

Loyalist Chechens Target 'Arab Mercenaries'

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Financed and led by flamboyant businessman Supyan Taramov, a pro-Russian Chechen rifle battalion mans a lonely outpost in the Vedeno Gorge

The locals say the air in the Vedeno Gorge is so thick you can spread it on bread. It's astonishingly clean and heavy with the smell of meadow flowers. Here, the road snakes up into the mountains, rising and falling sharply before disappearing into the clouds. And gossamer strands of mist wend their way through plunging ravines, like rivers moving in slow motion.

But the calm is deceptive. The Vedeno Gorge is one of the most dangerous regions in Chechnya. The forests which line the road offer the rebel fighters perfect cover while federal vehicles weaving laboriously between the potholes make easy targets for mortars and rocket-propelled grenades.

Fittingly enough, the Russian military headquarters for the Vedeno region are housed in the ruins of a Cossack fort built during the Tsarist wars. Fragments of crumbling palisade litter the approaches like broken teeth, a reminder of Russia's futile attempts to impose her will on the Caucasus.

But, if the battlefields are the same as they were in the 19th century, the battle-lines themselves are changing. Russian military intelligence remains adamant that the bulk of the rebel forces are now foreign mercenaries fighting a "holy war" under the banner of Chechen independence. And a major coup in this propaganda campaign is the number of ethnic Chechens joining pro-Russian volunteer regiments.

Vedeno boasts a Chechen rifle detachment commanded by the flamboyant Supyan Taramov. Taramov is reputedly a dollar millionaire who made his fortune selling computers. Ironically, in 1989, his main business partner was Shamil Basaev, now Chechnya's most feared warlord and Russia's most wanted man.

But Taramov has put his past behind him. He first formed his rifle detachment at the beginning of the war, equipping the volunteers at his own expense. Now the federal government has provided extra funding and the troops boast state-of-the-art sniper's rifles - which are the envy of their Russian comrades-in-arms.

Taramov commands around 1,000 men, many from his own teip, or clan. They are quick to defend their actions, claiming that they fight only against Arab or Ukrainian mercenaries and refuse to fire on Chechen units.

A vociferous Taramov explains, "We don't touch Chechens. We just talk with them. We tell them that the mercenaries are the guilty ones in this war. They're in the pay of countries which are determined to ensure that Caspian oil doesn't pass through Russian territory. Some of them understand their mistake and, if they haven't got blood on their hands, we'll put their names on the list of people entitled to amnesty."

How they manage to differentiate between the rebel factions in the heat of battle is a question which remains unanswered. But their insistence is natural enough - any admission that they had targeted ethnic Chechens would be tantamount to signing their own death warrants in a country where the code of blood vengeance remains strong.

Despite rumours that Taramov has wider political ambitions, Vedeno itself has reason to be grateful to the business tycoon. Last December, his riflemen drove out a rebel unit which had occupied the town. As a

result, most of the buildings are relatively undamaged and local hospitals still function - even if medical supplies are practically non-existent.

The Russian commanders welcome the presence of the rifle detachment - it acts as a buffer against the hostility of the local population and provides a loyal body of seasoned troops who understand the rebels' guerilla tactics.

Colonel Ivan Vasiliev, commander of the Vedeno region, admits that, at first, the federal forces didn't trust the Chechen volunteers. But gradually a series of joint operations inspired their respect and, on one occasion, Taramov's fighters saved the colonel's life.

"I went to eat in a local caf,," remembers Col. Vasiliev, "and I saw a man there who had come to our base several times in a row to plead for an amnesty. I was about to go over to him but then I noticed there were other men sitting nearby. I could see that they had weapons under their coats and I knew straightaway that they were rebel fighters.

"I just sat there, pretending to ignore them. They looked at each other, and after a few minutes, they got up and left. I was certain that they were going to blow up the caf, and I ran outside. But Supyan Taramov's people were already there - they had disarmed the rebels and arrested them. It was a close call."

The bond that has grown up between Col. Vasiliev and the Chechen volunteers is further reinforced by the loneliness of his command. "We have nowhere to retreat to here," he explains. "We're hemmed in by the mountains on every side."

Every so often, a patrol sets off into the mountain mists and fails to return. Then the Russians are once again reminded of the ugly truth that the partisan war can never be won and that southern Chechnya is still very much the domain of Basaev and the Jordanian-born Khattab. But, while the generals wearily move forward the deadline for the conclusion of the military campaign, field officers like Col. Vasiliev put more and more faith in their local allies - because in reality, they explain, this is a Chechen war and the Russians are, at best, only intruders.

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