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Chechnya remains a dangerous place for Russian troops

By World Affairs correspondent Nick Childs

The deaths of two senior Russian officials in Chechnya - the result of a rebel bomb attack - is perhaps the clearest sign yet that the real struggle for the republic has only now begun.

The Russian military used its overwhelming firepower to take the Chechen capital, Grozny. But since then it has failed to subdue the remaining rebel resistance.

Russia's generals clearly hoped to use the summer months to garrison the republic so they could keep a lid on the security situation.

But Chechen counter-attacks, using guerrilla tactics, have already inflicted a serious toll on the ill-trained conscripts who make up the Russian military presence.

Russian forces are now finding it extremely difficult and dangerous to move around the republic.

This new bombing, near the capital, underlines the fact that the Russians have not even been able to confine the rebels to their strongholds in the southern mountains.



Deputy civilian administrator Sergei Zverev was killed in a bomb attack

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The new attack, a recent rebel ambush in neighbouring Ingushetia, and another bombing now in the southern Russian city of Volgograd, which some are already blaming on the Chechens, will raise the spectre of the rebels expanding their struggle.

And behind all this is the Russians' nightmare of the last Chechen conflict in the mid-1990s, when their forces were forced out by the Chechen guerrillas.



There are fears that the rebels may be expanding their struggle

There have been various hints of behind-the-scenes talks between the Russians and the main rebel leader, Aslan Maskhadov, but with little suggestion that a deal is close, and many doubts as to whether Mr Maskhadov is really in control of the rebels.

In the meantime, Moscow is relying on its own military, which as yet does not seem to have an answer to the challenge it now faces.

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