



WORLD NEWS

One-man war in kidnap city

AFP



Vote for freedom: a rally before the election of Basayev as prime minister last month

Chechen hero fights to clean up lawless capital

EVEN in the sanctuary of his kitchen, surrounded by armed bodyguards and women in headscarves preparing his dinner, Shamil Basayev, the newly elected prime minister of Chechnya, displays the fighting spirit that made him the hero of his people and Russia's public enemy number one.

The former guerrilla leader who robbed banks, hijacked a plane and humiliated the Kremlin by taking 1,200 hostages inside Russia in the most daring operation of Chechnya's war of independence, is intent on his next bold struggle: to transform Grozny, the seat of his government, from the kidnap capital of the world into a safe and law-abiding city.

Ruthless and resilient, Basayev was the most famous Chechen field commander during Russia's 21-month battle to stop the small Caucasus region from becoming an in-

by Mark Franchetti
Grozny

only man who can save Grozny from a spiral of violent crime. Nearly 300 people, including westerners, have been kidnapped in little more than a year by gangs demanding ransoms of up to \$1m.

Wounded seven times, Basayev, 32, enjoys unparalleled re-

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spect in his country. He holds court like a tribal chief at his

kidnappings are doing great damage to our republic. My word and my image will help a lot in fighting crime. People know how we fought during the war. They remember that. They trust us and are already helping us by volunteering information."

Basayev's pledge comes at a critical time for Chechnya. Shooting has stopped in the breakaway republic and a fragile peace with the Russians is holding. In Grozny, which was all but flattened during the war, children now play among the ruins. The markets are busy. There are even plans to rebuild the presidential palace, the symbol of Chechen independence razed by the Russians during a conflict that claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Since the Kremlin withdrew its troops at the end of 1996, however, Chechnya has become dangerous in different ways. Kidnappings aside, rob-

Natalia Medvedieva



Law and order: Shamil Basayev, right, is relying on his image as a war hero to help him in his pledge to rid Grozny of crime 'by the summer'

James, the British special needs teachers who had travelled to Grozny to help children traumatised by the war.

Few westerners come to Chechnya now. Since a series of six-figure ransom payments was rumoured to have been made to free some Russian and Italian journalists, they are in grave danger of abduction. Most aid agencies have withdrawn their staff.

Those westerners who do venture into Grozny are met at the airport by heavily armed former guerrilla fighters earn-

ing with Kalashnikovs by their sides.

One of the first westerners abducted in Grozny, an Italian photographer, was seized in front of his guards and colleagues as he stood outside his car for a few moments to take a picture. Many others disappeared on the muddy roads that lead out of the city. All had armed escorts, including the British couple who, according to Chechen investigators, were betrayed by a guard. He apparently sold them for a share of any ransom.

"How come you have not been kidnapped yet?" asks Basayev jokingly whenever a journalist comes to see him. He inquires earnestly about his visitors' security arrangements.

"There are 50 kidnappers sitting in jail," he said. "By the spring I will have strengthened the security services. At the moment we don't even have the facilities to take mugshots or fingerprints, but the Chechen people are more than capable of solving the crime problem."

"I also intend to mount a big propaganda war to show my people what a tragedy these kidnappings are for our country. The people who are doing the kidnapping are not real Chechens — every true Chechen knows that to do that is to hurt Chechnya."

Last year four convicted murderers were executed in front of a crowd of thousands on a square in central Grozny. Although Basayev said he opposed such displays, six convicted kidnappers are on death row. President Aslan Maskhadov, who is due to visit Britain

next month, has already signed the order for the first two public executions.

Khunkar Israpilov, a tough war hero and former field commander who now heads the Chechen anti-terrorist special forces, is in the front line of the war against kidnapping. A close friend of the prime minister, he commands 150 men who are prepared to die in the struggle.

Israpilov, 31, lives surrounded by 15 personal bodyguards armed to the teeth. Two grenade launchers lie casually on the floor of his sitting room.

"We know that former Che-

Jeremy Nicholl

chen commanders who fought bravely during the war are now involved in some of the kidnappings," said Israpilov. "There is no shortage of people who can be bought now, but the abductions are without a doubt also political."

"Russia has an interest in destabilising the region and in portraying us as a bandit republic. The Russian special services are involved. This wave of abductions is our greatest problem. It's the death of Chechnya."

Since turning his guerrilla skills to the fight against crime, Israpilov and his men have

freed 190 hostages. He has personally led more than 100 rescue operations and is usually the first to go in, guns blazing. He has killed several hostage-takers and has yet to lose a single man, he says. His men were recently told to kill rather than take prisoners.

They are confronting lethal adversaries. The kidnappers are well organised and, according to Chechen police, it is difficult to enter Grozny without their knowing. Flight and accommodation details of incoming westerners can easily be bought and their contacts in Chechnya have often come under pressure to co-operate with kidnappers or face a severe beating.

The financial temptations are enormous. As the euphoria of victory over a former superpower by a few thousand poorly armed guerrilla fighters subsides, Chechens face a bleak future. Unemployment stands at more than 80%. Chechnya is caught in a limbo, acting independently but without international recognition.

Many people live without running water or proper heating amid mounds of twisted iron and huge slabs of collapsed concrete in buildings riddled with bomb craters. In the city centre not a single structure was left intact.

For Basayev, economic recovery is no less a priority than the restoration of order on which new investment would depend. "I don't need more than six months to accomplish that," he said. "The Chechens need order and a feeling that there will be order and equality in the future."



Unending struggle: Chechens still fight for recognition