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END NOTE

CHECHNYA: DISSECTING THE 'ANTITERRORIST CAMPAIGN.'

By Taras Kuzio

On 28 August, Federal Security Service (FSB) director Nikolai Patrushev transferred overall command of the "antiterrorist operation" in Chechnya to the Interior Ministry (MVD). The reason, Patrushev said, was because the situation had considerably improved. The "counterterrorism operation" was renamed the "operation to protect law and constitutional order." This move to reclassify the Chechen conflict follows four other steps undertaken by President Vladimir Putin to present an appearance of "normalization" of the Chechen crisis.

Firstly, the Moscow-backed referendum on a new Chechen constitution in March which, as in Soviet tradition, obtained an 80 percent endorsement with a suspiciously high 96 percent turnout.

Secondly, presidential elections in Chechnya in October followed by parliamentary elections in December across Russia. The new Chechen parliament is to be bicameral with 21 deputies in the higher Council of the Republic and 40 deputies in the lower People's Assembly.

Thirdly, there have been persistent complaints domestically and internationally of Russian "death squads" at work inside Chechnya. Chechen administration head Akhmed-hadji Kadyrov has written to senior Russian security force officers requesting that an intergovernmental commission be established to investigate nightly abductions of Chechens. In the first half of this year alone, 267 Chechens were abducted. The Chechen branch of Unified Russia, Putin's "party of power," denied the existence of the "death squads."

To appease such complaints, the North Caucasus Military District Court in Rostov-on-Don gave a 10 year sentence in July to Colonel Yurii Budanov, who was convicted of raping and murdering an 18-year-old Chechen woman in March 2000.

On the other hand, the renamed "operation to protect law and constitutional order" is highly surprising. Continued activities by Chechen militants inside Chechnya, the neighboring republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia, and in Moscow, belie the official view that the antiterrorist operation is over. In August, 50 Russian soldiers died in a truck bomb in Mozdok in North Ossetia. Nine more soldiers

were killed by a bomb in Grozny that same month and, in May, 17 soldiers were killed in a suicide bombing.

Female suicide bombers are a new and potentially more dangerous aspect of the conflict. These women have been described as "black widows" because they have lost male members of their families to Russian "counterterrorist operations." In Moscow in July, an FSB officer was killed attempting to defuse a bomb carried initially by a female Chechen suicide bomber. Another two suicide bombers killed 15 people at a rock concert that same month. In October 2002, 129 hostages and 41 Chechen militants died in a theatre siege in Moscow.

The recognition by the West that the Chechen militants are "terrorists" has been a central aim of Putin's after he allied with the U.S. after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. A secondary aim for Putin was to convince the West that the Chechens were linked to Islamic terrorist groups.

On both counts Putin can be satisfied. In June, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said that during the short-lived war in Iraq "some of the people who were still offering resistance were extremists from Chechnya." Similar unsubstantiated claims were made in 2002 about Chechens allegedly fighting on the Taliban side in Afghanistan.

Professor Peter Reddaway of the London School of Economics wrote to "The Guardian" on 30 June challenging Blair to produce evidence for his claim for which "there is no known public evidence." In fact, Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov supported the U.S.-led coalition's intervention into Iraq. As Reddaway pointed out, Blair did not bring up the Chechen situation during Putin's state visit to the U.K. in late June. Later that same month, Chechnya was also not on the agenda at the EU-Russia summit in St. Petersburg.

The U.S., EU, Canada, Australia, and Central European states did back the draft 2003 UN human rights commission resolution critical of the situation in Chechnya. Meanwhile, CIS states, Ukraine included, opposed it by supporting Russian objections. The UN resolution eventually failed.

In February, the U.S. State Department added three Chechen groups to the federal list of terrorist groups. This is the first occasion when the U.S. has labeled Chechen groups as "terrorist." State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said that the three designated Chechen groups had "training and money links" to the Al-Qaeda terrorist network.

A U.S. State Department press release later explained that the U.S. does not "consider all Chechen fighters to be terrorists." Maskhadov is not on the list of Chechen "terrorists" as he has never supported the use of violence for political ends against civilians, unlike Shamil Basaev whose organization was designated as "terrorist."

Another problem for the U.S. is how to define actions by Russian security forces in Chechnya. Christopher Swift, program director at the Washington-based American Committee for Peace in Chechnya and a former aide to national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, points out that many of the same kinds of actions undertaken by Basaev are also routinely undertaken by Russian forces in Chechnya. Beatings, murders, rapes, theft, and the removal of

children and teenagers by "death squads" in order to politically intimidate the remaining population are also consistent with the U.S. definition of "terrorism," Swift argues. The same argument was used by military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer in "The Moscow Times" on 7 August. He wrote that he saw little difference between the "inhumane war" fought by both sides.

The sheer scale of the numbers killed in the Chechen conflict dwarfs other more genuine "terrorist" campaigns in Western Europe, making it more difficult to qualify the conflict solely as a case of "terrorism." In Northern Ireland during the "troubles," 666 British servicemen were killed and 6,465 wounded. Three hundred Royal Ulster Constabulary officers were also murdered, bringing the total number of dead to nearly 1,000.

In Chechnya in the 1994-1996 conflict, 14,000 members of the Russian security forces are said to have died by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, far more than the official 5,500 dead and 700 missing. (This is higher than the 10-year conflict in Afghanistan where officially 13,000 Soviet soldiers died and 35,000 were wounded.) Soldiers' Mothers estimate that since the conflict resumed in 1999, over 11,000 Russian security force personnel have been killed and 30,000 wounded. This is again far higher than the official 4,572 dead and 15,549 wounded.

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