Three Russian soldiers killed in Chechnya

VLADIKA KAZ, Three Russian soldiers were killed in warring Chechnya over the past day, an official in the region's Kremlin-backed government said Thursday.

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Two of the soldiers died and another six were wounded when separatists fired on federal positions 13 times over the past 24 hours, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Another soldier died when a truck exploded on a rebel-planted landmine outside Belorechye village in the Gudermes district on Wednesday. Five others were wounded in the explosion, the official said.

Also Wednesday, two Chechen special forces officers were abducted in a market in the Chechen capital, Grozny, the official said.

Russian artillery shelled suspected rebel bases in Chechnya's southern mountains, a routine barrage that has failed to weaken resistance. The rural districts bordering Grozny also came under federal artillery fire, the officials said.

Russian troops detained at least 180 people in the near-daily security sweeps conducted to try to flush out rebels, many of whom reportedly melt back into Chechnya's civilian life after participating in attacks.

Fighting in Chechnya has persisted in the run-up to the region's Aug. 29 presidential election to replace Akhmad Kadyrov, the Kremlin-backed president who was killed by a bomb in May.

Critics warn that it's impossible to hold fair election amid fighting and human rights abuses. They say elections in Chechnya, including the current race, are heavily managed shows in which the Kremlin-backed candidate is assured of victory.

Russian forces retreated from Chechnya after a devastating 1994-96 war, leaving the region to run its own affairs. They marched back in September 1999 after rebels raided a neighboring province and were blamed for a series of deadly apartment-building bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities.

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