



RESEARCH PAPER 00/14
7 FEBRUARY 2000

The Conflict in Chechnya

This paper deals with the current conflict between Russian federal forces and rebel fighters in the secessionist North Caucasian republic of Chechnya. It examines the background and build-up to the conflict and looks at possible future developments.

The political situation in Russia and the presidential elections due to be held on 26 March 2000 will be covered in a separate paper shortly.

Tim Youngs

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS AND DEFENCE SECTION

HOUSE OF COMMONS LIBRARY

Recent Library Research Papers include:

List of 15 most recent RPs

99/110	Child Support provisions in the <i>Child Support, Pensions and Social Security Bill</i> [Bill 9 of 1999-2000]	21.12.99
99/111	A Century of Change: Trends in UK statistics since 1900	21.12.99
99/112	Defence Statistics 1999	
00/1	The <i>Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill</i> - Electoral Aspects [Bill 34 of 1999-2000]	06.01.00
00/2	The <i>Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill</i> - Donations [Bill 34 of 1999-2000]	07.01.00
00/3	The <i>Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Bill</i> - Referendums and Broadcasting [Bill 34 of 1999-2000]	07.01.00
00/4	The <i>Fur Farming (Prohibition) Bill</i> [Bill 6 of 1999-2000]	14.01.00
00/5	Unemployment by Constituency – December 1999	19.01.00
00/6	<i>Disqualification Bill</i> [Bill 41 of 1999-2000]	20.01.00
00/7	<i>Utilities Bill</i> [Bill 49 of 1999-2000]	26.01.00
00/8	<i>Medical Treatment (Prevention of Euthanasia) Bill</i> [Bill 12 of 1999-2000]	21.01.00
00/9	<i>Economic Indicators</i>	01.02.00
00/10	<i>Careers and Disabled Children Bill</i>	01.02.00
00/11	The <i>Export of Farm Animals Bill</i> [Bill 20 of 1999-2000]	02.02.00
00/12	The <i>Armed Forces Discipline Bill</i> [Bill 53 of 1999-2000]	04.02.00

Research Papers are available as PDF files:

- to members of the general public on the Parliamentary web site, URL: <http://www.parliament.uk>
- within Parliament to users of the Parliamentary Intranet, URL: <http://hcl1.hclibrary.parliament.uk>

Library Research Papers are compiled for the benefit of Members of Parliament and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public. Any comments on Research Papers should be sent to the Research Publications Officer, Room 407, 1 Derby Gate, London, SW1A 2DG or e-mailed to PAPERS@parliament.uk

Summary of main points

- For the second time since 1994, Russian forces are involved in a conflict with rebel fighters in the secessionist North Caucasian republic of Chechnya.
- Chechnya declared independence in 1991. Moscow refused to recognise the move and made an abortive attempt to re-impose federal control. Subsequent covert efforts to topple the Chechen leadership also ended in failure.
- The first conflict began in December 1994 when 35,000 heavily armed Russian troops re-entered the republic. Fierce fighting broke out as Russian units attempted to seize the capital Grozny in the face of stiff resistance from the less numerous and lightly armed Chechen rebels.
- After Grozny fell to the Russians in February 1995, rebel forces mounted a series of hostage raids and a guerrilla campaign, inflicting heavy casualties on the increasingly demoralised federal troops and turning Russian public opinion against the conflict.
- The two sides signed a peace deal in August 1996, agreeing to defer the issue of Chechnya's status for five years. Russian forces withdrew from the republic and elections were held. However, widespread lawlessness, frequent kidnappings and growing fragmentation within the Chechen political leadership hindered efforts at reconstruction and deterred foreign investment in the republic.
- In August 1999 a Chechen-based militia group of militant Islamists mounted a major incursion into the neighbouring Russian Federation republic of Dagestan, with the aim of establishing an independent Islamic republic. Within weeks, Russian forces had forced them back into Chechnya.
- The following month a wave of devastating bombings in Moscow and across Russia left over 300 people dead. The Kremlin leadership blamed Islamist militants based in Chechnya and began to bombard suspected 'terrorist' bases in the republic.
- Russia launched a major ground assault in Chechnya on 30 September 1999, involving over 90,000 troops. Federal forces advanced rapidly through northern Chechnya and by mid-December had encircled Grozny.
- Chechen rebel forces withdrew from the city in early February 2000 after weeks of heavy Russian bombardment and street fighting. Russian forces have lost between 1,000 and 3,000 men. An unknown number of rebels and civilians have also died.
- An early end to the conflict appears unlikely, at least before the Russian presidential elections due to be held on 26 March 2000. The Chechen leadership intends to wage a guerrilla campaign from the southern mountains of Chechnya. The Russian acting president, Vladimir Putin, who is the strong favourite to win the election, has vowed to continue the military operation in a bid to eliminate the rebels and restore the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.

CONTENTS

I	The Roots of the Conflict	7
	A. Background	7
	B. The Soviet Period	7
	C. Unilateral Independence (September 1991)	8
II	The First Conflict of 1994-1996	9
	A. The Build-up to Conflict	9
	B. Russian Forces Enter Chechnya	10
	C. The Conflict Continues	11
	D. The Peace Agreement of August 1996	12
	E. Post-Conflict Developments (1996-1998)	13
III	The Current Conflict	15
	A. Fighting in Dagestan	15
	B. Russian Forces re-enter Chechnya	15
	C. The Battle for Grozny	17
	D. The Chechen Counter-Offensive	18
	E. The Fall of Grozny	19
IV	International Reaction	21
	A. The Response in the United Kingdom	22
V	Possible Future Developments in the Conflict	24
	Appendix I Map of Chechnya	27
	Appendix II Map of Caucasus Region	28

I The Roots of the Conflict

A. Background

Chechnya, the traditional homeland of the Chechen people,¹ is situated on the northern slopes of the Caucasus mountain chain. Bordered by Georgia to the south, the republic has a predominantly Muslim population of around one million and covers an area of just over 6,000 square miles, slightly smaller than Wales.² It is flanked by the Russian Federation republics of Ingushetia and North Ossetia to the west, Dagestan to the east and north, and the Russian province (krai) of Stavropol to the north-west.

