

# Russia takes Chechnya towns

By Yuri Bagrov  
The Associated Press

KURCHALOI, Russia — Federal forces bombarded roads and footpaths in Chechnya's southern mountains on Monday, trying to prevent rebel raids into Russian-controlled villages, while acting President Vladimir Putin appealed to European human rights leaders to see Russia's side in the war.

Russian airplanes and artillery pummeled the region of Vedeno, a rebel stronghold deep in the mountains, about 35 miles south of the capital Grozny. Troops also took three settlements in the region, the Interfax news agency said, citing military sources.

According to Russian reconnaissance reports, rebels are active in the region and are planning to storm Russian-held villages. The federal forces want to prevent any repeat of the raids on three Russian-controlled towns earlier this month, which cast doubts on the military's reports of success in Chechnya.

Russian troops in the region were jumpy.

"If the Chechens come today, we'll be easily defeated," said Alexei Migulin, a Russian soldier in the village of Kurchaloi. He said that the 150 troops in the village had enough ammunition to last only 10 minutes.

Russia sent troops into Chechnya in September to crush Islamic rebels who had staged armed

incursions into neighboring Dagestan and are blamed for apartment house bombings that killed about 300 people.

In Moscow, Putin and other senior Russian officials met for more than three hours with a delegation from the 41-nation Council of Europe, the continent's highest human rights body. He urged that it "base its position not on propaganda materials but on the real situation, facts and trustworthy information."

The delegation was setting out on a fact-finding mission in preparation for a special debate on Jan. 27 over the war in Chechnya. Some council members have suggested that Russia's membership should be suspended.

The leader of the delegation, Lord Russel-Johnston, said he had expressed the council's opposition to the war to Putin.

"We want a cease-fire, we want negotiations, we want the intolerable situation with refugees to be stopped," he said.

Putin said that he wanted to see a quick end to the war, but that the Russians had no serious negotiating partners from the Chechen side, Russel-Johnston told reporters.

Putin also agreed in principle that international human rights observers should be allowed to operate in Chechnya, and that Russia would be willing to accept such observers in Ingushetia, a region bordering on the breakaway

republic, Russel-Johnston said.

The military reported Monday there had been more than 110 air raids on Chechnya in the past 24 hours, and that more than 80 rebels had been killed. The Defense Ministry said that over the same period, two soldiers had been killed and five wounded.

Jets strafed several villages at the entrance to the strategic Argun gorge, which leads through the rebel-held mountains to Georgia. The military said that the raids had hit five rebel bases in the mountains and created avalanches to block mountain passes.

Federal aircraft also targeted the Chechen capital Grozny, where ground troops have advanced cautiously to avoid the heavy losses suffered in the 1994-96 Chechen campaign.

Russian forces prevented at least six rebel attempts to break out of the city, Interfax reported.

In the southwestern Urus-Martan region, Russian troops opened fire Monday on a bus carrying refugees, killing the driver and three passengers, eyewitnesses said. It was not known what had prompted the shooting, but Nikolai Koshman, the Kremlin's top political representative in Chechnya, vowed the perpetrators would be punished.

"As soon as we find out who did this, they will be shot and killed in public," Koshman said.

# Milosevic aide denies links to homicide case

By Dusan Stojanovic  
The Associated Press

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia — The government was not behind the death of a notorious paramilitary leader, an aide to President Slobodan Milosevic said Monday, despite reports suggesting the victim may have been killed to prevent him from testifying against Yugoslav leaders.

Former Serb Police Chief Radmilo Bogdanovic, a senior official in Milosevic's Socialist Party, dismissed claims that the government was behind the gangland-style slaying of Zeljko Raznatovic, known as Arkan.

Bogdanovic told independent radio station B2-92 that it was "impossible to connect" Arkan's death with "state terrorism" and that "only a serious police and judicial investigation" could shed light on the killing.

Raznatovic, who had been indicted by the international war crimes tribunal for alleged atrocities committed during wars in Croatia and Bosnia, was believed to have close ties to Milosevic's security services.

That fueled widespread speculation in Serbia that Arkan was killed Saturday because he could implicate Milosevic and other Serbian leaders in atrocities committed during the bloody breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

At The Hague, Paul Risley, spokesperson for the war crimes tribunal, said two lawyers claiming to represent Arkan contacted the court separately last week and said the paramilitary leader was interested in negotiating a deal.

Risley said it was never clear whether the two lawyers actually represented Raznatovic.

Police have not issued a statement on the attack, which occurred Saturday night in the lobby of a luxury hotel.

With no official police account of the killing, Belgrade's newspapers were full of conflicting accounts, which further encouraged speculation of high-level involvement.

The government-run Politika daily said Raznatovic's assassin approached from behind and shot him in the head as he sat in the hotel lobby.

