

Russia-Georgia tensions worsen following Beslan siege

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The school siege at Beslan in the Russian republic of North Ossetia has exacerbated tensions between Russia and Georgia, its neighbour in the South Caucasus.

The Russian administration headed by President Vladimir Putin has utilised the tragedy in a manner similar to that adopted by the Republican administration in the US after the destruction of the World Trade Centre on 9/11. The Kremlin has also threatened to make pre-emptive military strikes outside its own borders against its enemies. Yuri Baluyevsky, Russia's top general, declared that military forces "will carry out all measures to liquidate terrorist bases in any region of the world."

The shift towards pre-emptive strikes outside of Russia is not an idle threat. It already carries out an assassination policy like that employed by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon and endorsed by Washington. In February Russian agents assassinated the prominent Chechen Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev whilst he was residing on the Arabian Peninsula in Doha, Qatar. The murder was in response to a previous bomb attack on the Moscow metro, which the Kremlin blames on Chechen separatists.

Sentencing two Russian agents to 25 years in jail this week, a Qatari judge stated, "The Russian leadership issued an order to assassinate the former Chechen leader Yandarbiyev."

The Russian government has denied any knowledge of the attack.

Putin and other leading government figures have identified Georgia's Pankisi Gorge as a possible target for pre-emptive attacks. Thousands of Chechen refugees live in wretched conditions after having fled Russian atrocities and are currently seek shelter in the difficult to penetrate region.

Russian sources claim the refugee community

provides the ideal cover for Chechen rebels to enter Georgia from the Russian republic and to re-enter other Russian provinces like North Ossetia through Georgia's porous and frequently lawless northern borders. Georgia shares its borders with the impoverished and troubled republics of Ingushetia, Dagestan, Chechnya and North Ossetia. Russia has since closed all its borders with Georgia.

Attempting to deflect criticism and avoid a confrontation with superior Russian military forces, the Georgian authorities have repeatedly claimed that the Pankisi no longer harbours Chechen rebels. The current government led by Mikhail Saakashvili blames the deposed administration of Eduard Shevardnadze for previous incursions by rebels into and out of Georgia.

The Bush administration in Washington has sent out conflicting signals. The US State Department backed the claims of the Tbilisi administration, stating that the Pankisi Gorge was free from rebel activity. Spokesman Richard Boucher said the Pankisi Gorge "is no longer a haven for terrorists." But the US ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, says some international terrorists are still present in the Gorge.



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