

Russian Commander: Chechen Rebels Supported by Local Population

The commander of the Combined Group of Forces in the North Caucasus, Major General Nikolai Sivak, said in an interview published in the newspaper *Krasnaya Zvezda* on May 20 that 17 servicemen have been killed in the region so far this year, which is an increase over the same period last year, Interfax reported. "Unfortunately, we were unable to reduce the losses compared to last year," he told the military newspaper. "Since the beginning of this year up to 27 April, 17 people have died; last year [2007] 15 people died during the same period." Sivak said that 32 militants had been killed since the start of 2008. "Last year the figure was about the same," he said.



Sivak said that "on the whole the situation is stable" in the Chechen Republic. "The Chechen police are contributing a lot to stabilizing the situation, and their leaders react to changes in the situation in a professional manner," he said. "The Chechen police have the situation under control and they are helping the troops. A total of 10,000 Chechen policemen serve in the Combined Forces in the North Caucasus," Sivak said.

Sivak also said that while the militants are currently facing shortages of arms and ammunition, "at the same time, unfortunately, we cannot say that the militants have completely stopped their activities" and "there is still an outflow of young people into the militants' ranks." He added: "Many of the militants we catch in the mountains are 20 years old at the most. This means that certain young lads fall victim to Wahhabi propaganda and, unfortunately, leave for the mountains."

According to Sivak, the reason this is taking place is the high level of unemployment in Chechnya—almost 60 percent of the working-age population—and low wages, which are on average only 2,500 rubles (around \$100) a month. "The second reason is that the local population either support the militant groups or remain neutral; they do not oppose them or give them up to the federal forces," Sivak said. "If it were not for this attitude amongst the people, the militant groups would have been done away with a long time ago."

"I don't want to blacken the local population wholesale, since they are helping our soldiers," Sivak told *Krasnaya Zvezda*. "The tradition of Caucasian hospitality compels local inhabitants to treat everyone who comes to their home with kindness, as a guest. But the militants skillfully use this and do not terrorize the local population, trying not to bite the hand that feeds them. And they carry out attacks on federal forces: the police, units of the Defense Ministry and Interior Ministry Internal Troops. Including on Chechens serving in the Interior Minister and in the Defense Ministry's Vostok and Zapad battalions." Sivak added that the militants are continuing to receive financing from abroad.

Kavkazky Uzel on May 20 quoted Chechnya's human rights ombudsman, Nurdi Nukhazhiev, as saying that he had received a large number of indignant telephone calls from inhabitants of the republic about Sivak's comments. Nukhazhiev said that those who called indicated that they fear that in response to Sivak's claims that the rebels are receiving support from the local population, the federal forces will take actions as a result of which civilians will suffer most of all. Nukhazhiev said Sivak's comments were an attempt to put too much responsibility for the fight against "illegal armed formations" on the civilian population. According to Kavkazky Uzel, there was no response from the Unified Group of Forces to Nukhazhiev's comments.

Kavkazky Uzel noted that with the arrival of spring—or, as the military puts it, "the appearance of greenery"—the rebel forces have noticeably increased their activities in the republic's foothills and mountainous districts, with small rebel units temporarily taking control of villages for a short time on two separate occasions in April. "We would note that the actions of the militants are on the whole targeted at staff of law-enforcement organs and many police officers, especially those working in the mountainous and sub-mountainous districts and villages, are taking precautions when traveling in cars, especially at night," the website wrote.

Kavkazky Uzel quoted an unnamed police officer in the mountainous Vedeno district as saying that the militants "periodically" set up checkpoints on roads, at which they stop cars and check documents, killing individuals who

display IDs indicating they are law-enforcement employees (Chechnya Weekly, April 10).

In March, the commander of the Interior Ministry's Internal Troops, Gen. Nikolai Rogozhkin, said that 400-500 rebel fighters were operating in the North Caucasus (Chechnya Weekly, March 27). In January, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov said "illegal armed formations" were still operating in Chechnya, but only in small numbers that did not represent a threat to peace in the republic.

