

Russian troops and rebels battle over last command post

MESKER-YURT, Russia (AP) — Deep in the rugged mountains of southern Chechnya, rebels battled intensely Wednesday against Russian troops trying to close in on the fighters' last major command post.

But Russia managed to tighten the circle around some 2,700 militants concentrated around the town of Shatoi, said Col. Gen. Gennady Troshev, the deputy military commander in Chechnya.

The troops are backed by warplanes and helicopters, which flew about 125 combat missions over the mountains over the past 24 hours, the military said Wednesday.

Shatoi, about 30 miles south of the

Chechen capital, Grozny, has considerable strategic value for both sides.

Russian officials have estimated that as many as 8,000 rebels are in the mountains, so taking Shatoi likely would not bring an end to the five-month-old war. But the loss of such a major command center could seriously damage the rebels' campaign.

"I think in the nearest future we'll be able to close the book on what we're doing here," Troshev said.

Troshev confirmed reports that a Russian helicopter was shot down by the rebels over Shatoi on Tuesday, but said its crew members had escaped and were now safe. Three other helicopters re-

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turned to their bases badly damaged, military officials said.

The army command, meanwhile, said about 100 rebels were killed and 24 were captured during three failed attempts to break through the Russian lines near Shatoi on Tuesday. Three Russian border guards were killed and two were wounded, it said.

Thirty more militants were killed when soldiers seized key heights around Maskhety, a village east of Shatoi, the military said. The claims could not be independently confirmed, and each side in the war tends to exaggerate enemy losses while understating its own.

Elsewhere in Chechnya, soldiers on roads and banned all civilian movement between settlements over fears of violence linked to Wednesday's anniversary of the 1944 mass deportation of Chechens to Central Asia.

The anniversary coincides with annual Russian holiday honoring military, and Russian strategists worry that the rebels were planning terrorist attacks.

The news agency ITAR-Tass reported that federal forces in Grozny on Wednesday found and defused three mines and two remote-controlled bombs placed on a railroad bridge.

Flood-torn Mozambique asks for international aid

MAPUTO, Mozambique (AP) — Mozambique appealed Wednesday for international aid after a cyclone and two weeks of torrential rains left much of the country under water and in danger of epidemics.

Aid workers flying over some of the worst-hit areas on Wednesday saw huge swaths of low-lying areas submerged. Much of southern Gaza and central Inhambane provinces was accessible only by air.

The toll inflicted on this impoverished southeast African country by two weeks of rains and Cyclone Eline, which churned through the country Tuesday before dissipating into a tropical storm, was staggering.

Foreign Minister Leonardo Simao, launching the aid appeal to diplomats here, said more than 70,000 acres of crops had been destroyed and an estimated 300,000

people lost their homes. About 30,000 cattle drowned.

The World Health Organization warned that more than 800,000 people were at risk from epidemics — particularly cholera and malaria.

Scores of roads and bridges were washed out, hindering delivery of emergency supplies. On Wednesday, yet another bridge — one linking the capital Maputo to the town of Xai-Xai in neighboring Gaza province — collapsed.

Simao put the preliminary death toll from the two weeks of flooding and the cyclone at 70.

The government said \$65 million dollars in aid was needed. The United Nations on Wednesday issued an appeal for \$13.63 million to be used by eight agencies covering food, shelter, health, water, sanitation, education, communication and coordination, said the U.N.'s Office for



the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Geneva.

The heightened risk of malaria was evident at a food aid depot north of Maputo where thousands of mosquitoes — which carry the disease and thrive in stagnant water — coated the walls.

Spaniards protest bombing death

VITORIA, Spain (AP) — Thousands of Spaniards nationwide observed five minutes of silence Wednesday to protest the latest deadly car bombing blamed on the Basque separatist group ETA.

In Vitoria, the Basque capital where a Socialist politician and his bodyguard were killed by the blast Tuesday, several thousand huddled under umbrellas in Spain Square as a steady rain fell.

Their solemn protest was mirrored all over Spain as people gathered outside town halls in silent condemnation of ETA, state radio said.

The explosion occurred Tuesday just 200 yards from the headquarters of the president of the Basque government. It killed Fernando Buesa, the 53-year-old leader of the Alava provincial chapter of the Socialist Party, and his 27-year-old bodyguard, Jorge Diez Elorza, authorities said.

There was no claim of responsibility, but government officials immediately blamed ETA, which announced in December an end to a 14-month-old cease-fire. ETA is

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— Tony Blair
Prime Minister of Great Britain

blamed for a similar bombing that killed an army colonel in Madrid last month.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair joined European Union officials today in expressing outrage over the bombing.

democratic society," Blair told reporters on a visit to EU headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. "This is something that cannot ever be accepted by people committed to peace and democracy."

In a separate statement, Nicole Fontaine, president of the European Parliament, called the bombing "a barbaric act unworthy of a civilized society."

The blast came in the runup to Spain's general elections on March 12, and all parties suspended campaigning. Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar is promising to continue his hardline stance against Basque independence. The Socialists also oppose concessions to ETA. Earlier at the Basque Parliament, hundreds of people filed past Buesa's coffin, which was draped with the red, white and green Basque flag, and the crimson flag of the Socialists.

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