

## 'Thirty Years War' expands to North Caucasus, Central Asia

by Konstantin George

On Sept. 27, the Russian Defense Ministry abruptly announced the indefinite postponement of the visit to the United States scheduled for the end of September by Russian Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev. The curiously formulated statement cited "illness," adding that Grachev had been taken to the hospital, suffering from a "bad cold." In reality, this was a "diplomatic illness," which marked a Russian policy decision writing off the Bush administration as a "lame duck." The postponement signifies that dealings with the United States will be frozen till after the November U.S. elections, and that the Russian military is angry at U.S. policies promoting the destabilization of Russia. The second reason for Grachev to stay in Moscow, is the civil war situations which are escalating in the southern belt of the former U.S.S.R., above all in the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan and the Caucasus region.

The postponement coincided with a speech to students at the Moscow Institute for Foreign Relations by Community of Independent States (CIS) by Defense Minister Marshal Shaposhnikov. Shaposhnikov announced, in contradiction to a highly publicized statement by Russian President Boris Yeltsin in January, that Russian inter-continental ballistic missiles are still targeted at the United States. Shaposhnikov stated that "a certain amount of time" is required between a political declaration and practical implementation; but, in his next breath, he made it clear that the "certain amount of time" was based on political, not practical, considerations. "We are waiting" for a reciprocal step "by the Americans," and once this happens, the problem will "automatically" be solved, the marshal told the audience. Shaposhnikov said that Russia will abandon its nuclear test moratorium if the United States proceeds with nuclear testing: "If our partners in the West don't stop their nuclear tests, then I believe, we'll have to abandon the moratorium and resume nuclear testing."

### Grachev not quite so 'ill'

Grachev's "illness" and hospital stay were of record short duration. Only hours after the postponement of his trip, Grachev appeared on Russian television to call for a U.N. or joint U.N.-CIS peacekeeping force to be sent to Karabakh, which is the focus of a raging war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This is the first time that the Russian military has mooted a U.N. force for Karabakh.

If an end to the fighting "doesn't happen, troops of the U.N. or jointly troops of the U.N. and CIS should be sent to put pressure on all those who are shooting," Grachev said. "My task is to seek close contacts with the defense ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and even to become friends with them." Grachev added that he had already done that, citing his mid-September arrangement of a cease-fire that was to have taken effect at midnight Sept. 25. In reality, however, as he was forced to concede, the cease-fire never took effect. In other developments, the Russian Itar-Tass news agency reported on Sept. 28 that observers from CIS states had visited the general staffs of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, and that the Azerbaijan Defense Ministry had called for CIS observers to monitor the front lines around Karabakh.

The speech came as the Caucasus conflict in the Georgian region spread to include parts of the Russian North Caucasus, and the civil war in Tajikistan threatened to become the first international war in Central Asia.

### The North Caucasus spillover

The Caucasus crisis escalated over Sept. 26-27. First, Russian-Georgian tensions increased following a provocative Russian Parliament resolution of Sept. 25, which denounced Georgia's ruling State Council as solely responsible for the war in Abkhazia, and demanded the "immediate withdrawal" of all Georgian troops from that region of Georgia.

The resolution was tantamount to endorsing the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia and making it part of Russia. If Georgian troops leave, Abkhazia would be left in the hands of Russian forces, Abkhazia militia, and armed "volunteer" units from Muslim mountain tribes of the Russian North Caucasus. The resolution also violated a Russian-Georgian cease-fire agreement for Abkhazia, which had stipulated a joint Russian-Georgian peacekeeping presence there. By giving the impression that Russian policy would change to outright support for Abkhazian secession, the resolution allowed the thousands of tribal "volunteers," primarily from the Chechen and Kabardino tribes of the North Caucasus, to ignore the Sept. 25 expiration of a Georgian ultimatum for them to depart.

An alarmed Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze flew to Moscow for emergency talks with Yeltsin on Sept. 28, to, in the words of Shevardnadze, "prevent a Russian-Georgian conflict." Shevardnadze, who branded the Russian Parliament resolution "a flagrant attack on a sovereign state," announced after his meeting with Yeltsin that he had succeeded in "saving" Russian-Georgian relations, though the situation remained "very tense." His optimism is unwarranted. The meeting produced neither a joint statement nor a statement by Yeltsin. Indeed, Yeltsin had said not one word in condemnation of the parliament resolution.