An unidentified gunman fired at a policeman in the Nadterechny district settlement of Znamenskoye on May 22 but was pursued and killed, Itar-Tass reported "A policeman from the Nadterechny district police came under fire at the exit from the Argo restaurant," a republican Interior Ministry source told the news agency. "The policeman returned fire and then called in reinforcements." According to Itar-Tass, police then cordoned off the restaurant and first fired warning shots and then fired at the attacker as he tried to escape by car. As a result, the attacker's car rammed into a road barrier, and the attacker died from his injuries in the hospital without regaining consciousness.

Kavkazky Uzel reported on May 21 that the previous evening, an unknown attacker had tossed a grenade into the courtyard of the Grozny home of an official with the Chechen branch of the Federal Migration Service. No one was hurt in the incident.

Interfax reported on May 18 that three servicemen were wounded that day in a shootout with rebel fighters in Chechnya's Urus-Martan district. "At 11:20, eight kilometers from the Urus-Martan district settlement of Tangi, an armed encounter with a gang took place as Defense Ministry servicemen were conducting search operations in a forest tract," a law-enforcement source told the news agency. The source said the rebel group consisted of around 15 people and that the commander of the Defense Ministry reconnaissance group, his deputy and a contract serviceman were wounded in the battle. RIA Novosti reported that three federal servicemen and a policeman were wounded in the incident.

Also on May 18, unknown attackers fired automatic weapons on the local police force building in the Shatoi district settlement of Dai. According to a law-enforcement source, a police officer was wounded in the attack and hospitalized.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374192>

Memorial: Vostok's Crimes Must be Investigated

Kavkazky Uzel on May 19 quoted a Chechen law-enforcement source as saying that officers of the Vostok battalion, the special unit subordinated to the Russian Defense Ministry's Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) and commanded by Sulim Yamadaev, are under investigation by the military prosecutor's office and could face criminal charges. The source said those under investigation include officers who had not reported for duty in the unit for a long period, and that some of these had actually quit Vostok following the armed confrontation between some of the unit's members and members of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's bodyguard service on April 14 in the town of Gudermes. The source said that some of the Vostok members, during a conversation with Kadyrov, had told the Chechen president that they wanted to serve in Chechen police units.



"Nonetheless, it should be noted that servicemen must above all fulfill the demands of army regulations and be governed above all by the law, not their own interests," the source said. "Servicemen of the Vostok battalion serve on the basis of contracts with Russian Defense Ministry, and before they leave, they must receive corresponding permission from the military department to sever their contracts. Failure to report for duty for ten days already entails criminal liability." According to Kavkazky Uzel, the source did not indicate how many former Vostok officers had joined Chechen police units.

The website noted that after the April 14 incident, Kadyrov claimed that some 300 members of the Vostok battalion had decided to leave the unit. The website reported that at least two of the battalion's company commanders had gone over to Kadyrov who, along with Chechnya's parliament and human rights ombudsman, called for the battalion to be dissolved or, at the very least, its commander, Sulim Yamadaev, to be removed. Kadyrov announced earlier this month that Yamadaev had been removed and that his command functions were being carried out by someone else, who Kadyrov did not identify (Chechnya Weekly, May 16).

However, there has been no official confirmation from the Defense Ministry that the unit has been liquidated or that Yamadaev has been removed as its commander. Indeed, Grani.ru reported on May 19 neither the Vostok battalion been disbanded nor Yamadaev removed as its commander. The website quoted a military source as saying that a decision concerning the battalion's command would be taken as a result of a "planned" certification, not a special one, and quoted a source in the Main Military Prosecutor's Office as saying that there can be no "automatic transfer" of Vostok servicemen to Chechnya's republican police force because Defense Ministry contract servicemen must follow a special procedure to end their contracts, and any violation of that procedure is in violation of the law.

