akhmad Kadyrov, Deniev refused to cooperate with his old political rival and left for Moscow.

In March of this year, he was abducted from his home by kidnappers who demanded \$500,000 for his release. It is thought that the ransom was paid by the Chechen diaspora in Russia.

Despite his colourful biography, Deniev has a reputation for being overly cautious and many observers doubt his ability to deal with the most pressing challenges of the job - the return of refugees, the reconstruction programme, the ongoing conflict with the energy networks and the personal security of his staff.

The question of arming the mayor's entourage is a thorny one - and a major cause of conflict between Gantamirov and the Russian authorities. Sergei Arenin, head of the Russian interior ministry directorate in Chechnya, has consistently ignored requests for weapons and security passes.

The passes carried by the mayor's bodyguards are out of date and their bearers are forced to run the gauntlet of the federal troops who have orders to detain anyone without valid documents.

Earlier this year, two members of the mayor's personal staff were arrested by Russian police in the Shali region and were later found dead in a nearby forest.

The problem of street lighting in Grozny is also high on the mayoral agenda. At night, rebel fighters have no difficulty slipping into the capital under cover of darkness and staging hit-and-run attacks on private

homes as well as military targets.

However, Grozenergo - a daughter company of Russia's EES Rossii - is refusing to restore street lighting until its ongoing dispute with the city authorities is resolved.

The company is demanding complete control over municipal distribution networks with a view to dictating electricity rates in the future. Gantamirov argued that such a move would deprive the city coffers of a major source of income.

Meanwhile, the pollution crisis is mounting. With the city drainage system largely destroyed by Russian bombing, sewage now flows directly into the rivers. At the same time, local water stations are unable to function and the vast majority of homes are without a water supply.

Furthermore, the 18 smouldering oil refineries which surround the Chechen capital are posing a serious threat to the local environment. The fallout from the fires has caused an epidemic of skin rashes across the city.

Unsurprisingly, then, the task of persuading refugees to return to their Grozny homes is proving almost impossible. Around 70 per cent of the refugees living in Ingushetia, North Ossetia and Georgia are thought to be residents of Grozny and the Chechen government is desperate to give them a reason to return.

However, bickering between the finance ministry and the Chechen authorities has prevented any real progress. While accommodation for 50,000 refugees has been found in private houses, the authorities responsible for rehousing are unable to agree on fair rental payments.

As mayor of Grozny, Deniev can expect little support from Kadyrov's administration which has already proposed an alternative candidate for the post.

However Kadyrov's own authority suffered a glancing blow last week when his deputy, Khamzat Idrisov, was arrested on embezzlement charges. And Deniev's appointment will undoubtedly serve to undermine his powerbase still further.

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Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

Focus: Caucasus

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