## Russian troops and rebels battle over last command po Ma

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-

"I think in the nearest future we'll be able to close the book on what we're doing

> - Col. Gen. Gennady Troshev Deputy Military Commander in Chechnya

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 roads and banned all civilian more between settlements over fears lence linked to Wednesday's anni of the 1944 mass deportation of Check to Central Asia.

The anniversary coincides w annual Russian holiday honori military, and Russian strategists w that the rebels were planning ter

The news agency ITAR-Tass reputhat federal forces in Grozny on Wedday found and defused three mines. two remote-controlled bombs placed made a wro railroad bridge

#### Flood-torn Mozambique asks for international aid

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 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 de-livery 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 deat

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 27year-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

"This is something that cannot ever be accepted by people committed to peace and democracy."

> - 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.

Terrorism has no place in a

democratic society," Blair to porters on a visit to EU head ters in Brussels, Belgium. "7 something that cannot everl cepted by people commit

Mary, a fev peace and democracy.' been sleepi In a separate states body, espec Nicole Fontaine, preside was and sti the European Parliar plete strang called the bombing "a Another fri baric act unworthy of college, har civilized society."

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The blast came in runup to Spain's general tions on March 12, and all ties suspended campaig Prime Minister Jose Maria nar is promising to cont his hardline stance aga

Basque independence. The So ists also oppose concessions to B Earlier at the Basque Parment, hundreds of people filed

Buesa's coffin, which was dra with the red, white and gr Basque flag, and the crimson of the Socialists.

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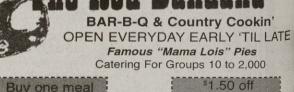




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