During the eighteenth century, Russian expansion into the North Caucasus met with strong resistance from the fiercely independent mountain peoples in the region, which is home to some 50 different, and in some cases unique, ethnic and linguistic groups. Led by Sheikh Mansur and then Imam Shamil, Chechen clan groups and their Circassian and the Dagestani neighbours engaged in a prolonged and violent conflict in a bid to preserve their distinct cultural identities and prevent the annexation of the region by the Russian Empire. Chechen society is characterised by strong loyalties and rivalries between the 150 clans or *teips*. A broad divide exists between the more independent-minded mountain *teips*, who have been particularly resistant to assimilation, and their lowland counterparts, who have been less hostile to Russian rule.³

By 1858, however, most of the North Caucasus was under Russian control, with a network of military garrisons and a rapidly growing Russian settler population. The various mountain peoples were granted certain concessions, such as an exemption from military conscription, and the right to practise Islam and observe Islamic *shariat* law. Nonetheless, periodic bouts of unrest continued to affect the region throughout the final decades of Tsarist rule.

B. The Soviet Period

During the civil war in Russia that followed the fall of the Tsarist state in 1917, promises of significant autonomy led many Chechens to side with the new Bolshevik regime. In 1921 Moscow agreed to the establishment of a Mountainous Autonomous Republic covering most of the north-east Caucasus with the exception of Dagestan. The republic, which had its own constitution based on the *shariat*, was dissolved a few years later with the introduction by Moscow of a new nationalities policy. The major non-Russian nationalities of the Soviet Union, including the Georgians, Armenians and Azeris, were given nominally sovereign

¹ The Chechens call themselves Nokchi and refer to their republic as the 'Chechen Republic of Ichkeria'. Maps of the region are included in Appendix I and II.

² 1996 estimates place the total population at 921,000, *The Territories of the Russian Federation*, Europa Publications, 1999.

³ The core of support for the Chechen war effort during the 1990s has been provided by the mountain *teips*. For more details on the complex *teip* structure see *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Waal, London 1997, p.24-36

republics, while other smaller peoples were given a lesser 'autonomous' status within the republics.

Chechnya was initially designated an autonomous province (oblast) within the 'Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic'. In 1934 it was merged with the neighbouring Ingush autonomous province and then upgraded in 1936 to form the Chechen-Ingush autonomous republic. The following year, however, the Soviet authorities again resorted to repression as 14,000 Chechens and Ingush were rounded up and executed.

In 1944 the republic was abolished and hundreds of thousands of Chechens and Ingush, along with neighbouring Karachais and Balkars, were deported to Central Asia and Siberia as a punishment for alleged collaboration with the invading German armies. As many as 200,000 Chechens are believed to have died as a result of the harsh conditions on the journey and in exile.⁴ The episode served to harden opposition towards Moscow's rule and did much to endow the Chechens with a strong sense of national identity. In 1957, under Khrushchev, the deported nationalities were permitted to return from exile. The combined Chechen-Ingush republic was restored, albeit with different borders and incorporating a large area of previously Russian territory north of the Terek river.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991 the 15 sovereign republics were allowed to become independent states, but the Russian government and parliament insisted on the integrity of what is now known as the 'Russian Federation'. Although the distinction between sovereign and non-sovereign republics within the old Soviet Union was somewhat arbitrary, the international community held the dissolution of the Union to be consistent with the Helsinki principles on the non-violability of existing borders. It was also consistent with the older principles of state succession, which had been applied to post-colonial South America and Africa. As a result, the international border between Georgia and the Russian Federation was universally recognised as running along the southern edge of Chechnya.

C. Unilateral Independence (September 1991)

Resentment among the Chechen population over their treatment at the hands of the Soviet authorities remained submerged until the final years of Soviet rule when Moscow's authority over the regions began to wane. In November 1990 growing pressure for a reassertion of Chechen identity led to the formation of a Chechen All-National Congress, headed by Dzhokhar Dudaev, a former Soviet air force general. Drawing on the Chechens' deep rooted historical grievances with Russia and shared experience of deportation, the Congress gradually wrested power from the authorities and on 6 September 1991 issued a unilateral declaration of independence. The move was reinforced by Dudaev's victory in a chaotic presidential election on 27 October.

⁴ J. Ormrod, "The North Caucasus: fragmentation or federation?", in I. Bremner & R. Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, 1993, 456-9; M. Galeotti, "Chechnia: The Theft of a Nation?", *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, April 1994, p.69.

An attempt by Russian Interior Ministry troops to arrest Dudaev was frustrated by Chechen militias and civilian crowds. Russian forces abandoned the attempt to restore federal control, leaving substantial stockpiles of weapons and equipment behind.

Moscow refused to recognise Chechen independence, but could do little to end what it regarded as an eccentric rebellion. Occupied with other more pressing economic and constitutional matters, the Kremlin leadership apparently hoped that the fragmented opposition to the Dudaev regime within Chechnya would unite to bring about its collapse without the need for Russian intervention.

II The First Conflict of 1994-1996

A. The Build-up to Conflict

By the summer of 1994 President Dudaev's position appeared under threat as tension with Chechen opposition groups erupted into violence. Within the Kremlin there was growing support for intervention, initially in the form of material assistance to the anti-Dudaev opposition. Some within the Russian leadership feared that inaction over Chechnya might encourage other republics in the Federation to attempt to secede. An added consideration was the presence of a significant ethnic Russian population inside Chechnya, believed to number around 100,000. Some commentators also claimed Moscow had an economic interest in re-establishing control over the oil industry around Grozny and the pipeline between Azerbaijan and Russia that runs through the republic.

Despite escalating Russian involvement during September and October 1994, the anti-Dudaev opposition suffered a series of military setbacks, culminating in a disastrous failed assault on Grozny in November. About 100 opposition fighters were killed during the operation and several dozen captured, including a number of Russian servicemen. Furthermore, Russian army helicopters and bombers were seen in action over the republic, although the defence ministry insisted on the fiction that these belonged to unidentified forces not under its control.