Meanwhile, the Memorial human rights group has demanded that crimes committed by members of the Vostok battalion be fully investigated. Memorial noted that while, in the wake of confrontation that took place in Gudermes on April 14 between Vostok battalion members and members of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's bodyguard, Vostok officers are being investigated for failing to report for duty for more than ten days, such a reaction by the federal authorities is inadequate given that Vostok members have been accused of far more serious crimes, including extortion, kidnapping and murder (Chechnya Weekly, April 17 and 24; May 1, 8 and 16).

"The crimes imputed to the commander of the Vostok battalion and his subordinates are by no means excesses on the part of the perpetrators, but are the result of the actions of a consciously created system," Memorial said in a statement. The group said that since the start of the "counter-terrorist" operation in Chechnya, federal forces have neither followed the law nor used legally-sanctioned force, with thousands of people in the republic disappearing as a result of the "death squad" tactics, including abductions, torture and extra-judicial killings.

"Then, in the process of 'Chechenization' of the conflict, the authority to employ similar unlawful violence was to a large degree transferred from the federal power structures to the local ones, comprised of ethnic Chechens," the Memorial statement read. It noted that the Gorets commando unit, which was subordinated to the Federal Security Service (FSB) and headed by Movladi Baisarov, who was later killed by agents of Kadyrov in Moscow, employed such illegal methods, and that once the unit was broken up, its members were absorbed into other local Chechen security structures without the unit's crimes having been investigated.

Memorial also noted members of the Chechen president's security service and the so-called Anti-Terrorist Center, another unit that was loyal to Kadyrov, were also involved in abductions and "disappearances" that were never investigated or prosecuted.

"It must not be allowed that the case of the Vostok battalion ends only with the removal of its commander and the firing of a number of his subordinates," Memorial said in its statement, adding that it will watch closely to see whether such crimes committed by Vostok battalion members are properly investigated. "We hope that the investigations of these crimes are seen through to completion, regardless of the ebb and flow of the conflict between administrative and power structures in Chechnya," the statement read. "We hope that in the course of the investigations of crimes committed by more than one person, the remaining persons will not be put in the category of 'persons not identified by the investigation' and that the investigations will bring to light all the participants in these crimes, not only the Vostok battalion's command."

The Memorial statement added that crimes committed by members of security forces acting on orders from superiors should not be qualified as the actions of a "criminal group," but that any investigation should "name and condemn the very system and practice of the activities of 'death squads' [and] the war crimes and crimes against humanity that have happened in the Chechen Republic."

Meanwhile, Kavkazky Uzel quoted Human Rights Watch researcher Tatyana Lokshina as saying that the conflict between Ramzan Kadyrov and Sulim Yamadaev is a graphic illustration of just how unstable the situation in Chechnya really is.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374193>

Zakaev Praises Kadyrov

The prime minister of the rebel Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI), Akhmed Zakaev, has praised Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov for ending "zachistki" (security sweeps) that resulted in the disappearances of Chechen civilians, as well as for having presided over Chechnya's "decolonization," Kavkazky Uzel reported on May 18. The website quoted Kadyrov as saying in an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty that the situation in Chechnya today is cardinally different from that of 2000-2003, "when the civilian population of Chechnya was subjected to cruel and severe zachistki, torture and violence."



According to Kavkazky Uzel, Zakaev said that Kadyrov played and is playing a big role in changing the situation in Chechnya. "A lot changed in the life of Ramzan Kadyrov, particularly after the murder of his father," Zakaev said. "And, unquestionably, he knows what that crime, what that murder was—who it was carried out by, on whose orders it was carried out. This person's position with respect to the Kremlin and all the remaining special units that were enabled in the liquidation of his father has made itself known." Zakaev said that his brothers-in-arms "are not fighting against Ramzan Kadyrov; they are fighting against the occupation forces," Kavkazky Uzel reported. "Aggression has been committed by Russia," Zakaev said. "But the decolonization of Chechnya is a fait accompli: Chechnya de jure and de facto absolutely did not become independent, but the very process of decolonization has already been completed. Undoubtedly, we will have to find another formula of co-existence with Russia that would answer to the interests of both Russian society and the Chechen people. Today the new [Russian] president [Dmitry Medvedev] has an extraordinary chance to formalize our relations from the position of law. Without a free Chechen Republic there will be neither stability nor democracy in Russia."

