

Russia offers cease-fire, hopes to end offensive



GROZNY, Russia (AP) — At the end of a day of brutal fighting, the Russian government late Monday offered a 48-hour cease-fire

"to prevent further bloodshed."

Russian tanks and artillery hammered the city's heart with hundreds of shells and rockets Monday as outnumbered Chechen rebels fought to hold the presidential palace and other key installations.

The Russian cease-fire offer, obtained by The Associated Press, was set to begin at 8 a.m. Tuesday (midnight Monday EST). It was unclear whether Russia would cease its offensive without the Chechens' agreement to its terms, including laying down arms and retreating from their positions.

The offer restated the key Russian demand to restore Moscow's control over the breakaway republic.

There was no immediate Chechen response.

Chechnya's president, whose whereabouts have been unclear for days, appeared on television Monday night to

comment about the war. Technical problems muted his message.

Russian troops pushed into Chechen positions from several directions on a chilly, overcast day, and the independent news agency Interfax said they controlled two-thirds of the capital.

Chechen fighters armed with rocket grenades ducked in and out of shattered buildings, trying to knock out Russian tanks blasting their positions. Artillery shells and rockets slammed into buildings around the palace as huge plumes of black smoke towered over Grozny.

There were strong indications of preparations for another major assault.

Several armored Russian battalions with dozens of tanks and armored personnel carriers moved toward Grozny. Others dug in at new locations around the city.

Large transport planes carrying Russian troops and supplies landed every half-hour at two nearby Russian air bases, apparently ferrying in more reinforcements for the offensive, which began Dec. 11.

The Russian government claimed its troops had advanced to within a few hundred yards of the palace on two sides by midafternoon and had the building — the

center of Chechen government — "completely blocked." It claimed 500 Chechen fighters had been killed by Russian troops in the previous 24 hours.

Russia sent tens of thousands of troops 1,000 miles south of Moscow to restore Kremlin control. Several thousand people have been killed or wounded, and the Red Cross estimates 350,000 are refugees — nearly one in four Chechen residents.

In its cease-fire offer, Russia urged the Chechens to "cease fire, leave their positions and military materiel, lay down their weapons and return people who were seized during the military confrontations."

In return, Russia said Chechen fighters who lay down their arms would be allowed to return to their homes.

It also said Russian commanders had been "given the necessary orders on ceasing fire in this period."

Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin said earlier Monday that a two-day cease-fire would be "only the beginning of the negotiation process," according to Russia's human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalyov.

Kovalyov said Monday that the cease-fire was designed to give both sides time

to remove their dead and wounded.

Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott headed for Brussels, Belgium Monday for urgent talks on Chechnya with Russian and NATO officials. Willy Claes, Secretary General of the Western alliance, called for an end to the fighting in the breakaway region.

"I am looking ... to the Russian authorities to decide without delay to end the violence against the Chechen people and to promote a peaceful settlement of the issue," the NATO leader told a conference in Brussels organized by a Belgian Roman Catholic organization.

Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev appeared calm in a television appearance wearing his military fatigues. The broadcast had no sound due to technical problems, so the content of his remarks was not known.

It was unclear when or where the footage was shot. Placards saying "Arise Chechnya, arise to gazavat (holy war)!" were shown on the screen.

But rebel morale seemed to founder. Chechen forces, eyes red with lack of sleep, faced increasing pressure as the area they control shrank.

Threat tests strength of four-month Bosnian-Serb truce

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — The Bosnian government today accused rebel Serbs of threatening a fragile four-month truce by ignoring some of its key elements.

The charge was made by Bosnian Vice President Ejup Ganic after talks with Yasushi Akashi, the chief U.N. envoy to former Yugoslavia, at U.N. headquarters in Zagreb, Croatia.

Ganic said Croatian Serb forces still have not pulled out of the besieged northwest Bihac region, and the so-called "Blue Routes" linking Sarajevo with other government-held territory in Bosnia have not yet been opened.

Ganic said he had called on Akashi "to push very hard to see this agreement implemented. Otherwise, it will collapse altogether."

A Serb pullout from the Bihac region is provided for by the latest truce pact, but the Croatian Serbs and rebel Muslims, who both have been fighting government forces in the northwest, are not party to the agreement.

Another stumbling block was a dispute over the withdrawal of government troops from a demilitarized zone on Mount Igman south of Sarajevo.

U.N. troops planned an inspection to see if the last position held by government forces had been vacated.

On Sunday, the Serbs insisted on withdrawal of government troops from two points east of the DMZ.

The latest condition was made by Bosnian Serb military commander Gen. Ratko Mladic, who met with the U.N. commander for Bosnia, Lt. Gen. Sir Michael Rose.

It seemed unlikely the government army would accept such a demand, which would wipe out gains from the army's offensive in the mountains south of Sarajevo last fall.

But Rose failed in an attempt to dissuade the Serbs from insisting on additional government withdrawals.

Apart from lingering disputes over points of the four-month truce, Maj. Herve Gourmelon, a U.N. spokesman in Zagreb, said the situation in Bosnia was generally quiet with minor cease-fire violations.

He said of the 16 cease-fire violations in the last 24 hours, 13 came from the Bosnian Serb army, three from government troops.

