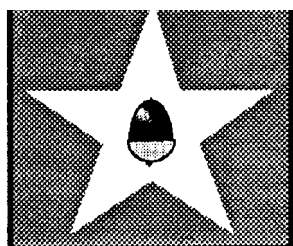


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

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**Pankisskoye Gorge:  
Residents, Refugees & Fighters**

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**P37**

# Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees & Fighters

C W Blandy

*Prospective US/Georgian action against the 'terrorists' in the Pankisskoye gorge in Georgia requires a sensitive approach. The ethnic groups long settled in the area include Chechen-Kistins, who offered shelter to Chechen refugees in the second Chechen conflict. The ineffectual Georgian government has acquiesced in previous Russian actions inside Georgia and attempts to control the border in difficult terrain. Unless Georgian actions in the gorge have Russian support, they run the risk of souring relations in the region and may not solve the local 'terrorist' problem.*

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## Introduction

Irakliy Batiashvili, parliamentary deputy and former director of the Georgian press-intelligence service, made an interesting allegation on 21 September 2001: *“under the rubric of the battle against the so-called Chechen terrorists, Russia is preparing a military operation into the [Georgian] Pankisskoye and Kodori gorges”*.<sup>1</sup> Pavel Felgengauer provided a much simpler explanation, that this was normal skirmishing.<sup>2</sup> Since then rumours have abounded over the movement and actions of Ruslan Gelayev and his 'bandits' on Georgian territory, but with the majority of reports highlighting the presence of Chechen separatists and Arab mercenaries in the Pankisskoye gorge. Their reported activities range from: rest and recuperation; the establishment of a training area; an important link in the logistic supply route for Chechen separatists from the south and a centre for organised crime and distribution of narcotics. Russian Federal aircraft bombed Pankisi on 26/27 November 2001.

More recently, a Russian inter-departmental working group arrived in Tbilisi on 14 February with the specific purpose of looking into the question of organising the return of Chechen refugees from Pankisi. Included in the inter-departmental working group from Moscow were representatives of the Russian Foreign and Interior ministries and the Border Guards under Deputy Emergencies Minister Yuriy Brazhnikov. The head of the Georgian Interior Ministry briefed them on the situation in the gorge. The Russian group also visited the heads of Akhmeta and Kakheti rayony. The Russians had only agreed to meet people who on an organised basis represent Chechen refugees living in the Pankisskoye gorge. According to Brazhnikov, *“Russia has its own variant of a plan for the return of refugees to Chechnya, there are teams, there are qualified people, who offer assistance in this”*.<sup>3</sup> Is the 'planned' removal of Chechen refugees a prelude to federal military action in the gorge? The situation has its own knot of complications which in turn could further exacerbate the unstable situation in the Caucasus.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.kavkaz.org/news/2001/09/21/news3.htm> Kavkaz-Tsentr: “Sobytiya: Russkiye khotyat napast' na Gruziyu” by Anzor Tsunamdzrshvili.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.mn.ru/issue.php?2001-42-42> Moskovskiye Novosti, No 42, 16 October 2001, p1-3, “Malen'kaya gryznaya voyna v Abkhazii” by Pavel Felgengauer. “Every autumn in the wild walnut collection season close to the Kodorskoye gorge a minor Abkhaz-Georgian war begins ... During the period of nut collection a golden time arises for different partisan groups, such as Georgians fighting for the 'liberation' of Abkhazia and unemployed Chechen fighters who provide 'protection'. Russia is simply lucky that in the Caucasus mountains cocaine does not grow and the nut collection does not provide 'cover': the Caucasus fighters could take control of a considerably greater narco-business, like their brother partisan in Columbia”.

<sup>3</sup> <http://nns.ru/chronicle/index.html> NSN: Temy dnya, 14 February 2002, “Organizovannykh bezhentssev pozovut domoy”.

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## Map 1 - Georgia



K - Kodori Gorge

P - Pankisskoye Gorge

## Background - Peoples & Frontiers

The remote and isolated villages in the Russia/Georgia/Azerbaijan border areas were populated by a variety of ethnic groups. They all shared a hard lifestyle, where travel by vehicle was difficult, and what roads there are were closed for more than six months of the year by snow and ice. Yet traditionally people, before the demise of the USSR, used to work in neighbouring regions, driving cattle to winter quarters; the inhabitants of the nearest populated points found markets for the sale of surplus agricultural products on both sides of the internal borders.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought additional complication to the lives of people living in the Caucasus with the establishment of a new formal international frontier along the length of the Great Caucasus Range between the Russian Federation, fronted by the small North Caucasus Republics, and two of the newly-created Transcaucasus sovereign states, Georgia and Azerbaijan: this was over and above the legacy of tsarist conquest embodied in a conscious policy of “knout and gingerbread” and the vicissitudes of communist power and nationalities policy.

Mountains, as such, do not necessarily divide peoples. In fact the reverse, for peoples from the same ethnic family have lived on both sides of the Great Caucasus Range for centuries. Since 1991 these have become divided from their kinsfolk by this frontier, trumpeting its new-found international status. Several major ethnic

groups have found themselves cut asunder, even from their traditional burial grounds, as in the case of the Lezghins.

The ethnic mix in the vicinity of the Pankisskoye gorge is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 - Peoples in Dagestan (RF), Azerbaijan & Georgia Divided by International Frontiers<sup>4</sup>**

Nationality	RF - Dagestan	Azerbaijan	Georgia
Avars	600,000	120,000	15,000
Aguls	20-24,000	4-5,000	- - -
Azerbaijanis	80-100,000	6,000,000	600,000
Laks	100,000	20,000	10,000
Lezghins	250,000	300-400,000	- - -
Rutuls	22-23,000	6-8,000	- - -
Tsakhurs	10,000	18-20,000	- - -

Another source mentions some “470,000 Lezghins on the territory of Dagestan and in Azerbaijan there are some 1,200,000 Lezghins”.<sup>5</sup> Some 10,000 Avars, certainly before the second Russo-Chechen conflict, were located in settlements and villages on Chechen territory close to the border. The 15,000 Avars residing in Georgia were highlighted in August 1999, when Russian Su-25 mistakenly bombed Omalo,<sup>6</sup> an Avar settlement in Georgia, during the opening phases of federal action in Dagestan.

An agreement was signed in 1992<sup>7</sup> between Makhachkala and Tbilisi on the transfer and resettlement of the Avars from the Kvareli rayon in Georgia to Yuzhno-Sukhokumysk in the north of Dagestan west of Kizlyar. The Georgian government was to cover the practical costs of resettlement. The programme has still not been implemented, but in August 1999 the Dagestani Minister for Nationalities and External Affairs stated that:

*“The programme for the resettlement of the Avars is not being realised due to the absence of finance from the side of Moscow. Not one Avar has been resettled in Dagestan within the framework of this programme, however [some] Georgian Dagestanis have resettled themselves in their own homeland and fitted themselves out independently. The authorities*

<sup>4</sup> *Sodruzhestvo NG*, No 3, March 1999, p1, “*Po raznyye storony Kavkazkovo Khrebeta*” by Il'ya Maksakov.