Newsru.com, citing Ekho Moskvyy radio, quoted Zakaev as saying: "We are preparing several serious documents aimed at averting clashes between the Chechen partisans and the Chechen police." According to the website, Zakaev also said that the Chechen separatist movement "will do everything possible to minimize attempts to Chechenize this conflict." Zakaev added that the Chechen resistance has become "freer" in its actions today. "If earlier they were forced to think about striking a column [of vehicles] or a target moving near a settlement, because after that strike the village would be subjected to a harsh zachistka, then today they can strike blows where they want and be sure that nothing will happen to the settlement afterwards, because there is the so-called 'Kadyrovite police', which does not allow excesses to be committed," he said.

Commenting on Zakaev's positive remarks about Kadyrov, RFE/RL's Andrei Babitsky noted that Zakaev began making such statements a year to a year and a half ago. "Kadyrov, in general, is creating his own closed, uncontrollable political system, impermeable to Russian influence under the mask of formal loyalty to the federal center," Kavkazky Uzel quoted Babitsky as saying. "In point of fact, the degree of independence of Kadyrov's Chechnya is very high, already almost approaching the degree of independence of Ichkeria. On the other hand, I think what we have here is not only a political provocation [by Zakaev aimed at heightening tensions between Kadyrov and Moscow-CW]; there is also a genuinely very serious and deep bond between these political revolutionaries of the Dudaev call-up – to which, of course, Zakaev belongs—and Kadyrov. All of them advocated Chechnya as a separate national state. And, on the whole, they have managed to achieve this to a significant degree."

Sergei Markedonov of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis expressed a similar view. "Ramzan Kadyrov is carrying out not only an independent domestic policy, but also [an independent] foreign [policy]," Kavkazky Uzel quoted him as saying. "Mr. Kadyrov is a kind of Caucasus emir not unlike the Bukhara emir in the Russian empire. We recall that this Bukhara emir was a colonel of the Tver Cossack forces [and] built splendid palaces in Zheleznovodsk. But this did not change the fact that his actions were in no way controlled by the imperial center. We see a similar situation in Chechnya."

Find this article at:

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374194>

Briefs

School Principal Murdered in Dagestan

A school principal in Dagestan was shot dead in full view of his students on May 22, RIA Novosti reported. A spokesman for the republic's Interior Ministry told the news agency that unidentified gunmen traveling in a hatchback without license plates gunned down Budun Sharaputdinov with a Kalashnikov assault rifle as he was getting out of his car in the school's car park, killing him instantly. The attackers then fled the scene. "Around 10 children witnessed the attack," the spokesman said, adding that a number of the children would require counseling. Interfax reported on May 21 that a person suspected of involvement in the murder of policemen was killed during a special operation in the village of Semender on the outskirts of Makhachkala, Dagestan's capital. A police commando was also killed and another wounded in the operation. The rebel, identified as Nabi Atagadzhiev, a resident of the village of Karamakhi, was suspected of involvement in the May 15 ambush that killed two policemen in the village of Gubden (Chechnya Weekly, May 16).

Kadyrov's Motorcade in Accident outside Moscow

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's motorcade got into a traffic accident in the Moscow suburbs on May 21, injuring two people. According to Komsomolskaya Pravda, the motorcade was traveling on the M4 "Don" federal highway toward Moscow when the driver of a ZIL truck, seeing the motorcade approaching from behind, tried to pull over to the right to get out of the motorcade's way but hit another truck that was passing and was knocked into a Nissan Murano jeep, which in turn hit a Mercedes from Kadyrov's motorcade, the rest of which proceeded onward without stopping. The driver of the ZIL was hospitalized with a fractured hip, while a two-year-old boy traveling in one of the vehicles involved in the accident received a concussion. As Newsru.com noted back in March, Kadyrov expressed concern about the number of traffic accidents in Chechnya and ordered that the rules of the road be enforced and observed, noting that many residents of the republic had complained that law-enforcement and military vehicles were themselves the cause of road accidents. Newsru.com reported that Kadyrov's own 56-vehicle motorcade travels on Chechnya's roads at speeds up to 170 kilometers per hour (around 105 miles per hour), which, as the website put it, "also increases the risk of creating emergency situations on the roads."

