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First Suicide Bombing Rattles Kazakhstan

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ASTANA, Kazakhstan — A suicide bomber wounded two bystanders in the Kazakh city of Aktobe when he blew himself up inside the offices of the state security services Tuesday, a spokesman for the prosecutor general said.

The spokesman, Zhandos Umiraliyev, said the explosion was not linked to terrorism. He identified the bomber as a 25-year-old member of a criminal group in the northwestern Kazakh city who was already under suspicion for other crimes.

Rakhimzhan "Makatov used a self-activated, low-powered explosive device," Umiraliyev told a news briefing. "As a result of the explosion, Makatov died at the scene. Two people in the vicinity received minor injuries."

The explosion was the first known suicide bombing in Kazakhstan.

A photographer said by telephone from Aktobe, an industrial city 100 kilometers from the Russian border, that the bomber detonated the device at the regional headquarters of the

National Security Committee, Kazakhstan's security police.

Reinforced police units had cordoned off the area, he said.

Regional imams were meeting in Aktobe's central mosque to discuss the incident, said Baurzhan Yesmakhanov, chief imam for the Aktobe region. He said Makatov was not known at the mosque.

"We have simply gathered imams to study what happened. We don't know what this is connected to," he said by telephone.

Umiraliyev said the prosecutor's office has opened a criminal case.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled Kazakhstan for 20 years, was re-elected by a landslide in April on a platform of economic growth and stability. He prides himself on lasting peace among the 140 ethnic groups that call Kazakhstan home.

But media reports in recent months have identified several Kazakh citizens among radical groups operating in the North Caucasus and Central Asia.

Militants from Aktobe have been detained or killed in recent months in Dagestan, where rebels want to establish an Islamic state, local media have reported.

Analysts have also warned that Central Asian militants, after years fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan, are filtering back across the region's porous borders to their homelands.

Tajikistan's army has been fighting insurgents in the country's mountainous east since an attack on a military convoy killed 28 troops last September, shortly after suicide car bombers attacked a police station in the country's second city.

Several radical Islamist groups have stated their objective of creating a Muslim caliphate incorporating large swathes of Central Asia, a region twice the size of Saudi Arabia.

"Not a single country in the region is immune," said Lilit Gevorgyan, an analyst at IHS Global Insight. "Secular governments are their No. 1 enemy."

But Gevorgyan said that, in contrast with poorer republics in Central Asia, militant groups were unlikely to find a groundswell of support in relatively prosperous Kazakhstan.

"The Kazakh population is not largely supportive of such movements," she said. "There will be less justification than for example in Tajikistan, where attackers could find a sympathetic ear among the more impoverished and more religious people."

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