

Life In Chechen Areas Under Russian Army Control

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By Maria Eismont, recently in Samashki, Chechnya (CRS No. 9, 3-Dec-99)

But the frontline forces know that the real targets will escape the worst of the fire. They are the well-prepared, battle-hardened Chechen guerillas themselves, waiting for their chance to avenge - on the ground - the brutality their people have endured from the air for days now.

These men sent the clearest possible message Friday to the Russian troops massing around the city, by killing 200 Federation soldiers in a battle near Urus-Martynovskiy and then systematically cutting the throats of around 50 who tried to surrender. It is another reminder, if one is needed, of the certain viciousness of any attempt to seize the capital.

Hundreds, possibly thousands of Russian soldiers could die in such an attack. And all recall the heavy fighting in the streets of Grozny during New Year's night in 1995, when some Russian regiments suffered a staggering 80 percent casualty rate among their men.

It makes the Russian high command and the politicians cautious. Friday's capture of the town of Argun, eight kilometres to the south-east of the city, leaves only a narrow supply route to the capital, but it is biding its time.

As it waits for a sign from Moscow for the start of operations in Grozny, the Russian army continues settling down in the towns and villages already under its control.

"In Dagestan, the population supported us," said a Russian officer, who identified himself as Viktor Ivanov, pointing at the Chechen village of Samashki. "Women were bringing us food and cried over our dead comrades. We were feeling needed. Here the population is very aggressive. We feel we are surrounded by enemies". The Russian forces had combed Samashki, in Western Chechnya, ten days previously.

'We have information that the rebels are coming back. We believe they are hiding among the 'so-called' peaceful population. Nobody is peaceful here,' said a member of the elite OMON special police force who called himself Vasya. 'Soon we'll have to enter this village once more and check it out,' he added.

The previous day a military convoy had been shot at by unknown snipers hiding in the woods, close to Samashki. This time there were no casualties among the soldiers, but snipers' attacks on Russian soldiers are frequent in the territories that Russian authorities have officially declared to be guerrilla free zones.

Remembering how, during the 1994-96 conflict, Chechen snipers inflicted huge losses among Russian soldiers, particularly after dark, Russian servicemen are now trying to cover their backs well in advance. They prefer to stop even innocent-looking people and detain them - often harassing them - before actually checking their identity and business.

'It's better to be killed under the bombs than live here and wait for your turn to be arrested and tortured. They hate all of us. They call it an 'anti-terrorist' operation, but in fact their goal is to exterminate all the Chechens,' said 63-year-old Imran of Sernovodsk, a Western Chechen village close to the border with Ingushetia.

There is a difference between the situation in the Western and North-Eastern parts of Chechnya currently under the control of Russian federal troops.

The north-east, with the centre in the city of Gudermes, can be called the 'tourist' side of Chechnya. The Russian army's press office has periodically organised visits of Russian and Western journalists to the area. OSCE and UN representatives, expected to establish observation points in Chechnya shortly, are likely to be based there.

Light, electricity and gas are now provided again in several villages there. Supply to the entire territory of Chechnya had been cut off immediately after the start of military operations and most of Chechnya is still without heat and electricity. A further measure of normality is being introduced, as schools are slowly re-opening.

The population of Chechnya's northern territory has traditionally leaned more towards southern Russia than an independent Chechnya. There are still many ethnic Russians living there and most Chechens living in this part of the republic opposed former Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudaev, who declared the republic independent from Russia in 1991.

Despite frequent complaints about the Russian army's behaviour, many people living there say that 'a bad Russian army is still better than being under the regime of crazy Islamic fundamentalists.' However, some young men have joined the guerrillas in the mountains, despite their parents' opposition.

The Western part is a different story. Seemingly because of the more aggressive approach of the Russian military commander on the Western frontline, General Vladimir Shamanov, the army's activities there are carefully concealed from outsiders.

Shamanov is known as a tough anti-Chechen hawk. He is considered by the Chechens as one of their worst enemies. In Western Chechnya, soldiers have been given a free hand to take a more aggressive approach toward the local population and reports of looting in Russian controlled villages are widespread.

Refugees returning to their homes often find them virtually empty and Russian soldiers can easily 'ask' any farmer to give his cattle away 'as a present.' To refuse is not recommended.

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