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Russian soldiers returning from the Grozny front

Civilians fleeing Grozny are reporting a merciless Russian artillery bombardment of the city, despite US warnings that Russia is failing to observe international human rights standards in the Chechen conflict.



Reports speak of shells falling on the roads which are supposed to guarantee safe passage out of the city for civilians.

The Russian military said warplanes and artillery had pounded rebel sites in the suburbs of the capital Grozny and had struck at two bases in the south of Chechnya.

Russian ground troops struggled to contain 350 rebels trying to break out of the village of Serzhen-Yurt, on the edge of the mountains in the south.

Thirty-five Chechens were killed and 10 Russian soldiers were wounded, according to Russian figures.

A Chechen rebel website reported that a Russian helicopter was shot down in the mountains.

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The Kavkaz-Tsentr news agency website said 100 "Russian mercenaries" were killed during a battle to prevent Russian reinforcements reaching the area, while six rebel fighters died in the engagement.

US criticism

US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott criticised Russian military tactics after talks with Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov in Moscow.

"We want very much to see Russia deal with what is a global problem ... of extremism and terrorism, but to see that Russia deals with that problem in a fashion that meets international norms.

"And the feeling is that this standard has not been met, particularly more recently," Mr Talbott said.

"Clearly, there are many people in Chechnya who don't want to see their territory used as a base for operations against Russia.

"But they also don't want to see themselves treated as terrorists and enemies, not to mention victims of indiscriminate killing and driving people from their homes," he said.

Three weeks

However, the Russian commander in Chechnya, Colonel-General Viktor Kazantsev, predicted military



A civilian looks at the body of a Russian soldier in Grozny



Russian guns are in position in mountains south of Grozny

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victory in the south within three weeks.

"Within a mere two weeks, three at most, we are planning to establish full control of the mountain areas of Chechnya," he said.

Interfax quoted the head of a pro-Moscow Chechen militia, former mayor Bislan Gantamirov, as saying Grozny itself would be taken in seven days.

He also said that 1,500 of his soldiers had entered Grozny accompanied by Russian forces, a claim which cannot be independently verified.

However, Turpal Atgeriyev, Chechnya's State Security Minister, has told Chechen television that fighters had enough ammunition and food to hold out in Grozny for three months.

And Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov has denied reports that he has ordered fighters to abandon Grozny and retreat to the mountains.



Chechen fighters can hold out for three months, says security minister

The units defending Grozny "are doing their job", he said, according to Interfax news agency.

"There is a clear-cut defence plan and every commander has a written order specifying the details."

Massacre

Russian Defence Ministry sources say that chief of staff General Anatoly Kvashnin has ordered a probe into reports that Russian soldiers had killed 41 villagers in Alkhan-Yurt at the beginning of December.

Moscow's main civilian envoy to Chechnya, Nikolai Koshman, said the reports were not true.

He said residents of Alkhan-Yurt had told troops there were no rebels in the village. But when the soldiers moved in they were met with grenades and gunfire.

UN probe

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has sent expatriate staff to Ingushetia to look into reports that Russian authorities may be forcing some civilians to return to Chechnya.

The UN experts are interviewing some of the 250,000 displaced Chechens who have fled to Ingushetia to determine whether some people had been forced back to areas of the breakaway region under Russian control, according to the spokesman.



Refugees queue for food in a camp at Karabulak

There were reports that some refugees had had food ration cards withdrawn to pressure them to go.

But on Thursday Russian authorities temporarily suspended an order denying food to refugees who failed to return to northern Chechen territories "liberated" by federal forces.

"People in Sputnik camp are being denied food. People from the towns of Sernovodsk, Achkhei-Martan, Assinovskaya and Samashki were last week threatened that if they don't return they will be denied food, and for the last two days have been denied food," one refugee said on Wednesday.

"We spoke to people we interviewed yesterday (Wednesday) and they told us today that they (Russian authorities) rescinded the order, and that they will receive food," said Peter Bouckaert, a spokesman for the New York-based Human Rights Watch group.

According to United Nations officials, who have provided food to the refugee camps, there is no food shortage.



Some families have been returning to Chechnya - but are they going voluntarily?



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In sharp contrast to Russia's first war in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996, Moscow appears to be pursuing its current campaign against the rebels on its own, so far successful, terms. But despite assertions by Russian military officials that the war is all but over, the rebels remain defiant and have been claiming some considerable victories.



Russian soldiers return from the front-line on the outskirts of Grozny atop an APC. Russia has repeatedly said that it will not try to take the city with an all-out ground assault.



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Chechen rebels resting from battle. They are believed to be highly organised and well armed - their weapons stolen from dead or captured Russian soldiers.



For most Russian soldiers the current campaign has been war at a distance. In an attempt to avoid the massive casualties of its last war in the region, Moscow has tried to shell Chechnya into submission.



Russian soldiers load artillery shells with the names of the Chechen commanders they are targeting scrawled on the barrels.



It is widely believed that this Chechen war will not truly be engaged until Russia tries to take Grozny with ground troops. Any major assault is expected to lead to large numbers of casualties on both sides.

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