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By Rustam Chiharro (1)

Two recent acts of terrorism, the hostage drama in Moscow’s musical Nord-Ost on 23 October 2002 and the suicide attack against the pro-Russian administration building in Grozny on 27 December, have left a great many questions unanswered. The author went to Chechnya recently to learn more about the circumstances of these crimes.

Dubrovka: portrait of a terrorist

Aishat Bakueva was born in Il'inovka near Grozny in 1973, the fourth of six children. In the Summer of 2001, Aishat’s brother, Bauddi Bakuev, a famous commander who was considered close to Chechen Vice President Vakha Arsanov, was killed by federal forces near Argun (2). That was the first casualty in Aishat’s family. A few months later her brother Aslan and brother-in-law Khassan were killed. The third brother, Idris, was killed during a "cleansing." Aishat’s sister, Zareta, died soon thereafter from a heart attack. Finally, in May 2002, Aishat’s youngest brother, the 15-year-old Daud, was caught laying a landmine on a road north of Grozny by federal soldiers and the Chechen OMON. The family never recovered Daud’s body.

Only Aishat and her mother, Datu, remained. Neighbors recall that Aishat did not cry at the funerals and avoided going to the cemetery to visit her siblings’ graves. The neighbors considered Aishat a Wahhabi and reproached Datu for having failed to raise her children properly. The rebukes grew louder and more venomous after the circumstance of Daud’s death became known, since local civilians are the usual victims of landmines.
After Daud’s death, Aishat was rarely in Il’inovka. According to Datu, she was too busy with her little pharmacy in Grozny. Aishat really did run a pharmacy and even traveled to neighboring republics to purchase medicine, but neighbors suspected that she was helping Wahhabi units to carry out diversionary maneuvers against the military.

In October 2002, Aishat sold her pharmacy to a friend. She told her mother she was going to Moscow on business. A week later neighbors recognized Aishat on television among the female terrorists in the Nord-Ost hostage-taking; one of her few friends who talked to the author says that Aishat never intended to return. The type of documents she may have used to get to Moscow is not known.

Datu categorically refuses to talk to journalists about her daughter. Once a week she travels to Grozny’s one public telephone station “to call Aishat.” Each week, the telephone operator dials the 11 digits of the Moscow mobile phone only to hear, "the number has been disconnected." Each week, Datu returns to Il’inovka and tells the neighbors, "Aishat sends her best regards. She bought a pharmacy in Moscow and is doing very well."

Datu is not alone in her self-deception. The federal government suffers from the same malady.

**Grozny: a roadmap of the attack**

On 27 December 2002, two trucks bearing suicide bombers blew up the Russian administration building in Grozny, killing 83 persons. The government compound, containing the buildings of the administration and government of Chechnya, the Ministry of Justice, the Interior Ministry, the Procuracy and the Regional Directorate of the FSB, are located in the Staropromyslovsky section of Grozny. The territory around the government buildings is not residential; it is surrounded by federal forces. Moreover, adjacent to the administration building is the regional FSB headquarters, which is equipped with external video cameras. There has been no release of information as to
whether the cameras were working the day of the blast, and if so, what has become of the tapes.

Procuracy investigators insist that the trucks with the explosives came from the direction of the Staropromyslovsky district. The main reason they give for this supposition is that two trucks bearing a ton of explosives could hardly have passed through the center of the city undetected. But even if they were coming from the assumed direction, the two trucks still would have had to pass three checkpoints off the main road, Staropromyslovky shosse, to reach their target.

Let us suppose that the two vehicles — a heavy "Kamaz" truck and the jeep "Uaz" — did indeed come from the shosse. Hence, they would have turned left past the traffic police post onto Garazhny Street. To reach the complex of government buildings, they would first have to pass the outer checkpoint manned by 10-15 MVD soldiers who check the documents of drivers and all passengers.

The two vehicles would have passed this checkpoint and continued down the road, passing the headquarters of the Sverdlovsky OMON. (3) Then the trucks would have proceeded past the republican Procuracy building, which is guarded by the special forces of the justice ministry (GUIN) that also protect visiting federal officials. Most of the territory adjacent to the Procuracy, including the road on which the trucks passed, is under constant surveillance by armored personnel carriers.

