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BEHIND THE BREAKING NEWS
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**“Dizzy with Success”: Russia's Latest Maneuvers in
Chechnya**

By Miriam Lansky

As often occurs with coverage of events in Russia, there are several stories behind the breaking news. And it is with knowledge of these behind-the-scenes details that a clearer picture can emerge. Thus, although the Russian government has claimed that recent bombings in Moscow are the result of Chechen terrorism, and a bombing campaign launched by Russia against Chechnya is designed solely to target terrorist bases, the real story behind conflict in the Caucasus and Russia's invasion of Chechnya is quite a bit more complicated.

Pressure on the Caucasian states

Some analysts have feared that Russia would use the troubles in Dagestan and Chechnya as an excuse to extend its hold on the states of the Caucasus. During the last week alone, Russia has taken several steps in that direction, including:

- A push for the re-manning of former Soviet bases in Azerbaijan and the resumption of Russian Border Guard control of the Georgian border with Chechnya;
- A warning of the need to increase the Russian presence at the Abkhazia military base, in response to rumors that Basaev might spend the winter in Svanetia, a neighboring Georgian district.
- The bombing of an Azerbaijani village on October 1 was meant to send a

"sort of warning" to the Azeri government Nezavisimaya gazeta reported on October 5.

- In a televised interview of October 3, Igor Ivanov, the Russian Foreign Minister, issued another warning by saying that Russian demands should not be "brushed aside, because they are not empty statements." In a style deeply reminiscent of Soviet parlance, Ivanov took upon himself to represent the interests of other states: "Georgia and Azerbaijan should be no less interested than Russia in seeing this conflict settled." To that end they must enter into the "closest cooperation" with Russia and the CIS.

These moves by Russia have not taken everyone by surprise, as statements by government officials have served as red flags. Over the last few weeks, for example, the Russians have closed and reopened the borders with Azerbaijan and Georgia, claiming (against reason, lack of evidence, and Azeri and Georgian protests to the contrary) that arms have been shipped to Chechnya and Dagestan through or from these countries. Actually, the entire scenario of externally procured arms seems far-fetched, since most of the time Chechens buy weapons from Russian soldiers.

Moreover, some Russian publications lately have been identifying the United States as the party ultimately responsible for conflict in the Caucasus, claiming that the US arms Georgia in order to push the Russian Federation out of the region. Thus, Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie reports that the US is the cause of heightened tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia. The paper completes its fanciful scenario with the following end result: "Abkhazia is entirely engulfed and NATO builds bases on its territory."

IMF buys the bombs

International Monetary Fund loans are not targeted at specific programs; thus, one cannot point to a structure in Russia and say that IMF money paid for this

hospital or that road. Instead, such funds are directed at financing the budget deficit, and the IMF pays for whatever is in the budget. It so happens that these days, as in 1994 and 1995 when the loans were first approved, the major expense is the slaughter of Chechen civilians. In this way the West is implicated in Russia's crimes against humanity. In fact, the magnitude of the loans in 1994-1995 was roughly equal to the cost of the war (Christian Science Monitor, May 8, 1995)

The Moscow Times noted the parallels between IMF funding and the bombing campaigns, and has argued that Russia should be held to the same standards of responsibility as every other funding recipient. ("Cut All IMF Funding for Putin's War," October 5, 1999) As the paper suggested, if Russia is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to blast civilians, the logical response is to cut the flow of money from the West. "When crimes against humanity like this happen in East Timor or Kosovo, Bill Clinton's administration is ready to intervene. There are always different rules for Russia, however. And that should change."

That the West feels constrained against complaining too forcefully about Russia's latest actions stems in part from a misguided sense that NATO's campaign in Kosovo set a precedent for Moscow's current activities. To accept that premise would do as much damage to Chechen civilians as sending money to finance the bombing campaigns. Though in some basic ways the bombing of Serbia and of Chechnya are alike -- in both cases bombs were used to take out important elements of the infrastructure, in both cases commanders briefed the press about their activities -- the similarities end there.

War is avoidable

Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, meanwhile, has been trying desperately not to seem radical. Russia has cut off all contact with him. He was thwarted even from meeting with the president of Dagestan, Magomedali Magomedov. The OSCE has also failed to responding. He repeatedly called for negotiations

and on one occasion sought to have Shevardnadze mediate. He has invited international observers. Only on the very eve of the ground war, when Russian troops had been massed at his borders, did Maskhadov start to make antagonistic statements. Throughout the escalating war of words from Moscow and the subsequent bombing, he created plenty of room to prevent the war if they wanted to do so. Moscow showed no interest in avoiding conflict.

By way of comparison, in 1994 Dudaev spoke in one breath of jihad and of the possibility of some sort of autonomy, a la Tatarstan. On the eve of the ground war, when tanks were rolling through Ingushetia, Dudaev offered an arrangement that would allow for substantive economic, military and diplomatic relations. Even in that case Chechnya provided enough face-saving room if the Russians had wanted to negotiate.