Find this article at:

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374195>

The North Caucasus Factor in Georgia

By Mairbek Vatchagaev

Russia has played the North Caucasus card against the Georgians once before - during the armed conflict of August-September 1992. At the time, Russia took advantage of the close ethnic ties between the Abkhaz and the Adyg (both are members of the same language subgroup within the Caucasus language family) by placing volunteer units recruited from the North Caucasus ethnicities, including the Cossacks, in the vanguard of its armed forces, which nevertheless played a very active hand in the conflict as well. The supply of military equipment, including helicopters, and air attacks on Georgian positions, were all meant to convey Russia's support as well as a warning to Georgia for attempting to escape the protective hand of its onetime Big Brother (a common name for ethnic Russians vis-à-vis all other USSR ethnicities).

The Chechen syndrome in Abkhazia is still a hot issue for Georgia, and any reports of Chechen activities in the region are treated by official Tbilisi as a cause for alarm, usually followed by frantic outreach to prominent Chechen politicians in the hope of obtaining reassurances to the contrary. In the eyes of the Abkhaz, well-known Chechen names include not only Shamil Basaev, but also Khamzat Khankarov and Ruslan Gelaev, who in Abkhazia are seen as heroes. The Georgians, in contrast, are still embroiled in arguments about the true roles of Basaev, Khankarov and Gelaev in the 1992 war. These names are also obscured by the inaccurate or deliberately false reports of some writers and reporters who rely on unsubstantiated information perpetuated by the Russian mass media. Shamil Basaev never served as Abkhazia's Minister of Defense—that position was held at the time by an ethnic Kabardinian Soviet army officer Sultan Aslanbekovich Susnaliev (conversation with Kabardino-Balkaria parliament member V. B. Makhov, www.abkhaziya.org/server-articles/article-f9fbf7589c43e1f4e1a58610e76e8498.html). The army chief of staff job was given to an ethnic Adyg, Amin Zehov, and the commander of the navy was a Dagestani Soviet navy officer, Ali Aliev. Even the Chechen troops, contrary to popular belief, were commanded by Khamzat Khankarov and not Shamil Basaev, who did not assume command until the Abkhazia conflict was almost over (which was grudgingly confirmed even by such infamous journalists as Yevgeny Krutikov, in an article published in *Izvestia* on June 4, 2001).

Emerging reports that the army units loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov have been dispatched to Georgia are yet another manifestation of the fundamental problem—that is, Russia's complete and unilateral control over who gets sent where and when. The first reports, in December 2007, were confirmed by Chechnya's Deputy Military Commissar, Said-Magomed Kakiev, who said that troops from his battalion were stationed in South Ossetia, while the Vostok battalion (which was commanded by Sulim Yamadaev) was moved to Abkhazia.

Considering that today's army, in contrast to the volunteer units of 1992, is made up of career military professionals hailing from the elite units of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of Russia's Ministry of Defense, Georgia's government has every reason to be worried that the presence of these troops will not contribute to increased stability in the areas of the conflict.

Georgia is making a strong effort to appeal to the international community, and in a much savvier manner compared to the early 1990s. Its goal today is to make the world understand the importance of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Georgia. Even its withdrawal from the CIS common air defense system treaty (which in any case became defunct shortly after its conclusion) became yet another step in Georgia's campaign to elevate its problems with Russia to the international stage. Many in the White House have never heard of the unrecognized republic of Abkhazia that put Russia and Georgia on a collision course. However, as the *Washington Post* reported (*Gazeta.ru*, May 6), the West has to start treating tensions between Russia and Georgia a lot more seriously. This matter is casting a shadow on the reputation of the West, which brought about the Rose Revolution but did little to secure Georgia's true liberation from the Russian bear's tight hold.

