

Russia poised for all-out attack on Chechen capital

Chris Marsden
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Signs are mounting of an imminent Russian invasion of the Chechen capital of Grozny, in the aftermath of Thursday night's bombing of the central open air market that killed an estimated 137 people and wounded another 260 to 400.

The attack was the worst on Grozny since fighting began in September. Chechen sources said 10 Russian surface-to-surface missiles caused the blast. Witnesses said the market was filled with people shopping for food or sitting at open-air cafes. One missile hit a packed bus, killing and wounding many of the passengers. Another missile hit a nearby maternity clinic, killing some 30 people, including new-born babies and mothers who had just given birth.

Dozens of people were still awaiting medical care in dilapidated hospitals. At least 20 people injured in the attacks died overnight and more are seriously injured. Medical supplies are largely unavailable and the city is without adequate water or electricity.

Also on Thursday, Russian police arrested the Moscow representative of Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov. Mayrbek Vachagayev was reportedly arrested at his central Moscow apartment by a police division responsible for organised crime.

The Russian military and the Federal Security Service (FSB), the successor to the old KGB, denied any involvement in the rocket attack on Grozny. But military spokesman Alexander Veklich initially admitted to the bombing, while denying that any civilians were in the market, which he claimed functioned as an arms bazaar. "Civilians don't walk at night time in a place where arms are sold to bandits and terrorists," he said. "A special operation destroyed the arms market together with all weapons, explosives and arms peddlers."

On Friday, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin

repudiated this statement, claiming the blast was the result of in-fighting among Chechen separatists. The market, he said, "is one of the headquarters of the armed bandits and therefore the explosion was the result of a clash between rival formations or gangs". Speaking at a press conference in Helsinki, Putin admitted that Russian special forces were operating around Grozny, but insisted they were not involved in the explosion.

Putin was in Helsinki to attend a European Union summit, where his government's actions in Chechnya have come under attack. His press conference was aimed at placating criticism from his European counterparts and averting possible intervention in the region by the Western powers.

The EU issued a communiqué urging Moscow to start immediate talks to end its military action in Chechnya. Later, European Commission President Romano Prodi said Putin had reassured the EU that Moscow would seek a long-term solution in the North Caucasus. "We appreciate this message because we are very, very worried about the situation," said Prodi.

The latest strikes on the Chechen capital underscore the possibility of an all-out Russian assault. The city was last attacked by Russian troops on New Year's Eve 1994 at the start of a brutal two-year war that cost 80,000 lives.

For almost three weeks, the cities and villages of Chechnya have been shaken by 24-hour artillery attacks and air raids. A 50,000-strong army encircles the country, and gas and electricity supplies from Russia have been turned off. Hundreds of civilians have died and thousands have fled. In Ingushetien, the neighbouring republic to the west, where most refugees have fled, 155,000 people are stranded.

The Russian army first conducted air attacks in order

to prepare for an occupation by ground troops. They penetrated into the northern part of Chechnya as far as the river Terek without encountering any real resistance. A so-called security cordon is to be created in this predominantly flat region, which was part of Russia proper before the establishment of the autonomous republics of Chechnya and Ingushetien in the 1950s.

According to the Russian government, the security cordon is to protect Russia against further attacks and encroachments by separatist forces, who Moscow claims are responsible for recent bombings in Russia, and who sought to proclaim a religious fundamentalist state independent of Russia in August during two spectacular attacks on the neighbouring Republic of Dagestan.

There have been continual reports of Russian attacks on the Chechen civilian population. In the *Frankfurt Rundschau* of October 2, Florian Hassel spoke with residents of the region bordering Dagestan, who said inhabitants had been executed by snipers while fetching water or bringing in the harvest. Rockets destroyed half the farmhouses of one village, while in other localities schools, hospitals, market places and manufacturing plants were subject to rocket bombardment. As of early October, the victims were believed to number almost 500. A Russian army bombing of a refugee bus occupied by women and children killed 40 people.

A continuation of the attacks on the mountainous regions further south and on the capital Grozny is expected at any time. Here the Russian army must count on incurring heavy losses. Traditions in these centres of Chechen resistance go back to the 19th century.

The leader of the separatist movement, Schamil, has received his greatest support in places like Wedeno and Schaloi, which were only conquered by the Czar after decades of fighting. According to Chechen President Maskhadov, 65,000 Chechens have been mobilised for the defence of the country.

Settlements to the north and west of Grozny are already under Russian control and the government in Moscow has said it intends to surround the capital with tanks and troops. Moscow earlier issued a statement indicating its determination to regain control of the republic: "The government of the Russian Federation hereby declares that its future actions will be equally

determined and tough, aimed at complete restoration of law and order on the whole territory of Chechnya..."



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