By late November this line of denial had become untenable and Moscow was forced to acknowledge that Russian forces were actively engaged. Faced with the choice of escalating hostilities further or entering into negotiations with Dudaev, influential hard-liners in the Kremlin advocated a massive show of force to bring Chechnya under control. Handicapped by poor intelligence, the Russian leadership believed that the prospect of full-scale conflict would force Dudaev to back down. The Minister of Defence, Pavel Grachev, famously boasted that a parachute regiment could take Grozny inside two hours.

One key factor in the decision to intervene was the belief that "a short victorious war" in Chechnya would improve President Yeltsin's ratings in the same way as the recent US intervention in Haiti had boosted support for President Clinton. There was apparently little debate within the Kremlin leadership, although a handful of officials did warn of heavy casualties and the potential for an Afghanistan-style quagmire.

Russian army and interior ministry forces began to mass along the Chechen border and on 9 December, following the expiry of an ultimatum to Dudaev to surrender, President Yeltsin authorised the use of “all means available” to disarm “illegal groups” and impose constitutional rule in the republic.⁵

B. Russian Forces Enter Chechnya

On 11 December 1994 Russian ground forces, numbering around 35,000 troops, crossed into Chechnya from three directions.⁶ Initially delayed by passive opposition from Chechen and Ingush civilians, Russian forces soon secured the lowland area to the north of the River Terek, where support for Dudaev was weakest, but fighting intensified as they closed in on Grozny.

The first attempt to take the city on New Year’s Eve ended in catastrophic failure, despite the great disparity between the two sides in terms of manpower and equipment. Unsupported Russian armoured columns attempted to occupy the centre of the city, apparently believing their sheer presence would bring about a Chechen surrender. Instead, fierce battles broke out as small groups of Chechen fighters mounted a series of devastating ambushes against the isolated Russian units. Casualties among federal forces were exceptionally high, with whole units virtually wiped out. In one of the most disastrous actions the 131st ‘Maikop’ brigade is said to have lost 20 out of 26 tanks, 102 out of 120 armoured personnel carriers and almost all of its officers, including the commanding officer.⁷ As many as 2,000 Russian soldiers are believed to have lost their lives during the first assault on Grozny.

Federal forces regrouped and mounted a massive air and artillery bombardment, before infantry and special forces units moved in to take the city piece by piece. Large areas of the capital were reduced to rubble by the fighting, causing widespread civilian casualties, particularly among members of the ethnic Russian population, who, unlike many of their Chechen neighbours, were unable to seek sanctuary with friends or relatives elsewhere in Chechnya.

Reports of rising Russian fatalities provoked considerable disquiet among the Russian media and public. By December 1995 the number of casualties from the conflict was estimated to be between 26,000 and 50,000, including around 20,000 civilians.

The reverberations from the debacle in Chechnya were felt throughout the Russian political and military establishment. Some commentators argued that power struggles between rival factions within the Kremlin were to blame, while others accused the political leadership of failing to heed warnings from the military of the dangers. Other factors included the parlous state of the armed forces and the lack of a unified command structure for the defence ministry, interior ministry

⁵ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 9 December 1994

⁶ The figure of 35,000 refers to the initial invasion force within a month of the start of the campaign. “The Russian Army in Chechnya”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, December 1999, p.9

⁷ This paragraph is based on eyewitness accounts by V. Litovkin, A. Frolov and B. Vinogradov published in *Izvestia* on 11 and 24 January 1995.

and security ministry troops taking part in the operation. In many cases, poorly trained and equipped conscripts were sent into action with wildly inaccurate intelligence on the enemy. The failure to co-ordinate operations resulted in regular 'friendly-fire' incidents, with Russian units shooting at each other. Such poor communication and organisation had devastating results. One statistic showed that

for every Russian soldier killed by the Chechens, five died in Chechnya due to carelessness or other reasons.⁸

A lack of discipline among the often frightened and brutalised Russian troops led to frequent reprisals against the civilian population, including the massacre of over 100 Chechens in the village of Samashki in April 1995. To help distinguish combatants from non-combatants, the Russian Interior Ministry established a number of 'filtration' centres. Many detainees were tortured or summarily executed. Thousands are believed to have died in captivity. Such brutality, both organised and spontaneous, deepened resentment among the Chechen population and heightened support for the rebel cause.

C. The Conflict Continues

In late February 1995 sustained Russian pressure forced a withdrawal by Chechen fighters from Grozny. By May the outlook for the rebels had deteriorated sharply as manpower, ammunition and medical supplies dwindled. In a bid to reverse the situation in June 1995 a group of rebels, led by Shamil Basaev and acting without authorisation from the Chechen leadership, mounted a raid on the southern Russian town of Budennovsk. The rebels seized a hospital taking some 2,500 hostages. The Russian government, embarrassed by a bungled attempt to storm the building, engaged Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to negotiate directly with Basaev. The stand-off was defused after Russia agreed to a cease-fire, direct peace talks and a guarantee of safe passage back to Chechnya.

Negotiations during July and August 1995 made significant progress towards an agreement and a lull in the fighting ensued. A series of bomb attacks on Russian officials in Chechnya, apparently carried out by rebel forces, essentially brought this peace process to an end. There was some speculation, however, as to whether hard-liners in Moscow had ordered the attacks to prevent the conclusion of a deal.

As fighting resumed, the Kremlin announced that elections were to be held in the republic in December 1995. Backed by Moscow, the former Communist leader in Chechnya Doku Zavgayev won by a large majority, although Chechen suspicion of politicians with links to Russia led to a widespread boycott of the vote.

⁸ *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Waal, London 1997, p.208

In January 1996 Chechen fighters carried out another hostage raid on Kizlyar and Pervomaiskoye in Dagestan. Again, the raid precipitated an ill-advised Russian assault that did further damage to the reputation of the leadership in Moscow.

