

Moscow escalates intervention in Dagestan

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For two weeks, an undeclared war has raged in Dagestan between Russian troops from the Ministry of the Interior and Islamic rebels under the leadership of the former Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev and the Jordanian Khattab.

On August 7, the rebels marched into Dagestan in small groups from adjoining Chechnya. After occupying seven villages in the mountainous regions of Botlikh and Tsumada, they proclaimed the foundation of the "Islamic Republic of Dagestan" and threatened Moscow with *jihad* (holy war), until all "non-Muslims", i.e., Russians, left the country.

The occasion for these events was the alleged incursion of Russian troops into the Republic of Chechnya, which has been effectively independent since 1996 as a result of the Chechen war, but officially still forms part of Russia. In the past months, bloody clashes have repeatedly occurred along the Russian-Chechen border.

The government in Moscow, whose policies have further impoverished the population of Dagestan and Chechnya, reacted to the occupation with bombings. According to Russian statements, already over 600 of the 1,200 separatist guerrillas have been killed. Chechen sources, however, speak of just two dozen dead. The UN puts the refugee flood the fighting has unleashed at almost 10,000, the greatest part of which can now be found in the republic's capital of Makhachkla.

While Russian government spokesmen and the Russian media express optimism about the course of events, the facts speak to the contrary. Originally, it was maintained that the clashes with the rebels would be concluded within a few days. Now the Russian government has been forced to dispatch some 20,000 soldiers into the region who will have to prepare for "many months of fighting". Treasury Minister Mikhail Kasyanov agreed to an increase of wages for soldiers sent to the crisis region to US\$1,000 per month, in order to strengthen the morale of the troops.

Despite initial appearances, the conflict is not likely to take the form of a new Chechnya. At that time, the separatists were able to place themselves under Dzhokhar Dudayev at the head of an independence movement that enjoyed widespread popular support. During the subsequent two

years of bloody war—from 1994 to 1996—Moscow carried out a brutal attack on the civilian population. Some 50,000 were killed on both sides.

What has happened since then? In spite of the sparse information flowing out of the country, it is obvious that the problems of the Chechen population have not been solved, even partially. The country is in chaos, while a thin upper layer from the mafia clans pocket the profits from the Azerbaijan oil that flows through the pipeline in Chechnya, and earns a bit on the side through smuggling drugs and weapons, as well as people.

The balance sheet of all the "independence and liberation movements" has led to disillusionment among the masses, and a turning point has been reached in the period since the end of the Soviet Union. The social driving forces behind the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Chechen war have become clearer for all to see: over the last years an enormous social differentiation has taken place in all the former Soviet republics, under the banner of "national independence" or "religious independence". The impoverished mass of the population sees itself robbed of any perspective for the present and future, in contrast to a thin layer of the very rich, who are thoroughly corrupt and ruthless.

What is the situation in Dagestan? About 2 million people live in this republic, belonging to 35 different ethnic groupings, the majority of which follow the Muslim faith and culture. The social situation is catastrophic, like that in all the Caucasus republics, which count among the poorest regions of Russia. Officially, unemployment amounts to 20 percent, while unofficial figures put it as high as 80 percent. Official youth unemployment is counted at 56 percent.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the once productive agricultural sector almost collapsed, along with the food industry. Fishing in the Caspian Sea and the vineyards are all that has survived. Dagestan is so poor that 87 percent of its state budget comes from Moscow. It is so underdeveloped that some towns do not even have a municipal water supply.

Society is controlled on the one hand by different clans, whose political influence stems from the former party nomenclatura. On the other side, as in Chechnya, religious

fundamentalist mafia-like structures have been formed. The distribution of wealth follows this pattern. The 200 richest families, representing less than 2 percent of the population, control 85 percent of the region's wealth, while the majority lives beneath the poverty line. The situation in this republic is an obvious example of the heritage of Stalinism, which resolved none of the traditional problems of the north Caucasus. These problems re-emerge today with even greater intensity.

Shamil Basayev, leader of the rebels and the preacher of an extreme form of Wahhabism (Saudi Arabian-type Islam), studied agricultural management in Leningrad. In August 1991 he stood before the White House in Moscow as an enthusiastic defender of Boris Yeltsin. After the Chechen war, where 10 of his relatives died, he became one of the best-known fighters against the regime in Moscow. Six months after the war, in 1997, he lost the Chechen presidential elections to Aslan Maskhadov, who has sought to tie the fate of his own group more closely to Moscow. Basayev's second-in-command, the Jordanian mercenary Khattab, is known for his career as a dealer in drugs and people.

Since the end of July, preparations have been under way for a meeting between Maskhadov and Yeltsin. The secret service had warned that, as a reaction to any understanding they might reach, the hostile groups would launch attacks into Dagestan in order to secure their income from the drugs and weapons trade, and the profitable business of hostage-taking. This is how they finance their independent "principalities".

In Dagestan these groups want to expand their spheres of influence by means of an Islamic liberation ideology and through the "liberation of the occupied zone". This has not met with the enthusiasm they expected in the general population. The majority have fled, while some of the Russian army joined them voluntarily.

The source of Basayev's weapons and financial support remains unclear. The Russian government accuses Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Kuwait, but these governments remain silent, although their material interests in the region are considerable. Dagestan lies on the banks of the Caspian Sea, forming almost two-thirds of its Russian coastline. The oil pipeline from the Azerbaijan capital Baku to the Russian Black Sea harbour of Novorossiysk runs directly through the country. If these countries succeeded in expanding their influence in the region, they could prevent the world market being flooded with Caspian oil, which would drastically push down world oil prices.

Azerbaijan and America, whose interests in the region connect ever closer in another direction, condemned the separatists' incursions immediately, because "the Islamic

rebel forces employ violence against innocent civilians". By chance, US Energy Minister Bill Richardson recently visited Turkey, prior to visits to Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, in order to force the construction of a gas pipeline into Turkey through Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan's sector of the Caspian Sea.

Europe is concerned that the conflict might jeopardise Russia's integrity, but is unclear how to use the hostilities to push through its own interests.

Since the financial crisis of last year and the military humiliation NATO inflicted on Russia during the Kosovo war, Moscow is very aware of its own weaknesses. The integration of the different regions of the country into the international economy further undermines the authority of Moscow. Regardless of the apparently deeply divided parliamentary factions and power groupings, they are united behind demands for a stronger state and a resolute solution of the conflict in Dagestan.

The appointment of Vladimir Putin as the new prime minister should be seen against this background. Yeltsin reacted to the increasing pressure at home and abroad with a pragmatic manoeuvre favouring the military and strengthening its apparatus, by making use of a dependable secret service and military man. The previous prime minister, Stepashin, one of those responsible for the debacle in the Chechen war, was no longer a viable option. He had to give way to someone who, in following essentially the same policy, could implement a harder line. Putin, well known for his cold-bloodedness, entered office with the words: "I am a military man and carry out orders."

Regardless how conscious Schamil Basayev is of the significance of his attacks, they show very clearly that the unity of Russia rests on feet of clay, and can be disrupted by the slightest push. The same powerful centrifugal forces that brought about the end of the Soviet Union now place the integrity of the Russian Federation in question.



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