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Sochi Security Gets High Marks

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Two police officers patrolling on horseback near the Olympic Park in Sochi. Some 37,000 security personnel are on high alert in the area for the Games. **Eric Gaillard**

SOCHI — Security concerns over terrorist attacks have declined since the Sochi Winter Olympics kicked off over the weekend, and visitors say they have not been inconvenienced by security measures despite the presence of thousands of law enforcement officers.

The issue of security dominated international headlines in the run-up to the Games, and the U.S. offered assistance from its own security services, citing the threat of attacks by Islamist militants from the turbulent North Caucasus region that borders Sochi as reason to be extra vigilant.

The U.S. officials attending the Games said they were satisfied with the security provided by Russian authorities, however.

"The level of security is quite appropriate and it is very good and I hope the attention of the media and the world turns now more to what the athletes are going to do instead of the

threats that are being made," Janet Napolitano, the head of the U.S. delegation and former homeland security secretary, told CNN on Sunday.

Tourists seemed equally pleased, saying the expectations that had been built up by Western media were false.

"I have been to London and Vancouver and the way everything is organized here is way better," said Tyler Post from Sacramento, California.

"Our media in the U.S. is a mess, what I see here is very different from the picture they have portrayed," he said.

Another U.S. tourist echoed that sentiment, saying the U.S. media had "made it look as though the police would be very pervasive."

"The media in the U.S. has obviously blown [the security issue] out of proportion," said Branton Terry from Oklahoma.

Even if not an eyesore for tourists, however, security was still clearly present at the Games. Little white tents were scattered around the alpine roads in the mountains, with police personnel monitoring the situation from the inside.

Security personnel were dressed in outfits that were indistinguishable from the volunteers' uniforms, a fact which perhaps ensured that visitors would not feel too nervous.

Despite earlier reports of U.S. officials complaining about cooperation with Russian security services, U.S. Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul said in an interview with NBC on Sunday that the U.S. had coordinated "very closely" with the Russians in sharing information on possible threats.

"We are quite satisfied with the level of cooperation we have now," McFaul said.

On the eve of the opening ceremony on Friday, International Olympic Committee head Thomas Bach told reporters in Sochi he was sure the games would be completely secure and laughed off a remark about these games being the first facing a direct threat.

"I am really sorry but you cannot forget how many threats there were at each of the Olympic Games before," he said. "We had threats on Sydney, we had threats on Athens. Maybe you remember the situation in Salt Lake City. There were many so you cannot single out these Games in this way."

Sochi police were unable to comment immediately on whether there were new threats in Sochi since the beginning of the Olympics, but no additional security measures were visible in the city during the first days of the Games.

Crowds of people had to wait to pass a security check only at one venue in central Sochi where spectators gathered to watch a live broadcast of the events.

On trains that run from Sochi to Krasnaya Polyana and other Olympic venues, security remained the same as it was before the Olympics. All the bags were scanned but security

officers operated quickly and there were usually no lines at the security checkpoints.

The train station in Sochi was the only place where spectators heading to the Olympic Park or alpine venues had to pass a security check.

The number of police officers on Sochi streets remained the same as it was on the eve of the Olympics. Police officers on 24-hour patrol could be seen every few hundred meters in central Sochi. Russian authorities had said earlier that some 40,000 police officers would be present in the city during the Games.

Another Olympic visitor from the U.S., Barbara Ganong, said that her visit to Sochi had proven earlier media reports wrong.

"They did a good job, security is not excessive and it definitely makes me feel safe," she said, standing in front of the entrance to the Krasnaya Polyana railway station.

Yet while media reports of terrorist threats and construction blunders were drowned out by feel-good stories about athletes taking gold during the first few days of the Games, there was one sobering reminder on Monday about Russia's ongoing battle against an insurgency in the neighboring North Caucasus.

Police killed five suspected militants and took one into custody in a raid on a house in Dagestan's capital, Makhachkala, located some 600 kilometers from Sochi.

Some observers and U.S. authorities had earlier warned that terrorist attacks during the Games were more likely in regions beyond Sochi, particularly in Dagestan.

Kommersant reported Monday that the alleged militants were part of an extremist group that had organized the twin bombings in Volgograd in December that killed 34 people. According to the report, one of the militants, Alexei Pashentsev, was an ethnic Russian who had recently converted to Islam.

The report also said police believed the group had moved to Makhachkala recently because they may have been planning a terrorist attack there while the Olympics were going on in Sochi.

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