

23 Soldiers Killed in Tajik Ambush

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A bus traveling in Dushanbe with photos of the recent prison escapees. **Dalton Bennett**

DUSHANBE, Tajikistan — Heavily armed Islamist militants ambushed a military convoy in eastern Tajikistan, killing at least 23 soldiers and dealing a severe blow to this impoverished nation on Afghanistan's poorly secured northern border.

The Sunday ambush is the deadliest attack on security forces in years and underscores the dangers that the Islamist militants pose to the government.

The military convoy was attacked near the Rasht district, an area about 80 kilometers north of the Afghan border, Defense Ministry spokesman Faridun Makhmadaliyev said Monday. He said the attackers, which included militants from Chechnya, Afghanistan and Pakistan, were led by Mullo Abdullo, a radical Islamist commander who took an active part in a 1990s civil war that killed about 100,000 people. Abdullo fled to Afghanistan after the end of the civil war in 1997, but he is believed to have returned to his native country sometime last year.

Another warlord, Alovuddin Davlatov, is also suspected to have taken part in Sunday's ambush, Makhmadaliyev said. Davlatov's brother, a politician with the opposition Islamic Revival Party, was detained by security services 10 days ago on suspicion of belonging to a

banned extremist organization.

Many soldiers were also seriously wounded and were evacuated for treatment, Makhmadaliyev said.

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon, who is currently in New York to attend a session of the United Nations General Assembly, ordered that the attackers be brought to justice.

Police patrols in the Tajik capital already have been increased amid rising tension following a string of terrorist blasts and a large-scale prison escape by Islamist insurgents and government opponents.

A suicide bombing against a police station in the northern city of Khujand earlier this month claimed two victims and wounded 25. Days later, a bomb was detonated in a disco in Dushanbe, wounding seven.

Authorities believe that Islamist militants were responsible for both bombings.

Military activity in the remote and mountainous Rasht Valley, where Abdullo is believed to have taken refuge, has picked up in recent weeks as authorities seek to capture 18 men still on the run after a dramatic prison breakout last month.

Only seven of the 25 fugitives, who included many Islamist militants and government opponents, have been captured.

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