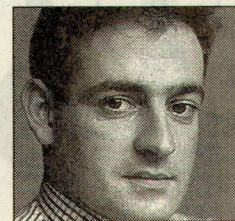


'Wish me luck', said the suicide widow waiting to kill Russians

NIGHT was falling as a Lada saloon with tinted windows lurched through the gates of a bleak, single-storey house hidden deep in the Chechen countryside. A petite young widow waited patiently in the back of the car while two rebel fighters searched the building and satisfied themselves that it was safe.



Mark Franchetti
Grozny

Dressed in a green headscarf with a tiger motif, she offered no greeting as she entered the house and sat on a bed beneath a single, naked light bulb. She fixed her gaze on the bare floor and I began to ask about the terrible events that had unfolded around her over the past four weeks.

Nobody who heard her speak, apparently without emotion, could have guessed that her husband had been shot dead, that she had watched one of his killers being tortured until his throat was cut or that a few hours earlier she had cradled and kissed her one-year-old daughter for the last time.

For "Kawa", as her minders call her, had just joined the growing band of Chechnya's "black widows", vowing to avenge her husband's death by turning herself into a human bomb.

"I have only one dream now, only one mission — to blow myself up in Russia, ideally in Moscow, and to take as many Russians as possible with me," she said in the first interview of its kind.

"I want to be sent on such a mission. I want revenge. This is the only way to stop the Russians from killing Chechens. Maybe this way they will get the message and leave us alone once and for all."

At 22, Kawa has decided that her life can have no other meaning in Chechnya, the scene of one of the world's most vicious conflicts over the past nine years.

After two wars that have left 100,000 dead, full-scale fighting between Chechen separatists and the Russian army has abated. But it has been replaced by a sporadic guerrilla war of womanish brutality in which women such as Kawa are playing an increasingly prominent role as suicide bombers.

Last October, 18 such women were among at least 40 terrorists who seized control of a

Moscow theatre at the start of a siege that ended with the deaths of 129 members of the audience and all the hostage-takers. Two other women blew themselves up last month at a rock festival near Moscow, killing 16.

Six out of seven Chechen suicide bombings in the past three months have been carried out by women. The attacks have claimed 165 lives and spread fear across Russia.

Now it is Kawa's turn. Having left her baby in the care of her mother-in-law last Thursday, she has committed herself to a rebel cell of between 20 and 30 fighters who are driven not only by their nationalism but also by their devotion to the cause of an Islamic Chechen state.

Like Kawa's late husband, they are Wahhabis — followers of the strictly orthodox Muslim doctrines that dominate Saudi Arabia — and she will spend her final weeks reading Islamic literature and praying with them during her spiritual preparation for "martyrdom".

Until then, they will guard her round the clock, even when she goes to the lavatory. She has severed all links with her family, who know nothing of her plans. All that remains is for her commander to pick her target and her time, and to teach her how to detonate the explosives that will be concealed in a belt around her slim waist.

Her hatred of the Russians dates back to 1995 when, at 14, she lost her father in a night-time raid on the family home. "A group of soldiers broke into the house," she recalled in flawless Russian. "They were drunk. They pushed the men into one room and the women and children into another."

"I heard shouts and then a few shots. I thought that they had fired into the ceiling to scare us but when we went next door my father was dead and



Target Moscow: 18 women were among the terrorists in last year's theatre siege in which 129 hostages died. Two other women bombers killed 16 at a rock festival last month

unremarkable-looking woman, barely 5ft 3in in slippers and a long blue dress cheerfully decorated with flowers, and I was not told her real name. But there was no doubting her resolve.

Asked how the mother of an infant could contemplate this, Kawa said: "Good people, relatives of my husband, will look after her."

There was no hint of sadness or fear in her voice. Her coldness was unsettling and I pressed her again. Surely her child was a reason to live? "Not without my husband," she replied. "We were very close." I did not see the face of this

my grandfather wounded. Since then I have become used to death."

Later she fell in love with Salman, who was two years older. They went to school together in Grozny, the Chechen capital, and survived some of the most intensive bombing since the second world war.

Despite the conflict, Kawa was a keen student and learned to speak good English. But prospects remained dismal by the time they married two years ago and Salman joined a small group of radical fighters.

Unlike an older generation of Chechen rebels who fought for independence in Soviet times, Salman and his young Wahhabi comrades were more fired up

by the concept of a holy war against Moscow. Kawa supported their struggle. Under her husband's influence she became more religious and dreamed of a state ruled by sharia, the sacred law of Islam. She began to wear a headscarf and buried herself in Islamic texts brought home to her by Salman.

Last month, however, he was identified as an enemy by Russian and pro-Moscow Chechen forces conducting a fierce counter-offensive against small bands of guerrillas.

He was ambushed at night and shot several times. His face was raked with machinegun fire in a vain attempt to prevent him from being identified. His

fellow fighters swore revenge. Apparently drawing on information from a mole in the special forces, they targeted a Chechen member of the team that had killed Salman. "We ambushed him and kidnapped him," said one of Salman's friends. "We took him to a safe house. There were seven of us. We placed him in front of Kawa and gave her a chance to shoot him right there and then. She turned it down."

"The man was sobbing like a baby, pleading for his life. First we shot him in one leg, then in the other. Only then did he give us the names of the other Chechens who helped kill Salman. Then we shot him in both arms and finally we slit his

throat. It was hard core but it was beautiful. Kawa watched the whole thing and we filmed the execution."