In the run-up to the presidential elections in June 1996 President Yeltsin made a renewed bid to outflank domestic nationalist opposition by seeking to manoeuvre the Chechen leadership into a cease-fire on terms that maintained the integrity of the Russian Federation. A crucial turning point came in April 1996 when Dudaev was killed by a Russian strike after his location was pinpointed through his satellite communication system. His successor, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, travelled to Moscow to negotiate a cease-fire agreement, which was signed on 27 May 1996. The following day Yeltsin flew to Chechnya and addressed Russian troops at the military airfield outside Grozny, declaring that “the war is over” and “the resistance put up by the bandits and separatists has been crushed.”⁹

Yeltsin subsequently defeated his communist rival in the second round of the election after securing the backing of the popular former Army General, Aleksandr Lebed. The Russian President’s claim of victory in Chechnya proved premature: regular cease-fire violations continued and at the beginning of August 1996 a Chechen offensive reversed the rebels’ losses of 1995 leaving them in almost full control of Grozny. Russian forces in the republic had suffered constant attrition during the conflict and morale was at very low levels. The Russian press reported that Russian servicemen were openly selling weaponry and ammunition to the rebels and allowing the latter to move freely through notional checkpoints.

D. The Peace Agreement of August 1996

Following the election, Lebed was appointed Yeltsin’s national security supremo and given two apparently incompatible tasks: to regain control of Grozny and simultaneously organise the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya by the beginning of September.

Russian attempts to recapture Grozny and other key areas of the republic failed, while General Lebed pursued the path of direct negotiations with the Chechen chief of staff Aslan Maskhadov. On 23 August an outline settlement was reached after three rounds of talks, with both sides agreeing to a cessation of military activities and a withdrawal of their forces from Grozny to agreed points outside the city. The political aspect of the settlement comprised a five-year postponement of a decision about the final status of the territory. In the meantime, Chechnya would remain part of the Russian Federation, at least in Russian eyes, but with an autonomous government formed after fresh elections.

Despite opposition within the Russian parliament, a cease-fire entered into force on 27 August 1996 and Lebed and Maskhadov initialled a peace accord at Khasavyurt (in neighbouring Dagestan) on 30 August. A representative from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation

⁹ *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 29 May 1996

in Europe (OSCE) was present at the signing. Estimates for the total number of casualties from the conflict were later placed at between 60,000-100,000 dead and 240,000 wounded.¹⁰

E. Post-Conflict Developments (1996-1998)

The sacking of Lebed in mid-October 1996 did not halt the implementation of the Khasavyurt accord. A further agreement on the withdrawal of the remaining Russian units by January 1997 was signed in November 1996, leaving Chechnya in the hands of several different Chechen groups. The main force under Maskhadov occupied roughly 60 per cent of the republic with two quasi-independent Chechen field commanders occupying local strongholds: Shamil Basaev, who led the 1995 raid on the southern Russian town of Budennovsk, and Salman Raduev. In the north a small area remained loyal to the pro-Russian administration of Doku Zavgaev, while other smaller areas were controlled by a number of criminal gangs.

Presidential elections were held on 27 January 1997. Aslan Maskhadov, the former chief of staff and architect of the peace settlement, won by a wide margin (59 per cent of the vote) against Basaev (24 per cent) and interim president Yandarbiev (10 per cent). The results were accepted by all the participants, including Zavgaev and his Russian backers.

However, it soon became clear that hopes for a new political consensus and progress towards rebuilding the republic and its shattered economy were premature. A decline in financial support from the federal budget, coupled with widespread lawlessness, organised crime and continued political fragmentation undermined Maskhadov's authority and deterred foreign investment in the republic. During 1998 the Russian presidential representative to Chechnya was abducted and three Britons and one New Zealander employed on a contract for the British firm Granger Telecom were kidnapped and murdered by an unnamed group. Aid agencies were also targeted. By early 1999 over 1,300 Russians, Dagestanis and Ingush had been kidnapped, tortured or murdered in the republic.¹¹

Efforts to promote an Islamic identity caused further splits within the Chechen leadership, particularly over the growing influence of the fundamentalist *Wahhabi* interpretation of Islam. Founded in Arabia in the 18th Century, the movement calls for a return to a 'pure' form of the faith as preached by the prophet Mohammed. It also advocates the use of force to spread the teachings of Islam, a concept that is alien to the more moderate, mystical Sufi strand of Islam prevalent in Chechnya.

Attempts by Maskhadov to ban the movement were undermined by the formation of an alliance between Basaev and the *Wahhabi* fighters of Habib Aburrahman Khatab, a Saudi Islamist and veteran of the first conflict and the civil war in Tajikistan. The new grouping vowed to drive the Russians out of the whole of the North Caucasus region and establish an

¹⁰ *The Territories of the Russian Federation*, Europa Publications, 1999, p.52

¹¹ "War in the Caucasus: The Chechen Tragedy Continues", *IISS Strategic Comments*, Vol.5 Issue 10, December 1999

Islamic republic. Despite condemnation from the Chechen President, the fighters began a campaign of attacks on military and police installations in the neighbouring Russian republic of Dagestan.

III The Current Conflict

A. Fighting in Dagestan

Instability in the region increased sharply in August 1999 with a major incursion into Dagestan by around two thousand militia fighters under the combined command of Basaev, Khatab and Dagestani Islamist leader Hajji Bhauddin. The declared aim of the incursion, which was denounced by Maskhadov, was to incite a local insurrection and establish an independent Islamic republic. In response, sizeable Russian forces were despatched to the area and, after several weeks of fierce fighting, the rebels, who had found little local support for their cause, were forced back into Chechnya.

The crisis took on an added dimension in late August and early September 1999 when a series of devastating bomb attacks in Moscow and other towns and cities across Russia left over three hundred people dead. The complete destruction of two apartment blocks in the capital caused particular anxiety among the Russian population. The Moscow government under newly appointed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin blamed Chechen and *Wahabbi* “terrorists” for the blasts and launched an air and artillery bombardment of suspected rebel positions inside Chechnya.

Attacks on civilian targets by Islamist militants are not unprecedented, but the lack of firm evidence of a Chechen link prompted speculation in the Russian media over the possible involvement of the Russian security services to provide a pretext for military intervention and thereby boost the popularity of Yeltsin’s nominated successor, Prime Minister Putin.

