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A training camp for Chechen guerrillas run by Arab-born warlord Khattab

By BBC News Online's Stephen Mulvey

Suicide has been part of the rhetoric of the Chechen war from its inception - in 1994 - but it is only now that it is becoming a reality.

Whether the car and truck-bombings of the last few weeks are the beginning of a new campaign that will change the face of the conflict, or whether they will remain isolated incidents, is unclear.

It has long been commonplace for Chechen fighters to declare their readiness to fight to the death - sometimes they have worn white head bands to symbolise this - and they have often been reckless and daring in the extreme.

The question is whether the "suicide battalions" Chechen leaders now claim to have created are a continuation of this existing tradition, or something new - born out of either desperation or a new spirit of radical Islam.

Assassination threat

The leading warlord, Shamil Basayev, has been quoted this week as saying that the "Islamic peacekeeping army" in Chechnya contains two battalions of suicide troops, numbering in total 500

“Fighting sincerely for the sake of Allah always ends in one of two great things - victory or martyrdom”

Jihad in Chechnya website

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people, and that another battalion of up to 300 is being formed.

According to Basayev - as reported by the Kavkaz-Center website - these troops could be ordered to carry out "powerful pinpoint strikes" against Russian bases outside Chechnya, and to "destroy the most odious figures" in the Russian military.

This would appear to point to a continuation of the "human bomb"-style attacks of recent days.

In the past, commentators have noted that while Chechen forces have taken steps that were risky enough to verge on the suicidal, they have nonetheless taken all possible measures to survive.

Jihad

During infamous raids on the Russian towns of Budyonnovsk and Kizlyar in 1995 and 1996 the guerrillas saved their own skins by taking hostages, many of whom died.

In at least one case they carried out a threat to kill a hostage in order to force the Russian authorities to meet their demand for safe passage back to Chechnya.

The Budyonnovsk raid was launched by Shamil Basayev at a time when the Chechens were staring defeat in the face, and had nothing to lose.

Many Russian analysts interpret the latest deadly attacks as a sign of Chechen desperation, and as an essentially encouraging signal that their resistance is running out of steam.

However, it may be neither of these things.

Islam has become a major factor in this second Chechen war, and in a much more fundamentalist form than in the first. The glorification of martyrdom by at least some of the combatants is clear for all to see on the Jihad in Chechnya website.

Inspiration



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This website charts the activities of Islamic volunteers in the Chechen jihad (holy war), in particular those fighting with the Arab-born fundamentalist guerrilla leader Khattab, a youthful veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war.

In its report on the suicide bomb attacks Jihad in Chechnya writes: "The Mujahideen are proud to announce the martyrdom of other Mujahideen, as fighting sincerely for the sake of Allah always ends in one of two great things - victory or martyrdom."

Shamil Basayev first began to form the battalions of suicide fighters, referred to as Shahid (martyrs), in September - though his words were initially dismissed by a Russian official as "colourful statements from the realms of fantasy".

“
Basayev likes to make colourful statements, including some from the realm of fantasies
”

Russian deputy Interior Minister, Igor Zubov

The fighters are reported to have undergone special combat training in the Chechen mountains, culminating in the Bayat - an oath in the name of God.

It cannot be ruled out that the latest acts of martyrdom will act as an inspiration to others, and do indeed signal the start of a dangerous new phase of the conflict.

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