<sup>5</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 100, 3 June 1997, p3, “*Lezginskiy narod ischet zashchity*” by Viktoriya Grankina. These figures appear somewhat high, unless other ethnic groups under Lezghin influence have been included: Tabasaran - 5% of pop - 105,000; Aguls, Rutuls, Tats and Tsakhurs - 3% of pop - 63,000.

<sup>6</sup> *Kommersant-Daily*, 11 August 1999, p3, “*Pilots get directed to peaceful targets*” by Yuri Syun and others.

<sup>7</sup> *Sodruzhestvo NG*, No 3, March 1999, p1.

## Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees &amp; Fighters

*in Makhachkala have accorded them the status of refugees and have paid out pensions and social assistance.”<sup>8</sup>*

**Map 2 - Boundaries Between Chechnya, Dagestan, Georgia & Azerbaijan<sup>9</sup>**



Nevertheless, the Avars want their own homeland, considering that in Georgia they lack any prospects for developing their language, culture and ownership of their own Avar villages. An additional factor which can only increase unease amongst the Avars living in Georgia is that border troops detain people moving across the border from Russia to Georgia and vice versa and direct them to go round through the Derbent control point, or even further, through Azerbaijan. As a result of the actions of border troops:

*“The local inhabitants, the majority of whom are unemployed, do not have the means to cover the cost of transport... Instead of a simple 5-6 hour journey they have to cover 500-800 km over a period of three days, [although] judging by what people say they go on paths well worn by centuries of use, but in this instance they are formally violators of state borders.”<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 82, 12 May 1998, p5, “Dagestan ostanetsya yedinoy nedelimoy respublikoy v sostave RF” by Il’ya Maksakov.

<sup>9</sup> *Atlas Zheleznykh Dorog SSSR – Passazhirskoye Soobshcheniye*, Glavnoye Upravleniye Geodezii i Kartografii pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR, Moskva 1988.

<sup>10</sup> *Sodruzhestvo NG*, No 3, March 1999, p1.

### The Chechen-Kistin

There are seven predominantly Kistin villages in the Pankisskoye gorge: Duisi, Dzhokolo, Kvemo Omalo (Omalo), Birkiani, Dzibakhevi, Shua-Khalatsani and Zemo-Khalatsani.<sup>11</sup> One of the reasons for the increase in the Kistin population is the fact that many Kistin had employment in Chechnya but were forced to return as a result of the present counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya.

According to one source,<sup>12</sup> at the beginning of the 1830s when the Long Caucasian War had started to escalate, some Chechens, whom the Georgians later called *Kistins* from the small River Kistinka which discharges into the River Terek south of Vladikavkaz, started to relocate themselves to the Pankisskoye Gorge in the north-eastern part of Georgia. Another source states that the migration of the Kistins to Georgia started in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and lasted approximately to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>13</sup> The Chechens from time immemorial have driven sheep into Georgia and sold them to the *Kakhetintsy* in exchange for grain, cloth and “*all sorts of other useful things*”.

#### **Box 1 – Chechen-Kistin Background<sup>14</sup>**

In 1836 Naib Dzhokolo, a Chechen, not wishing to subordinate himself to the Avar Shamil', some two years before he [Shamil] was chosen as the Imam of Dagestan and Chechnya, crossed over into Pankisskiy with his whole teip and established a village there which until this very day still bears his name. The Kistins continually increased in numbers, and now the Pankisskoye Gorge is entirely populated by them. Before the Chechen-Kistins became affected by the autumn events of 1999 they numbered some 7,000 people. The Kistins are bilingual, they speak equally freely in Georgian and in their native tongue: secondary and tertiary education in schools is carried out in Georgian, domestically the language is Chechen ... At the end of the last century [sic] the newcomers from over the range began to actively adopt Christianity and to take Georgian names. Suffice it to say that this circumstance was also to save the Kistins from deportation in 1944: not one of them was touched. After the revolution, when the Georgian Orthodox Church was deprived of all rights, missionary activity was forbidden, the second Islamisation of the Kistins began. And now they all to a man profess Islam, although in former times would rather be Christian.

However, as with all matters concerned with ethnicity in the Caucasus, the story of the Chechen-Kistin is not so simple. Zayndi Shakhbiyev<sup>15</sup> describes the Kistin as belonging to the Ingush. The Ingush, of course, are part of the Vaynakh peoples, as are the Chechens. In view of the fact that a number of Ingush were already Christians, one wonders if some of the Kistins were already Christians before their move south. According to Shakhbiyev,<sup>16</sup> the Ingush were historically part of the Chechen people, inheriting the central and southern section of the Terek oblast'

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.civil.ge/pankisi\\_about.shtml](http://www.civil.ge/pankisi_about.shtml) Civil Georgia “Pankisi Crisis”.

<sup>12</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 154, 18 August 2000, p8, “*Voyna narisovannaya i nastoyashchaya*” by Valeriya Kazhdaya.

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.civil.ge/pankisi\\_about.shtml](http://www.civil.ge/pankisi_about.shtml) Civil Georgia “Pankisi Crisis”.

<sup>14</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 154, 18 August 2000, p8.

<sup>15</sup> Zayndi Shakhbiyev “*Sud'ba Checheno-Ingushskogo Naroda*”. Assotsiyatsiya Obshchiy Yevro-Aziatskiy Dom. Rossiya Molodaya, Moskva, 1996, p58.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

and acquiring their name from the large aul of 'Ingusht' (Angusht) in the Tarskaya valley.

The Ingush in many ways have tended to be overshadowed by the more warlike characteristics of their Chechen cousins. Whilst supportive of the Chechens, the Ingush have tended to avoid armed confrontation and to use the voice of moderation. To some extent this can be explained by the different strands of religious worship within the Ingush population, Muslim, Christian and pagan. Shakhbiyev notes that the Ingush were superb builders, particularly working with stone;<sup>17</sup> that the Kistin are artisans<sup>18</sup> tends towards their having Ingush ancestry.

The different characteristics of the Ingush and the Chechen can be epitomised by President Aushev of Ingushetia and President Dudayev of Chechnya. The latter announced independence from Moscow in 1991. Aushev decided to separate from Chechnya, remaining a subject within the Russian Federation, believing that this would make a successful outcome of the Prigorodniy rayon dispute with North Osetia more likely. Remaining within the Federation ensured that Ingushetia did not suffer the armed retribution which led to the devastation and destruction of infrastructure of Chechnya, although the Ingush have been sorely pressed by the arrival of over 200,000 Chechen refugees.