B. Russian Forces re-enter Chechnya

As Russian ground forces mounted short forays into the republic, Chechen President Maskhadov called for negotiations to end the crisis, but met with rejection from Moscow. The Russian bombardment intensified and on 30 September a major ground assault began. Spearheaded by élite units, Russian forces drawn from the army, marines, interior ministry, border guards and special forces advanced rapidly through northern Chechnya. The operation was considerably larger in scope than the 1994 intervention, involving more than double the number of troops: over 90,000 as against some 35,000 in December 1994.¹²

Maskhadov responded by declaring martial law in the republic and calling on the fragmented Chechen militia groups to unite against the Russian threat. Nonetheless, there were signs of disarray in the Chechen leadership, with reports suggesting some field commanders not linked to the Basaev-Khatab incursion into Dagestan were seeking ‘non-aggression pacts’ with the advancing Russian forces.

¹² “War in the Caucasus: The Chechen Tragedy Continues”, *IISS Strategic Comments*, Vol.5 Issue 10, December 1999

The initial Russian aim of destroying ‘terrorist’ bases was soon broadened to include the creation of a ‘security zone’ in the low-lying region north of the river Terek. By early November, though, it had become apparent that the Russian advance was continuing across the Terek and on towards Grozny.

Whether this was intended from the start is unclear, although the sheer size of the operation may indicate that the original plan was to establish full control over the republic. On the other hand, it is possible that the operation’s early success coupled with the strong domestic support for the operation convinced the Kremlin to press on.¹³ Some commentators suggest that the Russian military leadership may have had its own motives for the campaign, to “avenge their humiliation by the Chechens in 1994-96 and change the world image of a decaying Russian army.”¹⁴ A further consideration may have been the location of Chechnya’s oil infrastructure around Grozny in areas that remained under rebel control.

During the opening phase of the operation, there were signs that Russian commanders had learned from the first conflict, when rising casualty figures undermined domestic support for the intervention. Russian units were reportedly relying on artillery and air power to reduce casualties among their troops and negate the rebels’ superiority in close quarter fighting. They also appeared to be attempting to undermine local support for the rebels: on several occasions Chechen elders instructed rebel fighters to leave in return for an undertaking from the Russian commanders not to bombard their towns and villages. However, those that did not comply came under intense bombardment from the Russians, prompting condemnation from the West and human rights organisations. There were also allegations that Russian troops were routinely accepting bribes in return for sparing certain areas,¹⁵ although the lack of independent reporting has hampered efforts to obtain an accurate picture of developments. Tight restrictions and fears over personal safety have deterred many foreign journalists from travelling to the republic.

As the Russian advance on Grozny continued, Chechen resistance increased. Nonetheless, the republic’s second city, Gudermes, fell on 12 November 1999 followed by Argun to the east of Grozny in early December. The assault on Argun reportedly left several hundred Russian troops dead and injured with some estimates suggesting the Russians had lost as many as 1,000 men since early October. Official figures placed the number of fatalities at 450.

¹³ Mark Galeotti argues that, as in 1994, the Army General Staff was a reluctant participant and advised against the operation. By contrast, some of the commanders in theatre, such as General Troshev and General Shamonov, have been more hawkish in their attitude. “The Russian Army in Chechnya”, *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, December 1999, p.8-9

¹⁴ “War in the Caucasus”, *IISS Strategic Comments*, Vol. 5 Issue 10, December 1999

¹⁵ BBC News web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, 17 January 2000

C. The Battle for Grozny

Following the fall of Urus Martan on 7 December 1999 the Russian high command claimed the encirclement of Grozny was complete. The day before, Russian forces had begun dropping leaflets warning civilians in Grozny that anyone remaining in the city after 11 December would be considered an enemy target. The text of the leaflets stated:

The united troop command gives you a last chance. Until December 11, there will be a safety corridor through the village of Pervomaiskoye. Those who remain will be viewed as terrorists and bandits. They will be destroyed by artillery and aviation. There will be no more talks. All those who do not leave the city will be destroyed. The countdown has started.¹⁶

The Russian ultimatum met with criticism from Western leaders. President Clinton declared:

Russia will pay a heavy price for those actions, with each passing day sinking more deeply into a morass that will intensify extremism and diminish its own standing in the world.¹⁷

In a comment that was probably intended for domestic consumption prior to the parliamentary elections on 19 December 1999 President Yeltsin warned his American counterpart against criticising Russia's actions, saying:

Clinton permitted himself to put pressure on Russia. It seems...he has forgotten Russia has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons.¹⁸

Putin played down the remarks saying he believed Clinton's comments were motivated by genuine concern for Russia and a lack of accurate information on the true situation in Chechnya.

Moscow did subsequently qualify its ultimatum, saying it was aimed only at "bandits" and not the civilian population. Two corridors out of Grozny were established: one to the north-west to the village of Pervomaiskaya and one to the south to the village of Alkhan-Yurt. Some civilians were able to escape, but as many as 20,000 were either unwilling or unable to leave.

By mid-December fighting was reported in the eastern and northern sectors of Grozny, and Russian commanders declared the city would fall within days. Such forecasts appeared misplaced, however, particularly after reports from Western journalists that a Russian armoured column had been ambushed on 15 December near the centre of Grozny. In an apparent repeat of events in 1995, eyewitness accounts and military sources suggested around

¹⁶ BBC News web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk> , 6 December 1999

¹⁷ BBC News web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk> , 7 December 1999

¹⁸ *Reuters*, 9 December 1999

100 soldiers had died and numerous armoured vehicles had been destroyed. The Kremlin played down the incident, perhaps fearful that reports of large-scale casualties might undermine support for the government prior to the parliamentary elections of 19 December.

The main ground assault on the city began on 25 December, but soon became bogged down in the face of determined resistance. The casualty rate among Russian forces rose significantly and, despite a series of incursions by Russian combat groups, control of the central districts remained in rebel hands. By early January the assault had lost momentum. A lull in fighting ensued as the Russians regrouped, apparently in preparation for a fresh offensive. The Russian high command declared the pause was to mark the Russian Orthodox Christmas and the end of Ramadan.