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza was dispatched on an urgent visit to Georgia to demonstrate America's support. The meeting with the president of the unrecognized republic of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, did not and could not produce any results because the right place to have these meetings and discussions is in Moscow—not Sukhumi—that is, with the people who have real control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

A no-holds-barred campaign against Georgia was launched in which no blow was too low. A Georgian spy was “suddenly” captured in Chechnya to everyone’s amusement—the arrest of a Chechen with a Georgian last name who allegedly had ties to the underground movement does not, charitably speaking, stand up to any scrutiny (Echko.msk.ru, interview with Georgian Minister of State Timur Yakobshvili, May 16, 2008).

On May 16, a plenary session of the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the immediate development of a timeline for the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia and restoring the ethnic mix of the unrecognized republic back to its state before the 1992 Georgia-Abkhazia conflict (Kavkaz-uzel.ru, May 15). However, this action drew the objections of Abkhazia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Shamba, who stated that any decisions adopted without input from the Abkhazian side should not even be a matter for discussion (Kavkaz-uzel.ru, May 16).

The statements made by Dieter Boden, the head of mission of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/DIHR) for election monitoring, regarding the need to recognize Abkhazia’s independence—made in the context of Kosovo independence, which is used by both the Russians and the Abkhaz as propaganda fodder to promote their respective positions (Kavkaz-uzel.ru, May 14)—generated angry reactions within Georgia’s political elite. Former President Edward Shevardnadze said that in this case, “one shouldn’t forget about the Chechen Republic that was forcibly brought into Russia. Chechens will ramp up their activities very shortly and my advice is to take advantage of this moment. Georgia’s government should use Chechens’ increased activity and ensure the return of Abkhazia” (Kommersant, May 16).

According to those who took part in the military march toward Sukhumi, former President Shevardnadze tried to play the Chechen card during his conflict with Russia. During his presidency and with his tacit consent, the Pankisi Gorge became a haven for the Chechen armed forces that, up until 2003, used this site as a base for units entering Chechnya and for transporting the wounded to neighboring countries. Shevardnadze’s term also saw an attempt to seize Abkhazia’s capital of Sukhumi in 2001, but U.S. interference put a stop to this operation when the troops were only a few miles away from Sukhumi. The storming of Sukhumi was supposed to serve as the rehabilitation of Ruslan Gelaev, who had been instrumental in pushing Georgian troops out of Sukhumi ten years before the attempted takeover.

Instead of their usual tactics of appealing to the conscience of the Russian military and waiting for the arrival of U.S. troops, Georgia should let Russia know—in no uncertain terms—that it intends to revise its relationship with the Chechen rebel fighters who were recognized by Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and his parliament. This step will certainly cool some heads in the Kremlin.

Georgia ran into some bad luck: for Russia, the loss of Kosovo has to be compensated by the triumph of diplomacy in Georgia, and Russia will do everything in its power to gain the upper hand in this conflict in order to avoid the perception that it is losing all of its battles, one after the other. This is why it is futile to hope that the Russians will give up seeking a minor military victory over a region they have controlled for the last two hundred plus years.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374196>

Georgia Threatens to Play the Rebel Card in the North Caucasus

By Andrei Smirnov

Russian-Georgian relations continued to be tense because of the situation around the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia. When additional Russian troops were deployed to Abkhazia under the pretext of increasing the number of peacekeeping troops in the region to guarantee its security, the Georgian authorities regarded this decision as Russian aggression. Trying to find a peaceful solution to the problem and calling for dialogue with the Abkhazian separatists and Russia, Georgia is trying at the same time to push the West (the European Council and the United States) to increase pressure on the Kremlin.

