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World: Europe

'Humanitarian catastrophe' in Chechnya



Chechen women cross into Ingushetia carrying their belongings

The southern Russian republic of Ingushetia has appealed for help in dealing with thousands of refugees fleeing Russian air strikes in neighbouring Chechnya.

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In what the authorities described as a "humanitarian catastrophe", 30,000-100,000 Chechens were reported to be streaming out of the rebel republic.

Many refugees had been forced to abandon their cars and belongings at the border and were travelling on foot into Ingushetia and the neighbouring Russian republic of North Ossetia.

The Ingushetia authorities said they could not cope with the exodus and appealed for help from the United Nations and Moscow.

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Officials said there was not enough food to go round, but thousands more

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The BBC's Rob Parsons: "Thousands of refugees are clogging the roads"

stranded on the roads.

Ingushetia said 25,000 people were waiting in a traffic queue several kilometres long in the border area.



Heavy smoke billows over a Grozny oil plant

The Russian Minister for Civil Defence and Emergency Situations, Sergei Shoigu, is due to fly to Ingushetia on Tuesday to look into the humanitarian problems.

Russia's Itar-Tass news agency said he was expected to meet the Ingushetia authorities and to visit refugee camps before any decision was made on the provision of additional humanitarian assistance to the republic by the Russian federal government.

The tension inside Chechnya continues to build, with Russia's 99th army division reported to be moving tanks up to the border as a security precaution.

Reports say nearly 400 people have been killed in five days of Russian bombing on the Chechen capital Grozny.

No ground war



The BBC's Yvette Austin: "Moscow wants to create a broad safety zone around Chechnya"

Russia has said it will continue to attack rebel bases until the militants blamed for cross-border raids into the southern republic of Dagestan and recent bombings in Moscow are wiped out.

President Yeltsin has demanded "100% guarantees" from the military that Islamic militants will not be able to infiltrate through national borders.

The Kremlin has also snubbed the Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov's appeal for a face-to-face meeting with President Yeltsin to avert an all-out war.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said after talks with President Yeltsin that there would be no meeting with Mr Maskhadov until Russia decided it was "appropriate".

Chechens were waiting to cross.

On Sunday, Ingushetia closed its border, a move which threatened to cause a humanitarian disaster for thousands left

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Grozny residents salvage belongings from their homes following the bombing



A Russian soldier ferries ammunition on the Dagestan-Chechen border

Oil refineries hit

On the fifth day of air strikes, Russian bombers attacked oil refineries and factories south of Grozny.

Russia also stepped up its blockade, moving 200 pieces of heavy armour and artillery to its western border where many thousands of Chechen refugees have fled.

Mr Putin said the intention was to destroy the rebels' infrastructure. But BBC Moscow Correspondent Rob Parsons says the evidence so far is that this will destroy what little remains of Chechnya's war-ravaged economy and leave the rebels largely untouched.

The military is making contingency plans in case the politicians give the order to invade.

However, Mr Putin has continually played down the threat of a ground assault, saying there would be no repeat of the defeat and heavy casualties sustained during the Chechen war five years ago.

During an appearance in parliament on Tuesday he told journalists: "We are not speaking of a ground operation right now. I think the measures which we are currently taking to fight terrorists are sufficient."

But he added: "If these measures allow us to successfully meet our objective of defending Russians against terrorists, then we will need no other measures. If we fail, then we will study other [options]."

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