The surprise resignation of President Boris Yeltsin on 31 December 1999 had little immediate effect on the prosecution of the conflict. The new acting president, Vladimir Putin, who has played a leading role in the operation from the start, travelled to Chechnya on New Year's Day. He announced that the offensive would continue as planned, but refused to give a date by which he expected it to be concluded. During an address to troops he declared the operation was not only aimed at eliminating the terrorist threat, but also restoring the territorial integrity of Russia:

I want you to know that Russia values highly what you are doing, and what you are doing is very necessary for the country, very necessary. We are not talking simply about restoring the honour and dignity of the country. No, we are talking about far more serious matters. We are talking about putting an end to the disintegration of Russia.¹⁹

The long delay in securing control of Grozny represented the first major reverse for Russian forces since the conflict began. It prompted a reshuffle of two of the senior military commanders, General Gennady Troshev and General Vladimir Shamonov, head of the western and eastern region respectively. Some commentators interpreted the reshuffle as an admission of failure, although the Ministry of Defence insisted the two generals were retaining their roles as "strategic leaders" of the operation, while passing tactical control to their deputies.²⁰

D. The Chechen Counter-Offensive

A short rebel counter-offensive began on 9 January 2000. Fighting was reported in several areas behind Russian lines after rebels infiltrated around Argun, Gudermes and Shali. In a repeat of the tactics that had proved so successful during the first conflict, Chechen fighters were able to strike and withdraw before the Russians could respond effectively.

¹⁹ *Russian Public TV from BBC Monitoring*, 1 January 2000

²⁰ *Financial Times*, 11 January 2000

The counter-attacks demonstrated the fragile nature of Russian control behind the front-line. The poorly trained conscript units and interior ministry forces charged with securing the rear have shown little appetite for patrolling after dark and during bad weather, allowing Chechen fighters to infiltrate with relative impunity.

As during the first conflict, the line between civilian and combatant has become blurred as Chechen militia members rotate in and out of the front line. To address the problem of distinguishing civilians from rebels and to prevent further incursions, the Russian leadership announced a change in tactics, declaring that all Chechen males between the ages of 10 and 60 were to be detained and checked for possible links to the fighters.²¹

Allegations have been made of widespread human rights violations by Russian forces. Reports claim civilians were massacred in the village of Samashki in revenge for the heavy casualties suffered there by Russian units during the first conflict. The international human rights group, Human Rights Watch (HRW), says Russian troops have looted Chechen homes and summarily executed numerous civilians in the village of Alkhan-Yurt to the south-west of the capital.²² HRW also alleges that people attempting to flee the war zone have been subjected to extortion, beatings, and threats by Russian units.²³

E. The Fall of Grozny

During January 2000 the failure of the bombardment to dislodge the rebels from Grozny led to fierce street fighting, as federal units, assisted by pro-Moscow militia fighters, mounted an infantry assault to capture the city district by district. Efforts to secure control of the central districts were repeatedly frustrated by sniper fire from the rebels, who were reportedly making use of the city's extensive sewer and bunker system. In some instances, Russian forces were driven back from freshly captured territory by Chechen counterattacks.

On 1 February rebel forces announced a withdrawal from the centre of Grozny, a move that had been anticipated for several weeks. The Chechen leadership acknowledged early on in the conflict that it lacked sufficient forces to hold the city indefinitely. Instead, its declared plan has been to resist the Russian advance for as long as possible, before withdrawing to the southern mountains, from where its fighters would continue a guerrilla campaign against federal forces.

Chechen claims that the bulk of the approximately 2,000 strong rebel force had succeeded in breaking out of the Russian encirclement prompted angry rebuttals from Russian officials, who said that 586 rebel fighters had been killed during the withdrawal. Although such claims are probably overstated, reports from Grozny suggest the Chechens suffered heavy casualties and lost several senior commanders. The Russian defence minister, Igor Sergeyev, declared

²¹ *Washington Post online*, 11 January 2000

²² *HRW Press Release*, 11 December 1999, from <http://www.hrw.org/press/1999/dec/chech1211.htm>

²³ *HRW Press Release*, 14 December 1999, from <http://www.hrw.org/press/1999/dec/chech1214.htm>

on 2 February that the operation was proceeding “brilliantly” as Russian forces advanced into the central districts of the city.²⁴

The rebels believe their aim of inflicting heavy casualties on federal units and stalling the Russian assault on Grozny has been achieved. Fatalities among Russian forces rose sharply during January 2000 and the slow progress in taking Grozny forced Moscow to suspend its secondary offensive against rebel supply routes in the Argun and Vedeno gorges. Senior Russian officials said on 25 January that 1,173 troops had died since the operation began in September 1999.²⁵ The experience of the first conflict, however, when official sources consistently understated Russian losses, has led commentators to believe the true figure could be much higher, perhaps as many as 3,000.²⁶

Reports suggest there have been heavy civilian casualties, although accurate figures are difficult to establish. During the battle for Grozny, an estimated 20,000 civilians remained inside the city with few basic amenities, and food and medical equipment in short supply. The number of people displaced by the fighting has also swelled. Around 10,000 people were reported to have crossed into Ingushetia during mid-January, bringing the total to between 150,000 and 180,000.²⁷ Poor conditions in the refugee camps have prompted warnings from the UNHCR of the threat of disease, particularly tuberculosis.

What impact the capture of Grozny will have on the decision-making process in Moscow remains to be seen, particularly given the presidential elections now due on 26 March 2000. During January reports of rebel incursions and rising federal casualties had fuelled concern in Russia that the operation was degenerating into a repeat of the first conflict. The previously strong media support for the operation began to waver amid allegations of censorship by the military authorities. Nonetheless, Russian opinion polls, although an unreliable guide, seem to indicate that public approval of the operation is holding steady.²⁸ Acting President Putin has restated his intention to prosecute what the Kremlin terms an “anti-terrorist operation” and refuses to impose a firm deadline on when it will be completed.

²⁴ BBC News web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk> , 2 February 2000

²⁵ There are reported to be around 93,000 Russian troops in Chechnya facing a rebel force of up to 11,000, *Reuters*, 28 January 2000

²⁶ The Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* estimated that, by early January 2000, Russian forces had lost 1,300 dead, 300 missing and 5,000 injured. The Association of Soldiers’ Mothers claimed on 25 January there had been at least 3,000 Russian fatalities, Centre TV from *BBC Monitoring*, 15 January 2000 and BBC News web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk> , 26 January 2000

²⁷ *North Caucasus Update*, 21 January 2000 from UNHCR web site at <http://www.unhcr.ch/>

²⁸ One poll conducted on 21 January showed 69 per cent in favour of continuing the offensive in Chechnya, unchanged from the week before, Russia TV from *BBC Monitoring*, 30 January 2000. Another poll claimed 56 per cent expect the country’s next president to end the conflict, NTV International from *BBC Monitoring*, 30 January 2000

IV International Reaction

International reaction to the conflict has been varied. Although most states broadly accept the objectives of the Russian operation, namely combating terrorism and preserving Russia's territorial integrity, some, particularly in the West, have expressed concern over the methods used. Other states, such as China, have declared their unreserved support for the action, believing the conflict to be an internal Russian matter.

