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With Sochi Locked Down, Worries Arise of an Attack Elsewhere

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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Russian security officers riding a chairlift above the men's Olympic downhill skiing course at the Rosa Khutor alpine resort near Sochi on Saturday. **Kai Pfaffenbach**

Amid unprecedented security measures by the authorities to secure Sochi for the Winter Olympics, observers have expressed concerns that other cities in Russia have been left unprotected, with law enforcement personnel and technical equipment needed to prevent terrorist attacks having been concentrated in the Olympic capital.

Some Russian regions, including Moscow, have announced that security measures will be intensified until the end of the Games on Feb. 23, and that particular attention will be paid to the security of airports and railway stations to catch potential terrorists who may be in transit or are targeting busy transportation hubs.

The U.S., which has offered Russia assistance in securing the Games by sending FBI agents to Sochi and Moscow, as well as fighter jets and warships to the Black Sea, also said that a key

concern was the possibility of a terrorist targeting locations outside the main event areas.

"The biggest issue from my perspective is not the Games themselves, the venues themselves," U.S. National Counterterrorism Center director Matthew Olsen told the Senate Intelligence Committee last week. "There is extensive security at those locations — the sites of the events. The greater threat is to softer targets in the greater Sochi area, in the outskirts beyond Sochi, where there is a substantial potential for a terrorist attack."

President Vladimir Putin has said security will be guaranteed in Sochi, with about 40,000 personnel employed in the effort, but he has not specifically addressed concerns about other potential targets.

But other targets appear to be more vulnerable. In late December, two terrorist bombers blew themselves up in separate attacks in Volgograd, leaving 34 people dead.

In Moscow, law enforcement authorities will operate a robust security regime until mid-March. Alexei Mayorov, head of regional security at Moscow City Hall, said in an interview with Moskva FM radio last week that police would work more intensively during this period and that all crowded places would be patrolled more actively and often. He said some 500 volunteers would also help law enforcement personnel at airports and railway stations.

"Moscow, as the capital, cannot stand aloof," Mayorov said. "It is a large transportation hub — Olympic visitors and official delegations will go to Sochi via Moscow."

Security at airports throughout the country has been strengthened since early January, with the Federal Air Transportation Agency banning all liquids on board flights, saying that attacks by terrorists using improvised bombs were possible. The ban will be in effect until late March.

Safety measures in Moscow and St. Petersburg will be greatly increased, making them the two most protected cities in Russia after Sochi, according to Gennady Gudkov, former deputy head of the State Duma's Security Committee.

"I believe it is impossible to attack Sochi — it is fully protected," said Gudkov, who is also a colonel of the Federal Security Service in reserve.

But he said there was potential for terrorist attacks outside Sochi during the Olympics because it was impossible to introduce security equal to that in Sochi in all regions of Russia.

Not only Moscow and St. Petersburg are beefing up their security. Additional security measures for the period of the Olympics will be introduced in regions as far away as Tver, the region's Governor Andrei Shevelev said, according to local media. Tver is located almost 2,000 kilometers north of Sochi and is not known as being a hotbed for terrorists.

Some question whether there will be enough security personnel in the regions, however. In November, St. Petersburg-based news outlet Fontanka.ru, citing an unidentified law enforcement official, reported that some 37,000 police officers from different regions would be sent to Sochi to secure the Games.

The report said Moscow police would send some 3,000 officers to Sochi, St. Petersburg would send 1,000, the Tatarstan republic would provide 700, and even such small towns as Klin

in the Moscow region would also allocate officers for the Games. These figures could not be confirmed.

Andrei Soldatov, a prominent security services expert who runs the think tank Agentura.ru, said that for terrorists, timing is more crucial than location, so there could be multiple attacks during the Games both in Sochi and beyond.

He said the main security problem was with data collection and the exchange of information between agencies in different regions. When the last major counterterrorism reform was conducted in 2006, he said, the main emphasis was put on fighting large militant groups. Now, Soldatov said, attacks are usually carried out by a single person, and Russian authorities are not fully prepared to prevent such attacks.

"I am appalled that when information about a possible female suicide bomber appeared, law enforcement authorities in Sochi reacted to it too slowly, demonstrating that Russian law enforcement is not trained to work in crisis situations," he said.

In mid-January, police fliers appeared in Sochi saying that a potential suicide bomber, Ruzanna Ibragimova of Dagestan, who had apparently been interrogated in the past by law enforcement officials, may have made it through the ring of security around Sochi. Since then there have been no further reports regarding Ibragimova.

Vulnerable North Caucasus

Gudkov said that North Caucasus republics located close to Sochi, such as Dagestan, the current epicenter of a violent Islamic insurgency, were the most likely targets of terrorist attacks during the Games.

But acting Makhachkala Mayor Murtazali Rabadanov said last month that no additional security measures would be introduced in Dagestan in connection with the Olympics.

In mid-January, a counter-terrorism operation regime was put into place in Makhachkala when law enforcement officers blocked a group of militants in the city after an explosive device was detonated in a city restaurant, injuring 16 people.

"In Makhachkala, security is high all the time," Gudkov said. "It is normal there, they have gotten used to it, so that is why there is no need to introduce additional measures."

Not everyone shares the concerns over terrorist threats in the regions, however. Maxim Agarkov, a terrorism expert with the SK-Strategia think tank, which focuses on the North Caucasus, told a joke in response to a question on potential terror attacks:

"When a blonde was asked whether it was possible to see a dinosaur on the street, she said the odds were 50-50. It is the same in this situation — maybe there will be attacks, maybe not."

But he acknowledged that no city in Russia besides Moscow was protected enough to prevent terrorist threats.

He said that police officers sent to Sochi from the regions were the best-qualified officers

in the country but that there would be no lack of security personnel in the regions during the Games.

Soldatov said the problem with officers sent from the regions was that they did not know Sochi well, since they had never worked there.

But Agarkov said he believed no more than 1,000 regional officers were sent to Sochi and that the figure of 37,000 police officers was closer to the total of all the security staff that would be present at the Games.

"If it was only the number of police, there would be no accommodation for all of them in Sochi," he said.

It seems that Sochi is indeed experiencing problems with accommodating all the security personnel sent to the city. Last month, two police officers from St. Petersburg tried to flee from Sochi, saying that living and working conditions were "inhumane," Fontanka.ru reported. The news article featured a photograph of two police officers sleeping on the floor in a tiny room.

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