

## **Ingush-Ossetian Dispute Worsens**

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A fresh bout of violence sends relations between the two North Caucasian neighbours into a new downward spiral.

The most neglected conflict in the Caucasus is showing worrying signs of heating up, after a string of violent attacks last month and angry protests by refugees.

North Ossetian leader Taimuraz Mamsurov has accused officials from neighbouring Ingushetia of deliberately stirring up the dispute between the two autonomous republics over the disputed Prigorodny district, which erupted in violence in 1992.

"Almost every day, we are catching Ingush deputies and officials in the settlements of the Prigorodny district and deporting them," said Mamsurov, accusing the media in Ingushetia of waging an "information war" against his republic.

In June, the Ingush parliament adopted a motion calling on Moscow to return the disputed territories, which belonged to Ingushetia until 1944, and Ingush president Murad Zyazikov said that federal rule should be established in them.

On July 21, the North Ossetian authorities announced they had prevented a "major terrorist attack" in their capital, Vladikavkaz, after they detained three young Ingush men from the village of Kartsa on the outskirts of the city driving a vehicle, which they said contained a remote-controlled bomb.

Relatives of the arrested man said that he was going to a wedding party and the explosives were planted in his vehicle.

Kartsa has a large population of Ingush as well as Ossetians and Russians, and was the scene of fierce clashes in 1992 between Ingush armed groups and Ossetian policemen. The North Ossetian police say it is a centre of militant activity.

Alla Akhpolova, spokeswoman for North Ossetia's interior ministry, said that when, after the July 21 incident, police searched a house in Kartsa they met armed resistance from an Ingush man Abubakar Khamkhoyev, who was killed. Khamkhoyev later turned out to be an Ingush policeman. One senior Ossetian policeman, Taimuraz Dzebisov, also died and two of his colleagues were wounded in the incident.

Ingush residents of Kartsa said Khamkhoyev was killed after he threw himself on a grenade thrown by the Ossetian policemen, saving his mother's life.

Two days later, two other local residents, both ethnic Russians, were shot at by gunmen from an unmarked car. One of the former died in the incident.

Zarema, an Ingush resident of Kartsa, heard the shooting. "We are living in fear here," she said. "I am afraid for my sons. The Ossetian law enforcement bodies are not able to look after the security of Ingush

citizens. We've decided to sell our house and move to Ingushetia -although there is no calm there either."

Ingush-Ossetian relations gradually improved in the decade following the 1992 fighting, when hundreds died and tens of thousands of Ingush fled North Ossetia for Ingushetia. However, since the Beslan school tragedy of 2004, when 330 people died and several of the hostage-takers were Ingush, tensions have risen again.

Last month, a group of Ingush refugees in the settlement of Maisky on the border between the two republics began a hunger strike that lasted 24 days, demanding they be allowed to return to their former homes.

"My friends and I had to resort to extreme measures and declared a hunger strike," said Ruslan Kushtov. "Our rights have been violated since 1992. Ossetian refugees from Georgia live in the house that I personally own in Yuzhny on the edge of Vladikavkaz and my family has to shift about in railway carriages. Why do we have to put up with this?"

"We have been offered money to give up our homes but we are not selling our homeland," said Idris, who comes from the outskirts of Vladikavkaz, but now lives in the Ingush village of Karabulak.

The increased tension comes despite a pledge by Russian president Vladimir Putin to "eliminate the consequences of the 1992 conflict" by the end of this year. Putin's representative for the region, Dmitry Kozak, has made a number of trips to both republics this year to try and implement this plan.

However, Ossetian sociologist Alexander Dzadziev was sceptical about the chances of a breakthrough this year, saying all the emphasis was being put on the issue of refugee return and not on the other problem fueling the conflict.

"They are just dealing with eliminating the consequences [of the conflict], no one is engaging with the issue of restoring good relations [between Ingushetia and North Ossetia]," he said.

The hunger strike was called off after the North Ossetian authorities promised they would register the refugees in their former addresses. But there is a big gap between formal registration and actually receiving a home to live in.

"The North Ossetian leadership has decided to allocate 210 land plots for forcibly displaced people in Prigorodny district," North Ossetian nationalities minister Taimuraz Kasayev told IWPR. "In a short period, we have managed to resolve major organisational, financial, material, and technical problems, which will allow us to accommodate citizens of Ingush nationality."

However, a strong atmosphere of distrust is preventing a smooth return of the refugees and the violence has continued. A senior Ingush police official, Amirkhan Akhsoyev, died after being attacked in Maisky on August 2.

"There are forces that are doing all they can to set the Ingush and Ossetians against each other," warned Myrat-Haji Tavkazakhov, leader of the Muslim community in North Ossetia. "This should not be allowed. All disputed issues should be resolved peacefully."

Mikheil, a resident of the village of Tarskoye in the Prigorodny district, agrees, blaming politicians for stirring up the dispute. "We go to mosques and ask God to protect people from trouble. It is time to bury the axe of war deep in the ground. No one hinders us from doing this. The Ingush and Ossetians want to live without conflicts," he said.

Alan, an Ossetian resident of Ir, said he was worried. "The federal authorities are speeding up the return of the Ingush to our villages but, for some reason, no one has asked us whether we want this or not. Isn't it us who have to live with them? The officials create the problems and the people have to pay for them," he said.

"Bandits are travelling freely on our territory, building up caches of weapons and ammunition, and killing people," an angry Ossetian policeman, who did not want to be named, told IWPR. "It's very hard to put up with this and it has to stop. There may be retaliation. Russian law does not seem to be working in the neighbouring republic."

A political commentator in Vladikavkaz, speaking anonymously, ascribed the latest flare-up to domestic politics in Ingushetia. "Some forces in Ingushetia want to expose president Murad Zyazikov or to put pressure on him by playing on this topic - because Zyazikov is an extremely unpopular figure in Ingushetia," he said.

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