

Islamists Stage Suicide Attack on Chechen Parliament

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GROZNY — Islamist rebels killed at least four people and wounded 17 others on Tuesday as they tried to seize Chechnya's parliament in a brazen suicide attack that showed that Russia has failed to quell insurgency on its southern flank. At least three insurgents were also killed, officials said, ending one of the most brazen attacks on the province's capital in months.

One insurgent set off a bomb at the gates of the parliament complex in Grozny, killing himself and wounding others, Chechen police spokesman Ramzan Bekkhoyev told AP.

At least two other gunmen ran into the building shouting "Allahu Akbar!" — "God is great!" in Arabic — as they opened fire on the people inside, Bekkhoyev said.

Restive Chechnya in the Russian North Caucasus has been battling an Islamist insurgency for years despite the iron rule of its Moscow-backed president, Ramzan Kadyrov. Russian Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev is in Grozny and holding talks with Kadyrov about the violence.

Nurgaliyev said the insurgents had tried to get into the main parliamentary hall.

"As always, they failed. Unfortunately, we were not able to avoid loss of life," he said in televised comments. "The situation we saw today is extremely rare. Here, there is stability and security."

Police said all the attackers were killed, either by suicide or after a gunfight with police. A spokesman for investigators told AP that 17 other people had been wounded; Russian news agencies said 6 police and 11 civilians were among them.

The agencies reported earlier that insurgents had also attacked the Agriculture Ministry building. The building is in the same complex as the parliament, and that incident appeared to be part of the same attack.

An AP reporter in the parliament complex saw ambulances take away two bodies, along with the severed head of an insurgent. There was a grim scene around the parliament building, with body parts and a decapitated corpse near shattered window glass on the ground. Clean-up crews had come to the scene ahead of Kadyrov's expected arrival.

Interior Ministry special forces paced the area in camouflage fatigues, wielding grenade-launching Kalashnikov rifles.

Shots were earlier reported inside the office of the parliament's speaker, Dukvakha Abdurakhmanov, but Interfax later reported that he had been safely evacuated.

Russia fought two wars with Chechen separatists in the 1990s before finally installing a loyal government there in 2000.

Since then, most of the Islamist insurgents have moved over into the neighboring Russian republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia, with terrorist attacks seldom striking at the heart of Grozny in recent years.

In August, however, a shootout in Kadyrov's home village between his guards and suspected insurgents left 19 people dead, including 5 civilians, raising fears of a reviving insurgency.

The provinces make up Russia's predominantly Muslim North Caucasus region, which separatists strive to turn into an independent emirate that adheres to Sharia law. The insurgents are thought to be in a sporadic network of cells that shelter in the region's forested mountains.

There has been a spate of attacks originating in the North Caucasus this year. In March, suicide bombers from Dagestan detonated explosives in the Moscow subway, killing 40 people. Days later similar bombings in the province itself killed several police.

Last month a suicide car bombing killed 17 people and wounded more than 140 in Vladikavkaz, a regional center in the North Caucasus.

They follow a multitude of high-profile terrorist attacks by Chechen rebels since the Soviet collapse, including the Beslan school siege in 2004 that ended in a bloodbath in which more than 330 people, about half of them children, were killed.

Despite the recent surge in attacks, Nurgaliyev said the rebels' days were numbered.

"The leadership of the insurgent underground has practically been taken out. A significant portion of its arms supplies and financial resources have been cut off. The work of emissaries from foreign terrorist centers has been contained."

Kadyrov, meanwhile, has in recent years boasted of peace returning to Grozny, but human rights activists say the price has been too high. They say extra-judicial killings, kidnappings and torture administered under the pretext of fighting extremism maintain the quiet.

(AP, Reuters)

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