### **Importance of Pankisi to Chechen Fighters**

At the end 1999 the federal government gave Russian Border Troops the task to sever the *boyeviki's* vitally important transport artery which lay across the southern part of the Argun gorge, the Chanty-Argun, from the Chechen settlement of Itum-Kale to Shatili in Georgia. Along this route the supply of ammunition, foodstuffs and medical supplies flowed with little or no interruption. The capture of Itum-Kale in January 2000 and the federal forces' ability to cut the Itum-Kale – Shatili road would prove a major setback for the Chechen separatists and the Wahhabis, but this in turn enhanced the importance of the south-facing Pankisskoye gorge for all elements engaged in fighting in Chechnya to the north.

### **Terrain Between the Pankisskoye Gorge & Chechen Border**

Tbilisi is situated approximately 180km from the gorge. From the Pankisskoye gorge to the Russo (Chechen)-Georgian border is about 70km. In order to get to the Chechen Republic it is necessary to cross the Great Caucasus Range, and this requires passage through or over difficult mountain passes, namely the Atsunta pass, the Yukerigo pass at the southern end of the Kerigo gorge and the Kachu pass, all of which are situated in the Tushetskiy range. In winter heavy snowfall in the mountains makes these passes almost impossible for movement of any kind. Furthermore the terrain south from the Chechen border is bleak, open and with few trees to provide natural cover. Having crossed the passes there is still the obstacle of bypassing both Georgian and Russian border troops outposts and foot patrols. Particularly on the Russian side, border outposts are deployed in depth, not just strung along the border in a single line. The manning of these border posts and

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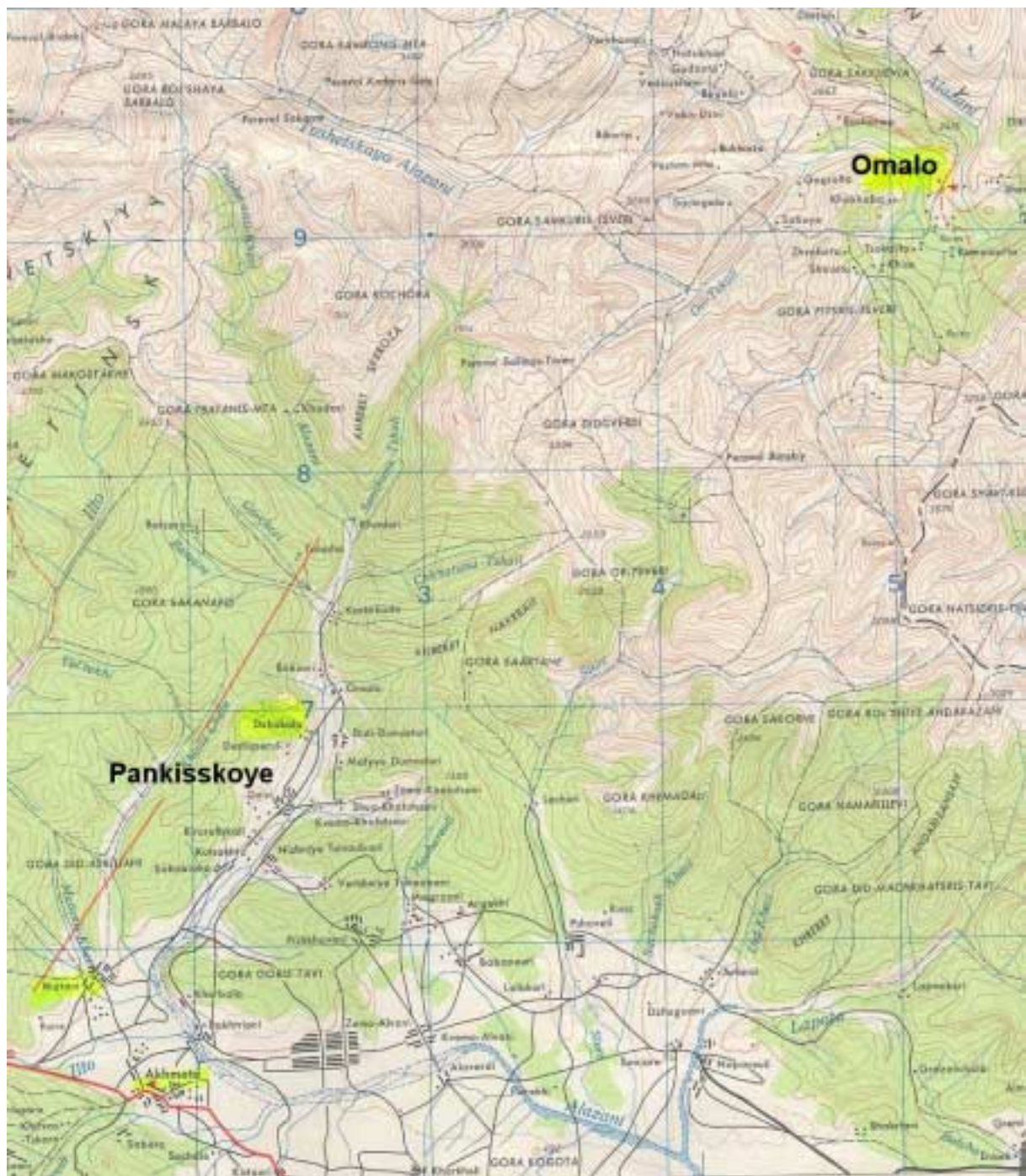
<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p95.

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.civil.ge/pankisi\\_about.shtml](http://www.civil.ge/pankisi_about.shtml) Civil Georgia "Pankisi Crisis". One of the reasons for the increase in the Kistin population is that many Kistin had employment in Chechnya but were forced to return to Georgia as a result of the present counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya.



patrols is undertaken by local mountain people, the Tushetintsy and Khevsury, who know all the mountain paths, trails and tracks in this area.<sup>19</sup>

**Map 3 - Pankisskoye Gorge & Omalo NE Georgia<sup>20</sup>**



<sup>19</sup> <http://www.mn.ru/issue.php?2002-6-4> *Moskovskiy Novosti*, No 6, 2002, "Pankisskiy treugol'nik" by Akakiy Mikadze.

<sup>20</sup> Map Series Eastern Europe 1: 250,000 "Gora Kazbek" NK 38-5 Series N501.

## Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees &amp; Fighters

Map 4 - Securing the Checheno-Georgian Border<sup>21</sup>

## Key

- |                    |                   |                    |
|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1 - Itum Kale      | 2 - Shatili       | 3 - Kyurelam       |
| 4 - Korutakh       | 5 - R Meshekhi    | 6 - Mt Bastykhi    |
| 7 - Khacharoy-Ekhk | 8 - Veduchi       | 9 - Chamgi         |
| 10 - Grotzkhoy     | 11 - Kerigo Gorge | 12 - Yukerigo Pass |
| 13 - Atsonta Pass  | 14 - Khone        |                    |

One point which immediately strikes the eye in studying the maps is the large number of ruins, deserted and discontinued settlements which must point to the problems of trying to survive in this environment coupled with the fact that the young are attracted by an easier and more lucrative life in major urban centres. A typical example in Georgia is that of old people living in a village throughout the year, only visited by their sons and daughters working in Tbilisi in the summer

<sup>21</sup> Obshchegeograficheskiye karty Rossiyskoy Federatsii – Ingusheskaya Respublika, Chechenskaya Respublika – 1: 250,000, Federal'naya Sluzhba Geodozii I Kartografii Rossii 1995/1999.

months. One other important factor is that the population in this high mountain region, both in Chechnya and Georgia, have summer and winter villages, so for six months or so during the year there are deserted villages. Often when the summer months come round again, owners of these summer residences find that they have been broken into and lived in during the harsh winter months by the *boyeviki*. Dwellings, barns and villages are annotated on the maps by the abbreviations *let.* or *zim.*, summer or winter; for example the two watermills at Khone would only be working during the summer months. Along the whole border on the Georgian side from the Atsunta pass by Ht 3431 round to the Yukerigo pass to the east are numerous dwelling places only used during the summer months. It should also be remembered that whilst Itum-Kalinskiy rayon in Chechnya is perhaps the largest in area of all the rayony in Chechnya, it has the sparsest population. In the “*20 mountain villages there is only a population of about 3,000 people*”.<sup>22</sup> One additional interesting fact stemming from isolation, remoteness and inaccessibility is that several local old residents in and around Itum-Kale have never even learnt Russian. Furthermore, “*here children do not go to school because in the course of the last 10 years after the coming to power of Dudayev, schools did not work*”.<sup>23</sup>

### The Capture of Itum-Kale

The operation by Border Troops was planned in close cooperation with the Ministry of Defence. The North Caucasus Regional Directorate (NCRD) of the Federal Border Service (FPS) in conjunction with the Commander of OGV (South) Lieutenant General Ashurov gave their headquarters staffs the task of preparing a thoroughly worked out plan which took into account all the experience of the last campaign. As a result, over the course of the next two months they suffered very few casualties.

#### **Box 2 – Initial Border Operations in December 1999<sup>24</sup>**

**17 December 1999:** *Desantniki* of 56<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the Russian airborne forces landed and secured the following dominating heights: the ruins of Verkhniye Dzhari (2,100m), Korotakh and the Kyurelam ridge with the task of protecting border troops.

**19 December 1999:** A FPS recce group finally determined the location of the forthcoming heliborne landing zone close by the junction of the Argun with the River Meshekhi. One platoon was already sitting on the heights (1,243m) in the neighbourhood of ancient towers belonging to the mountain peoples; lower down there was another platoon. Not so long ago a large *boyeviki* base camp had been located here, which the Russian *desantniki* had taken completely by surprise.

**20 December 1999:** At dawn around 0800hrs, the first helicopter with border troops lifted off at Torgum (Ingushetia) and set course for the Argun gorge. Helicopters flew continually throughout the day until 1600 hrs. Each subunit on landing was ready to go into action immediately, with Mukha grenades, AGSs, 82mm mortars and 72 hours dry rations.

Included in the airborne-assault manoeuvre group were professional contract servicemen from the Voronezh Border Detachment. Sappers experienced in explosive devices and working on rocky terrain were also part of the detachment.

<sup>22</sup> *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 117, 30 June 2001, p2, “*Federaly prepyatstvuyut ukhodu boyevikov*” by Aleksandr Ryabushev and Il’ya Maksakov.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Pogranchinik, February 2001, “*Argunskiy desant*” by Vadim Udmantsev.

## Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees &amp; Fighters

The Deputy Head of the NCRD, head of the territorial detachment (Nal'chik) Major General Viktor Zolotukhin, known by many from days in Tajikistan, controlled the activities of the FPS heliborne *desant*. On the first day the "*vertushki*" transported around 120 men. On landing they immediately selected local defence positions, covering the helicopter landing site, and determined possible ambush positions. Even if the border troops were shielded by subunits of 56<sup>th</sup> Parachute Desant Regiment, there was a strong possibility of trouble from the north and west. Captured enemy equipment was of assistance in moving ammunition from the landing site. Both Army and FPS troops took part in the Argun *desant*. Helicopter aircrews made up to 8-10 sorties (usually no more than 3-4). On 20 December along the flight path Torgum-Meshekhi 45 helicopter sorties were completed.<sup>25</sup> The border troops did not have long to wait before being fired on by the *boyeviki* during the night. Small groups of *boyeviki* frequently and deliberately provoked firing, in order to pinpoint fire positions; however, the border guards "*had already learnt about this ancient Afghan ruse*".<sup>26</sup>

The logistic planning for the border troops was based on the assumption that they would have a greater scale of logistic support than the Army: each outpost was to be supplied with about 30 tonnes of field kitchens, tents, bakeries, etc. Hot bread was delivered to the outposts, freshly baked and distributed to the *desantniki*. At a time when they were deprived of sources of water and warmth, but penetrated through and through by icy winds, the "winged infantry" picketed the high mountain tops, whilst the border guards were getting ready to move further forward. The actual border with Georgia was only 4km away.

On 24 December, as earlier on 20 December, around 100 men from the Far Eastern airborne-assault manoeuvre group landed and occupied positions on the direction towards Itum-Kale by the little town of Bastykhi (1,438m), where a river of the same name flows into the Chanty-Argun. Here, as at Meshekhi, there were dark and sombre ruins: ancient towers, family cemeteries, but also several gorges, and it was here that the Far Eastern airborne-assault manoeuvre group blocked off possible *boyeviki* escape routes. At the beginning of January 2000 troops already controlled 17km of the Argun road between Nizhniye Dzhari and Bastykhi. The border troops outpost "Argun" (1,253m) was situated 800m from the border, but *boyeviki* still managed to escape from here. The *boyeviki* in Itum-Kale subordinated to Khattab had the task of defending and holding on to the rayon centre. Whilst FPS troops had gained the intelligence that Maskhadov had given the *boyeviki* the additional task of expelling the *Federaly* from the Argun gorge, federal forces were given the task of raising the Russian flag over Itum-Kale by 15 February 2000.

