

Islamist Group Says It Staged Kazakh Blasts

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A militant Islamist group has claimed responsibility for two explosions in a western Kazakh oil city after threatening violence in the country, a U.S.-based online monitoring service said.

The suspected bomber was the only person killed in the blasts Monday, which occurred close to administrative buildings in Atyrau, close to the Caspian Sea about 2,500 kilometers west of the capital, Astana.

Intelligence monitoring group SITE said a message on an online forum attributed to the Jund al-Khilafah group said the bombings were a response to the government's "indifference" to its warnings to repeal new laws restricting religious freedoms.

Kazakhstan adopted new legislation last month that bans prayer rooms in state buildings and requires all missionaries to register with authorities every year.

President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled Kazakhstan as a secular republic since

independence from the Soviet Union, has backed the law as a means of stamping out religious extremism in a country that has been largely untouched by militant attacks.

Several unexplained bombings and shootouts this year have raised concerns about growing militancy. Authorities moved to adopt the new law soon after security forces in August detained 18 people in Atyrau on suspicion of planning "acts of terror."

Bolat Daukenov, deputy governor of the Atyrau region, as saying Monday's bombings were the "last breath" of the group of people arrested, the news agency Novosti-Kazakhstan reported.

Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) said it would carry out more attacks unless the law was repealed, SITE reported. The group denied reports that it was a suicide attack and said the person carrying the bomb died when it exploded accidentally.

The previously unknown militant group last week issued a video dated Oct. 21 warning of violence unless the government abolished the religion law.

The group also criticized the authorities for banning headscarves. In fact, there is no provision in the law that restricts religious headwear.

The Atyrau region prosecutor's office said it had identified the bomber as a local 24-year-old man, Novosti-Kazakhstan reported.

Homemade explosive devices and instructions for assembling them were found during a search of his home, the prosecutor's office said.

Atyrau is an administrative and residential center for international oil groups such as Chevron-led Tengizchevroil, which operates Kazakhstan's largest producing oil field, Tengiz, to the south of the city. ☒ "Today the office in Atyrau and in Tengiz are working normally. The company has raised security," Linsi Crain, a spokeswoman for Tengizchevroil in Atyrau, said by phone after the explosion Monday. ☒ U.S. oil majors ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips have offices in the city, as does Italy's Eni, part of the consortium developing the giant Kashagan field some 80 kilometers from the city.

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