Kawa said in her eerie monotone that she had not killed the man herself because she had "other plans". "I didn't feel like it," she added.

Had she felt better when the others killed him? "No," she said. "I felt a little sorry for him but then again he deserved it. I wasn't shocked. Why should I have been? I have seen people get killed many times before."

widow waiting to kill Russians



No end in sight: Chechen troops defend an area near the presidential palace in 1995. Full-scale fighting has now been replaced by guerrilla warfare and suicide bombs

the house in person to ensure Kawa was freed for her mission. She was taken away by the rebels, leaving her baby behind.

Despite her premonitions, her mother-in-law is unaware that she will not be coming back. "I didn't say goodbye to anyone," Kawa told me matter-of-factly. Opinion is sharply divided over the rise of the "black widows" in Chechnya, where tension is expected to increase further in the run-up to elections for a new chief of the pro-Russian administration in October.

Conservative older Chechens regard the women's activities as a source of shame in a patriar-

chal society. But many young Chechens respect their strength of purpose and will. They also acknowledge that despite the recent spate of attacks, women may stand more chance of reaching a target without arousing suspicion.

The suicide operations show the deceptive nature of the relative calm that has descended on Chechnya. Sixty thousand Russians now control most of the small republic, apart from a remote mountainous area in the south where 2,000 die-hard rebels are still concentrated.

Gas and electricity have been restored to most of the inhabitants of the ruined city of Gro-

zny, which is bustling again by day. Night-time "disappearances" during Russian security sweeps occur less frequently and shoot-outs are no longer the norm. But small groups of rebel fighters like Salman's are carrying out random hit-and-run attacks, planting mines and setting booby traps along roads used by Russian army columns and Chechen special forces loyal to Moscow.

And the "black widows" are striking as frequently outside Chechnya as they are inside the republic. The Kremlin has claimed that most of the female bombers are forced to blow themselves up, that some are drugged and oth-

ers raped. "Absolutely not true," said Kawa. "In most cases the motivation is revenge and that's my motivation. It's always their decision. Nobody is forcing them."

Aishat Bakuyeva, one of the women who took part in the Moscow theatre siege, had lost four brothers before she strapped explosives to her chest. The youngest of the women was only 16. She is believed to have joined the operation to avenge another dead brother.

Not all the bombing has been prompted by personal tragedy, however. The parents of Zareta Bairakova, 26, who worked in a

Grozny market before storming the theatre, have no explanation to offer for her action.

"One afternoon last September Zareta and I were praying together," said her mother, Madina, fighting back tears. "There was a knock on the door and a woman I had never set eyes on before asked to see my daughter."

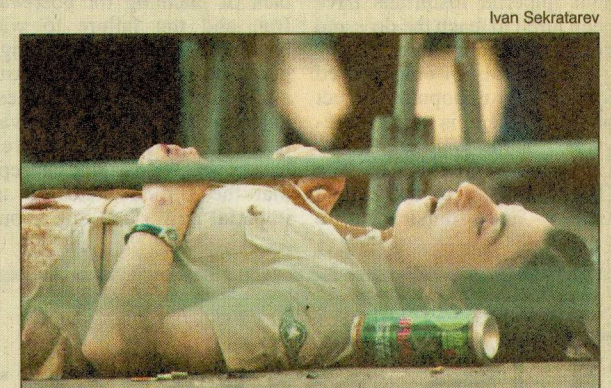
"The two of them went next door for five minutes. My daughter then returned and said she would see the woman out and be back in 10 minutes. I never saw her again."

Zareta is believed to have concealed from her family her connections with Wahhabi extremists. For some bombers, their beliefs and the horrors of war provide sufficient motivation.

As for Kawa, the final decision about her fate rests with her commander. Until his orders were finalised, she said, she would remain with his men. As her minders returned for her and she prepared to leave, her thick eyebrows arched as she smiled beneath her scarf for the first time during our meeting. "I wish you wouldn't do this, at least for your child's sake," I stammered. "What can I say?"

"Wish me good luck," she said. As she vanished into the darkness, I was lost for words.

TRAIL OF DEATH



Chechen suicide bomber killed at a Moscow festival

June 2000

Khava Barayeva, 22, a relative of Movsar Barayeva, 25, the leader of the Moscow theatre hostage takers, drives a truck packed with explosives into a Russian army base in a village six miles south of Grozny. 17 Russian soldiers die.

November 2001

Elza Gazuyeva, hiding hand grenades under her clothes, blows herself up along with the Russian military commander of Urus Martan, a Chechen town that had become a base for Wahhabis.

October 2002

At least 40 heavily armed Chechen rebels, including 18 female suicide bombers, take more than 800 people hostage at the Nord Ost theatre in the Russian capital. All the Chechens are killed by Russian commandos; 129 hostages die from suffocation and poisoning after breathing in a gas used in the rescue.

June 2003

A Chechen woman blows herself and at least 18 people up on a bus packed with Russian air force personnel near Mozdok, a Russian base close to the border with Chechnya.



July 5 2003

Two Chechen women detonate explosives in their belts at a Moscow rock concert, killing at least 16 people. It is the first suicide attack in Moscow.

July 10 2003

A Chechen woman is arrested before she can blow herself up in central Moscow. A Russian bomb disposal officer is killed.