

# Lukashenko Denies State Involvement in Explosion

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MINSK — Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko angrily refuted allegations Saturday that the government was behind a metro bombing in Minsk that killed 13 and wounded more than 200 others.

Monday's bombing in Minsk puzzled terrorism experts, who have struggled to speculate on possible motives in a tightly controlled country with little history of attacks on such a scale.

Some bloggers have speculated that authorities may have resorted to terrorism to distract Belarussians from the country's poor economic state.

But Lukashenko said in a televised address that "only idiots" would accuse the government.

"What they are saying — that this was done to distract the attention from the economic situation — only idiots and scoundrels would make such judgments," he said. "Is the situation in the country so critical that I have to resort to desperate measures? It is not

critical."

Authorities have arrested five suspects in connection with the blast, including a man in his mid-20s accused of placing the bomb on the platform of Minsk's busiest metro station, Oktyabrskaya. Investigators haven't said who ordered the bombing.

The United Nations Security Council last week strongly condemned "the apparent terrorist attack." A council diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly, said "the word 'apparent' was included in this statement for a reason."

Fears have grown over the days since the bombing that it is being used as a pretext to stamp out the last vestiges of political pluralism and dissent.

Lukashenko has ordered the country's dissidents to be questioned over the blast, while the prosecutor general has said irresponsible web reports have prompted a need to "bring order" to the Internet, one of the last outposts of free speech.

The concerns were compounded Friday when the Information Ministry reprimanded two leading independent daily newspapers for their coverage of the bombing. The ministry accused Nasha Niva of publishing what it called an erroneous report about authorities failing to evacuate one of the victims of Monday's attacks for several hours. It accused the second newspaper, Narodnaya Volya, of discrediting Belarussian state television, but didn't elaborate.

Each of the two newspapers has received official rebukes for their past reporting. Under the Belarussian law, two such reprimands are enough for authorities to go to court to seek a media outlet's closure.

Belarus is going through a severe economic crisis, with hard currency reserves running critically low and a possible currency devaluation looming.

Lukashenko said Friday that economic troubles had been fomented by unspecified forces as part of their efforts to destabilize Belarus.

"First came the currency market, then food market and then the subway blast occurred," Lukashenko said at a government meeting. "It was the entire chain."

Belarus' Health Ministry said a 47-year-old man has died from injuries sustained in Monday's bombing, taking the death toll from the attack to 13. It said 161 people remain hospitalized.

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