

Nuclear saber-rattling from Yeltsin as Chechen War intensifies

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Mounting tensions between the US and Russia, heightened by Moscow's attack on Chechnya, were underscored by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who used a December 9 press conference in Beijing to remind American critics of the war that Russia remains a nuclear power.

Standing next to Li Peng, the head of China's legislature, Yeltsin rejected admonitions from US President Bill Clinton that the Kremlin end its military assault and seek a negotiated settlement with the Chechens. "President Clinton permitted himself to put pressure on Russia," Yeltsin said, "but it seems he has forgotten that Russia has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons."

The two-month-long war in Chechnya is assuming an increasingly brutal form, and Yeltsin's remarks are a reminder of its potentially devastating implications, not only for Russia and Chechnya, but for the entire world.

Since its start on October 1, the Russian assault has resulted in a stream of refugees, now estimated at 233,000 people. Up to 4,500 Chechen civilians have been killed and 1,000 Russian soldiers have perished.

The Russian force consists primarily of recruits between 18 and 27 years of age. The following example is typical of letters home from Russian soldiers: "Hello Volodya. I am in Chechnya. As usual, we have been betrayed... I listen to the radio and I am amazed. I hear one thing and see the complete opposite.... The soldiers are half-starved and half-naked. The rations are lousy. The food consists of barley, chopped straw and peas. We get up in a field now and sleep on the ground... They also deceived us about the promised extra payments" (*Frankfurter Rundschau*, December 2, 1999).

Despite the heavy censorship and contradictory information issued by the Russian Ministry of the

Interior, hardly a day passes without reports emerging of massacres of the Chechen civilian population and refugees. On at least two occasions refugee convoys have been bombarded from the air, with the loss of at least 40 lives.

The living conditions for those who have remained in their homeland are catastrophic. Supplies of food and drinking water have virtually collapsed in the areas which have been bombed. The situation with regard to medicine is even worse. There has been no gas or electricity for weeks.

In the overcrowded refugee camps in the neighbouring republic of Ingushetia, whence the majority of refugees have fled, diseases are spreading and people are dying of cold and general weakness.

Russian army losses are also growing as exchanges intensify. Last Friday 250 Russian soldiers were killed after being encircled by rebels in clashes around the separatist stronghold of Urus-Martan, 20 kilometres southeast of Grozny. Some 200 were killed in the course of the battle and 50 prisoners were executed by rebel troops, who slit the Russians' throats.

Following heavy air bombardment supplemented by artillery attacks, the Russian army has advanced on towns and villages from the north, occupying over half of Chechnya and surrounding the capital of Grozny.

On December 8 and 9, Russian troops seized the two most important strongholds of Chechen resistance south of Grozny—Urus-Martan and Schali. The Russian army thereby gained control over the most densely populated area of Chechnya south of the capital. The Chechen fighters retreated to Grozny and mountainous regions in the south.

With the expiration of a December 5 Russian ultimatum, an attack on the capital is planned for December 11. A Russian leaflet distributed in Grozny

called on the remaining 40,000-50,000 inhabitants to leave the city via a “security corridor”, as bombardment of the city continued.

“All those remaining in Grozny after this date will be regarded as terrorists and bandits and will be destroyed by artillery and air attacks,” the leaflet declared. The inhabitants of the city were invited to move to a newly erected refugee camp to the northwest of Grozny, which, in fact, has places for only 4,500 refugees.

The aim of the Kremlin is to avoid a repetition of the disastrous defeat it suffered in the war of 1994-96, when thousands of Russian soldiers lost their lives in house-to-house fighting as they attempted to occupy Grozny and a number of other towns. The mood against the war increased dramatically among the Russian population and forced Moscow to put a halt to hostilities.

Russia intends to occupy and subordinate the rebellious republic, which, after the first Chechen war from 1994 to 1996, remained officially within the Russian Federation but enjoyed de facto independence. The treaty of August 1996 that ended the first war was due to be re-negotiated in 2001, at which time the final status of Chechnya was to be determined.

The Russian troops, having to this point been able to take the regions in the north of Chechnya without excessive conflict or casualties, are now threatened with much heavier clashes with Chechen forces, which will be fighting from their traditional strongholds in the mountainous regions in the south of the country.

Big Russian losses and a resulting wave of protest in Russia could abruptly spike the war propaganda of the Kremlin. The first signs of disenchantment with the frothing nationalism propagated by Moscow are indicated by revelations about the consequences of the war for the Russian population. These have been made public despite the blackout on news and the pro-war propaganda circulating in the Russian media.

Ida Kuklinka, from the Committee for Soldiers' Mothers, said that the picture given by the Russian Defence Ministry of conditions for the soldiers was “pure invention”. She reported of her journey to the North Caucasus, where she visited hospitals and spoke with soldiers. In Mozdok, the main base for the Russian army, she saw daily how dozens of wounded and dead were being loaded onto planes.

She said that in discussion with doctors she was told,

“With winter coming and hygienic conditions in a deplorable state, many fall ill. Already cases of hepatitis and pneumonia have appeared. They have no drinking water and no place to wash. They are dirty and cold, and infectious diseases develop rapidly.”

The current war is largely the result of growing international tensions, in particular between the US and Russia, concentrated in the struggle for the resources of the former Soviet Union. This conflict is assuming increasingly aggressive forms.

The clique inside the Kremlin have been provoked by a series of developments, including: the acceptance into NATO in March of this year of the former East bloc countries of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary; the US-NATO bombing of Yugoslavia—a traditional ally of Russia; US preparations to establish a missile defence system and its demands for a revision of the 1972 US-Soviet anti-ballistic missile treaty; and last month's signing of a treaty for the construction of a US-backed oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea which would skirt Russian territory.

It is necessary to view the hypocritical expressions of sympathy for the victims of the war from US President Clinton and his colleagues in Europe in this light. Alongside the ruling circles in Russia, they bear major responsibility for this bloodbath.



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