

Ring of fire closes round Grozny

SHOUTING into an old Soviet field radio to make his orders heard above the sound of heavy artillery last week, General Gennady Troshev exuded supreme confidence. The Russian field commander of Chechnya's eastern front had been up since 5am, overseeing the latest victory by his troops over Islamic rebels.

Three weeks after taking Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city, Troshev, 52, was preparing to move into Argun, a town of strategic importance only three miles to the east of Grozny, the breakaway republic's capital.

Standing in the thick mud of a field that had been under rebel control just hours earlier, the gruff general — who once lived in Grozny — was less than a mile from the centre of Argun.

Russian fighter planes roared overhead, taking advantage of the clear weather to pound the town relentlessly. The crisp early morning air echoed with mortar fire and automatic gunfire. Helicopter gunships hovered in the sky.

Dozens of tanks and armoured personnel carriers ploughed through the morass to take up positions near a wood on the outskirts of town where troops exchanged fire with the rebels.



The voice of an officer from an advance party crackled over a radio with the co-ordinates of the enemy positions. Minutes later, young conscripts scrambled around ammunition boxes, preparing to load shells into tanks for another barrage of heavy artillery.

One of Argun's highest buildings, a grain silo already in Russian hands, was clearly visible across the woods. As operations by ground troops to take the town got under way, control of the railway freight terminal fell into Russian hands.

"The town is all but ours," Troshev declared. "Another day and we will move in to flush out the last rebel groups. Their end is near."

"In the last 24 hours I haven't lost a single man. The rebels are suffering heavy casualties. In



Mark Franchetti,
the only Western
reporter on the
Russian frontline
in Chechnya

Argun we killed some 250. Several were Arab mercenaries. The town was controlled by 1,000 rebels. Most have already left, but they are not going anywhere. We will get them. It is about time they understood who they are up against."

Three months into its campaign to crush Chechen rebels — blamed by the Kremlin for a series of bomb attacks on apartment blocks that claimed nearly 300 lives last summer — the Russian army is beginning to encounter its first serious resistance.

It took Chechnya's northern plains with ease. But as Russian forces move into the main towns, they are clashing increasingly with groups of highly experienced fighters.

It took Troshev's men two days to secure the outskirts of Argun. About 50 rebels were killed in an attempt to hold onto a derelict farm they had used as a base. Now under Russian control, it has been turned into an army camp run by paratroopers.

"It was a tough fight," said Anatoli Zaitsev, a 19-year-old tank driver. "But in the end we won."

"Chechens are sly fighters. They hide like animals in trenches so small they look like foxholes. We are coming across a lot of mines, at times even around the bodies of Russian soldiers. The Chechens are determined and fight to the bitter end. They'd rather die than give up. They are crazed fanatics."

The Russian military has dismissed reports that it had lost 50 soldiers in the battle for Argun, putting the death toll at only four. It also rejected claims that it had lost 250 at Urus Martan, a rebel stronghold where fierce fighting raged last week.

Elmira Kozhayeva



In for the kill: Chechens await their fate in Grozny as Russian tanks pound Argun, three miles away. The onslaught is led by General Troshev, who is ready to 'strangle' the capital

Yesterday the army claimed to have completed its encirclement of Grozny. The Kremlin denied any involvement on the part of its forces in the killing of 40 refugees in a convoy fleeing the capital on Friday.

However, Russian officials acknowledge that after weeks of retreat, Islamic forces have begun fortifying their positions around Grozny and Urus Martan. An indication of the battles that may lie ahead came when the Russian government belatedly reported a firefight which annihilated a Russian reconnaissance patrol.

The clash occurred when a 14-man patrol crossed into Chechnya from Dagestan. Twelve soldiers were killed and two taken prisoner after coming

under rebel fire. The reports have increased Troshev's resolve to take Grozny and to hunt down Shamil Basayev, the Chechen rebel commander whom Moscow accuses of terrorism.

"From Argun, it's all the way to Grozny and beyond," he said, pointing his finger to the west. "We won't stop until we have cleared the entire region of rebels."

"Morale is high. This time everyone knows what we are fighting for. We are avoiding the heavy casualties we suffered during the last war, so we won't storm Grozny. We will strangle it and besiege it with airstrikes and artillery."

