

Dushanbe Blasts Leave Everyone in the Dark

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Widespread scepticism that three explosions in quick succession can have been the work of teenage hooligans.

Three explosions in the centre of the Tajik capital Dushanbe have sparked fears of renewed instability among residents, who remain sceptical of the official explanation that they were caused by a gang of teenagers.

The explanation did little to curb rumours that dark forces were trying to cause trouble ahead of the presidential election scheduled for this November.

The first blast, just after midnight on June 15-16, was in front of the Iranian embassy and also just 100 metres from Tajikistan's parliament. The second explosion was just 20 minutes later, close to the offices of the Charity Fund run by the opposition Islamic Rebirth Party, IRP. Finally, at 8:30 the same morning, there was yet another explosion near the Constitutional Court and the Kainak business centre.

The interior ministry said there were no casualties, although windows were shattered by the blasts.

Interior ministry press office chief Khudoinazar Asozoda told IWPR on June 20 that officers were considering all possible options ranging from a malicious prank by young hooligans to a deliberate attempt to create instability – though he did not say by whom or to what end. Asozoda said the three incidents were definitely connected, but were not acts of terrorism.

At this point, the ministry said only that the first explosion involved fireworks packed into a plastic bottle.

On June 21, Asozoda issued an official statement covering the two later explosions, saying they were the work of adolescents. Asozoda told reporters that the gang had found some flammable material at a nearby building site and made makeshift bombs. Ten youths had been arrested, he said, adding, "There is no political aspect or terrorist motive."

This explanation did not, however, include the first incident near the embassy of Iran, a country with which Tajikistan has maintained cordial relations based in part on a shared cultural heritage.

The fact that the initial criminal case was launched by the ministry for security rather than the interior ministry, which is in charge of the uniformed police who deal with routine crimes, suggested that the matter was being treated more seriously than officials cared to admit.

By the time news of the arrests came out, the rumour-mills were already spinning fast.

"It's impossible that three explosions in the city centre of the city were the work of hooligans. They would be too scared to do such a thing, said Maya Barotova, a Dushanbe resident. "It's more likely to have been prompted by the upcoming presidential election that promises to be very turbulent since there are plenty of dissatisfied people in the country."

Most observers expect President Imomali Rahmonov to win re-election easily in the November ballot, although opposition parties are likely to field one or more challengers.

Muhiddin Kabiri, deputy head of the IRP, whose offices are close to the second blast site, expressed similar scepticism about the main official line.

"I don't believe this was an act of hooliganism. All the explosions happened almost simultaneously and in the centre. Most likely that they were well planned and had some purpose," Kabiri told the Avesta news agency. "I have no inkling about who this attack was aimed at."

But Kabiri does not think the IRP was the target. If that had been the case, he said, the attack would have been aimed at party headquarters on the other side of town.

Kabiri's colleague Hikmatullo Saifullozoda, who heads the IRP's analytical centre, said the explosions were definitely coordinated and most likely political. "These explosions were deliberate, and certain interest groups were behind them. Most likely they are somehow related to the upcoming presidential election," he said.

Although it is unclear which group would benefit from violence, the pre-election periods are always a time of heightened tensions. A month before the February 2005 parliamentary ballot, there was a car bomb attack outside the ministry for disaster management in which only the driver died. It took the authorities until March 2006 to reveal any details.

In a country which experienced five years of civil war ending in 1997, people remain nervous about the slightest hint of instability. Residents of Dushanbe city centre were alarmed by the blasts and the lack of what they saw as a credible explanation.

"Now I'm afraid to let my children go play outside even in the daytime," said Najiba Rasulova, a mother of two.

Her neighbour Anna Semenova said, "I don't know what I'm going to do. I'll probably exchange my flat for somewhere on the edge of town, or even leave Tajikistan. It will never settle down here."

The same night that the three blasts took place in Dushanbe, there was a massive explosion on the pipeline which brings natural gas from Uzbekistan to the Tajik capital.

Eyewitnesses said the blast, just 20 kilometres away from Dushanbe, caused a huge fire, with flames shooting 50 metres into the air. It took firefighters four hours to deal with the blaze, which left most of the capital without gas for heating and cooking.

Although early reports suggested that a simple gas leak was involved, the Ministry of Security again got involved in the investigation, and prosecutors opened a file treating the matter as sabotage.

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