Opacity of decision making in Moscow

Other than the argument that it is fighting terrorism, Moscow has not articulated a policy or a goal. As in 1994, the process is obscure and it seems that the war is actually a way of resolving elements of a political struggle within the leadership.

The defense minister and the prime minister have sent out different signals about the possibility of ground war. The prime minister seems to be in control. Where is the president in all of this? Back in January of 1997, Yel'tsin sent a message to Maskhadov congratulating him on his election as president of Chechnya, and said that Russia respects the choice of the Chechen voters. In its negotiations with Chechnya, Moscow has treated Maskhadov as the legitimate president. On what grounds, and with what authority, does Putin contravene that now?

There is speculation that Maskhadov was working with Stepashin and Rushailo to get rid of Basaev and Khattab. When Basaev staged his raid into Dagestan in July, Maskhadov called up reinforcements to protect the border. In a recent interview Maskhadov indicated that he might have attempted to arrested Basaev

if not for the Russian bombing of Dagestani villages.

"Had the Russians not chosen to bombard the Wahhabi villages in the center of Dagestan, after Basayev's first retreat, we could perhaps have dealt with them. They [Basaev, Khattab, and other radical elements] were discredited, divided. But the continued attacks by the Russians reunited them. (...) [I]f tomorrow the Russians were to recognize our sovereignty, saying in effect: 'That's it! We are no longer interfering in anything. Build anything you want!' -- I would have a free hand to deal with the partisans of the grand jihad." (Le Monde (Internet version), 18 Sep 99; FBIS-SOV-1999-0918)

On the one hand Stepashin and Rushailo would use "preventative strikes" against the field commanders' detachments; on the other hand, they worked towards organizing a meeting between Maskhadov and Yel'tsin. The Chechen State Security Minister Turpal-Ali Atgeriev was briefly arrested in July. After his release he said that the purpose of detainment had been to humiliate Stepashin. Also some have reported that the MVD and the military are in competition. On 6 July Izvestia reported that the military "openly sabotaged" Stepashin's and Rushailo's strategy earlier in the Spring. Now, under the Putin government the military command has clearly taken the lead.

It seems that the Stepashin government sought to defeat the militant elements while maintaining a dialogue with Maskhadov. That all changed either when the financial scandal broke or when Stepashin was replaced by Putin. In any case, there was a sharp change in policy when Moscow turned its focus from "eliminating" Basaev and Khattab to creating a buffer zone in Chechnya. This shift is explained by the bombings that left roughly 300 dead in Moscow, but the authorship of those explosions remains obscure.

Moscow bombings

Setting aside the question of what "Chechen terrorists" would have to gain by

exploding bombs in Moscow and turning Russian popular opinion against Caucasians, if the Chechen field commanders did set the initial explosions, why have they stopped? Why aren't more buildings in Moscow going up in smoke as retribution for the bombing of population centers in Chechnya? It's as though the "terrorists" achieved their aim by waking the Russian bear.

Conjecture that someone other than the Chechens may have set the explosions is bolstered by a recent report that the FSB was in a big rush to bury the crime scenes of the Moscow bombings. "The Moscow Times notes in an editorial that the Ulitsa Guryanova bombing site was buried just 10 days after the explosion, and the Kashirskoye Shosse site was never secured before rubble clearance began the day of the blast. 'Is this ignorance?' asks the Times. 'In the capital city of a country where the current prime minister, Vladimir Putin, was once its top security official, the assumption sells the FSB short. The Federal Security Service has the equipment, know-how and political clout required to perform a proper investigation.... Few bombing sites are destroyed as quickly as those at Ulitsa Guryanova and Kashirskoye Shosse.'" (Russian Reform Monitor, No. 688, October 5, 1999)

Military Tactics

What does the Russian government and military command hope to accomplish? Punish the Chechens? Create enough chaos to justify postponing the elections? Use the war as a pretext for launching new operations against Georgia and Azerbaijan? Maybe all of those -- time will tell. At present, the newly adopted tactic appears to be to take the northern lowlands, thereby pushing Chechen forces into the mountains where they will presumably freeze or starve to death. Would Russia really be content with holding only a portion of Chechnya and allowing the Chechen commanders to maintain control of the other part?

In 1995 and 1996 the Chechens were down to holding only one or two mountain settlements. That is what prompted Basaev's raid on Budennovsk. When

Maskhadov was squeezed to the wall he came out of the mountains and took back Grozny on the day that Yel'tsin was sworn in as president. History has shown that the Chechens do not starve and freeze -- they have survived in the mountains for too long -- they come down and bring the war to Russia. So far, Russia has not shown the military preparedness or the will to follow the Chechens into the mountains and defeat them there.

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