During a visit to Moscow in late January 2000 the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, said:

We are all against terrorists, and terrorists should be rooted out. However the force we use against them must be proportional and be focused on the terrorists we are trying to get rid of. We should be very careful to avoid situations where violence is visited on innocent civilians, because such situations often risk violating international humanitarian law.²⁹

The United States and other Western governments have adopted a similar line. In a joint statement of 17 December 1999 the EU and US declared:

We recognize Russia's right to uphold its territorial integrity and to defend its citizens from terrorism and lawlessness, and we condemn terrorism in all its manifestations. But we believe that Russia's military tactics in Chechnya are undermining its objectives, creating a humanitarian crisis, endangering innocent civilians, and jeopardizing stability throughout the Caucasus region. A military solution to the conflict is not possible. We call for an immediate and lasting cease-fire throughout Chechnya and a political dialogue that can lead to a durable solution to the crisis.³⁰

At the Helsinki European Council in early December the EU agreed to impose a limited range of sanctions on Russia, including a suspension of the TACIS programme of financial and technical assistance and the diversion of some of the funds to humanitarian assistance. The Member States also decided to pursue Russia for breaches of its partnership and co-operation agreement with the EU and to suspend economic dialogue and consideration of further trade concessions.

The effect of the Russian operation on the civilian population of Chechnya has caused particular concern in the Council of Europe, of which Russia has been a full member since 1996. Despite condemnation of Moscow's actions, the Parliamentary Assembly on 27 January 2000 decided by 83 votes to 71 against suspending Russia's membership. The Assembly will review the situation in April if the following recommendations are not adhered to:

²⁹ BBC News web site at <http://news.bbc.co.uk> , 28 January 2000

³⁰ *US-EU Summit Statement*, 17 December 1999

The parliamentarians called on Russia to stop immediately indiscriminate and disproportionate military action, including use of young conscripts, and to start a political dialogue with the elected Chechen authorities. They urged it to cease attacks against civilians and respect the civilians' rights, allow those wishing to leave Chechnya to do so in full security and dignity, and refrain from any forced repatriations. Russia was asked to allow for the unhindered delivery of international humanitarian assistance and operation of humanitarian organisations, to ensure free access by the media to the region and its independent operation, and to initiate a regional dialogue on the peaceful solution of the conflict.³¹

Moscow argues it is pursuing an anti-terrorist operation and rejects what it believes to be interference in its own internal affairs. It has also blocked the UN Security Council from pursuing any formal discussion or action on Chechnya.³² China, perhaps mindful of its own minority issues, has declared its support for the Russian position. During a meeting with Yeltsin on 9 December President Jiang Zemin said he fully understood the reasons for the offensive. However, some international legal experts have questioned the general international acceptance that Moscow's use of force in Chechnya is legitimate to restore the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.³³

A. The Response in the United Kingdom

The British government's position on the conflict was outlined by the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, on 7 December:

Britain understands that Russia has legitimate concerns about terrorism and violent crime in Chechnya, but we cannot understand how Russia imagines that it can root out terrorism by attacking a whole population.³⁴

He went on to say:

If one wants to defeat terrorism, one has to isolate the terrorists. My anxiety is that the current behaviour of the Russian military in Chechnya is likely to create a radicalised younger generation who may well be more readily recruited as terrorists.³⁵

On 13 December 1999 Prime Minister Tony Blair declared the West had a strong interest in Russia's continued pursuit of democratic reform, but warned the events in Chechnya could not be ignored:

Our relationship with Russia is a vital one, above all for the security and stability of our continent. We want Russia to continue on the path to democracy, the market

³¹ Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly press release, 27 January 2000

³² HC Deb 17 January 2000, c326-327w

³³ See for example Marc Weller, "West paved the way for Chechen war", *The Times*, 24 November 1999

³⁴ HC Deb 7 December 1999, c695

³⁵ HC Deb 7 December 1999, c697

economy and the rule of law, and will continue to support the transition process. But business as usual is not possible while human rights are being comprehensively abused in a corner of the Russian Federation.³⁶

The leader of the opposition, William Hague, concurred with the Prime Minister on the gravity of the situation in Chechnya and declared the Opposition's support for the measures imposed on Russia by the EU. He added:

Russia's actions have been brutal, but it is in everyone's interests that we do not unwittingly destabilise the Russian economy or the progress of democracy in that country.³⁷

The leader of the Liberal Democrats, Charles Kennedy, welcomed the steps taken by the EU against Russia, which he said was "behaving in such an outrageous fashion over humanitarian issues."³⁸ The Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman, Menzies Campbell, had earlier asked the Government to "consider all possible, political, diplomatic and economic responses" if Russia continued its "brutal treatment of innocent civilians in Chechnya."³⁹

The question of the nature of the conflict is important, since Russia is a party to the Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions. The provisions of this are less stringent than those of the Conventions proper and Additional Protocol I, which relate to international armed conflicts, but they do set out some basic humanitarian norms, which must be observed. It applies in cases other than international conflicts where a state is in conflict on its own territory with an organised armed force under responsible command, which is in control of sufficient territory as to be able to carry out sustained and concerted military operations and to implement the Protocol itself. It is therefore significant whether the conflict is regarded as a civil war or as an anti-terrorist operation.

The United Kingdom has provided assistance to the humanitarian relief effort in the region. The Secretary of State for International Development, Clare Short, declared on 24 January:

Since 1 December 1999, DFID has contributed \$145,000 (£893,000) to the UN Inter Agency Appeal for internally displaced people in the North Caucasus. The contribution was split between the World Food Programme (\$1,000,000), the United Nations Children's Fund (\$250,000), the World Health Organisation (\$100,000) and the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (\$100,000). In November, DFID contributed £500,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) appeal for the North Caucasus; ICRC work in the region is ongoing. The UK has also contributed through our share of the 1.2 million euro pledged by the EU.

