

Russian troops display force

PERVOMAYSKAYA, Russia — Flare-firing Russian jets and helicopters roared early Monday over this bleak village, where government forces surrounded Chechen kidnapers and their hostages in the seventh day of an unnerving standoff.

Russian authorities said Sunday the rebels, who hold 100 hostages, had been given the night "to think things over." They did not specify what action would be taken if the gunmen continued to ignore demands to release the hostages.

Aircraft buzzed the mist-wrapped village during the night, apparently to maintain pressure on the rebels. Shock waves from low-flying jets broke windows in surrounding villages.

Interior Ministry officials in Moscow said the rebels took shots Sunday at Russian troops and military helicopters, wounding two soldiers. But an official from the local Interior Ministry said no shooting occurred.

Russian troops have been walking a narrow path in the hostage crisis, trying not to give ground to the rebels while doing nothing to endanger the

hostages, which include women and children.

The rebels have threatened to shoot the hostages if they are not granted safe passage back to Chechnya, the secessionist republic where rebels have been fighting Russian troops since December 1994.

The rebels had seized up to 3,000 hostages Tuesday in Kizlyar, a town in the neighboring republic of Dagestan, but released most the next day and headed for Chechnya in buses. They were stopped by Russian forces at Pervomayskaya, about a mile from the Chechen border.

A Russian Interior Ministry official in Moscow, who declined to be identified, said that as the troops pulled back Sunday evening, the rebels shot at them and fired rockets at two helicopters. The official accused the rebels of trying to provoke a Russian assault.

But an official of Dagestan's Interior Ministry, who gave his name only as Lt. Col. Musayev, denied the report, calling it a "provocation."

In the nearby village of Sovetskoye, no gunfire could be heard.

"If even one hostage is shot, I will act immediately."

MIKHAIL BARSUKOV

Head of the Russian Federal Security Service

Gen. Mikhail Barsukov, head of the Federal Security Service, and Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov arrived in Dagestan on Sunday to oversee the operation, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported.

"If even one hostage is shot, I will act immediately," Barsukov said Saturday. He did not say what steps he would take.

Earlier, a Russian assault on the hostage-takers seemed imminent.

"We are preparing the operation. There is a deadline of 10 a.m. (2 a.m. EST.) We start then," Maj. Gen. Alexander Mikhailov, spokesman for

the Federal Security Service, told reporters early Sunday. But that deadline passed with no action and it was not clear for how long it was extended.

Mikhailov said there would be no pardon for the raid's leader, Chechen rebel Salman Raduyev, or his lieutenants.

"He has a lot of blood on his hands," Mikhailov said.

Moscow showed no sign of backing down from its demand that all hostages be released unconditionally.

In a similar hostage crisis in June, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin held televised negotiations with the rebels and allowed them to escape to Chechnya, where they released the last of their hostages.

This time, the Kremlin and the Russian public, exasperated by the 13-month-old war and continuing rebel raids, might support the use of force.

The Kremlin sent troops into Chechnya to put down Chechen rebel leader Dzhokhar Dudayev's three-year drive for independence. Up to 30,000 people have died. Raduyev is Dudayev's son-in-law.

Budget prospects not bright

WASHINGTON — Saying "we're universes apart," House Budget Chairman John Kasich on Sunday gave little chance for a balanced budget deal this week.

But he said Republicans probably would agree to raise the debt ceiling, avoiding a government default, even without a budget compromise.

Democrats, blaming the Republicans for intransigence, were only slightly more hopeful about reaching a budget agreement soon. The White House and Republicans are due to make another stab at compromise on Wednesday.

Kasich, R-Ohio, said Republicans would likely shift strategy if the budget impasse continues by raising the debt ceiling and targeting only federal programs they dislike for another government shutdown.

Unless the debt ceiling is raised, the nation risks becoming unable to pay the interest on its debts. "You don't want to mess around with defaulting here in the United States," Kasich said.

A day earlier, House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., said that Congress would "find a way to solve the debt ceiling."

But on Sunday, White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta said that President Clinton would veto any spending legislation that cripples programs Clinton feels are important.

"The Republicans aren't really interested in compromise," House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri said on NBC. "They want it their way or the highway and the president is not going to do that."

Gephardt said 50-50 odds for a deal were "probably as good as you can put on it."

Without a deal, the nation possibly faces another partial government shutdown when current temporary funding measures expire on Jan. 26, and a government default on Feb. 15 when the Treasury must pay interest to bondholders.

News in a Minute



Bush admits to Gulf War error

WASHINGTON — Former President George Bush says he underestimated Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's political staying power after the Persian Gulf War and regrets that the allies didn't do more to undercut Saddam's authority.

In an interview with David Frost to be aired Tuesday on PBS, Bush said he still thinks Saddam will be overthrown by his own people. But Bush recalled that during the 1991 Gulf War he and others felt a sound military defeat would lead to his downfall.