According to the scenario, the two trucks drove past the headquarters of the republican FSB (in charge of counter-terrorist operations), which is equipped with external and internal video cameras. Roughly 100 meters from the FSB Directorate and 150 meters from the GUIN is the only functioning hotel in the Chechen capital which is intended for the various VIPs who occasionally visit. The hotel is protected by the GUIN and also has external video cameras.
The second checkpoint consists of a cement wall with a gate that is guarded by an armored personnel carrier and a special purpose unit of the MVD.

The third and final kontrol'no propusknyi punkt (KPP, or checkpoint) actually consists of two barriers. The road between them is roughly 50-60 meters long and is not straight, but rather has a "snake" design — there are cement blocks forcing drivers to make several sharp turns before reaching the last checkpoint. Supposedly, the terrorists picked up speed in the "snake" and, having made a sharp left turn, rammed through the last checkpoint.

All traffic is checked at the entrance to a KPP. If a vehicle tries to ram the checkpoint, it collides with cement and metal gates that would constitute a serious impediment even to an armored personnel carrier. If a vehicle does manage to force its way through the checkpoint, it would hardly make it halfway through the "snake" before coming under fire. The last checkpoint is guarded by FSB, GUIN, and several German shepherd dogs especially trained to sniff out explosives. After this last barrier, the distance to the administration building is 80 meters.

It is much more realistic to imagine a scenario in which the two trucks packed with explosives and driven by terrorists passed unimpeded through all three checkpoints. Probably the drivers had all the proper paperwork. It is also likely that the trucks belonged to one of the garages on the premises of this governmental compound.

There is an inquiry into the question of who may have provided documents for the terrorists, but it will most likely lead nowhere. First of all, nothing is left of the trucks and the terrorists; moreover, the whole affair has resulted in another round of detaining more "suspects" in the course of the "cleansings." Initially, the head of the Russian-installed Chechen Administration accused Aslan Maskhadov. Later, Shamil Basaev took responsibility for planning the car bombing. (4) The accusation and the claim of responsibility are fairly routine and should not be taken at face value — such statements
are part of the rhetoric of the war and may in fact have little to do with how the terrorist acts were organized.

The explosion on 27 December may have been the loudest, but was hardly the most significant success of the Chechen fighters over the last 18 months. In August 2001 there were near-simultaneous attacks on commandant buildings in Shali, Argun, Urus-Martan, and Gudermes which destroyed the military headquarters of those towns, killing hundreds of servicemen. In the winter of 2001-2002 at least half a dozen helicopters were shot down within 300 meters of the main Russian military base at Khankala. (Officially the helicopters crashed due to technical problems or adverse weather conditions.) Then, in September 2002, the government was forced to admit that fighters had shot down an MI-26 transport helicopter carrying more than 100 passengers. After that attack, the number of servicemen in Grozny was increased substantially and apartment buildings near Khankala were razed.

These governmental measures, however, do not address the problem. The main weakness of the federal force is precisely the large numbers of servicemen massed on the tiny territory of the Chechen capital, in particular their many chains of command and their total immobility. The temptation of easy money is all around. The military chaos in Chechnya is an all-encompassing phenomenon and, because of that, crimes such as selling documents, weapons, or trucks to the fighters will never be solved. Greed triumphs over fear — this is one of the fundamental reasons for the Chechen fighters’ success.

After the December attack on the administration building the authorities decided to intensify security measures further by cutting off all civilian traffic on Staropromyslovky shosse — the road that connects the city center with the government compound and the suburbs to the north and east of Grozny. This clever arrangement sends all civilian traffic, including buses, along an alternate route, which is barely passable and adds an hour to the commute. Only three weeks after these measures were in place, fighters
blew up the Grozny medical school located 100 meters from the heavily guarded perimeter of the government complex.

(1) Rustam Chiharro is a Moscow-based freelance journalist writing from Nazran, Grozny.

(2) Bauddi Bakuev was suspected of holding hostage the Russian MVD General Gennadi Shpigun. — Ed.

(3) Regional OMON detachments deploy for six-month tours in Chechnya. In this case the Sverdlovsky OMON was performing the duties of the Temporary Operational Group of the MVD for the Leninsky rayon of Grozny.