Fighting and land mine explosions kill two soldiers and two police (Chechnya)

Vladikavkaz (Russia) - Fighting and land mine explosions in Chechnya killed two soldiers and two police over the previous day, an official in the Moscow-backed Chechen administration said Monday.

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In neighboring Ingushetia, police fatally shot two men who opened fire Sunday after being ordered to show their identification papers, said Col. Ilya Shabalkin, spokesman for the federal forces. He said a suicide bomber's belt packed with 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of explosives was found with the men, Russia's ITAR-Tass and Interfax news agencies reported.

Tens of thousands of Russian troops have been trying to crush Chechen separatists for five years. Full-scale offensives have tapered off, but the outnumbered and outgunned rebels have kept Russian troops on edge with small scale attacks and planted land mines. Deadly suicide bomb attacks—as far away as the Russian capital—have frightened the nation.

In Chechnya, rebels opened fire on federal positions 15 times in the past 24 hours, killing one soldier and wounding six, the Chechen official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. In southern Chechnya, an armored personnel carrier packed with six soldiers hit a rebel land mine that exploded, killing one and wounding five.

Two police officers were killed in a clash with rebels in the Chechen capital, Grozny, the official said.

The Kremlin has said that the situation in Chechnya is stabilizing, but the southern region, which has seen two wars in a decade, is still marred by violence. Russian troops pound suspected rebel bases daily with heavy artillery and round up dozens of alleged rebel supporters.

The Interfax-Military News Agency, citing a military source, reported Monday that last week rebels blew up 18 cars, trucks and armored personnel carriers throughout Chechnya. The agency also said that four Chechen oil wells were set on fire overnight, with three still burning Monday afternoon.

Russian forces withdrew from Chechnya in 1996 after the rebels fought them to a standstill in a 20-month war, which left the region de facto independent and largely lawless. The military swept in again in 1999 after Chechnya-based fighters made incursions into neighboring Dagestan and after the deaths of some 300 people in apartment bombings that officials blamed on Chechen separatists.

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