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Lutheran

Page 12 • Friday, December 3, 1999

Chechen forces under fi Russians urged to negotia

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GROZNY, Russia (AP) — Chechen forces came under heavy fire in Grozny and two nearby towns yesterday, but the Russian military acknowledged that the militants were well-entrenched in the Chechen capital.

A top European human rights official, meanwhile, urged Russia to stop the fighting and negotiate a settlement.

Chechen military commander Isa Munayev said a number of people had been killed in Grozny, while the Russians had lost a large number of soldiers and armored vehicles, the Interfax news agency reported.

The Russians concentrated their airstrikes and artillery shelling on Grozny and on two satellite towns — Argun and Urus-Martan.

Munayev said the fighting was particularly intense at Urus-Martan, where the militants came under "drenching fire.

As with earlier operations, the Russians have been bombarding the militants from afar in the expectation that the rebels will retreat without a full-scale infantry battle.

The strategy worked well, bringing the Russians to the outskirts of Grozny on the north, east and west. But the rebel fighters have resisted much more fiercely in recent days as the fighting has approached the capital

In Argun, three miles east of Grozny, and in Urus-Martan, about 10 miles southwest of the capital, the militants have appeared much more willing to remain and fight.

The Council of Europe's human rights commissioner Alvaro Gil-Robles, who returned from a twoday trip to Chechnya and nearby regions today, urged negotiations.

We believe that a democratic country, and Russia is a democratic country, cannot use just any means to fight terrorism," Gil-Robles told journalists in Moscow. "This war must be ended as soon as possible, and a political dialogue must begin.

Russia claims that its strikes are aimed against Chechnya's militants, who are blamed for a series of terrorist

Chechens well-entrenched in Grozny Russian and Chechen forces battled for control of A three miles east of the capital, and the Russians un airstrikes and artillery fire at rebel positions in a woo area adjacent to the town



bombings in Russia, but Chechen authorities, and human rights groups all say that hundreds ians have also been killed.

The Kremlin has shrugged off international to stop the offensive, which is largely pop Russians weary of widespread crime they Chechens and other Caucasus Mountains Russian air force bombers dropped 1,100-

explosive bombs Wednesday on Grozny and tan. The air force also employed huge concre bombs for what they said was a successful at underground arms depot.

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