

Ingush Garlic Picker: 'What if We See a Rebel?'

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Interior Ministry officers patrolling a Malgobek-Nazran highway. Locals fear running into rebels in the forests. **Kazbek Basayev**

NAZRAN, Ingushetia — Neiba scrapes out a meager income selling soil-caked clumps of wild garlic she picks in the forests of the country's poorest province — an occupation a growing Islamist insurgency has made increasingly hazardous.

"I will only go to the forest with my husband, and even then, we are terrified every time," said Neiba, 43, as she adjusted her bright red hijab at the sprawling outdoor market in Nazran, Ingushetia's largest town. "What if we see a rebel?"

"But we must make a living," she said, flashing her remaining four teeth, each of them encased in gold.

In the North Caucasus, woodlands reaching up to the country's mountainous southern border

are haunted by rebels trying to carve out an Islamic state — a hideout and home base for an insurgency the Kremlin has failed to quell or contain.

Authorities blamed the militants for a suicide bombing that killed 35 people and injured about 130 at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport a week ago, saying Saturday that the attacker was a 20-year-old native of the North Caucasus. No group has claimed responsibility.

The robust insurgency in Ingushetia underscores the threat. On Monday, the head of Nazran's central district was gunned down in his car near the market where Neiba has her stall, in one of dozens of attacks in Ingushetia this year and a symptom of a broader problem.

Islamist attacks in Russia were up by 14 percent in 2010 on the year, almost all of them in the North Caucasus, according to terrorism experts at the U.S.-based Monterey Institute of International Studies.

President Dmitry Medvedev also cited an increase, telling security officials that terrorism is Russia's biggest threat.

In Ingushetia and other North Caucasus republics, experts say feelings of rootlessness and a lack of acceptance by ethnic Russians add to a dispiriting mix that pushes young men into the insurgency.

With Ingushetia's official unemployment at 57 percent and the average salary at 7,000 rubles (\$235) a month, bored and desperate youths turn to Islamist extremism.

"Quite a few guys from my high school have become rebels. I don't agree with this, but it kind of makes sense. They have nothing better to do," said Magomed Aushev, 27, who recently lost his job as a sales assistant in a cell phone shop.

"There is no money here, just death and murder," he said.

The government is fighting a two-pronged campaign, trying to lure youths away from the insurgency while fighting near-daily battles with rebels.

"They come down from the mountains to get food and quickly disappear off again. Sometimes we're lucky and nab one. Many times we don't," said a camouflage-clad 21-year-old policeman who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Hoisting a Kalashnikov on his shoulder, a revolver and a stun gun on his bullet-laden belt, he is one of hundreds of police guarding Ingushetia's towns, roads, small green mosques and even schools.

Shootouts, blasts and suicide bombers last year killed 359 civilians and law enforcement officers across the North Caucasus, 49 of them in Ingushetia, the Monterey institute said in a report last week. Local media put the number even higher.

"Calm and order are still a long way off," Ingush President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, who survived a suicide-bomb attack two years ago, conceded last week to reporters. He did not rule out the insurgency gaining more strength.

The Ingush government says there are only about 25 rebels operating in the republic, which has a population of 600,000. The Monterey institute said 251 rebels were killed across the North Caucasus last year, 54 of them in Ingushetia.

Armed checkpoints and hijabbed women selling potatoes dot the muddy and potholed road to Malgobek, a town 45 kilometers northwest of Ingushetia's capital, Magas.

Five hundred red brick cottages line newly paved streets on the outskirts of the town — the first of three new suburbs to be built in Ingushetia by 2015 with funds sent from Moscow in a bid to combat extremism.

"We want our youths to be busy, to have indoor plumbing and televisions," Malgobek district head Yeraki Gantymirov said, adding that destitute families were given the houses for free late last year.

"You have to stop them from being tempted by terrorism," Gantymirov said as plastic sheeting covering newly installed windows flapped in the wind behind him.

But young people say they want more than just comfort and jobs.

"There is not a single spiritual leader for the young, someone who will listen to us. To stop Islamist ideology, we need to have an idea of national identity," said Bagaudin Khautuyev, 18, who heads the Youth Parliament, an initiative set up by Yevkurov last year to engage the young with society.

Simmering ethnic tension is a poisonous ingredient.

"Young people join the rebels because of their unwillingness to be part of a state that considers them second-class citizens. All of this is happening against the backdrop of growing anti-Caucasus sentiment among Russians," said Mairbek Vatchagaev from the Washington-based Jamestown Foundation think tank.

In December, Moscow saw some of the worst racist violence since the Soviet collapse when thousands of ultranationalists gathered near Red Square and attacked passers-by who appeared to be from the North Caucasus. The violence spurred a barrage of Islamist rhetoric on insurgency-affiliated sites.

"We need our own language, TV channels and papers, we need to celebrate the ethnic groups across the North Caucasus. This will fill that gap in society that drives people to extremism," said Zhansurat Ausheva, who heads Ingushetia's Union for Journalists.

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