

Gunmen Raid Gantamirov's Home

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Sentenced to death by the outlawed rebel government and locked in conflict with the Russian high command, Bislan Gantamirov has good reason to be paranoid

Grozny mayor Bislan Gantamirov is claiming that a force of 120 gunmen who staged a dawn raid on his home last week were in fact Russian commandos disguised as Chechen fighters.

The Russian defence ministry has dismissed the accusation as "crazy and absurd" adding that "it has no relation to reality and is merely an exercise in disinformation".

But the maverick mayor, who is also deputy head of the pro-Russian civilian administration in Chechnya, insists that the kidnap attempt was planned and carried out by the federal high command.

Gantamirov was away from his home in the village of Gekhi, near Urus-Martan, when the raiders struck on the morning of December 5. They outflanked a Russian military checkpoint on the road into the settlement before making their way to Gantamirov's residence.

Finding their target absent, the raiders proceeded to ransack the house, then abducted two Chechen policemen who were stationed in the village.

The incident marks the second attack on Gantamirov's home in less than a year. Last winter, 11 Chechen fighters were killed and 20 wounded in a concerted attempt to storm the building. On this occasion, the raiders captured a local militiaman whose headless corpse was found a week later.

Gantamirov has been a highly controversial figure since he was jailed for six years in 1998 for embezzling \$5 million of government funds. Desperate to find an ally in the Chechen ranks, President Boris Yeltsin released Gantamirov from jail in November 1999 and gave him command of the pro-Russian militia.

Under Gantamirov's leadership, the 2,500-strong force suffered heavy losses during the battle for Grozny, taking on policing duties in the capital after the rebel forces had withdrawn.

In July, the Chechen leader was appointed deputy head of the civilian administration, under Akhmad Kadyrov, the republic's former mufti. Over the past five months, the bitter rivalry between the two men has become legendary and, on at least one occasion, Moscow has been forced to defuse a potentially violent confrontation.

Of late, Gantamirov has made no secret of his suspicions that the federal high command is plotting his overthrow. He believes that his outspoken criticisms of the Russian campaign in Chechnya have made him enemies in the Kremlin where he is seen as a political loose cannon rather than a valuable ally.

And, in Chechnya itself, Gantamirov has effectively burned his bridges. On November 15, all Chechens collaborating with the federal forces were officially condemned to death by President Aslan Maskhadov's outlawed regime.

The announcement was followed by a spate of brutal assassinations. In late November, the head of a Chechen mountain district was decapitated together with his deputy. Days later, masked gunmen attacked the mayor of Gudermes, Malik Gazemiev, wounding his driver and his brother.

Last Thursday, a kamikaze raider exploded a bomb outside the police headquarters in Gudermes, killing himself and wounding several Chechen militiamen.

So far, however, none of the pro-Russian Chechen leaders have yielded to rebel pressure and abandoned their posts.

Meanwhile, Gantamirov has gone back on the offensive, accusing "chameleon" Chechen policemen of collaborating with the separatists. He has announced plans to reform local police forces by increasing the number of "freelance" officers.

All candidates will be interviewed by a special commission including FSB and interior ministry agents as well as representatives from the Grozny mayor's office - headed by none other than Bislan Gantamirov.

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