

NEWS DIGEST

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Russian bombs dropped in Grozny

GROZNY, Russia - Russian jets screamed over the Chechen capital Wednesday, bombing houses and killing scores of people as ground forces fought to approach the city from three directions.

The attacks were some of the heaviest against Grozny since Russia launched its campaign to wipe out Chechnya-based Islamic militants.

President Boris Yeltsin said Russian troops would not stop their offensive until they "destroy the center of international terrorism in Chechnya."

Chechen military headquarters said 116 people, mostly civilians, were killed in Wednesday's air and artillery attacks, but the figure could not be con-

firmed. Streams of desperate civilians fled to the countryside.

Huge plumes of smoke rose over Grozny as pairs of Russian jets roared over the city. Bombs and rockets destroyed houses and apartment buildings, including the home of warlord Shamil Basayev.

Basayev's fighters were among those who twice attacked the neighboring Russian republic of Dagestan in August and September, prompting Russia to launch the campaign to eliminate them. Russian officials also blame the militants for apartment bombings in Russia last month that killed some 300 people.

Russia has repeatedly said its mili-

tary actions are limited to attacking rebel positions. Air Force Chief Anatoly Kornukov said Wednesday that "peaceful civilians both in and outside Grozny are spared missile and bombing strikes."

But Chechen Vice Premier Kazbek Makhachev called Wednesday's raids "state terrorism ... a slaughter of the people."

Scores of civilians, including women and children, have been killed by the attacks on Grozny and other Chechen towns in recent weeks, according to independent observers.

Yeltsin said Wednesday that Moscow was determined to press ahead with its campaign.

Yeltsin left Moscow on Wednesday for a vacation, apparently content to let his officials handle the war.

Meanwhile, Russian forces in eastern Chechnya took control of four villages and surrounded two others, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Gennady Alyokhin said. Russian forces in the region were focusing air and artillery raids on the nearby city of Gudermes, he said.

The four captured settlements - Azamat-Yurt, Stepnoye, Nizhni Gerzel and Kadi-Yurt - lie along a strategically important highway running east to Dagestan and just a few miles from Gudermes, the Russian military command said.

Attack in Armenia kills at least seven

YEREVAN, Armenia (AP) - Gunmen seized Armenia's parliament in a torrent of automatic weapons fire Wednesday, killing the prime minister and at least six other people before holding up in the building with dozens of hostages.

At least two of the captives were released early Thursday (late Wednesday CDT), nearly 10 hours after the siege began. The attackers didn't explain the release.

With the bodies of Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisian and Parliament Speaker Karen Demirchian still on the podium where they fell, the attackers demanded to see the president.

"They said it was a coup and called on the journalists to inform people about it. They said they were going to punish the authorities for what they did to the nation," said one reporter who was in the chamber during the afternoon attack.

As day turned to night, police said up to five gunmen held dozens of hostages in the main chamber of the parliament building. A man identified as the gunmen's leader, Nairi Unanian, spoke in a telephone interview with a local television station.

He said the deaths were unintended except for Sarkisian, who he claimed had failed to serve the nation.

"The country is in a catastrophic situation, people are hungry, and the government doesn't offer any way out," Unanian said.

Armenian television broadcast footage of the stunning attack, showing at least two men firing automatic weapons in the parliament chamber. Some lawmakers dove under their desks, others fled into the streets.

One of the attackers approached the prime minister and said: "Enough of drinking our blood," according to reporters present during the attack.

The premier calmly responded, "Everything is being done for you and the future of your children."

The attacker - identified by reporters as Unanian, an extreme nationalist and former journalist - opened fire.

The other gunmen included Unanian's brother and uncle, the reporters said.

The attack was likely to plunge Armenia into a major political crisis. The country, which became independent following the 1991 Soviet collapse, has been plagued by political and economic turmoil for the past decade.

President Clinton said he was shocked and saddened by the attack.

"I condemn the senseless act against individuals actively engaged in building democracy in their country," Clinton said in a statement. "The victims and their families are in our thoughts and prayers."

Hundreds of police and soldiers ringed the parliament building in central Yerevan. Two armored personnel carriers took up positions in the grounds and President Robert Kocharian was personally directing security operations.

The gunmen were demanding talks with Kocharian, the country's top leader, but officials did not say if any other demands had been made.

The motive for the attack was not clear, although speculation centered on the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has dominated Armenian politics for the past decade.

The enclave was under the control of the neighboring Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, whose territory surrounded it. The enclave declared independence in early 1988 and drove Azerbaijani troops out with Armenia's help.

Presidential candidates begin first debate of series

HANOVER, N.H. (AP) - Eager for their first debate of the campaign, Al Gore and Bill Bradley began sparring even before the television cameras were turned on Wednesday night. Both agreed to seek bipartisan cooperation with Congress.

Gore and Bradley were both on stage for their introductions when the vice president took the offensive. "What do we do now?" he said to the town hall-style audience at Dartmouth College. "Why don't you start asking some question while we're waiting."

