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Yeltsin halts raids on Chechnya



WORLD

ARSHTY, Russia (AP) — Blamed for the deaths of hundreds of civilians, Boris Yeltsin ordered a halt Wednesday to bombing raids on the devastated capital of Chechnya. But his fighter jets continued to buzz the breakaway region.

Chechens were skeptical of the Russian president's announcement. He made the same promise a week ago, but within a day air strikes were again punishing Grozny, destroying an orphanage and setting much of the city center ablaze.

A thick, milky fog enveloped Grozny most of the day on Wednesday, shutting down Russian guns that have pounded the city for weeks. Gunfire erupted in the outskirts.

Ill-equipped but determined Chechen fighters waited to defend their capital. The streets of Grozny were littered with burned-out Russian tanks and other debris of war after a failed New Year's Eve assault. The Chechen flag still flew over the region's parliament.

The announcement came as the Kremlin sent in fresh troops and arms, apparently gearing up for a new assault on the Chechen capital and the prized palace of President Dzhokhar Dudayev.

It was not clear how an end to the bombing of Grozny would affect the military campaign in the Caucasus Mountain region. Yeltsin's press service said he made the decision because he was concerned about civilian casualties.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of civilians and fighters have been killed or wounded in the invasion, many by indiscriminate air raids. Red Cross estimates 350,000 people have been left homeless.

Yeltsin spokesman Vyacheslav Kostikov said the president was unprepared for the harsh criticism he has received from within Russia and abroad, and felt it "deeply and tragically."

In Washington, the State Department reacted cautiously to Yeltsin's announcement and said it was anxious to see the order carried out. "We'll be monitoring the situation carefully," said spokesman Michael McCurry.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher called Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev after the announcement to underscore a need to limit civilian casualties. Kozyrev assured him that such an effort was being made, McCurry said.

Chechens were not so sure.

"It's a lie, a deception. We remember what happened last time," said Musa Gadaborshev, 42, a businessman who has taken 11 refugees into his home in Nazran, about 35 miles west of the capital.

Nearby, villagers in tiny Arshty, on the border with Ingushetia, were trying to make sense of a Russian aerial attack Tuesday that killed four residents and wounded seven.

"There was no reason for this at all," said one witness, Malmkhan Tsatsiev. "We're all peaceful people, not a single rebel, not a single fighter."

Russian warplanes also bombed Shali on Tuesday, hitting a hospital and marketplace in the town 20 miles southeast of Grozny. Red Cross officials said 20 people died and at least 100 were wounded. Other estimates of the dead were even higher.

The Russian minister in charge of ethnic relations, Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Yegorov, said Grozny should be in Russian hands — without a battle — by Thursday. He did not explain.

Yeltsin has been criticized by his own human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalyov, who has spent three weeks bunkered down in Grozny. He headed for Moscow on Wednesday with an appeal to stop the war, signed by 81 Russian soldiers captured in Chechnya.

"Count for yourself how many soldiers have died here," the appeal said. "We can only say that all units sent to storm the city of Grozny on Dec. 31 were completely defeated."

"And, the most terrible thing is the huge number of civilian casualties — helpless invalids, elderly people, women — most of them ethnic Russians who had no place to go."

In Moscow, a leading reform lawmaker, Grigory Yavlinsky, called for Yeltsin's resignation, and two top generals repeated their criticism of the war.

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Student uses novel idea for excuse

PIETERMARTITZBURG, South Africa (AP) — A student facing shoplifting charges offered the court a novel excuse — he wanted to go to jail like Nelson Mandela and write a book about it.

Michael Dladla, 22, said at his initial court hearing he shoplifted candy to be imprisoned and write a book about the experience, the South African Press Association reported.

President Mandela's autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom," was published last fall. Dladla told the court he saw Mandela talking on television about his years in prison on terrorism charges and decided to try to get jail also.

Dladla said at the first hearing last month that he wanted life imprisonment.

But at his second hearing Tuesday, after spending several days in jail, Dladla agreed to be released with a warning to show up for subsequent appearances, SAPA reported.

Grenade found in teacher's cake

BANGKOK, Thailand (AP) — Elementary school students taking a peek at their teacher's New Year's cake spotted a booby-trap hand grenade inside. Authorities were alerted and the cake was defused.

Had the children lifted the cake box's lid wide open, it would have triggered the grenade, Maj. Sompong Musikrak said Wednesday.

Sompong said a man handed the box to a pupil at school Tuesday and told him to deliver it to his teacher.

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