³⁶ HC Deb 13 December 1999, c22-23

³⁷ HC Deb 13 December 1999, c23

³⁸ HC Deb 13 December 1999, c27

³⁹ HC Deb 7 December 1999, c697

V Possible Future Developments in the Conflict

The conflict is now entering a new phase, following the rebel withdrawal from the centre of Grozny. The announcement on 2 February that a further 3,500 Russian paratroopers are to be sent to Chechnya appears to indicate that Moscow intends to continue, or even intensify, the campaign in search of a comprehensive military victory. There are reasons to believe that such an aim may prove elusive. The rebels, who number around 7,000, have threatened to repeat the guerrilla campaign of the first conflict by carrying out hit-and-run raids against Russian forces aimed at sapping morale and turning public opinion against the operation. Certain elements have also threatened to carry out terrorist attacks

Even if Russian forces succeed in occupying much of the republic, they are unlikely to be capable of eliminating the highly mobile rebels. The rugged terrain and extensive forests in the south make ideal guerrilla territory and inhibit the effective use of the superior federal firepower. Russia's control over the territory it has captured thus far remains tenuous, even with a major security presence behind the front line. The poorly trained Russian conscript units in the rear areas have shown little inclination to carry out the continuous patrolling required to prevent further rebel incursions.

Despite reports of heavy Chechen casualties during the withdrawal from Grozny, the rebels have proven themselves to be well organised. They also enjoy significant financial and logistical backing. Funds are reportedly obtained from Chechen business, both legal and illegal, and through donations from Islamist charities and groups abroad, some of which are believed to have links to Osama bin Laden. Arms and equipment are secured from a variety of sources including black-market sales by Russian troops. Supplies are also believed to be entering the republic across the relatively porous Azeri and Georgian frontiers, despite assurances from Baku and Tbilisi to the contrary. Russian paratroopers control around one quarter of the Chechen-Georgian border, but the high mountainous frontier region may prove impossible to secure totally, particularly during the winter months.

Some commentators warn the conflict could spill over into Azerbaijan and Georgia if Russian forces engage in hot pursuit of rebel fighters across the border. There is some concern that Russia may attempt to use the crisis to destabilise the governments of the two states, in a bid to re-assert its influence, particularly given the attempts by Tbilisi and Baku to forge a closer relationship with the EU and NATO.

Others believe the operation in Chechnya will continue to absorb Russia for the foreseeable future. If Moscow intends to retain control of Chechnya in the longer term, it will need to maintain a significant garrison capable of mounting counter-insurgency operations. Such a presence could prove to be a considerable drain on Russia's finances and delay much-needed military reform and modernisation. The financial cost of the conflict has already escalated sharply, although some of the potential expense has been offset by the use of Soviet-era ordnance stockpiles. Mikhail Kasyanov, the Russian first deputy prime minister, said on 24 January that during 1999 the conflict had cost a total of 5 billion roubles (£106 million), compared with the initial forecast of 3.5 billion roubles.

Furthermore, the conflict is placing proportionally greater demands on the armed forces than the 1994-1996 conflict or the invasion of Afghanistan. The current deployment of over 90,000 troops represents 36 per cent of the total armed forces compared with 50,000 in Afghanistan (2.5 per cent of total forces) and 35,000 during the first Chechen conflict (7 per cent).⁴⁰

An added factor in the equation is the forthcoming presidential election scheduled for 26 March 2000. Vladimir Putin has so far benefited from his prominent role in the conflict and he has risen within six months from a virtual unknown to acting president. He is now the clear favourite to win the election. Public support for both Putin and the operation remains strong, but could be undermined by rising Russian casualties, further bomb attacks on Russian civilian targets, or a repeat of the Budennovsk hostage raid of 1995.

It is possible, therefore, that considerations of cost, morale and public opinion may compel the Russian leadership to reconsider the military offensive. One option might be to withdraw to a more manageable 'security zone' north of the Terek, although there could be difficulties in sustaining this over time.

Some analysts believe the Kremlin intends to pursue a negotiated settlement, notwithstanding the fact that halting the operation would meet with resistance from elements within the military. When Kremlin officials first raised the possibility of a negotiated settlement in late October, several leading generals threatened to resign, warning that civil war might ensue. However rhetorical these threats, a clear victory in the election could boost Putin's authority and enable him, if he wished, to override or defuse such opposition.

Contact between Putin and Maskhadov was established in November 1999, although they failed to agree on a basis for the start of negotiations, primarily due to Moscow's insistence that Maskhadov sever his ties with Basaev and Khatab. Furthermore, question marks remain over the degree of fragmentation within the Chechen leadership, following reports that Maskhadov's political authority had declined significantly. While the conflict continues, a challenge to his position appears unlikely, but a move towards negotiations with Moscow could provoke a split with some of the more militant field commanders.

Alternatively, the Kremlin may try to isolate Maskhadov by securing a peace settlement with other Chechen political figures capable of gaining the support of at least some sections of the Chechen population. The former mayor of Grozny, Bislan Gantemirov, would be unlikely to command sufficient popular backing, due to the close co-operation between his militia and the Russian military. A more credible option is Chechen mufti Akhmed-hadhi Kadyrov, whose outspoken criticism of *Wahhabi* influence has increased his standing among many Chechens. Putin has said he considers Kadyrov to be "as good a negotiating partner as any

⁴⁰ These figures refer to initial invasion forces within one month of the start of the campaign. "The Russian Army in Chechnya", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1999, p.9

other”, while conceding that Kadyrov “is by no means pro-Russian”.⁴¹ Businessman Malik Saidullaev, on the other hand, may face opposition from the Russian military due to his allegations of federal involvement in the massacre of 40 Chechen civilians in Alkhan-Yurt in early December.

As of early February 2000, however, there are few signs of an imminent end to the conflict and several commentators have predicted that the North Caucasus region will remain unstable for many years to come.

⁴¹ *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, 7 January 2000

Appendix II

Reproduced with permission of Military Survey, Defence Agency