With that, members of the audience did.

The first question was about bipartisanship, and both pledged to work with Republicans and Democrats alike.

Gore said he would "build personal bridges" with both parties. Bradley, like Gore a former senator, said "it's about reaching out to people."

They also took questions on Cuba and campaign finance reform before the formal start of the debate.

Both men were seated on their debate stools when CNN began its scheduled telecast.

The stakes were high for the two men, probably higher for the vice president, who has watched a commanding lead in national and statewide polls shrivel in the face of a spirited effort by the former New Jersey senator.

In their pre-debate, Gore pledged to reform campaign finance laws and practice "a different kind of campaigning," suggesting that his call for weekly debates would improve the political process.

Bradley said: "Politics has become the mechanics of winning too much. What's been lost is a sense of service."

The campaigns converged for a 60-minute televised forum in which audience members furnished the questions. The format allowed little chance of back-and-forth between the two Democrats.

"Politics has become the mechanics of winning too much. What's been lost is a sense of service."

BILL BRADLEY
presidential candidate

Gore is trying to rejuvenate his presidential bid with a more relaxed, less rigid style on the campaign trail. At the same time, he has sharpened his criticism of Bradley, calling him a "left of center" insurgent who would build an enormous federal deficit with his health care and anti-poverty plans.

All but ignoring the barbs, Bradley is sticking to a months-old strategy to portray himself as the candidate of big ideas and Gore the timid practitioner of "trifling things." While Gore jazzes up his performances, Bradley still wear reading glasses on the stump and avoids sound bites; his style is a lack of style.

Gore advisers cautioned him before the debate to avoid appearing too negative, though he was poised to seize on any question that gave him an opening to question Bradley's proposals or his rival's commitment to the party. Bradley's team had the former senator ready to respond if Gore went on the attack.

"We're not going to just let him mischaracterize us," said Bradley's communications director, Anita Dunn.

The debate was held in the context of new Democratic polling that underscored Bradley's surge. A Quinnipiac College survey released Tuesday showed him leading Gore 47 percent to 39 percent in New Hampshire, just outside the margin of error.

Bradley has pulled even in New York and has narrowed the vice president's lead in Iowa.

Two polls released Wednesday showed that Bradley trails Gore nationally, though he has gained ground since July and April, respectively. Other polls suggest that Gore has slowed his slide in national polls this fall.

The vice president had expressed no interest in debating until Bradley dashed his hopes for an easy primary contest. Gore now says he wants to debate weekly, though the campaigns have agreed on only a handful of dates before the first votes are cast in Iowa's late-January caucuses.

World and Nation Datelines

■ Minnesota Ventura says he probably won't run for president

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) - Gov. Jesse Ventura tried again Wednesday to clear up questions about his presidential ambitions by issuing a resounding "no."

A day earlier, the Reform Party governor had told Harvard Current magazine that he would consider running if Minnesotans mobilized behind him.

"I said that I'm not running, that I won't run, and they said to me, 'Well, what if it means saving the third-party movement?'" Ventura told reporters.

"And I said, if indeed it got to that point, it would require the people of Minnesota to come out and say, 'It's OK, governor, run for president.'"

He emphasized, "It does not mean I'm doing it."

■ Texas Houston beats Los Angeles as smoggiest city in America

HOUSTON (AP) - It was probably just a chemical belch at a factory on the edge of town. But it was enough to push Houston past Los Angeles to become the smoggiest city in America. A smog day is when the ozone level rises above a certain mark set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Houston and Los Angeles were running neck-and-neck in air pollution stakes until Oct. 7, when the nation's fourth-largest city surpassed the second-largest by recording its 44th smog day of the year.

As of Wednesday, the Houston count had reached 46. Los Angeles was still at 43.

■ Colorado Special prosecutor will not be appointed in Ramsey case

DENVER (AP) - Gov. Bill Owens said Wednesday he has decided not to appoint a special prosecutor to look into the JonBenet Ramsey slaying, saying police are working with new evidence and headed in the right direction.

Owens also had strong words for the little girl's parents, John and Patsy Ramsey, asking them to "stop hiding behind their attorneys" and return to Colorado to help authorities solve the case.

Two weeks ago, a Boulder County grand jury completed a 13-month investigation of the 1996 slaying without issuing any indictments. District Attorney Alex Hunter said there was not enough evidence to charge anyone, although he and police said the Ramseys remain under suspicion.

■ Washington Federal budget at surplus for second year in a row

WASHINGTON (AP) - After decades of deficit gloom, the United States posted a record \$123 billion federal budget surplus last year, marking the first back-to-back surpluses since Dwight Eisenhower was president.

The good news announcement - exceeding all estimates - sparked a battle for bragging rights Wednesday between the White House and the Republican-led Congress, with both sides hoping to reap political dividends in next year's elections.

President Clinton said American businesses and workers have benefited from lower interest rates, a shrinking national debt and a growing pool of investment capital. Republicans also claimed credit for the surplus.

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