The talks over Abkhazia were juxtaposed to the dramatic spillover of the Caucasus conflict into the Russian North Caucasus, with the Kabardino-Balkar autonomous republic, which straddles the Russian-Georgian border, moving toward an Oct. 5 proclamation of independence from Russia. The Chechen Republic, Kabardino-Balkar's neighbor to the east, was the first Muslim tribal North Caucasus autonomous republic to secede from Russia.

The Kabardino-Balkar crisis erupted Sept. 23 when Russian authorities in the region's capital of Nalchik arrested Musa Zhanibov, the head of the North Caucasus "League of Mountain Peoples," which organized the sending of armed volunteers from Russian territory into Abkhazia. Legally, the grounds for arrest were clear, but the timing betrayed another motive. No sooner was Zhanibov detained, when the Kabardino secessionist party began daily violent demonstrations in Nalchik, demanding his release and the resignation of local authorities.

As events showed, someone in Moscow was promoting secession—it would provide an ideal basis to ram through a policy of imperial restoration as the "only" means to prevent "chaos." On Sept. 27, after secessionist demonstrators tried to storm the government building and television station, authorities in Nalchik declared a two-month state of emergency. For it to function, it required military steps by Moscow, which were not forthcoming. A day later, the state of emergency was lifted and the Kabardino secessionists announced that a "congress" proclaiming Kabardino independence would be held Oct. 5 in the

Chechen capital of Grozny.

Even more serious than the crisis in the Caucasus is the bloody civil war in the Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan, which is close to becoming a conflict throughout Central Asia.

### **Tajikistan civil war**

Over Sept. 26-27, the civil war in Tajikistan between supporters and opponents of deposed President Nabiyeu went out of control, when Nabiyeu's forces, after having seized, or having been given, tanks and armored vehicles from a Russian regiment, occupied the city of Kurgan-Tyube, some 50 miles southeast of the capital, Dushanbe, massacring hundreds. In a letter to Yeltsin, Tajikistan Prime Minister Abkasho Iskandarov accused the Russian military of co-responsibility for the Kurgan-Tyube "bloodbath," through weapons transfers to the Nabiyeu forces, and charged Russia with a policy of "one-sided interference in the internal affairs of Tajikistan."

The Kurgan-Tyube massacre, by moving the locus of fighting to the cities, where 500,000 ethnic Russians and other Europeans live, guaranteed a Russian military intervention. Urgent sessions of the Russian Defense Ministry presided over by Grachev, culminated in a Sept. 28 Defense Ministry announcement, citing a "request" to intervene from Prime Minister Iskandarov—which in actuality didn't exist—that Russia would send an additional 800 combat troops, including an airborne battalion, to Tajikistan, raising its troop strength there to 10,000. The announcement specified that the troops were to protect Russian military bases and troops from further attacks, seize and defend vital installations, protect the Russian civilian population, and guard the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

By Sept. 30, the Russian reinforcements had seized Dushanbe Airport and begun patrolling the capital, swollen with the civilian population of Kurgan-Tyube which had fled the massacres, while Dushanbe's panicked Russian and ethnic German inhabitants were waiting for military protection to escape. A refugee wave of hundreds of thousands of Europeans out of Tajikistan is imminent. This exodus will destroy most of the remaining non-rural economy of Tajikistan. Without the Europeans, industry will shut down, as will most energy production, schools of higher learning, and medical facilities.

Another tragedy involves Tajikistan's Uzbek minority, which makes up 23% of the population. Uzbeks have begun fleeing Tajikistan, amid reports of still-localized Tajik attacks on Uzbeks. The situation could produce an exodus of more than 1 million Uzbeks into Uzbekistan, which would trigger the same process there against that republic's large Tajik minority. We are on the verge of "communal warfare" and forced population transfers on a scale not seen since the 1947-48 British-orchestrated Hindu-Muslim slaughters that accompanied the partition of India.