

5 Militants, 2 Troops Die in Clash

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ALMATY, Kazakhstan — A clash outside Kazakhstan's commercial capital has left five militants and two government troops dead, prosecutors said Sunday, violence that could unnerve authorities trying to contain a surge in Islamist and other militant activity in nation.

The fighting occurred as security services in Boraldai village cornered suspects wanted in the murder last month of two policemen in nearby Almaty, the prosecutor general said in a statement.

Authorities did not name the targeted group or give its affiliation, but said it was armed and planning attacks in Almaty.

The clash fits into a broader pattern of Islamist-related violence in which more than 30 people have been killed this year in Kazakhstan, an oil-rich, mainly Muslim nation of 17 million along Russia's southern border.

The nation had been largely untouched by Islamist violence since gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. But the killing of two police officers in western Kazakhstan in June was linked by authorities to indigenous terrorist groups.

In November, a radical Islamist killed seven people, including five law enforcement officers, in a rampage in the southern city of Taraz. That prompted security operations in which two more police officers and nine suspected militants were killed.

Authorities have responded to the wave of violence by passing a law that tightens registration rules for religious groups. Supporters of the bill said it would help combat religious extremism.

The law marked a reversal of President Nursultan Nazarbayev's earlier attempts to cast Kazakhstan as a land of religious tolerance. Some argue the legislation may further marginalize and radicalize devout Muslims.

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