

# Russian Prime Minister Refuses to Rule Out New Chechen War

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## ***Russian Prime Minister Refuses to Rule Out New Chechen War***

By CELESTINE BOHLEN

MOSCOW, Sept. 29 — As Russian and international agencies struggled to keep up with the tide of Chechen refugees fleeing air strikes by Russian warplanes, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin refused today to rule out a possible ground war against the rebellious southern province.

Mr. Putin also said that talks with the Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov, were still possible but only if Chechnya's elected leaders take a stand against the Islamic militants who have used Chechnya as a base for attacks against neighboring prov-

inces, and are suspected of waging a terrorist campaign in Russia.

The Russian Government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have promised to ship food and tents to the estimated 60,000 Chechen refugees who have flocked across the border with neighboring region of Ingushetia since the Russian air campaign began a week ago.

News reports say refugees are still streaming across the border, crowding into bus and rail stations, and into a single encampment of only about 20 tents set up near the border village of Sleptsovskaya.

Interviewed on Russian television tonight, refugees said they were fleeing in fear for their lives. Sobbing, one woman told NTV, a commercial station, that she could not understand why innocent civilians were being made to suffer for the crimes of terrorists they do not support.

Chechen officials today continued to report hundreds of civilian casualties caused by the bombing, but without independent confirmation, some Russian newspapers today said these reports were inflated. A reporter for Radio Liberty, one of the few independent journalists based in

Grozny, the Chechen capital, was able to confirm the death of eight civilians, including four children, killed Monday in the bombardment of a school outside Grozny.

Since 1996, when Chechnya defeated federal forces after a two-year war, the mountainous region has been increasingly isolated by a wave of kidnappings that have deterred reporters and aid organizations from traveling there.

The Maskhadov government, whose authority has been weakened by the rise of independent warlords, has disavowed any connection to the

Islamic militants who last month launched armed attacks against Dagestan, a region that lies between Chechnya and the Caspian sea. Russian officials say that the militants, led by Chechen fighters, are supported by international terrorist groups that want to destabilize Russia's volatile North Caucasus region.

In recent weeks, the Russian military has moved an estimated 50,000 troops to the region to isolate Chechnya, but several Russian newspapers reported today that the real goal is a ground invasion that could begin within days.

Mr. Maskhadov canceled a meeting today with the Dagestani leader, Magomedali Magomedev, when the road to the meeting place was

blocked by angry Dagestanis protesting Chechen-led aggression on their territory.

The meeting, authorized by Moscow, had been seen as a preliminary opening for further, higher-level talks that Mr. Putin has said repeatedly can take place only on Moscow's terms.

Asked today about the reports of preparations for a ground war, Mr. Putin said every tool needed to destroy terrorists in Chechnya will be used. He said Moscow would be willing to negotiate with Mr. Maskhadov, but only if the Chechen leaders finally condemn terrorism, clearly and firmly, and express their readiness to hand over the criminals.