There was some small-arms fire in the Bihac "safe area" and in the border region near Velika Kladusa, where occa-

sional explosions were also heard, Gourmelon said.

Also in Sarajevo, Richard Holbrooke, the visiting U.S. assistant secretary of state, said the Contact Group of representatives from the United States, Russia, France, Britain and Germany would travel to Sarajevo, Zagreb and Belgrade starting Wednesday to try to get talks on a long-term peace plan going again.

But Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic complained that the Contact Group had failed to back up its promise to punish the Bosnian Serbs for not accepting the peace plan that would give the Bosnian Serbs 49 percent of Bosnian territory, down from 70 percent they now hold.

Holbrooke said it was the goal of the group to gain acceptance of the plan "as a starting point for negotiations, and we believe this is vitally important now that a cease-fire and cessation of hostilities are essentially in place."

"It is vitally important for the plan to be accepted," he said. "There is no change of the plan."

Bosnia's war began in April 1992 when Serbs rebelled after Muslims and Croats voted to secede from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. More than 200,000 people are dead or missing.

Iran may be 5 years from having nuclear arms

NICOSIA, Cyprus (AP) — Iran has signed an \$800 million deal with Russia to finish building a nuclear facility halted by the 1979 Islamic revolution. The agreement heightens concerns that Tehran is developing nuclear weapons.

Although state-run Tehran television said the facility will produce only electricity, Iran is thought to be less than five years away from producing nuclear arms.

Sunday's agreement was signed by Russia's atomic energy minister, Viktor Mikhailov, and the head of Iran's nuclear agency, Reza Amrollahi, according to the television report, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corp.

The report said the deal would enable Iran "to make proper and peaceful use of nuclear energy and to provide part of the country's required electricity" within the next four years.

Russia's participation in the deal was condemned by Iran's largest opposition group in exile, the Baghdad-based Mujahedeen Khalq.

"Such undertakings only assist the religious-terrorist dictatorship in Iran to pursue expansionist goals to acquire nuclear weaponry," said the group's spokesman, Ali Safavi.

On Sunday, U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry warned during a visit to Israel that the Clinton administration is "very much concerned about the potential

that Iran might become a nuclear power."

Earlier reports indicated the agreement covered only one of two unfinished 1,300 megawatt reactors in Bushehr, reportedly a major center for nuclear research located 450 miles south of Tehran on the Gulf coast.

Both reactors were started by Germany's Siemens/raafwerke Union before the Islamic revolution, which brought Muslim fundamentalist rule to Iran.

Germany has since refused export permits for vital equipment. Iraqi bombing raids damaged the facility in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Moscow agreed in principle in late 1993 to rebuild the facility and appears to be honoring the

commitment despite U.S. pressure against it.

Moscow's ITAR-Tass news agency said over the weekend that the long delay in implementing the agreement was due to "a number of technical and financial problems."

In September, the CIA warned that Russia was a key source of nuclear technology and expertise for Iran's drive to become a nuclear power.

The United States and Israel believe Iran may be only five years away from developing its own atomic bomb. But some experts doubt Iran has the capacity or knowhow to sustain a clandestinely acquired nuclear program.

Israel and PLO determined to fulfill agreement

EREZ JUNCTION, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel and the PLO today reached an agreement on safe passage routes linking the autonomous Palestinian areas, the release of prisoners and a passport that the self-rule authority plans to issue.

PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres declined to give details about the agreements after a 90-minute meeting near the Erez border crossing.

Both said despite difficulties plaguing negotiations, they remained determined to implement the PLO-Israel agreement.

"We are making progress," Peres said. "In spite of all the worries and skepticism ... the agreement is being implemented. It takes a little more time, more difficulty, but we are changing almost daily."

About four hours before their talks began, a rigged donkey cart exploded near an Israeli bus taking passengers to a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip. There were no injuries or damage.

Arab reporters said the explosion occurred as the bus neared the Jewish settlement of Kfar Darom. They said the explosives were wrapped in plastic bags and buried under boxes of oranges on the cart.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast.

A land dispute with Jewish settlers near the occupied West Bank town of Bethlehem last month and the killing of 10 Palestinians and a Jewish settler last week threatened to break the fragile Israeli-Palestinian ties.

Arafat said the explosives found on the cart were old mines left over from Israel's 27

years controlling the strip.

He said the Palestinian Authority had asked Israeli sappers to help dismantle the mines, and 85 were uncovered in Gaza recently.

Arafat also said the Palestinian authority was sensitive to Israel's security concerns.

"We are interested to understand more and more the security needs of Israel in this second stage and ... what we have to do together to overcome all these obstacles step by step," Arafat said.

He said there will be another top-level meeting between the Israelis and Palestinians next week.

Arafat said the Israeli government approved the new passport the self-rule government plans to issue, a red one for VIPs and a green one for ordinary Palestinians.

WUNDERLAND GAMES WITH NICKELS
 5th STREET PUBLIC MARKET
 5 VIDEO GAMES
 683-8464
 VIDEO ADVENTURE
 VALLEY RIVER PLAZA

ALL DAY TUESDAY
SPAGHETTI
 ALL YOU CAN EAT EVERY TUES!
 includes Garlic Bread 11:30 am-10 pm
\$2.99
PIZZA PETER'S
 ITALIAN KITCHEN
 2673 Willamette • 484-0996