

Mere days before the world was to once again acknowledge the anniversary of terrorist attacks on the United States, fears of terrorism were renewed in Russia as Chechnya once again moved to the forefront of international attention. Four separate terror attacks in recent weeks, apparently carried out by Chechen separatist rebels, have resulted in the deaths of over 400 people in Russia.

On August 24th, five days before scheduled presidential elections, two virtually simultaneous plane crashes in Russia resulted in the deaths of 90 civilians, and were later blamed on Chechen terrorists. On August 31st, two days after Alu Alkhanov was elected president of Chechnya, a suicide bomber killed 10 people in an attack on a subway station in Moscow. Between September 1st and 3rd, about 30 guerillas seized a school in the southern town of Beslan (near Chechnya), and held 1,181 children, parents, and teachers hostage. When the hostages attempted to flee, 339 were killed and 727 were wounded by either bomb detonations or by gunfire. Thirty-one of the hostage takers were also killed.

Chechnya is a Russian province in the North Caucasus region bordering on Georgia, whose people have claimed autonomy since the early 20th century. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Chechnya's relationship with the Russian Federation has descended into a state of extreme volatility that has produced outbursts of violence and military confrontations in the region.

Along with 14 other jurisdictions in 1991, Chechnya held presidential elections, voting in Dzhokhar Dudayev as president.

Dudayev, who was killed by a Russian rocket four years later, attempted to assert Chechnya's independence; however, Russian President Boris Yeltsin refused to recognize the oil-rich region as an autonomous state and sent troops to retain and control the area, only to withdraw after being confronted by armed Chechen militants. In 1994, the Russian army invaded Chechnya and began occupying the city of Grozny. By the next year, Russia had 45,000 troops stationed in Chechnya and the surrounding area.

In recent years, rebels have turned to terrorism in attempts to garner support for their cause, including the seizure of a theatre in Moscow in late 2002, demanding that the Russian government end the war in Chechnya. All the attackers and over 100 hostages were killed in the resulting stand-off. Bombings and military attacks have continued to ravage the region, prompting Russian officials to fear the spread of insurgency to the surrounding North Caucasus region. It has been estimated that the Chechen conflict has claimed the lives of between 100,000 and 238,000 people in the last ten years alone.

Positive steps were taken earlier in 2003 in moving towards peace in the region. Citizens voted on a referendum that would create a new regional constitution, recognizing Chechnya as a separatist republic within the Russian Federation. This change, however, would mean the citizenry would have to abandon aspirations for complete independence from Russia. Attitudes turned sour once again when last September's presidential elections resulted in the installation of Akhmad Kadyrov (a

candidate heavily endorsed by Moscow) as president, amidst questionable electoral conduct. Kadyrov was later killed in a bombing during a ceremony at a packed soccer stadium in May 2004 that also killed 24 civilians and injured another 46. Shamil Basayev, a Chechen separatist leader, allegedly orchestrated the attack.

In response to these recent attacks, the Kremlin has made strong statements condemning the actions of Britain and the US in granting asylum to Chechen rebels and suggested that striking terrorist bases beyond their borders pre-emptively was certainly a consideration. "As for carrying out preventative strikes against terrorist bases" asserted Colonel-General Yuri Baluyevsky, "...we will take all measures to liquidate terrorist bases in any region of the world." Baluyevsky made these comments after meeting with General James Jones, the NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

This is not the first time Russia has claimed the right to strike pre-emptively outside its borders. It threatened neighboring Georgia that it would seek out the Chechen rebels that the country allegedly harbors, and earlier this year two Russian agents were convicted for a Qatar car bombing that killed a Chechen rebel leader.

Already at odds with the Bush administration's similar policy on pre-emptive strikes, the European Union reacted cautiously to Baluyevsky's comments. EU spokeswoman Emma Udwin questioned whether the Colonel-General's statements accurately reflected the actual policies of the Russian government stating, "We have not heard anything similar

from President [Vladimir] Putin himself."

Putin did however respond to journalists who questioned his government's dealings with the terrorist attacks and the Kremlin's ensuing actions. In apparent regard to what Russia sees as the double standard in dealing with terrorists, mostly on the part of Europe and the United States, he commented "Why don't you meet Osama bin Laden, invite him to Brussels or to the White House and engage in talks," he demanded. "No one has a moral right to tell us to talk to child-killers." Putin followed suit this past weekend by firing minister Kazbeck Dzantiev and the Federal Security Service's Valery Andreyev. The regional President of North Ossetia Alexander Dzasokhov also fired his entire government, and has promised to step down himself if he fails to resolve the issue and find those responsible. Russia's Federal Security Service, the progeny of the Soviet-era KGB, has offered 300 million Russian Rubles (approx. \$13.3 million CAD) for information that could help neutralize Chechen rebel leaders Shamil Basayev and Aslan Maskhadov.

Meanwhile anger and grief continues to fester in Beslan and surrounding regions as the citizens begin to bury their dead. As of yet 210 bodies have been identified and forensic workers continue to do an emotionally taxing job of locating and identifying the remains of at least 160 others.