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Chechens maintain resistance in Grozny

ALKHAN-YURT, Russia (AP) — About 2,000 Chechen fighters broke through the Russian blockade of Grozny and tried to head south to join up with fellow rebels Tuesday, battling federal forces attempting to prevent their escape with tanks and artillery.

Other rebels stayed in the battered Chechen capital to keep up the fierce resistance they have mounted to months of air and artillery attacks and a five-week Russian push to take the city center.

At least two prominent rebel commanders remained in Grozny with their forces, rebels said.

It was unclear how many rebels remained under their command; Russian reports estimated there were about 3,000 fighters in the capital last week.

A large group of rebels got caught in a minefield on the outskirts of Grozny on Monday, and several prominent Chechen commanders were killed or badly wounded, witnesses said. Russian artillery then opened fire on the field, killing and wounding scores more fighters, they said.

Notorious Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev reportedly had his leg

torn off when his car was blown up by a mine as he escaped Grozny; he was spirited away, rebels said, and his whereabouts were unknown.

Among the Chechen commanders reportedly killed were Aslanbek Ismailov, who had headed Grozny's defenses, Khunkar-Pasha Israpilov, and Grozny Mayor Lecha Dudayev.

Russian commanders denied that the rebels escaped; a main goal of the Russian offensive had been to wipe out the fighters in Grozny.

The rebels who left Grozny are expected to join thousands of comrades in the south to go on fighting.

Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev insisted Tuesday that federal forces were successfully blocking rebels trying to flee Grozny.

"Nobody will ever allow the rebels to leave the city other than under a white flag and after laying down their weapons," he said.

The rebels did not announce that they had given up the fight for the capital. Their strategy in Grozny was to inflict as many losses as possible on the Russians while avoiding heavy casual-



ties that would harm their ability to continue the war.

In the last Chechen war, the rebels lost Grozny in 1995, but kept fighting until they retook the city in 1996.

News in Brief

Yeltsin celebrates 69th birthday

MOSCOW (AP) — A month after shocking Russia by abruptly resigning, former President Boris Yeltsin celebrated his 69th birthday Tuesday amid reports that he is happier and healthier than during his final years in office.

Spending the day quietly with family, Yeltsin received a morning visit from acting President Vladimir Putin, offering birthday congratulations. Yeltsin still lives

in the government home near Moscow.

Yeltsin's wife, Naina, treated guests and her family to Siberian dumplings and pancakes.

While Yeltsin issued no comment Tuesday, his wife said he is making plans, including foreign trips and working on a book, and that he has not been traumatized by retirement.

Ambassador calls for talks with China

BEIJING (AP) — The new U.S. ambassador to China said Tuesday that the United States wants to open wide-ranging talks with the Chinese government on human rights issues.

Joseph Prueher, speaking to U.S. business executives in Beijing, said Washington welcomed the release last week of Song Yongyi, a librarian at Dickinson College in Pennsylvania who had been detained in China since August.

But Prueher said a meaningful dialogue on human rights would have to go further.

"I think it's important that human rights discussions with China not be a series of spikes, of individuals, but rather a broader dialogue where we get more philosophically in tune," he said to the American Chamber of Commerce in China.

"A secure, stable and prosperous China is what's in the interests of the United States," Prueher said.

Austria accord reached

VIENNA, Austria (AP) — Austria's conservative partners announced Tuesday that — if approved by Austria's president — would give the rightist party a share in the country.

The prospect of such a coalition has led the 14 countries to share membership in the European Union with Austria in sanctions.

The United States and other nations have said they would improve relations with Austria if the party joins in power-sharing.

The vehement opposition based on Haider's past praising Nazi policies, and the party's anti-foreigner, has been a critical view of the European Union.

Earlier Tuesday in Brussels, the European Council said the EU's executive branch would continue to have a relationship with the government as long as it abides by the EU's treaty.

Defense Minister Wolfgang Laband, a People's Party member, said foreigners had no right to run the country and the country should bend to pressure from the EU.

The EU action was a small alpine country of 8 million people, which is only one of the reasons brought about when Secretary-General Karel Haider was elected president in 1999, trying to conceal his intelligence officer in the NATO.

Austria has been without government since inconclusive parliamentary elections Oct. 1999. Haider's party into power ahead of the People's Party.

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