

Russians admit major losses

NOVYE ATAGI, Russia (AP) — Russian forces battled Monday to hold on to two key towns under heavy attack by Chechen rebels, and Moscow admitted for the first time that its forces had suffered major losses.

With its campaign to take Chechnya stalled, the Russian military has been on the defensive in recent days. The rebels launched attacks Sunday to take the towns of Argun and Shali, which were captured last month by Russian forces.

An Interior Ministry spokesman said Monday that rebels killed 26 Russian soldiers and wounded 30 during the last 24 hours. Russia has claimed for weeks that its losses are no more than one or two a day, despite persistent reports by soldiers in Chechnya that casualties are much higher.

Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeev said Monday that a temporary lull in bombing of the capital Grozny for Orthodox Christmas was over. But Russian forces had not stopped ground operations around Grozny.

Russian commanders said their troops had gained the upper hand in Argun and Shali, but reports from the area said fighting was still raging.

Col. Gen. Viktor Kazantsev claimed that Russian troops had pushed back a force of 300 rebels that attacked Argun, located 10 miles east of Grozny.

"The federal troops are in full con-



Photo by James Hill/NewsMakers
A tank commander from the western group of Russian forces in Chechnya stands on guard in front of the hills of the Argun Gorge near Duba-Yurt on Sunday.

rol of the situation within the town," Kazantsev said. He said federal troops were "mopping up" Argun, an indication that scattered groups of rebels were still putting up resistance.

Chechen forces rejected the Russian claims, insisting they were in control of Argun. Acting President Vladimir Putin "will beg us for peace," said Salanbek Aduyev, a rebel warlord.

Kazantsev said Russian troops had the upper hand in Shali, located 12 miles southeast of Grozny. But military sources told the ITAR-Tass news

agency that there was still heavy fighting in the town.

The Interfax news agency also reported that federal troops were surrounded in the local administration building in Shali, and that well-protected militants were firing on them from nearby buildings.

ITAR-Tass also reported that rebels were holding hostages in a school in Gudermes, the largest Chechen city the Russians claim to control. The news agency did not say how many hostages were being held.

— ELECTION 2000 —

Republican candidates debate their tax plans

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. (AP) — Gov. George Bush described himself Monday night as "a tax-cutting person" who delivered in Texas and would as president, while Sen. John McCain said his tax plan is "far better" for lower and middle income Americans.

The two were part of the third Republican campaign debate in five days on Monday.

Taxes were the keynote argument, stirred by Steve Forbes' television ad attacking Bush on grounds he reneged on a pledge against any tax increases in Texas.

McCain chimed in, saying that the federal tax cut Bush is proposing would spend all the projected budget surplus and \$20 billion more, with two-thirds of the cut going to the wealthiest 10 percent of Americans.

He said he wants surpluses used to protect Social Security. "For us to put all of the surplus into tax cuts, I think, is not a conservative effort," he said.

Disputing the Forbes ad, Bush said he has twice led his state to the biggest tax cuts in its history. His packages included offsetting increases in sales taxes, but Bush said the result was lower levies on Texans.

"I am a tax-cutting person," Bush said. "I know how to get it done."

Forbes wasn't budging, saying he stood by his ad. "A pledge should not be used as a trinket to win an election," he said. "The ad is accurate. ... You did break that pledge." He said things like that make Americans cynical about politics.

Bush shot back, "One thing that makes the American people cynical is negative advertisements on TV."

Later, Bush said he would not do to other candidates what Forbes did to Bob Dole, the GOP nominee in 1996, who emerged from the primary campaign weakened by Forbes' attack ads.

"You're not going to win the White House by making pledges that are then broken," Forbes said. "We've been through that before, particularly on taxes."

In the 1988 presidential campaign, Bush's father made "read my lips, no new taxes" a regular pledge. As president, he accepted tax increases to get a deficit-cutting budget deal, and the issue was turned against him in his losing re-election bid in 1992.

The Forbes ad points to a 1994 vow Gov. Bush made while running for governor, signing a pledge to an anti-tax group that he would "oppose any legislation establishing a state personal income tax or increasing the sales tax."

In 1997 Bush supported a tax-cut bill that included some sales tax increases — an action, critics say, violated the pledge. The bill didn't pass; Bush later signed a tax-cut measure into law, saying he supported the earlier bill in order to move the process along.

Later, Forbes confronted Bush

again, this time on abortion.

"Let's take a dream ride for a moment," he said, "let's pretend that you get the nomination."

"I accept that premise," Bush put in.

Forbes then challenged Bush to promise that as nominee, he would preserve the anti-abortion plank in the Republican campaign platform, and would promise to pick a running mate and nominate judges committed to ending abortion.

Bush said he would choose a vice president who agrees with his policies and is qualified to be president, would name federal judges who strictly interpret the law, and would "work to keep the Republican Party pro-life."

"Vagaries aren't going to work" Forbes said.

"You may not like the answer, but that's the answer," Bush told him.

Five of the six candidates hedged on an administration plan for aid to Africa to fight the AIDS epidemic. Sen. Orrin Hatch said he agreed with the \$150 million in assistance. Bush, McCain and Forbes said they favored helping, but only with guarantees that the money would actually go to the people in need, not to corrupt governments.

In turn, the GOP candidates, Alan Keyes, Hatch, Gary Bauer, Forbes, McCain and Bush, all declared that Elian Gonzalez, the 6-year-old Cuban boy whose mother died in escaping to Florida, should not be returned to Cuba.

They also said the boy's father, who wants him returned, should be brought to the United States to make the decision.

The 90-minute, nationally televised debate was staged at Calvin College in a state Bush calls his "firewall." A victory in Michigan would help him rebound if he gets upset in earlier primary states.

McCain has made the Feb. 22 Michigan primary one of his top four targets, along with contests in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

The Jan. 24 Iowa caucuses open this year's election cycle.

In two debates last week, the candidates also wrestled with competing tax-cutting philosophies. Bush wants \$483 billion in reductions over five years, with some of the money returned to low- and middle-income Americans to fit his "compassionate conservative" slogan.

McCain, who plans to flesh out his plans Tuesday, is proposing a \$240 billion, five-year package that expands the lowest income tax bracket and creates tax-free savings accounts for the middle class.

His plan is smaller than Bush's because he would save 63 percent of future budget surpluses to finance Social Security. He also would use the surplus on Medicare and reducing the national debt.

Twelve die in Turkish fight

TUNCELI, Turkey (AP) — Clashes in southeastern Turkey killed six Kurdish rebels and six Turkish soldiers, the Turkish military said Monday.

The rebels also damaged a Turkish military helicopter in Sunday's clashes, the military said.

The U.S.-made Sikorsky transport helicopter was hit by rebel gunfire but managed to land, the officials said, speaking on the customary condition of anonymity.

A statement by the Turkish military in Diyarbakir said six soldiers and six "terrorists" were killed in a clash in Tunceli, without giving details.

Military officials said the rebels were part of a breakaway Kurdish rebel faction, which has rejected the peace initiatives of the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK.

But local civilian officials said the rebels were members of a different group, the leftist Turkish Workers Peasants Liberation Army, which is fighting to create a Marxist state in Turkey.

Tunceli is a stronghold for both groups, which have collaborated in the past in attacks on Turkish forces.

Officials of the PKK's political wing in Europe said they did not know if the fighting involved a breakaway group or retreating rebels and could not confirm casualties.

The PKK has accused Turkish forces of attacking retreating rebels.

Fighting reportedly continued Monday. The Anatolia news agency said Turkish forces backed by airpower had launched an operation to seek out a large group of rebels in the mountainous area.

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