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## Festival to Get Chechnya Rocking

By Anatoly Medetsky, Timur Aliev | Jun. 24 2005 00:00



AP

Pop singer Glyukoza performing at a Jan. 25 concert in Gudermes at the site of a new water park under construction.

GROZNY -- A six-hour rock music festival in Chechnya would seem an unlikely effort to return peace to a place where rebel attacks and mysterious abductions remain common.

But the Chechen government and a slew of prominent Moscow-based bands, including Va-Bank, SerGa and B-2, believe otherwise and are gearing up for the "Phoenix: Return to Life" festival on July 5.

The festival's name is a telling metaphor, aimed at promoting the idea that life is returning to normal in the war-scarred republic. A bird in Egyptian mythology, the phoenix is a symbol of resurrection because it burns up in flames and then rises from the ashes.

The concert's venue is being kept secret until the last moment for security reasons, and musicians say security will be in the hands of Chechnya's first deputy prime minister, Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov's controversial security force has been suspected of being behind many of the thousands of abductions in the republic in recent years.

"Generally, the main task is to go there to play music and show that life is good and it's good to live," SerGa frontman Sergei Galanin said at a recent Moscow news conference to promote the event. "If it helps someone become interested in a peaceful life, it will be useful."

"I don't think that music is as influential as we would like to think it is, but we have to convey our positive feelings. I hope people will understand that there are other reasons to get together and other conversation topics," he said, referring to the conflict in Chechnya.

Chechen Prime Minister Sergei Abramov predicted that the festival -- sponsored by state-owned oil company Rosneft and cellular provider Megafon, among others -- would "become Russia's music event of the year."

The organizers promise a laser show, military salute and fireworks to accompany the music. In addition to the sound equipment, the organizers will also have a stage specially flown in to Chechnya from Moscow.

The event will cost \$300,000 to organize and aims to attract at least 10,000 people from Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan, said Igor Tarasov, the Chechen government's chief of staff, who was appointed the festival's director.

Artur Atsalamov, frontman of Myortviye Delfiny, or Dead Dolphins, said that the concert would be free for all comers. Apart from Rosneft and MegaFon, funds for the festival also come from the Akhmad Kadyrov Charity Fund, named for Ramzan Kadyrov's father, the late Chechen president killed in a bomb attack last May, Atsalamov said.

Other bands that have confirmed their participation are Nochniye Snaipery, or Night Snipers; Nuans; Voskreseniye, or Resurrection; and the singer Yuta, organizers said.

Abramov said that DDT would also play at the concert, but other musicians said the band had yet to make up its mind. Vladimir Kuzmin and Zemfira declined invitations without giving a reason, Tarasov said.

"Some bands refused to go because they considered Chechnya to be an unsafe place, but we will not name them for ethical reasons," said Dmitry Krichevsky, a percussionist with Moscow's Kukuza band and the festival's art director.

The bomb that killed Akhmad Kadyrov went off in a Grozny soccer stadium amid Victory Day celebrations on May 9, 2004. To minimize the risk of a terrorist attack, festival organizers said they would not disclose the venue for the concert until a few days before, saying only that it would take place in Grozny. "It involves too many people," Tarasov said.

But if two concerts this year in Chechnya are anything to go by, the concert's location could be switched in an effort to wrong-foot anyone planning an attack. The concerts, both smaller events, were in the republic's second-largest town, Gudermes. Authorities described a May 29 concert in the town as a warm-up for the July 5 event.

As another security measure, the concert will run in broad daylight, from noon to 6 p.m., Krichevsky said. It was unclear how a laser show and fireworks would impress the public before dark.

Federal troops and Chechen law enforcement agencies will provide security at the event, the organizers said.

Atsalamov of Myortviye Delfiny said Ramzan Kadyrov, who heads the presidential security force known as the kadyrovtsy, would be in charge of security. "No one in Chechnya will protect us better than Chechens," Atsalamov said. "Ramzan has a good team. Everything will be fine."

Other rock stars also played down the danger. "There are always elements of risk," Galanin said. "After the assassination of U.S. President John Kennedy in the mid-1960s, life has become unquiet. It became clear that anyone can be killed, even a president."

Asked if the concert might be a terrorist target, like the 2003 Krylya rock concert in Moscow, Galanin said, "Any festival is such an opportunity now."

Two women rigged with explosives blew themselves up near Moscow's Tushino Field during a concert there in July 2003, killing themselves and 14 other people, in an attack that was blamed on Chechen terrorists.

Atsalamov said the risks in Chechnya were similar to those anywhere in Russia. "People get kidnapped in Chechnya? All right, but people get kidnapped everywhere. People get kidnapped in the rest of Russia. I watch the crime news. We'll go sing there, and maybe they will kidnap fewer people," Atsalamov said.

Some of the musicians said they might include songs about war at the festival. "There are songs that reflect our attitude to wars," Galanin said.

Others disagreed. "To sing songs about a war in a war zone is too much," said Alexei Romanov of Voskreseniye.

There was confusion at the news conference about who first came up with the idea for the festival. The Chechen government claimed responsibility and said it had recruited several of the acts, but the rockers said it was their idea.

Alexander Strizhak, director of JSA, the company that will deliver and mount the festival stage, said the idea came from Krichevsky, who confirmed that.

But Alexander Sklyar of Va-Bank said the initiative came from B-2. A suggestion that the Kremlin was behind the festival was dismissed.

"I haven't heard that the presidential administration has anything to do with rock musicians in connection with this festival," Voskreseniye's Romanov said.

Reports of fees being paid to the rock stars also appeared contradictory. Tarasov said that the organizers had set aside \$135,000 to pay the musicians.

Krichevsky, however, said that the musicians would not be paid, as the festival would be for charity, Moskovsky Komsomolets reported Wednesday.

Organizers appeared to be aiming for a quality show, choosing companies with an established name to carry out technical work for the festival. Moscow's JSA was responsible for making and mounting the decorations on Red Square for this year's 60th World War II anniversary, and it has also put on concerts in Russia for Deep Purple, Alice Cooper, Guano Apes and Roxette. KG Group, which will provide sound equipment and organize the laser show, was a contractor for the Russian Fashion Week in April.

In Grozny, some residents were less than impressed by the concert. "It's ridiculous. A festival like this should be in a place where it's possible to guarantee security not only for viewers, but also for the performers," said student Tamara Aliyeva, 21. "They even had those explosions in Tushino, didn't they?"

Others, however, welcomed the chance for good publicity. "This event is important; it will be a chance to change Russians' opinion about Chechens," said Adlan Sagaipov, editor of Chechnya's Zov Zemli newspaper. "It will not provide jobs or help reconstruction, but it will be useful for propaganda."

"Various performers used to come here," said businessman Aslan Asuyev, 35. The last concerts he remembered, he said, were in the late 1980s.

Famed crooner and State Duma Deputy Iosif Kobzon gave a concert in Chechnya in 1997, when the republic had de facto independence. Warlord Shamil Basayev, then Chechnya's first deputy prime minister, thanked Kobzon by giving him a pistol.

More recent experience shows the concert will likely be popular. For the Gudermes gig, all 3,000 tickets were sold out a week before, despite a sale price of 2,000 rubles (\$70) each, the Chechen government said on its web site.

*Staff Writer Anatoly Medetsky reported from Moscow.*



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