When at the end of January 2000 Lieutenant General Ashurov landed at Itum-Kale, north east of Tuskharoy, the border service group in the southern part of the Argun gorge was larger than the MOD airborne group by some 6 times (VDV - 300 men, FPS - up to 2,000). The massed fire of "Smerch" became almost an obligatory prelude before the dispatch of the airborne-assault manoeuvre group to the new area. Artillerymen worked most effectively with the assistance of the "Rapir" equipment which fixed the radio transmissions and conversations of the *boyeviki* up to a range of 6km with a guaranteed accuracy of 10m, after which the 120mm mortar battery hit the detected targets.<sup>27</sup> The *boyeviki* tried to save themselves by

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

running from house to house in search of safe shelter, imploring their field commanders to be evacuated by vehicle. But once again having heard enemy voices on the air, the apparatus gave out the enemy coordinates and mortar bombs “*always arrived at the right address*”.<sup>28</sup> With the fall of Itum-Kale on 10 February 2000, the *boyeviki* moved downstream to the rayon centre of Shatoy to bolster the defence there. Border troops were reinforced in Tuskharoy, at Khacharoy-Ekhhk, by the village of Veduchi, and at the locations of old ruins such as Chamgi and Groztkhoy in the Kerigo gorge where the FPS established outposts on the route south to the Yukerigo pass.

### Summer-Autumn 2001

During August 2001 there was an increase in the activities of detachments of the FPS and subunits from other Federal Forces in and around Itum-Kale, Shatoy, the Chanti-Argun and Sharo-Argun gorges together with the activity of *boyeviki* in Vedenskiy rayon.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps at that time it signalled a new phase in Chechen separatist resistance to the Federal Forces’ counter-terrorist operation, despite some Federal successes<sup>30</sup> in towns, villages and settlements situated on the central plain where Interior Ministry operational groups carried out eight special operational preemptive strikes in Khankala and Groznyy, and in Shelkovskiy, Nozhay-Yurtovskiy and Shalinskiy rayony.

A short press-release on 2 September 2001 with the title “Autumn beckons the *boyeviki* into Chechnya”<sup>31</sup> provided additional speculation based on information from Federal Forces that in the area of the Russo-Georgian border several large detachments of Chechens were in the process of regrouping. Artillery and aviation fired on the almost inaccessible mountain passes and the so-called ‘wolves trails’ located some distance from the Federal Border Service piquet posts in the Argun gorge, and “*no one discounted the possibility of a breakthrough*”. Border troops had picked out 20 main axes along which border breaches were considered possible. According to operational information at the time, in the Sharo-Argun there was a Chechen diversionary detachment of 150 men. Another group, in the order of 70 men, had assembled ready to cross the border in the direction of Shatili and the upper reaches of the Chanti-Argun. However, the report stated that the *boyeviki* did not have much time, because the leaves were falling and movement through the gorges and ravines was becoming more difficult.

Despite federal successes, however, the question remains, how was it possible for the Chechen separatist or Islamic extremist to continue to conduct armed

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> See C W Blandy “*Chechnya: Dynamics of War – Hounded Out*”, CSRC, P36, September 2001, p8.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.smi.ru/2001/06/26/993548242.html> “*Za Barayevym – Movsayev, na ocheredi Tsgarayev, Khattab ne podberzhden*”. Federal successes included the death of Arbi Barayev at Alkhan-Kala sometime between 22 and 24 June 2001, the arrest at Shali of Turpan Movsayev, a participant in the Budennovsk raid in June 1995, the blocking of Magomed Tsgarayev’s detachment of 20 men in the Sharo-Argun gorge and subsequent death of Tsgarayev. See <http://www.smi.ru/2001/08/17/998040534.html> “*Salmana Manuyeva poimali v Alleroy*” for the capture of Salman Manuyev in Alleroy on 17 August 2001.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.nns.ru/chronicle/index.html>, 2 September 2001, “*Osen’ manit boyevikov v Chechnyu*”.

resistance on not such small a scale against the federal forces? In part this is answered by Colonel General Konstantin Totstkiy, Director of the FPS, following an inspection visit to Itum-Kale rayon:

***“The relief in the Chechen sector of the Russo-Georgian border is very complicated and the weather is unstable, which is why the FPS did not manage to land troops in the Sharo-Argun gorge where border guards had discovered a gang of guerrillas on 25 June.”***<sup>32</sup>

General Moltenskiy, commanding the military forces in Chechnya, remarked somewhat differently that:

**“Border guards and the military cooperate in this sector, and **guerrillas do not have the ghost of a chance to break through.**”**<sup>33</sup>

### **Peregrinations of Ruslan Gelayev**

As a result of a combination of difficult, open, treeless terrain and consequent vulnerability to mobile patrols, artillery bombardment and irregular harassing fire on known cross-border routes, static observation posts and aerial reconnaissance missions by federal forces along the Chechen section of the Russo-Georgian border, Chechen *boyeviki* have been forced to reconnoitre and use other routes, including through the Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachayevo-Cherkessia sectors of the international frontier. The possible involuntary involvement of these regions is yet another indicator of the poison of the present conflict leaching out from the Chechen Republic. Unless political solutions are found soon the violence threatens to engulf the whole of the North Caucasus. Continuing, insensitively executed *zachistka* (cleansing) operations will reap their own harvest in the minds of peoples already chafing at the bit to run their own affairs, such as the Karachay and the Balkars.

So sensitive and volatile is the situation between Georgia and Abkhazia that tension between the Georgian government and the Abkhaz authorities increased rapidly when a mixture of Chechen and Georgian guerrilla groups infiltrated into the breakaway republic of Abkhazia during September-October 2001. Half-truth, denial, contradiction and speculation over the arrival, presence and whereabouts of their unwelcome ‘armed-to-the-teeth’ guests from the north have characterised the Georgian government's response. The Georgian government is particularly vulnerable, for “*it not only does not control the situation in Abkhazia and Pankisi, but neither in Adzharia nor Dzhavakhetia*”<sup>34</sup> and of course, there are still elements among the population in Mingrelia which mourn the demise of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Since long before September 2001 tough messages have been emanating from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanding that Georgia turn over members of Chechen illegal bandit formations.

<sup>32</sup> *Granitsa Rossii*, 9 August 2001, p4, “*Guerrillas have no chance to break through*” by Kira Oko, translated by Alexandr Dubovoy, emphasis mine – CWB.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis mine – CWB.

<sup>34</sup> <http://gazetasng.ru/article.cgi?id=30007> GazetaCNG.RU:Vse o Sodruzhestviye Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv, 27 February 2002, “*Pankisi kak orudiye informatsionnoy voyny*” by Aleksandr Orlov.

