Several policemen injured in shootout in Russian region bordering Chechnya

Vladikavkaz - A Russian military spokesman said four rebels had been killed, but denied reports that any hostages died in a massive shootout Saturday between police and militants who had holed up in a house in Ingushetia, a Russian region neighboring war-wracked Chechnya, news agencies reported.

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"This information does not correspond to reality," the Interfax news agency quoted Col. Ilya Shabalkin, the spokesman for Russia's military campaign in Chechnya, as saying.

Interfax also cited an Ingush interior ministry source as saying that according to their information two police officers held hostage had been shot earlier.

The ITAR-Tass agency reported that at the end of the siege, three bodies had been found, including that of hostage Vakhi Korigov, an Ingush policeman.

The stand-off began after three police and security officers were wounded in a shootout with suspected Chechen rebels who then holed up in a house in the village of Ordzhonikidzevskaya, regional law enforcement officials said.

Gilani Merzhoyev, prosecutor in the Sunzhensk region, said the three were shot and injured while checking passports, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported. Merzhoyev said there appeared to be two rebels.

Another source in the ministry, however, said two Federal Security Service officers and four policemen were wounded in an exchange of fire with the alleged Chechen rebels who then took five people, including one child, hostage in the house. Earlier the source had said the hostages were a family of four.

After fire destroyed the house, the militants took refuge in the basement, but the fate of the hostages was not known, the source said on condition of anonymity.

ITAR-Tass, citing an Interior Ministry source, meanwhile reported that between two and six rebels were holding two policemen hostage in the basement of the burnt house and threatened to shoot them if they were not given safe passage to the mountains. They also threatened to set off 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of explosives if the house was stormed.

Interior Ministry forces fired heavy-caliber weapons into the charred ruins of the house, while blocking off all the roads in the area, the news agency reported.

After the siege had ended, Shabalkin claimed the killed rebels were linked to Basayev and "were preparing terrorist acts with the use of suicide-bombers."

Ingushetia has been rocked by frequent attacks on Russian servicemen and local police officers, kidnappings and other violence. Less than two weeks ago, a suicide attacker blew up a car laden with explosives near Ingush president Murat Zyazikov's motorcade. The Ingush leader was lightly injured.

While some of the violence is local in origin, some has spilled over from the ongoing war in Chechnya.

Eight servicemen were killed and another eight were wounded in rebel attacks and land mine explosion over the past day in Chechnya, an official in the Kremlin-backed administration said Saturday.

Five of the soldiers died as federal outposts came under fire 16 times.
Five of the soldiers died as federal outposts came under fire 16 times in the past 24 hours, said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity.