

Arrests Follow Niazov Assassination Bid

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The colourful and controversial Turkmen president claims former officials now living in exile were behind attempt on his life.

Sixteen people have been arrested in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat in connection with Monday's failed bid to assassinate President Saparmurat Niazov.

Shots were fired after two cars and a truck reportedly blocked the 62-year-old leader's motorcade as he drove to the presidential palace near the centre of the capital. Niazov was unhurt, but there have been reports of casualties among the assailants and the president's bodyguards.

The president later claimed that he hadn't even noticed the assault, telling reporters, "When I got to work I was informed that there had been a shoot-out."

Turkmen police detained the suspects Tuesday, November 26. A spokesman said that four members of the group were "mercenaries", but would not reveal any further information.

Niazov - who likes to be called Turkmenbashi, or Father of all Turkmen - made a statement on local television on Monday evening, blaming exiled opposition leaders for masterminding the attack.

Named in the broadcast were former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov; one-time ambassador Nurmukhamet Khanamov; Khudaiberdy Orazov, who once ran the republic's central bank; and ex-agricultural minister Iamadurdy Yklimov.

All four of the ex-officials, who have denied any involvement with the plot, have been living abroad for more than a year.

A presidential advisor alleged that Russian "political activists offered support" to the plotters. Russia's foreign ministry has declined to comment on the allegation.

The former Soviet republic has clashed with Moscow over a number of issues, including the division of the Caspian Sea's mineral wealth and the allegedly poor treatment of ethnic Russians in the country.

The attempted assassination follows growing discontent within the energy-rich state, where the majority of the population lives in abject poverty.

A series of unprecedented demonstrations have taken place, and some of the many giant portraits and statues of Turkmenbashi, which decorate the streets and squares of every town, have been vandalised.

Niazov, who was made president for life in August, acquired international notoriety this year when he controversially renamed the months of the year after himself, members of his family and Turkmen heroes.

His regime has come under constant criticism from western human rights organisations.

In July, the International Helsinki Foundation commented, "The Turkmen government shows a complete intolerance of the opposition, persecutes critically-thinking people and imprisons or deports religious activists and has completely destroyed the basic institutions of democracy. In Turkmenistan, freedom of speech is completely absent."

Location: Turkmenistan
Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia

Focus: Central Asia

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