Perhaps the most notable of the field commanders to 'wander' into Abkhazia was Ruslan Gelayev, who according to information from the Russian Federal Security Service:

*"From April 2001, together with his detachment (around 500 fighters) was situated in the Kodori gorge (Georgia). According to Georgian special services, Gelayev with his detachment is in Ingushetia."*<sup>35</sup>

On 4 October 2001 the Russian Presidential Information Directorate confirmed that Chechen and Georgian *boyeviki* numbering some 500 men had captured the Abkhaz village of Georgiyevskoye, which they later abandoned, and moved off northwards in the direction of the federal border after the Abkhaz armed forces used artillery and armour to dislodge them.<sup>36</sup> The battle lasted some 8-9 hours. According to the Abkhaz, the *boyeviki* were led by Ruslan Gelayev. Earlier they had been based on Georgian territory in the village of Verkhnyaya Lata.<sup>37</sup> Lata is a village which lies on the ancient Sukhumi Military Highway alongside the Kodori River.<sup>38</sup> The area is described thus:

*"The road goes along the pretty valleys of the Kuban' River and its tributaries, the Teberda and the Gonachkhira ... along a narrow trail worn down in the snow, tourists (in fact at the present time fighters) cross over the Klukhorskiy pass, after which they they continue their journey south into Georgian territory... On the slope to begin with the road descends along the valley of one of the tributaries of the Kodori - the River Klych and then winds along the Kodori itself until it reaches the shores of the Black Sea and the capital of Abkhazia - Sukhumi."*<sup>39</sup>

On 9 October 2001 the same group of *boyeviki* captured the Armenian village of Naa in the Gul'ripshskaya district of Abkhazia, shooting 14 local inhabitants. Further reports on 16 October brought news that Gelayev's detachment had gone over to the offensive in the Kodori gorge and had almost been able to reach Sukhumi, some 30km from the gorge.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile on 16 October, the Abkhaz leadership announced the beginning of the final phase of the operation to destroy the *boyeviki* in the Kodori gorge. According to Valeriy Arshba, in the area of Mount Sakharnaya Golova 200 *boyeviki* were concentrated. They were subjected to artillery and aerial strikes and were trying to break through into Karachayevo-Cherkessia via the Marukhskiy pass.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.nns.ru/Person/gelaev> NSN: Personalii "Gelayev Ruslan (Khamzat)".

<sup>36</sup> [http://ng.ru/events/2001-10-13/8\\_chronicle.html](http://ng.ru/events/2001-10-13/8_chronicle.html) *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, No 192, 13 October 2001, "Chechnya: Khronika konflikta (s 29 Sentyabrya po 12 Oktyabrya).

<sup>37</sup> <http://lenta.ru/vojna/2001/10/04/abkhazia> LENTA.RU: CHECHNYA: "Banda Gelayeva propyvayetsya v Rossiyu" 4 October 2001.

<sup>38</sup> The Georgian Military Highway is of course the most well-known, but there are three, the third being the Osetian Military Highway. Further details can be found in V L Vilenkin "Po Tsentral'nom Kavkazkomu i Zapadnomu Zakavkazyu", Gosudarstvennoye Izdatel'stvo Geograficheskoy Literatury, Moskva 1955, pp35, 87 and 204.

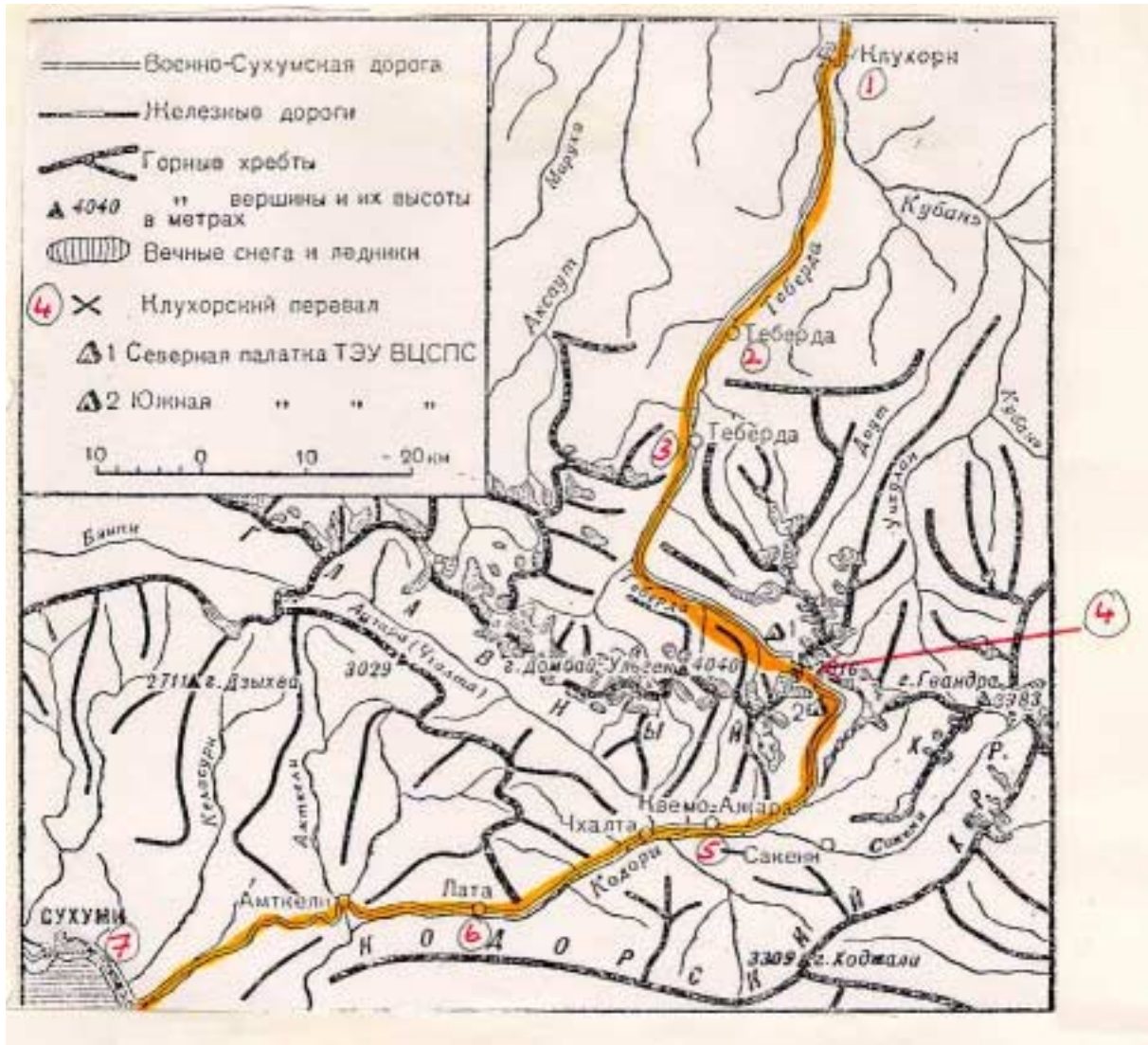
<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p205.

<sup>40</sup> <http://gazetasng.ru/article.cgi?id=24220> GazetaCNG.RU: Vse o Sodruzhestviye Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv 16 October 2001, "Otryad Gelayeva voshel v stolitsu Abkhazii, soobshchayet Gruzinskoye televideniya".

## Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees &amp; Fighters

There are many question which remain unanswered to date: did the Georgian authorities ask Gelayev and his band to leave Pankisi; was Gelayev wounded in Abkhazia; did he receive hospital treatment in Tbilisi subsequently; did Gelayev and his band as part of a covert agreement with the Georgian side deliberately provoke the Abkhaz authorities?