Despite the increasing activity of U.S. diplomacy in the South Caucasus and the visit by an American diplomat, Matthew J. Bryza, to Abkhazia, a breakthrough in settling the crisis is nowhere in sight. The Georgian authorities hoped that the visit of Georgia's State Minister for Issues of Reintegration, Temur Iakobashvili, to Moscow would initiate a serious dialogue with Moscow. It was clear, however, that Tbilisi needed leverage to force the Kremlin to look for a compromise. While Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia, the only way for the Georgians to force the Kremlin to look for a compromise is to threaten the Russian authorities with possible help to rebels in the North Caucasus. The Georgian authorities generally use the North Caucasian card as an argument of last resort in their negotiations with Russia on Abkhazia and South Ossetia (another breakaway Georgian region).

On May 8, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili declared that "if somebody wants to annex a part of Georgia, this will inevitably provoke consequences in the North Caucasus, but we don't want it" (Georgia-News, May 8). On May 14, the former Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze made a much more candid statement: "While talking about the independence of Abkhazia one should not forget about the Chechen Republic that has been incorporated into Russia by force," he said. "The Chechens will be more active in the near future and one should advise them not to waste this moment. The Georgian authorities should use the activity of the Chechens and bring Abkhazia back. The most important thing is to choose the time and it won't be difficult to bring Abkhazia back" (Regnum, May 14).

Shevardnadze made the statement two days before the visit of Iakobashvili to Moscow. It is quite possible that the Georgians believed that such threats would make the Kremlin more compliant. Russia, however, responded immediately to Shevardnadze's threat. On May 16, the same day that Iakobashvili visited Moscow, a source in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) told the media that a Georgian spy had been detained in the North Caucasus. The source said that Ramzan Turkoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen origin, had orders from Georgian security agencies to get in touch with "bandit formations in the North Caucasus" to provide them with money given by Tbilisi "in order to step up sabotage activities in the Russian territory" (Interfax, May 16). Later, on May 17, again on the condition of anonymity, the FSB declared that terrorists continued to recruit Muslim youth in the Pankisi Gorge (a Georgian area populated mostly by ethnic Chechens) and that "leaders of terrorist groups are providing bandit formations with financial help from the Georgian territory" (Itar-Tass, May 17).

The fact that all these FSB statements were made unofficially raise doubts about their credibility. Most likely, this is just a warning message from the Kremlin to Georgia not to use the Chechen card against Russia; otherwise the Russian authorities will have the right to attack the Pankisi Gorge under the pretext of conducting an anti-terrorist operation.

In reality the prospect of the union between rebels in the North Caucasus and Georgian authorities is a nightmare for the Russian security officials. They are particularly afraid of any increase in rebel activity in the areas of the North Caucasus adjacent to Abkhazia such as Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia. On May 17, General Arkady Yedelev, the commander of the Russian anti-terrorist forces in the North Caucasus, visited Nalchick, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, where he said that "today terrorists need an excursion (meaning a large-scale raid - AS) into the areas that include the territory of Kabardino-Balkaria and especially Karachaevo-Cherkessia." Yedelev laid special emphasis on Karachaevo-Cherkessia because this region is adjacent to Abkhazia and if the Caucasian rebels really have plans to help Georgia they should strike there or even more westward in Sochi, which is only 10 miles from the Abkhazian border.

During a press conference in Nalchick, Arkady Yedelev led the public to understand—in a quite emotional manner—that there are no grounds to believe there is any serious anti-Russian resistance in the North Caucasus, which the Georgians are talking about so much. “There is no increasing liberation struggle against Russian occupation in the North Caucasus,” he said. “It is nonsense. Our peoples have been living together for a thousand years and have established a unified and undivided state. There are forces who would like to see the North Caucasus burning but they will fail” (Regnum, May 17).

The disappointment of the Kremlin is understandable. In the event of rebel raids in the northwest Caucasus, Russian domination in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be immediately questioned and Georgia will have real leverage on Moscow, not the virtual leverage it has now.

Find this article at:

<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374197>