

Two Russian policemen were shot dead in Chechnya last week, swinging the spotlight back onto the far southern corner of the Russian Federation, where two bloody civil wars (or anti-terrorist actions, according to taste) have been fought over the last fifteen years.

Despite the continued influence of rebel forces, in 2009 Moscow announced that the situation in Chechnya had improved to such extent that it felt able to end its military operation against the rebels which had been underway since the end of significant combat operations in the second Chechen war in May 2000. On the 16th April 2009 Medvedev issued a decree officially ending the counter-terrorist operation in Chechnya, marking the end of a ten-year conflict that cost tens of thousands of lives, but which had attracted relatively little outside attention.

Russia was expected to begin withdrawing its 25,000 troops, all limitations on travel to Chechnya were to be removed, and Grozny airport was set to open for international flights. On 16th November 2009, the first international flight out of Grozny Airport saw some 200 pilgrims bound for Saudi Arabia, waved off by President Kadyrov. But there are still 90,000 Russian troops in the North Caucasus. And the British Foreign Office still discourages all travel to the region.

A referendum in 2003 had approved a new constitution, giving Chechnya more autonomy whilst remaining part of Russia. Moscow ruled out participation by the armed opposition and there were widespread concerns that the republic was far too unstable to ensure a valid outcome. Parliamentary elections in 2005 saw Putin's United Russia party win over half the seats. Separatist rebels dismissed the election as a charade but Putin said that constitutional order had been restored. Since then there has been increased investment in reconstruction projects.

Ramzan Kadyrov, son of assassinated President Akhmad Kadyrov, was nominated for the presidency by Vladimir Putin in spring 2007 and approved almost unanimously by the Chechen parliament. Ramzan Kadyrov insists iron rule is needed to maintain peace. The President has also sworn to avenge his father. Human rights groups have criticised the violent activities of a powerful militia known as the "Kadyrovtsy" consisting of thousands of paramilitaries with the avowed mission of wiping out rebel forces. Mr Kadyrov denies accusations that the force is behind many of Chechnya's killings, abductions and worst crimes, although he has admitted that there are some "rogue elements" among them.

Kadyrov claims there are fewer than 30 insurgents left in his republic – one hundredth of what the International Institute of Strategic studies estimates. He has also accused the West of financing the Islamist insurgency, as well as plotting to seize the entire Caucasus region.

Doku Umarov succeeded Abdul-Khalim Saydullayev as Chechen rebel president when the latter was killed in a police operation in June 2006. Unlike his predecessor, a Muslim cleric little-known outside Chechnya before he succeeded Aslan Maskhadov in March 2005, Mr

Umarov has often been mentioned in reports on Chechen rebel activity. He has been active in operations since the mid-1990s.

In his first public statement after becoming leader, he vowed to step up attacks against police and military targets across Russia. He said he would seek to avoid civilian casualties.

But last month Umarov vowed on Islamist websites to spread his attacks from the Muslim-dominated North Caucasus into the nation's heartland, wreaking havoc through jihad. His pledge follows escalating violence in the form of shootings and suicide bombs targeting authorities over the last year in the mountainous North Caucasus - particularly Chechnya, but also Ingushetia and Dagestan.

There are well-founded and growing concerns over security and stability in the North Caucasus as a whole. In the first half of 2009 over 300 violent incidents took place across the North Caucasus. Their targets were mostly government and law-enforcement officials. In May the interior minister of Dagestan was shot dead, and on the 22nd June the president of Ingushetia, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, was critically wounded in a suicide-bomb attack.

Over the last two years, deaths due to violent incidents have shot up dramatically in the North Caucasus, from just over 40 in January 2008 to 140 in August 2009, according to a study by Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies. There is now alarm that Islamist extremism could spread to other parts of Russia, home to around 20 million Muslims, more than half of whom live outside the North Caucasus.

Alexander Cherkasov, who has closely followed the North Caucasus for 15 years for rights group Memorial, said whereas in the past rebels wanted freedom from Russia, a struggle that dates back over 200 years, now they are influenced by jihadism, a global fight against alleged enemies of Islam. Christopher Langton of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London told Reuters that "jihadism" in the North Caucasus is "energized" partly by links to Afghanistan and the Middle East composed of a mixture of smuggling, trade, Islamic non-governmental organizations and charities.

A mountainous region, Chechnya has oil and natural gas deposits as well as limestone, gypsum, sulphur, and other minerals. Major production includes oil, petrochemicals, oil-field equipment, foods, wines, and fruits. Chechnya's most abundant fruit are wild grapes. The Chechens press these for juice which they drink fresh and also boil down into sweet syrup. Because of Islam's predominance, a culture of winemaking did not develop in Chechnya, as it did in Christian Georgia. According to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation Chechnya's chief exports are oil and grain. However, its economy and infrastructure were reduced to ruins by the years of war between local separatists and Russian forces, combined with armed banditry and organised crime.