

Spring of Hope

Author: IWPR

Chechen leader Yusup Soslambekov believes the coming of spring spells new hope for peace talks

Yusup Soslambekov is an unlikely champion of peace. The former Chechen vice-president returned to Grozny in early February to discover that his wife had died in a Russian airstrike and two male relatives had been executed by interior ministry police. The men were accused of being rebel partisans and summarily shot. Neither, says Soslambekov, had taken part in any of the fighting.

However, despite his personal tragedies, the President of the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples (CCP), who was once a leading member of Aslan Maskhadov's government, is spearheading moves to find a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Following the Kremlin's refusal to negotiate with Maskhadov - whom it has branded an international criminal - Soslambekov is offering his services as an intermediary. The CCP, he said, was in a position to bring together pro-Russian, separatist and federal leaders in a bid to "end to this bloody insanity".

The former vice-president believes that the prospect of a drawn-out partisan war in the Chechen mountains will eventually push Moscow to the negotiating table while the political significance of the military campaign will be downgraded in the wake of the March 26 presidential elections.

It was vital to start peace talks before unrest amongst the civilian population reached boiling point and spring offered the rebels a tactical advantage.

"When the leaves start to appear on the trees a widespread partisan war will begin," explains Soslambekov. "The Russian blitzkrieg has ground to a halt and there's a real danger that the current conflict will turn the whole of the North Caucasus into another Afghanistan. The Kremlin politicians need to launch diplomatic initiatives without delay.

"We must bring an end to this bloody insanity. Despite all the victims and the destruction, there is still a chance to come out of this situation with dignity."

The prospect of spring has clearly sobered up the jubilant Russian generals who are now calling for a swift military resolution before the mountain forests provide the separatists with abundant natural cover.

Ominous too are repeated rebel attempts to escape into the Chechen lowlands - instead of heading south for the Georgian border as the Russians had expected. Earlier this week, two groups of fighters, each numbering around 1,000 men, broke through federal lines at Komsomolskoye and Ulus-Kert, where 86 paratroops from the Pskov Airborne Brigade were reportedly killed.

Although Moscow denies the rebels have cheated the Russian encirclement, police units in lowland settlements have already reported a "marked upsurge in the local male population". In Chechnya's second city, Gudermes alone, over 1,000 new residents have materialised "from nowhere". All of the newcomers are said to have impeccable documentation.

Soslambekov explained that Russian forces were fomenting a potentially explosive situation in the

occupied parts of Chechnya. Checkpoints and roadblocks being enforced by interior ministry police were often used to mount punitive operations, he said. Curfews restricting movement between towns and villages were designed to extort money from the civilian population, since free movement could only be secured by paying bribes.

Soslambekov concluded, "This kind of repression can only increase the number of people prepared to defend their property and their right to live."

Given that the conflict has impacted on neighbouring countries, Soslabekov believes that regional leaders should be involved in peace talks, "The Confederation of Caucasian Peoples, which played a major role in the Abkhazian peace process, is putting itself forward as a mediator."

Attempts to hold talks with the Russians in the past have been frustrated by Moscow's refusal to recognize Aslan Maskhadov as a legitimate representative of the Chechen people. Soslambekov suggests that talks should be held with both sides - with pro-Russian Chechens such as Bislan Gantamirov, Akhmad-Khadzhi Kadyrov, Ruslan Khasbulatov and Dzhabrail Gakayev and with Maskhadov's cabal of respected field commanders.

"Despite the denials of the Russian generals, these men wield a very strong influence over the current situation in Chechnya," said the former vice-president.

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