Minefield massacre bleeds rebels; Russia says it was a trap

TEARS FELL from the Chechen fighter's eyes as he recalled escaping from a Russian minefield by walking on the bodies of friends who had been torn apart by explosions.

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His hands shaking with grief, Umar Tashayev was unable to talk, instead writing on a scrap of paper what happened when a rebel column blundered into the minefield as it tried to escape from Grozny on Monday after months of fighting in the Chechen capital. "I saw dreadful things during fighting in Grozny, but that massacre was beyond comparison," he wrote. "We had to walk on our dead comrades" to avoid stepping on unexploded mines.

Khamzat Tisayev, who was wounded in the foot, said some fighters sacrificed themselves to clear a path, running ahead to set off mines for the about 2,000 fleeing fighters. "The boys marched on mines and shouted to us: 'Meet you in paradise!'" Tashayev and other rebels who survived were still trembling with shock as they recalled the exploding mines, the scores of mutilated bodies on the bloodstained snow and wounded comrades crying in agony. The carnage, which left at least 600 militants, including several prominent warlords, killed or badly wounded, was the bloodiest loss for the rebels since Russian forces invaded Chechnya in late September.

The Russians say they lured the rebels into a trap by pretending to accept a $145,000 Cdn bribe in exchange for safe passage out of Grozny, then finished them off with artillery barrages. "Frankly, we did not expect bandits, especially the key figures, to swallow the bait," Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, a top regional commander, told Russian television stations. He did not say whether the rebels had paid the money. Rebels who survived said they had been told by their commanders that the Russians were letting them slip out of Grozny for a bribe - something they said Russian officers have done frequently in the past. Despite the rebel losses, the escape of hundreds of other fighters was a setback for the Russians, who had based their strategy on wiping out the insurgents in Grozny and ending the war.

The Chechens who escaped are determined to go on fighting. Before trying to slip out of Grozny on Monday, rebel commanders sent a reconnaissance party ahead. It never returned, but Aslanbek Ismailov, the rebel commander in charge of Grozny defences, decided to leave anyway. Ismailov, along with commanders Shamil Basayev, Lecha Dudayev, Khunkar-Pasha Israpilov and other prominent leaders, decided to lead the column to encourage their men. Lyoma Dadayev, a fighter who survived the march, said Basayev turned to his men and said: "Women often tell us: 'You let our sons be killed while you stay alive.' Well, we shall go first." Ismailov, Dudayev and Israpilov died in the first explosions, and Basayev was badly wounded. Khasan Baiyev, chief of Alkhan-Kala hospital, said Basayev lost his left leg and right foot. Women who helped care for the Chechen wounded said Basayev also lost an eye. After the first mines exploded, Russian artillery shells and rockets screamed into the rebel column, killing scores of fighters. The rebels continued moving despite the explosions, leaving their dead and wounded behind. Some still shudder at the memory. "I was pulling my comrade on a sledge, and then was hit in my leg by a fragment," Dadayev said. "I had to leave him behind, because otherwise I would have died too." "Our wounded comrades were pleading not to leave them there, but we had to keep going," wrote Tashayev, the rebel who couldn't speak.

When the rebels, clad in white winter camouflage, finally reached Alkhan-Kala, they laid scores of wounded on the snow near the hospital, which was too small to take all of the casualties. The hospital had no water or heat and very little medicine or medical instruments. Baiyev, the hospital chief, performed amputations with a hacksaw without any painkillers or antiseptics. Baiyev, his face grey from working round-the-clock, said he did more than 40 amputations on the first day. Villagers took the wounded into their homes, where the fighters lay without any medicine to ease their pain. In one house, the smell of rotten flesh filled a room where two rebels lay, their feet amputated. "These people don't know that they have gangrene and are doomed," Dr. Malika Sabiyeva whispered, turning away from the wounded men. "We don't know what to do. We have nothing to help them."

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