"I miscalculated," Bush said. "I thought he'd be gone."

Bush reiterated his oft-stated view that it would have been a mistake to order the U.S. military to hunt down Saddam in Baghdad, and that it was a correct judgment to end the war after having evicted Iraq's occupying army from Kuwait.

But the former president, in the interview taped last Dec. 12 in his Houston office, said Saddam fooled him when he used his surviving military power to quickly crush postwar revolts by Kurds in Iraq's north and Shiites in the south.

"I think he took us by surprise," Bush said.

Man shot at Catholic Church

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — A man armed with a knife was killed by a police officer Sunday after he tried to steal a collection plate during Mass at St. Mary's Catholic Church, police said.

Police spokesman Lt. Alan Scott said the unidentified suspect was shot once in the torso after he lunged at three police officers with a knife when they tried to arrest him in a restroom in the church vestibule.

He said the knife had a 7-inch blade.

None of the 350 worshippers or church employees was injured. The suspect, who may have been a transient, died at Memorial Hospital shortly after 11 a.m., Scott said.

Fans dislike ticket agencies' tactics

AUSTIN, Texas — Many loyal Bruce Springsteen fans who lined up for concert tickets over the weekend were out of luck after ticket agencies paid 100 homeless people to camp out for tickets.

The homeless lined up Friday night and bought most of the \$30 tickets when they went on sale Saturday morning. By Saturday night, ticket agencies were reselling them for as much as \$400.

Kent Taylor, the Showtime Tickets owner who hired 50 homeless people to buy as many tickets as they could, said he doesn't feel guilty. He gave people a chance to make \$50.

"Everybody has a fair chance to be the first ones in line," said Taylor, who said he hires the homeless about twice a month. "It's easier to round up homeless people. They're more flexible than people who work."

Front-line soldiers withdraw in Bosnia

OKRUGLICA, Bosnia-Herzegovina — Several thousand government, Serb and Croat troops withdrew from their front-line trenches and bunkers across central and northeastern Bosnia on Sunday, beating a deadline to create buffer zones between the forces.

The withdrawal came five days before the Jan. 19 deadline for the creation of 2 1/2-mile buffer zones along former front lines throughout Bosnia.

The deadline is part of the U.S.-brokered peace agreement signed last month, under which Bosnia is to be partitioned into two ethnically based entities and a 60,000-man NATO-led peacekeeping force deployed.

"This is a tremendous beginning," Maj. Alistair Ross, a NATO spokesman, said at this front-line village, 120 miles northwest of Sarajevo. "It's too early to say the peace will hold, but what we're seeing today hasn't been achieved in almost four years of war."

"I'm going home soon, but in the meantime I'm happy to be four kilometers (2 1/2 miles) away from those Serbs rather than just 300 meters (yards)," said Toni, a mud-caked young soldier who declined to give his full name.

In another sign of subsiding tensions, Serbs on Sunday released two

"This is a tremendous beginning."

MAJ. ALISTAIR ROSS

NATO spokesman

people who had been held since crossing into Serb sections of Sarajevo around Christmas.

The release of the two was not directly related to the exchange of around 900 people planned for Monday and Tuesday, mandated by the peace agreement that says all war prisoners must be freed by Jan. 19.

But it was likely to boost the confidence of the hostile sides. Other prisoner exchanges have foundered at the last minute.

The peace agreement creates British-, French- and American-patrolled sectors in Bosnia. British troops in armored vehicles will patrol their area of the front line over the next several days to verify compliance.

"It gives us considerable satisfaction. This mandate is very different from the old one. It seems to be working," said Ross, who also was a member of the U.N. mission that the NATO-led force replaced. That mission was widely seen as ineffectual.

Historic King district gets additional land for center

ATLANTA — The site of a former pencil factory will be added to a historic district honoring Martin Luther King Jr. on Monday as part of celebrations marking his birthday.

The 5.5 acres will be converted into a parking lot for a King visitors center that is being built by the National Parks Service. A milelong walkway will connect it to the Carter Presidential Center's library and museum.

With Atlanta the host of the 1996 summer Olympics, officials expect many more visitors to the sites.

"For someone visiting here from France, England, China, what they're going to think about is 'Where is Martin Luther King?' and 'Where is Jimmy Carter?' We're connecting them," said Rand Wentworth, a repre-

sentative for a trust that has acquired and transferred land to complete the 15.5-acre district.

In the 1950s, the Scripto pencil plant was Atlanta's largest employer, providing jobs for residents and customers for businesses.

The land transfer is one of many ceremonies marking King's birthday in Atlanta and elsewhere around the nation. President Clinton is scheduled to attend a service at Ebenezer Baptist Church, next door to the King Center, before touring the Olympic Stadium.

The King Center, which is run by King's family, will hold its annual march and rally. Emory University will show a portfolio of rare photographs taken during the last year of King's life.

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