

Russian police begin mass roundups in wake of terror bomb attacks

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Police carried out mass arrests in Moscow and Russian government officials threatened a renewed military assault on the breakaway region of Chechnya after two terrorist bombings in the space of four days killed more than 200 people in the Russian capital.

The first bomb destroyed a working-class apartment building in southern Moscow on September 9, while the second bomb hit a similar structure September 13. The second blast was particularly devastating, collapsing the brick and mortar structure completely at 5 a.m., when most residents were asleep in their beds, and killing nearly everyone inside. Both explosions required careful preparation and extensive organisation, in order to assemble hundreds of pounds of military-style explosives and detonate them during the night when they would cause the maximum casualties.

Four other bombs have exploded in Russian cities in the past two weeks—on August 31 near a Moscow shopping area, killing one person, on September 4 in the Dagestan city of Buinaksk, killing dozens in an apartment building for Russian soldiers and their families, in St. Petersburg, and in the south Russian town of Volgodonsk. But the Moscow apartment blasts were the most terrifying and atrocious of the incidents, touching off widespread anger and panic in the city.

By Saturday an estimated 11,000 people had been picked up by police in Moscow. Hundreds of them were Chechens and many others were of Caucasian descent, although no evidence has yet been presented which conclusively links the wave of explosions to the ongoing conflict in the north Caucasus. No rebel group in either Chechnya or Dagestan has claimed responsibility for the bombing, and at least one of the explosions, in St. Petersburg, has been linked to gang activity.

Government officials called for military retaliation against Chechnya, although both Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and his bitter rival, guerrilla leader Shamil Basayev, have denied involvement. Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov said, "We should not be afraid to cross

into the Chechen territory to destroy militants and restore constitutional order," he said. "Radical measures have to be taken within Chechnya itself," the prosecutor general added. "The armed forces can be employed if there is a danger of the disintegration of the state."

In both houses of the Russian Duma there were calls by legislators for termination of the ceasefire which ended the war in Chechnya in 1996 and immediate air strikes on Chechen targets. Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev said that if air strikes were ordered, the bombings would be carried out "throughout the territory of Chechnya, irrespective of where the bandits are."

The murder of hundreds of innocent Russian working people, among them dozens of children sleeping in their beds, is a despicable crime that cannot be justified regardless of the alleged political motivation of the perpetrators. Moreover, there are many reasons for scepticism about the official claims that Chechen terrorists were responsible. Given the Byzantine and unprincipled political infighting within the ruling class of bureaucrats and gangsters in Moscow, there are many forces who could have had a hand in instigating the terror bombings, including the Yeltsin government, its factional opponents, and the security services themselves, who have long experience in carrying out bloody provocations.

One thing is clear—the ruling circles are reacting to the bombings aggressively, introducing the tightest possible controls, especially in Moscow and at all atomic energy facilities. President Boris Yeltsin ordered an "intensified security regime" for airports, railway stations, markets and other areas where people concentrate. He demanded that the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, implement an immediate search of all attics, cellars and empty houses in the city.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who was in New Zealand for the Asian Pacific Economic Co-operation summit when the first Moscow apartment blast occurred, immediately returned to Russia. At the airport prior to his return, he declared that one could not describe the perpetrators of these actions as humans: "They are not even beasts, but something

even worse.” The measures taken against them would be suitably grim, he said. “Beasts” is the nickname given by the Russian army to the inhabitants of Chechnya.

In his initial comments on the bombings, President Yeltsin said one should not “deal with the problem on an ethnic or religious basis. It is impermissible to carry out cleansing on the grounds of national origin.”

Nevertheless, virtually every leading politician and media source declared the terror attacks to be the response of Chechen rebels to the Russian bombing of Dagestan. Moscow Mayor Luzhkov has made comments of a similar nature. Then at a meeting in the Kremlin Yeltsin stated that the war initiative in Dagestan had now spread to Moscow.

Thus the media and Russian political circles began a public campaign against Chechens. On September 14 the newspaper *Izvestia* commented positively on the spontaneous formation in various Moscow neighbourhoods of “civilian militias”, which have begun patrolling the cellars and entrances of apartment houses. In the opinion of the newspaper, “the population has decided to build up its own form of security, having recognised that the state could not guarantee their safety. Bewilderment and fear are gradually being transformed into hatred, and the slogan ‘for every house in Moscow, a village in Chechnya’ has become enormously popular.”

In Moscow moves are underway to force businesses originating in the North Caucasus out of the city. The security forces are organising a whole system of reprisals against the Chechen diaspora, and a number of Chechen businessmen who hold leading positions in the oil trade, show business, retail trade, etc. Employers suspected of financing the Chechen fighters were the first victims of the repressive measures.

The well known journalist M. Leontief, head of the biggest TV station, ORT, described the situation as a “Third Patriotic War” (after World War I and World War II). He said the explosions in the capital were the consequence of the Chechen war, “the result of Budjonnovsk and the fact that Basayev's bastards were escorted home with full honours and then a peace deal was done with them. This is the result of the peace of Chassavjurt. That is what happens when one capitulates to this band of criminals.”

The commentary refers to events during the war in Chechnya, when guerrilla leader Basayev and a few of his rebels occupied a hospital in the south Russian town of Budyonnovsk, taking hospital workers and patients hostage. The hostages were freed after considerable concessions had been made to Basayev and the rebels.

There are increasing demands for the calling of a state of emergency. The most significant source for such demands is the Kremlin itself. In order to relieve tension, the President's

representative in the Duma, Kotyenko, stated that the calling of a state of emergency was unlikely. To do so, he said, “certain legal requirements are necessary—the constitution only allows for a state of emergency on the basis of a federal constitutional law, but such a law does not exist.” He continued: “The announcement of a state of emergency could take place in a few localities, but that would have no influence on the conduct of (forthcoming) elections for the Duma.”

The question must be posed, however: who would benefit from such a profound destabilisation of the country? According to stipulations of the Russian constitution, a state of emergency means the cancellation of all elections and strips the ordinary citizen of all rights and freedoms. The alternative for Yeltsin and his entourage is impending defeat in the December parliamentary elections and then complete ouster from power in the presidential vote set for next June.

The Yeltsin clique in the Kremlin are in desperate straits at the moment. With regard to domestic politics, Yeltsin's rivals, an opposition drawn from the former Stalinist bureaucrats and financial oligarchs who have formed the Lushkov-Primakov bloc “Fatherland—All of Russia”, have grown in strength and are considered favourites to win the forthcoming parliamentary elections. At the same time Yeltsin's family is implicated in the huge international corruption scandal involving European and American banks.

The political and economic elite in Russia consider the numerous reports and exposures of financial corruption to be part of a deliberate campaign to discredit Russia, in particular the big industrial enterprises and banks. Many see Yeltsin and his supporters as the potential victims of this campaign.

Irrespective of their differences, all of the factions within the ruling elite in Russia have an interest in strengthening the hand of the state, and boosting the power of the military and police when it comes to resolving political problems. Under conditions of instability and mass panic it is possible to impose measures which would be unthinkable under “normal” conditions.



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