

# Kremlin Refuses to Talk to Maskhadov

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By Sanobar Shermatova

**The Ichkerian president has shown his readiness to negotiate. However, it seems that Moscow is ignoring his initiative**

There has been a fresh flurry of political activity around the Chechen problem. The central issue is possible negotiations with Aslan Maskhadov. The Russian Union of Soldiers' Mothers Committees announced the intention to meet with representatives of the Ichkerian president.

Next, an offer of mediation came from the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society (SPAS) which held a conference on Chechnya in late October, in Stockholm. Aslan Maskhadov's position at the conference was presented by Umar Khambiev, his chief envoy.

Finally, Aslan Maskhadov's son, Anzor, said that his father is ready to begin negotiations without any preliminary conditions.

What would be the subject of any negotiations? Here the intermediaries' positions differ. According to Akhmed Zakayev, Soldiers' Mothers could bring about a unilateral ceasefire by the militants; the rest being up to politicians.

Khambiev, speaking at the Stockholm Conference, said, however, that Aslan Maskhadov is ready to step down as president provided that power in Chechnya is transferred to an international administration. This point is part of the concept of "conditional independence" for Chechnya: It provides for placing the republic under UN jurisdiction, subsequent disarmament, and new elections for a civilian administration. This is in line with the Ichkerian peace plan - at least, it has been until recently.

Today, however, the situation has changed. Anzor Maskhadov told Abdurashid Saidov, a Moscow-based physician, that his father is ready to put off for the foreseeable future the discussion of the key problem that is now a major source of controversy - namely, the status of the Chechen Republic. In the meantime, the Ichkerian president vowed to fight the intransigent elements that will refuse to lay down arms should the negotiations be a success.

It turns out that Aslan Maskhadov's latest initiatives are directly in conflict with Ichkeria's official plan.

What are the possible implications of this softening of position? Chechen politicians and political experts are divided on the issue. Thus, Yavus Akhmadov, a professor of history, believes that after the Beslan tragedy Aslan Maskhadov has become ineffectual as a possible negotiator: His legitimacy in Western eyes has waned considerably. A new situation calls for new solutions, and this is just what Aslan Maskhadov did.

Ruslan Yamadayev, a deputy of the RF State Duma, sees the Ichkerian president's initiatives as an attempt to quit without losing face. Aslan Maskhadov feels the futility of further resistance while his peace plan is simply unrealistic, so it needs revising.

Thus a new plan is put forward. Is Moscow going to negotiate now?

The Stockholm Conference gives some indication of Russia's official reaction. Representatives of the Russian Embassy in Stockholm or of the Swedish Foreign Ministry were conspicuously missing there, which rather downgraded the level of the event. Originally, the conference was conceived as a forum for the opposing sides to put forward their positions.

Why does the Kremlin, despite a real threat of new terrorist attacks, refuse to talk to the Maskhadovites? Inside sources say that the problem of negotiations is over-politicized and this is the main stumbling block. Thus, the Russian authorities are unlikely to review their attitude toward Akhmed Zakayev who continues to be treated as a terrorist.

The problem does not lie in his past but, rather, in the Ichkerian minister's link to Boris Berezovsky, a Russian business tycoon who lives in self-imposed exile in London. Berezovsky is not so much concerned with finding a political settlement as he is trying to use the Chechen problem in his stand-off with President Vladimir Putin. Insofar as the Berezovsky plan includes negotiations between Soldiers Mother Committees and the militants with subsequent public rallies demanding Putin's resignation, all participants in the plan will automatically come under fire from the Kremlin controlled media. There could also be other measures to thwart negotiations.

At the end of the day, "the Kremlin does not see Aslan Maskhadov as a viable negotiating partner," Aslambek Aslakhonov, President Putin's adviser on the North Caucasus, says. Despite the numerous statements concerning the Ichkerian president's involvement in masterminding terrorist attacks, The Russian authorities do not really believe this. Yet neither do they believe that Shamil Basayev and his men will obey Aslan Maskhadov's orders to stop terrorist attacks.

The idea of Moscow negotiating with Maskhadov representatives does not make much sense at present as new problems are coming up. Even should the Chechnya reconstruction plan be successfully implemented there will be no peace in the republic until the various sections of society have come to terms with each other. The post-war experience of Tajikistan shows that the search for a national reconciliation formula is a tortuous, painstaking process. Does Moscow understand this? Hardly, judging by the practical steps that are being taken by the federal center which has in effect put an equals sign between political settlement and economic reconstruction in the republic.

#### FACT BOX

Aslan Maskhadov. Born on September 21, 1951 in Kazakhstan. Former Soviet colonel. In 1992, retired from the Russian Army and became Chief of Staff for the Chechen army. In 1994-1996, led Chechen rebel forces in the war with Russia. In 1996, led Chechen delegation in the peace talks with Russia. In 1997, elected president of Chechnya. In 1999, removed from power by Russian military forces in the second Chechen war and went into hiding, leading Chechen rebel forces. After Moscow-backed Chechen president Akhmad Kadyrov was assassinated in May 2004, Maskhadov vowed to kill whoever replaced him. After the hostage crisis in the South Russia town of Beslan in September 2004, Russia's FSB has set a \$ 10 million bounty for information leading to the capture of Maskhadov and top Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev.