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Top Chechen Rebel Steps Down

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An undated frame grab image, taken from files made available by IntelCenter and clipped from a video posted on a pro-rebel Web site in March, purporting to show Chechen militant leader Doku Umarov.

The leader of the North Caucasus Islamist insurgents, Doku Umarov, has stepped down for health reasons and named an obscure mid-ranking Chechen rebel, Aslambek Vadalov, as his successor.

In a video posted on YouTube on Monday, Umarov said he wanted his Caucasus Emirate, an umbrella group loosely connecting rebels in the North Caucasus republics, to "be led by younger and more energetic commanders."

Umarov called on the leaders of insurgents in Ingushetia, Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria — the three republics where rebel activity has grown dramatically in the past two years — to approve his choice.

Vadalov, shown in the same video, said he would wait for the response of the rebel leaders.

Umarov, 46, added that he intended "to continue to wage jihad and will do his utmost to help the new leadership."

A third senior rebel shown in the video sitting next to Umarov said Umarov had stepped down because of poor health.

Vadalov joined the rebel cause in 1994 and fought against Russian troops under the command of Jordanian-born warlord Khattab, who was blamed for masterminding a series of terrorist attacks and was killed by federal forces in 2002, according to the rebel web site Kavkaz Center.

Vadalov's latest known position was as head of a rebel unit responsible for fighting in eastern Chechnya. He was one of the first to support Umarov, who upon taking charge of the rebels in 2007 moved to transform the fight for independent Chechen statehood into an Islamist guerrilla cause covering the whole of the North Caucasus and with branches in other republics with sizable Muslim populations.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov said Monday that efforts to capture Umarov — Russia's most-wanted rebel — would continue unabated despite his resignation.

"He is sick, hiding like a rat in a hole, overrun with lice, toothless and in no position to lead," Kadyrov told reporters in Grozny, Interfax reported.

Umarov has claimed responsibility for all major terrorist attacks in recent years, including the March 29 suicide bombings in the Moscow metro that killed at least 40 people and wounded 100 others.

The United States listed Umarov as a terrorist in June.

Vadalov's appointment would not lead to a significant shift in the rebels' strategy, said Andrei Soldatov, a security analyst with the Agentura think tank.

“If he had any leadership talents, he would have demonstrated them since 1994 and been more widely known," Soldatov said.

He added that the current rebel tactic of keeping a minimum number of fighters in the forests and concentrating on bombing and shooting attacks in urban areas is optimal given the constraints that the rebels face, and will not change under a new leader.

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