**Map 5 - The Sukhumi Military Road & Kodori Gorge<sup>41</sup>**



## Key

- |                      |                     |             |
|----------------------|---------------------|-------------|
| 1 - Klukhori         | 2 - Teberda (Lower) | 3 - Teberda |
| 4 - Klukhorskii Pass | 5 - Kvemo Adzhara   | 6 - Lata    |
| 7 - Sukhumi          |                     |             |

Nor did the matter rest there, in the hands of the Georgian and Abkhaz authorities. Russian helicopters and aircraft crossed into Georgian airspace in November 2001, both at the Chechen end of the frontier and in the western, Abkhaz area.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p204.



**Box 3 – Violations of Georgian Airspace 27-28 November 2001**<sup>42</sup>

Though on Tuesday night Russian aircraft did not bomb Kistin dwellings in villages in the Pankisskoye gorge, another attack became known. “Helicopters of a foreign state on Wednesday night took part in the bombing of the Georgian village of Khevsureti, it is not excluded that there are casualties,” Irakliy Menagarishvili, Georgian Foreign Affairs Minister, stated at a press conference. According to a deputy chairman of the state department for the protection of Georgia’s borders, David Gula, it was confirmed by Georgian border troops that on the night of Wednesday on the Chechen sector of the Russo-Georgian border Georgian air space was violated by four helicopters, which proceeded to drop bombs on the outskirts of the Georgian villages of Arkhieli, Amga and Kerga and then returned in the direction of Russia.

Irakliy Menagarishvili evaluated the violation of the country’s air space on 27 and 28 November by Russian war planes Su-25 and Mi-24 which was accompanied by rocket-bomb attacks as “*an attempt at naked aggression*”... The Minister emphasised that six Russian Su-25 had bombed the territory close to the village of Birkiani of Akhmeta rayon, encroached on Georgian airspace for a distance of 50km, that “*excluded the probability of a mistake*”. In his words the bombing of Arkhotskoye gorge took place with four Mi-24 helicopters.

The Minister also remarked that as a result of these nocturnal acts there had been no casualties but several buildings had been destroyed in different villages. He also reported that at 1235 on Wednesday from the Russian side four Su-25 aircraft had violated Georgian airspace in the area of the Kodori gorge which returned, flying around in the area of Mestia. Menagarishvili felt this was an attempt at “*psychological pressure*”. In his words it sounded the alarm that these incidents took place on the eve of Georgian President Shevardnadze’s visit to Moscow for the CIS summit and a meeting with his Russian colleague Vladimir Putin.

## New Operations in Pankisi?

### A Spectrum of Views

Associated with the fact that the “*9/11 attacks changed the geopolitical calculus*,”<sup>43</sup> not only has tension increased over the Pankisskoye gorge, degenerating almost into a war of words between Tbilisi and Moscow which has centred on the Russian requirement for the Georgian authorities to exert control and re-establish law and order within the gorge, but the United States now appears to have a direct interest in view of the global anti-terrorist operation, over and above its interest in curbing Russian pressure on the Southern Caucasus states. Speculation and denial about the possibility of unilateral military action by Moscow, a possible joint Russo-Georgian operation or indeed one undertaken by the Georgians with American specialist help has been rife since the beginning of February 2002. Added to this, of course, are the views of the people living in the gorge: fear of Russia being the predominant one amongst refugees and those likely to be returned or ‘repatriated’ to Chechnya. Basically, there are two problems: to curb the lawlessness in the gorge and secondly, the voluntary return of refugees to Chechnya.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.kavkaz.org/russ/article.php?id=311>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/cgi-bin/newspro/fullpnews.cgi?newsid1014385500,25939> Civil Georgia – Pankisi Crisis, 22 February 2002, “*Ariel Cohen: I don’t see the Operation with Russian Involvement*”.

## Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees &amp; Fighters

Several press reports and federal intelligence sources have mentioned that “*Pakistani, Arab and Pushtun fighters have found a refuge in the Pankisskoye gorge in the north of Georgia not far from the border with Chechnya*”.<sup>44</sup> Representatives of both the USA and the Russian Federation are endeavouring to put pressure on the government of Eduard Shevardnadze to make a strike against the Islamic radicals in the north of Georgia. According to reports from Russian intelligence sources a high ranking American diplomat in Tbilisi stated that the USA was prepared to offer help to Georgian anti-terrorist subunits. The US Chargé d’Affaires in Georgia, Philip Remler, announced that:

*“As regards Al Qaeda, according to our information, several tens of Mujahedin hurried from Afghanistan and at the present moment are hiding in the Caucasus. Furthermore we received information about the fact that a proportion of them are playing hide and seek in the Pankisskoye gorge and are in contact with Khattab. The last named in his turn is linked to Usama bin Laden. The Pankisskoye gorge is a very dangerous place in Georgia.”*<sup>45</sup>

Both the United States and the Russian Federation thus appear to have a common view on the problem which has arisen in the Pankisskoye gorge. Whilst Georgia had earlier stated that there were no fighters in the gorge, on 6 February 2002 the Georgian security minister, Valeriy Khaburdzaniya, stated that the well-known Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev could have moved into the Pankisskoye gorge, although he did not have a reserved place there: “*in the gorge Gelayev and Chechen subunits moved about in a dynamic manner*”.<sup>46</sup> Comments about the possibility of Al Qaeda operatives, militants and Taliban fighters arriving in the gorge reached new heights when it was reported that some senior Russian officials alleged that the world’s most wanted man, Usama bin Laden might also be hiding in the gorge.<sup>47</sup> Khaburdzaniya excluded the possibility of carrying out a joint operation by Georgian and Russian special forces.

On 15 February it was reported that Russia and Georgia had prepared a plan for the return of Chechen refugees situated in the gorge. The announcement was made by the leader of the inter-departmental working group, Yuriy Bazhnikov, and the Georgian Minister for Internal Affairs Koba Narchemashvili. It was planned to draw on the knowledge of the senior elders from the Chechen refugees in the gorge and then compose a list of those wishing to return to Chechnya, with the list being ready in March. How would the refugees be distinguished from the fighters? This would be carried out in complete openness on the basis of registration:

*“Only after that, the concrete list of those wishing to return to Chechnya would be compiled and we would set about the next stage of the*

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.smi.ru/2002/02/15/1013787317.html>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> <http://gazeta.ru/2002/02/19/BinLadenandU.shtml> Gazeta.Ru, 19 February 2002, “Bin Laden and US Troops Welcome in Georgia”.

