

Republic resists Yeltsin crack

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From Susan Viets in Grozny and Peter Pringle in Moscow

THE centre of Grozny, the capital of the tiny oil-rich Chechen-Ingush autonomous republic, was last night filled with thousands of demonstrators and men armed with shotguns and cans of petrol, as the breakaway Muslim southern republic prepared to defend itself against a possible attack from Russian troops.

About 600 Russian troops were mobilised in and around the city of some 400,000 over the weekend after the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, imposed a state of emergency in the rebel republic. General Djokhar Dudayev, the leader of the Chechen independence movement, has refused to recognize the state of emergency. He was elected president last month in a vote not recognised by Russia.

Gen Dudayev issued a decree lifting the state of emergency, declared martial law and called on Chechens "to defend the freedom of the people". Tass reported that groups of individual Chechen citizens, "who are prepared to defend the President at all costs, are heading towards Grozny".

The Chechen-Ingush army minister, Yusup Soslambekov, said that up to 1,000 Russian interior ministry troops had landed at Grozny airport on Saturday, but were surrounded by Chechen forces and had withdrawn. "We expect the arrival of more troops," he said, "but each Chechen is a soldier and the task of our people is to defend our homeland."

The Chechen-Ingush republic, which has a population of just over a million, mostly Sunni Muslims, is north of Georgia. It was incorporated into the Tsarist empire

in 1859. Its determination to become independent has posed a severe test of Mr Yeltsin's authority over ethnic minorities in the Russian republic.

In Moscow, the Russian parliament met yesterday in an emergency closed session to discuss the imposition of state of emergency amid growing criticism of Mr Yeltsin's high-handed attitude to the Chechens.

On Saturday an Aeroflot passenger plane was hijacked by four Chechen rebels. But the plane returned to Grozny, and all 178 passengers were released. Tass said the the four hijackers would be taken to meet "the investigating bodies". Mr Yeltsin's representative in the autonomous republic, Akhmed Arsanov, sent to Grozny last month to negotiate a settle-

ment, was quoted on Russian radio as saying he would persuade Mr Yeltsin to lift the state of emergency, and then he would resign. The radio said later that the interior minister, appointed by Mr Yeltsin to the Chechen republic last month, Vakha Ibragimov, had resigned in protest over the introduction of the state of emergency.

Some of the interior ministry officers sent to restore order have apparently taken an oath of loyalty to Gen Dudayev, who was sworn in by the breakaway Chechen parliament as the first president of the republic on Saturday.

So far, the Russian deputies have found that Mr Yeltsin's decree imposing the state of emergency conformed with Russia's constitution and laws but some want to change the rules concerning a curfew and to impose an interim administration while talks continue on independence.

■ Armenia and Azerbaijan have agreed to create a six-mile buffer zone along their common border in an effort to end their bloody four-year conflict, the unofficial news agency Interfax reported yesterday, **AFP reports**. The agreement was reached at a meeting on Friday chaired by Mikhail Gorbachev, and attended by Ayaz Mutalibov, the Azeri President, and Babken Ararktsyan, of the Armenian Supreme Council. Under the agreement, the Soviet interior and defence ministries, in co-ordination with the governments of the two republics, "will put Armenia's and Azerbaijan's border regions under control", Interfax said.

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