

New Chechen Terror Wave?

The most frightening explanation of the Moscow terror siege is that the Chechen militants were acting on their own.

THE Moscow theatre siege may be over, but the mass hostage-taking marked a radicalisation by the rebels and has provoked fears of a new wave of terror.

For the first time, Chechen extremists are using tactics more commonly associated with Middle Eastern terrorism: suicide missions aimed at civilian targets. The radical Islamist group Jamaat, which led the attack, has hundreds of adherents and in the war-torn republic itself there are many more brutalised and desperate Chechen fighters in the mould of its leader, Movsar Barayev.

Jamaat emerged in the village of Alkhan-Yurt, south of Grozny, the Chechen capital. Its nominal leader is Shamil Basayev, a Chechen warrior who launched the last such massive operation outside Chechnya, in the town of Budyonnovsk in 1995. Little is known about Movsar Barayev except that he was the nephew of a notorious fighter and kidnapper who was killed by the Russians last year.

The Chechen rebels break down into several factions. The most moderate is led by Aslan Maskhadov, who was the chief resistance commander during the first war of 1994 to 1996 and then elected President of Chechnya in 1997, after the Russian Army withdrew. He was received by President Yeltsin in the Kremlin and was recognised internationally.

Mr Maskhadov is a former Soviet artillery officer who has always said that he is fighting solely for Chechnya's political independence. However, since 1999 President Putin has refused to negotiate with him. If Mr Maskhadov did approve of the raid, as the Kremlin suggests, it means that the conflict has entered a new and dangerous phase, in which the rebels are targeting Russian civilians. That would kill the already faint hopes of a political solution to the conflict.

However, Mr Maskhadov's spokesmen have strongly denied reports that their leader was behind the attack and say that he still wants to negotiate. In an interview with the Chechenpress news agency, Mr Maskhadov said that his spokesman had tried to dissuade the rebels from their desperate actions: "We resolutely reject terror as a method for achieving any goals." He said that he felt responsible as President "for those who in desperation went to sacrifice themselves".

President Putin was quick to denounce the hostage-seizure as the latest link in a chain of "international terrorism". A link can be traced between the Arab world and al-Qaeda and the Chechen rebels. Since 1996 the rebels have been receiving money from the Middle East. The prominent Saudi-born commander known as Khattab, who had fought in Afghanistan, moved to Chechnya in 1995 and continued to fight until he was murdered in March. His position has been taken by another Saudi.

It is also interesting that a leading Chechen Islamist spokesman, Movladi Udugov, who is believed to be living in one of the Gulf States, telephoned the BBC in Moscow just as Barayev and his men were taking over the theatre, and that the hijackers released a videotape to the Arabic television station al-Jazeera.

But it would be a serious mistake to make too much of the foreign factor in Chechnya, as Mr Putin has been doing opportunistically since September 11. Most Chechens are Sufis, with no sympathy for Islamic fundamentalism. On a purely physical level, the region is surrounded on three sides by Russian troops and on the fourth by high mountains, so only a few very dedicated volunteers can make their way there. The overwhelming majority of the rebel fighters are Chechens and foreign experts believe that they still get most of their weapons from the corrupt Russian military.

So the most frightening scenario could be that no one — not Mr Maskhadov nor Mr Basayev nor al-Qaeda — was behind the mission, except the 25-year-old Barayev himself, and that this is the beginning of a random campaign of terror by Chechen militants.

“There may be thousands of Barayevs in Chechnya, whose name means nothing to us now,” Mairvek Vachagayev, a former spokesman for Mr Maskhadov said gloomily. “The Russians should thank God that they just seized a house of culture and not a nuclear power station.”

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