This conflicted with other independent media reports that said several masked assailants staged the attack while Arkan was walking through the lobby. The independent Glas newspaper claimed Arkan knew one of the assassins and greeted him moments before the shooting started.

"If we don't get a precise police statement soon on who is behind the assassination, the question should be asked on whether the police are hiding the facts about the murder, or perhaps they are behind it," Budimir Babovic, a former Interpol official, told Belgrade's Beta news agency.

Arkan, 47, led a paramilitary group known as the "Tigers," that was purportedly organized in the early 1990s by Milosevic's secret police to fight alongside Serb-led troops.

That enabled Milosevic's government to try to disassociate itself with some atrocities committed in Bosnia and Croatia.

Arkan's Serbian Unity Party said a memorial service for Raznatovic will be held Wednesday at the Union Hall in Belgrade while the funeral was scheduled for Thursday.



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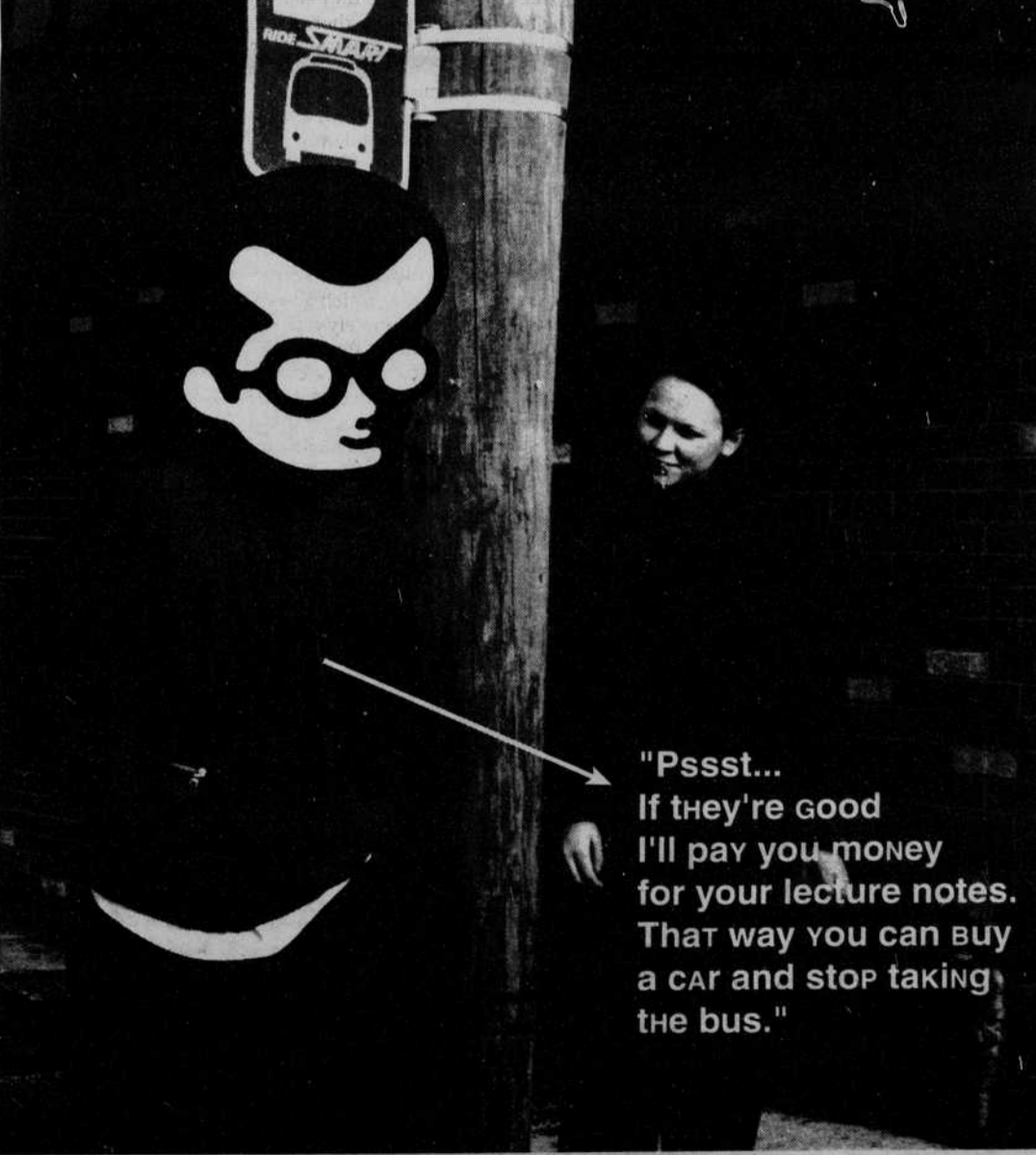
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