"Then we will issue a two-day ultimatum and open a corri-

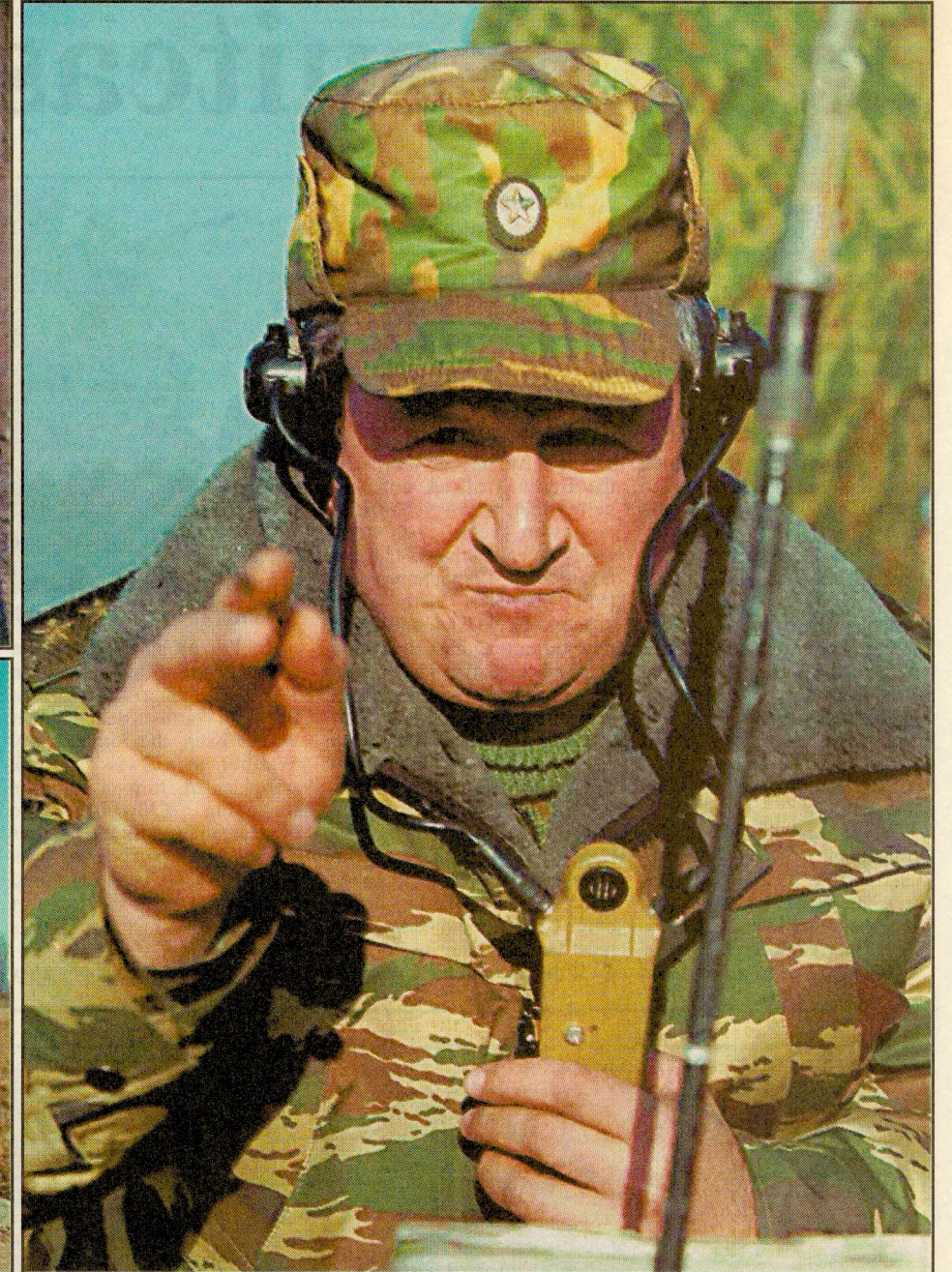
dor to the south for those willing to leave the city. Those who stay will be wiped out. Only then will we move in."

It could take weeks. An estimated 5,000 rebels are preparing to defend Grozny. Routes into the ruined city have been mined and deep trenches dug around it. It will not be easy to dislodge the rebels, who know they will be forced to flee into the mountains if they lose.

Most of those who have remained in Grozny have escaped the heavy Russian bombardment by retreating into Soviet-era underground nuclear bunkers that have held up well against conventional bombs.

Yesterday, as Russian aircraft intensified the bombardment of Urus Martan, the Russians

Dmitry Beliaikov



claimed Chechen fighters were planning to move into neighbouring Dagestan to take large numbers of hostages in an operation aimed at forcing an end to Moscow's campaign in Chechnya.

As Russian ground troops began to roll into Argun, fighter planes targeted retreating militants heading south. Early reports said that 30 vehicles carrying rebels to Grozny were destroyed.

Seen from a Russian military helicopter last week, northern Chechnya looked empty and desolate, scarred by tank tracks and bomb craters and seemingly devoid of life.

In a clear indication of the escalating nature of the conflict, the Russian army com-

mand in Mozdok, North Ossetia, announced plans to deploy new generation K50 Black Shark helicopter gunships, starting in mid-December.

The sprawling base was bustling with activity last week. Columns of tanks, armoured personnel carriers and trucks passed its heavily guarded gates in a steady flow of traffic to and from the front line.

MiG fighter planes and helicopter gunships were regularly taking off from the base's icy airstrip, heading for targets in Argun, Urus Martan and elsewhere in Chechnya.

On Friday morning alone, Russian Su24 and Su25 planes flew 20 sorties and helicopters attacked enemy strong points 30 times.

"This time we are going to the very end," said one burly lieutenant-colonel based in Mozdok, a veteran of the previous war that the Russians fought against the Chechens from 1994-96.

"This time it's different. The boys are keen and psyched up, and there are fewer casualties. The whole campaign is being planned better. Then the war was run by the politicians. This time the army is running the show. Orders don't get contradicted every time and there is no confusion." And this time we won't take any prisoners. The line is clear and we all agree.

"We are going all the way. Soon the whole of Chechnya will be back under Russian control."