*operation – the transport of refugees from Georgia to Russia. Boyeviki will be filtered according the lists.”<sup>48</sup>*

On 18 February a spontaneous meeting took place in the village of Dyusi some 2.5km SSW of Dzhokolo in the gorge and the leader of the local administration tried to clarify matters. The latest announcements from representatives of the foreign affairs departments of Russia and the United States,<sup>49</sup> according to Vakha Khasanov, had started to generate rumours concerning possible negative developments which could take place in the gorge. Worried inhabitants had assembled with placards and other signs of protest and concern. The thrust of their language was easily understood. The people simply did not wish to be part of a large political deal. All that they were concerned about was the ability to live their own lives in peace without any outside interference. Mendacious information and gossip added fuel to the flames, broadcasts on Georgian television alleging that a meeting was taking place of local Kistins against refugees with demands for them to leave Georgian territory. People had gone to the meeting with the specific purpose of identifying themselves with the position of the refugees, offering solid support. The solidarity with the refugees centred around the point that none of the people wanted Russian participation in this particular question. No one believed or trusted Russia, and they would only return home when the 'occupiers' had left the Chechen Republic. Many people in Pankisi are convinced that:

*“Russia and her agents of influence in Georgia could set out to bomb Pankisi, in order to provoke dissension between the local population and refugees, as they say, everything because of the refugees, all the uneasiness and danger is due to their presence in Georgia.”<sup>50</sup>*

The threat of being the target of Russian Su-25 bombers had a real ring of probability, bearing in mind the bombing of Omalo close to the Dagestani border in August 1999 and the aircraft incursions in November 2001. One must also recall the unmarked aircraft which attacked children at Roshny-Chu, Urus-Martanovskiy rayon, Chechnya in October 1995.

## Conclusion

### Scope of Operation

Over the past two years or so there have been many instances of lawlessness in the gorge, smuggling, hostage-taking and drug running, but it has tended to be of a local Caucasian nature with complicity and involvement by elements of the Georgian law enforcement authorities and the leaders of organised crime in Georgia. From the Russian side one cannot but feel there has been a tendency to over-magnify the number of religious extremists and *Wahhaby* present in the gorge; undoubtedly there are some but not in the numbers publicised by Moscow. Trumpeting the anti-global terrorism call in the wake of the United States' lead and extending it to include the extermination of Chechen separatist, Wahhabi and so-called Al Qaeda elements in the gorge is undoubtedly one of Moscow's objectives.

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.smi.ru/2002/02/15/1013787317.html>

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.kavkaz.org/russ/article.php?id=1765> Kavkaz Centre 18 February 2002, “Pankisi v ozhidanii udara” by Vakha Khasanov, radio “Kavkaz”.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

## Pankisskoye Gorge: Residents, Refugees &amp; Fighters

However, retaliatory action by Moscow in the shape of further unilateral bombing raids would be counter-productive in the eyes of the international community, let alone a direct military insertion of ground troops or 'winged infantry'. In many ways the problem of Pankisi lawlessness does not demand a military operation. In essence it is much more of an internal police operation. Here, of course the problem goes much deeper: it comes down to paying the the police and law enforcement agencies sufficient money to keep them from supplementing their income by other means. But how? Going deep in Georgian political life are the whiffs of corruption in higher places.<sup>51</sup>

Restoring law and order in Pankisi is one matter in which the Georgian government must take the lead, if it is going to survive as an independent sovereign state.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, probably the best method for the Georgian government over Pankisi is to avail itself of American assistance in the shape of military advisors, training packages and equipment. Furthermore, as part of the global operation to outlaw international terrorism, mainly under the aegis of the United States, the ongoing monitoring, investigation of fund transfers and attempts at curbing illegal financial transactions will slowly start to bridle the abilities of internationally organised crime. At least, under the circumstances of a closer United States presence in some way or other, there can be greater confidence that the action required to restore law and order in Pankisi will be carried out within the framework of international law and respect for human rights. Whilst Moscow as an interested party should be consulted, briefed and kept in the picture, the excesses and brutality of its past and present mopping up operations in Chechnya render its presence in any Pankisi operation unwelcome and detrimental, particularly in view of the residue of hate and loathing present amongst the Chechen population in Chechnya itself.

Taking a wider perspective, if the matter of Pankisi is kept as a low key police operation, then other potential problems such as the presence of Avar peoples in Kvareli and Lagodekhskiy rayony will be able to be resolved peacefully and without undue turbulence. A joint Russo-Georgian military operation would not help that situation, particularly where there is a need for future cooperation and funding from the Georgian government to carry out the move of Avars to the north of Dagestan.

One further point remains. The Abkhaz and the South Osetians for their own reasons would almost certainly support any moves by Russia. The Abkhaz are striving to achieve independence from Georgia through Moscow and the South Osetians want union with their kinsfolk in Russian North Osetia, not forgetting that a comparatively large number of South Osetians were resettled in Prigorodniy rayon in 1944 after the forced deportation of the Ingush and Chechens to Kazakhstan.

Chechen refugees sheltering in the Pankisskoye gorge must not be forcibly returned to Chechnya in view of their fears over the inevitability of processing through

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/cgi-bin/newspro/fullnews.cgi?newsid1014469936,50587> Civil Georgia "Opposition Goes International", 25 February 2002. "Zurab Zhivania stated on February 21 that the main recommendations of the US experts and officials to Georgia is to defeat corruption ..."

<sup>52</sup> One of the tragedies about Georgia has been its dependence since 1800 on St Petersburg and Moscow, which has probably stultified the growth of a stable, democratic political culture. It is somewhat similar to the arrested development of Chechen statehood and democracy due to continued interference and the resultant conflict between Chechen and Russian.

filtration centres and the continuing *zachistki* operations resulting in abuses of human rights, unwarranted and unnecessary loss of civilian lives in Chechnya.

The Georgian authorities themselves must carry out any operation to restore law and order in the Pankisskoye gorge. Assistance to the Georgian government from the United States in the shape of military advisors, training packages and equipment will bring a variety of benefits:

- It will steel the Georgian authorities to take action.
- With a United States presence, there will be greater confidence that the action required to restore law and order will be carried out within the framework of international law and respect for human rights.
- Limiting the operation to one involving the police and law enforcement agencies with US advisors will avoid wide-spread reverberations which could have an impact on other peoples in the Caucasus, such as the Avar community in Georgia.
- It will provide a degree of confidence to Moscow that the problem of Pankisi will be regularised through American interest in neutralising even a small Al Qaeda presence, if indeed Al Qaeda operatives are present in the gorge.

However, a fine but clear line needs to be drawn with US involvement in Pankisi. US support for Georgia over Pankisi could be seen in a detrimental light by the Abkhaz and South Osetians, who could possibly have a totally erroneous perception that the US will start to take the side of Tbilisi against Sukhumi's and Tskhinvali's pretensions for independence. Great care needs to be taken to maintain constant liaison with Moscow, particularly on the part of Tbilisi, which to date has been a little tardy over explaining its plans to avail itself of superpower assistance.

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