

Russia mounts invasion of Chechnya

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2 October 1999

Thousands of Russian troops advanced into northern Chechnya Thursday backed by more than 1,000 armoured vehicles. The Russian units, stretching over some 80 kilometres (50 miles), moved 5 kilometres (three miles) into Chechnya's northern Naursky and Sholkovsky regions.

Chechen forces were reported to be digging trenches to block the Russian advance. A separate force crossed from Ingushetia to Chechnya's west, moving towards the town of Bamut about 30 kilometres (18 miles) southwest of the Chechen capital, Grozny.

Meanwhile, Russian planes have continued 10 days of bombing raids on Chechen targets. Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry admitted that 78,000 people have fled the air strikes in Chechnya, with most heading for Ingushetia, where they are arriving at a rate of 5,000 to 6,000 a day. If the fighting continues there could be over 200,000 refugees. This is equal to the total number of inhabitants in Ingushetia. Neighbouring Dagestan has closed its border with Chechnya, leaving thousands of refugees stranded on the frontier without food.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov described Chechnya as an "internal Russian problem", adding that Russia was "taking all the necessary measures so that the legal fight with terrorism has fewer consequences for the civilian population".

Russian air attacks on Chechen targets have been justified on the grounds that Chechnya is a base for Dagestani Islamic separatist troops, led by Shamil Basayev and Abu Khattab. After the recent bomb explosions in Moscow and Volgograd, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said that a "safety corridor" had to be established around Chechnya, accompanied by attacks on the separatists' key positions.

On September 23 this was put into practice and the first in a series of missile attacks on Grozny was launched. The first target was the Sheikh Mansur airport, situated 2 kilometres from the city centre. Attacks continued on the next day, concentrated on the Oktjabrsky quarter, which has been controlled by the Islamic opposition for some

months. Fuel depots and the Grozny oil refinery were also bombarded in the northwest of the city. According to Russian sources these are under the control of Basayev. The refinery started to burn fiercely and enveloped Grozny in a cloud of smoke.

Contrary to the assertions of the Russian leadership, however, the civilian population has been targeted. Chechen representatives report that Russian air sorties were flown against "peaceful villages", including Sholkowskoje, Nashai Jurtowskoje and Sharoiskoje, as well as a village three kilometres from Grozny.

Chechen sources say that over 200 people have been killed so far. Chechen Under-Secretary of State Akhmadov indicated that the situation in Grozny has been made more difficult by the influx of 30,000 refugees from the border regions. This is where Russia has concentrated its attacks against the rebels. "The blockade means that we do not have means to help them," Akhmadov explained.

The Chechen leadership is seeking a rapid settlement and has warned against an escalation of the conflict. At a joint session of the Chechen parliament, the government and the Sharia committee, a defence committee was formed and a state of emergency imposed over the republic. A defence plan for the capital was prepared "in case of aggression by Russia", as well as "special measures in case of continued air raids and artillery bombardment of Chechen cities and villages".

Chechnya President Aslan Maskhadov called for "the problems to be resolved at the negotiating table and, if necessary, by consulting a third party, such as an international observer".

The escalation of Russia's war measures in the north Caucasus is being advanced by forces in the Kremlin who see the proclamation of a state of emergency as the only means of maintaining the existing conditions of rule inside Russia.

There is a substantial campaign amongst Russian politicians to this end, supported by the mass media. Minister of the Interior Vladimir Rushailo explained, for

example: "For the first time in the history of Russia, criminals have established control over one of the federal states, and, with substantial foreign support, have developed subversive activities inside Russia." He continued, "Their target consists of the most important geo-strategic region of the country, their aim is the creation of a criminal enclave where international terrorists can be trained unhindered. This will expand their operations into the whole world."

Immediately prior to the invasion, Russian newspapers compared the situation in Chechnya with the methods used by NATO in the war against Yugoslavia. *Isvestia* cited the official line that "targets are bombarded that are connected directly or indirectly with the infrastructure of the troops of Basayev and Khattab". The newspaper then continued: "In reality, this means the methodical destruction of everything which might stand in the way of carrying out special operations.... This tactic is almost a complete copy of the methods that were applied by the NATO countries against Yugoslavia."

This is an attempt to justify the escalation of Russian militarism by citing the precedent set by NATO, and counter any protests from Western governments over the bombing of Chechnya. Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Madeline Albright has warned Russia not to permit an escalation of the situation. The European Union issued a statement on Thursday urging Moscow to avoid a repeat of its 1994-96 war with Chechnya over the region's drive for independence.

The attack on the Grozny oil refinery shows that Russia is using all means at its disposal to keep this geo-strategically important region under its control. Chechnya is no longer able to cope with the lucrative oil production of 835,000 tons from its own 1,500 sources, as well as the 120,000 tons annually coming through the Russian pipeline from Azerbaijan.

Ever since the conflict began in Dagestan, international business consortia have been relying less and less on Russia. The pipeline under construction in Dagestan avoids Chechnya, but now lies at the focal point of a new source of conflict. Because of the blockade of Chechnya, Russia is not able to fulfil its various oil delivery obligations. The chances that Georgia might take over the Azerbaijani oil deliveries have risen.

Domestic preparations in Russia for a new war must be seen in this connection. A pogrom atmosphere is being encouraged against those from the Caucasus and above all Chechens. Those with dark skins have been subject to arbitrary arrest and many have been brutally assaulted.

The main instigator of this is Moscow Mayor Yuri Lushkov, who is standing as a "law-and-order" candidate in the coming Duma (parliament) elections.

Here again the media is supplying the necessary backing for the Kremlin's sabre rattling. Atrocities carried out by Caucasian gangs on Russian civilians and soldiers are constantly shown, while the press makes no mention of the fact that the Chechen civilian population has borne the main burden of Russian military attacks.

The war drive has paved the way for even greater attacks on the democratic rights of the Russian working class. On September 24 the Duma passed a law granting further powers to the secret service (FSB). This extends the jurisdiction of the FSB regarding the occupation of properties and houses and during vehicle searches. It can restrict citizens' freedom of movement if necessary, enforce house arrest, or make them leave their properties and houses to the FSB.

This law was passed unanimously by 305 Duma deputies. In view of the forthcoming parliamentary elections and ongoing financial scandals concerning connections between the Kremlin and the Mafia, the Kremlin is trying to keep control over the situation by creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation and laying the groundwork for declaring a state of emergency.

The struggle against a supposedly terrible and powerful enemy is used to divert the population's hatred of the Kremlin oligarchy in another direction. "In my judgement, the most important thing is the consolidation of society," asserted Prime Minister Putin. "We have a duty to unite around the most important task: protecting our citizens from terror and preserving our state."



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