

Blast in Kyrgyz Capital Raises Tensions

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Authorities accuse Islamic radicals of planting bomb, though others are not so sure.

A bomb blast in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek is the work of the same shadowy group whose members were involved in a gunbattle with police in Osh less than 24 hours earlier, officials say.

The bomb went off a day after a firefight between police and unidentified armed men in the southern Kyrgyz city of Osh (For more, see [Kyrgyzstan on Alert After Osh Clash](#).)

It also came just two days before United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was due to visit Kyrgyzstan, which hosts an American military air base.

The explosion happened at about nine in the morning on November 30 outside a sports facility where the high-profile trial of members of former president Kurmanbek Bakiev's administration has been going on since mid-November. They are accused of ordering police action that caused the deaths of at least 70 people during protests in April that led to Bakiev being ousted.

Kyrgyzstan's interior ministry said two policemen and a civilian were injured by the explosives, placed in a drain at the Kojomkul Palace of Sports. It happened about five minutes' walk from the White House, where the Kyrgyz parliament sits.

Interior ministry and National Security Service officers launched an immediate investigation to identify the nature of the explosive device and track down possible culprits.

Marat Imankulov, the secretary of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, said the blast was so powerful that part of the manhole cover over the drain was blown 300 metres away.

"The explosive device was activated by a remote control unit or a mobile phone, so in theory the perpetrator could have been observing as a bus transporting police drove up to the Palace of Sports. But the bus drove off, and ten seconds later there was a powerful explosion," he said.

Imankulov said there was undoubtedly a link to the group targeted by the police operation in Osh the previous day. He also said he believed the attack was intended to disrupt the trial in the sports facility.

The authorities have already said one of the men killed in Osh was positively linked to a plan to stage terror attacks in Osh and the Kyrgyz capital; this was discovered in an earlier police operation carried out on November 22. That raid resulted in several arrests and the seizure of home-made explosives and remote control detonators.

Following the Bishkek blast, the deputy head of the National Security Service, Kolbay Musaev, said the main suspects had connections to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, IMU, and the Islamic Jihad Union.

The IMU conducted raids in Central Asia in 1999-2000 and is currently operating out of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Islamic Jihad Union is a splinter group which broke with the IMU in northwest Pakistan some years ago, apparently over future plans for militant action.

IWPR asked Artur Medetbekov, formerly deputy chief of the National Security Service and now head of a private security agency called Alfa-Antiterror, to comment on possible motives for the bombing. He said it was a professional attack designed to sow fear among the public and send a warning to the authorities. He too made a connection with the ongoing trial.

Kadyr Malikov, head of the Religion, Law and Politics Centre in Bishkek, remains sceptical that the IMU or other Islamic groups were behind the bomb.

He told the AKIpress news agency that Islamic radicals would have little interest in disrupting the Bishkek trial, as it covers only unrest in April and not the mass ethnic violence that left over 400 dead in southern Kyrgyzstan this June. In addition, the pan-Islamic agenda involved uniting different ethnic groups against the state.

"The IMU is interested in winning wider support among the public and uniting ethnic groups around the ideology of political Islam," he explained. "It isn't in the IMU's interest to draw attention to itself with explosions [targeting] the public, particularly the Kyrgyz-speaking public, as this could lead to ethnic conflict."

Malikov believes other hands are at work. He said there is insufficient information to identify them but they may well be forces with economic or other vested interests, which could exploit instability and chaos to their own advantage.

Political analyst Marat Kazakpaev expressed concern that Kyrgyzstan could see more attacks of this kind, as police raids appeared to have failed to capture and neutralise the group involved.

Other analysts say incidents like these point up the need for more effective policing.

In the April unrest, police were accused of meting out harsh treatment to demonstrators, and following the June ethnic violence, they came in for a lot of criticism for failing to protect the public impartially.

Political analyst Mars Sariev suggested that the authorities might use the Clinton visit to ask for more counter-terrorism assistance.

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