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Bombers Storm Chechen Parliament

By Alexandra Odynova

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OMON riot police officers securing the front of the Chechen parliament building in Grozny on Tuesday after a brazen attack that killed at least six people. **Musa Sadulayev**

A brazen attack on the Chechen parliament in Grozny killed at least six people, including Islamist insurgents, and injured 17 others Tuesday morning, a sign that post-war stability in the republic remains fragile.

“At least three attackers managed to get inside the Chechen parliament and blew themselves up,” Mariam Nalayeva, a spokeswoman for the Investigative Committee's Chechen branch, said by telephone from Grozny.

News reports later in the day spoke of four or five rebels who got through security by following a Chechen lawmaker's car and started a shootout.

Officials did not immediately comment on the discrepancy in numbers.

The attack began at about 9 a.m., when Chechen lawmakers were about to meet a delegation

of 50 officials from the Sverdlovsk region legislature.

The assailants killed at least two police officers, as well as the parliament's supplies manager, and injured seven policemen and 11 civilians, Nalayeva said.

She said no lawmakers were hurt in the attack, although news reports said the Chechen parliament's chief of staff, Iskam Baikhakov, was hospitalized with unspecified injuries.

Early reports said the attackers took hostages, but that information was not confirmed. One of the attackers blew himself up near the parliament's front entrance, and two others barricaded themselves on the first floor, where they also set off explosives, investigators said in a statement.

Televised footage showed policemen breaking glass doors of the building with the butts of their assault rifles and civilians being evacuated. Photos taken in the aftermath depicted broken windows and walls covered with bullet holes.

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov arrived at the scene soon after the attack.

“As a result of the coherent actions of the law enforcement agencies, the liquidation of the insurgents was accomplished within 15 to 20 minutes, and all the lawmakers and technical personnel were released,” Kadyrov said in a statement.

Sverdlovsk lawmaker Igor Danilov, one of the people trapped in the parliament during the attack, told Rossia One television that shooting lasted about 1 1/2 hours outside the building.

“We were inside the building when we heard a very powerful explosion,” Danilov said, adding that there was no panic during the shootout.

The attack coincided with a visit by Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliyev to Grozny. Nurgaliyev met with Kadyrov soon after police regained control of the parliament and praised the actions of law enforcement officers.

A parliamentary session over Chechnya's 2011 budget, attended by Kadyrov, was held in the building after the assault.

Tuesday's attack is the second high-profile assault in Chechnya in three months. A shootout in Kadyrov's home village in August killed 19 people, including five civilians, and fueled fears of reviving insurgency.

Kadyrov blamed Akhmed Zakayev, a former Chechen rebel granted British asylum in 2003, and his “patrons in other Western countries” for the latest attack, which followed a recent split in the militants' ranks.

Zakayev last month backed Chechen warlord Khusein Gakayev, who said in August that he would not follow orders from Doku Umarov, once considered the leader of all North Caucasus rebels.

Incidentally, a district court in the Stavropol region city of Yessentuki ruled Tuesday that Zakayev should be placed on an international wanted list over new terrorism-related charges.

The Prosecutor General's Office has already issued an Interpol arrest warrant for Zakayev on similar charges, but Zakayev has been able to travel freely between several European countries.

Tuesday's attack appeared to be a rebel attempt to kill Chechen lawmakers and possibly Nurgaliyev and Kadyrov as well, said Maxim Agarkov, an analyst with the SK-Strategia think tank.

He added that the insurgents apparently were trying to prove their worth to foreign sponsors, whom he called a major source of income for North Caucasus rebels.

“The fight for foreign funding requires significant actions,” he said.

“It's clearly a fight for Middle Eastern money,” he added, without identifying the sponsors.

No one has claimed responsibility for Tuesday's attack.

Meanwhile, more violence hit the turbulent North Caucasus as a director of a Dagestani children's rehabilitation center, Krimsultan Umarov, was shot dead along with a friend in a car Monday night, Interfax reported.

Another attack was prevented Tuesday in Kabardino-Balkaria's capital, Nalchik, when law enforcement officers spotted and disarmed a homemade bomb, it said.

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