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Truck bomb suspected in Russian apartment building blast

September 16, 1999

Web posted at: 7:13 p.m. EDT (2313 GMT)

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From staff and wire reports

MOSCOW (CNN) -- Russian Prime Minister [Vladimir Putin](#) ordered government agencies to increase security and appealed to citizens to protect themselves following a deadly blast Thursday in southern Russia, the fourth explosion at an apartment building in two weeks.

At least 17 people were killed and more than 115 injured when explosives hidden in a truck or an underground pipe blew off the front of a nine-story apartment block in Volgodonsk, about 800 kilometers (500 miles) south of Moscow, Russian security officials said.

Volgodonsk is close to the volatile North Caucasus Mountains region, where Russian forces have been battling separatist militants since early August.

The blast left a five-meter (16.4-foot) deep crater in front of the building and severely damaged a nearby police station and about 20 other surrounding buildings, Interior Ministry officials said.

Rescue workers and volunteers sifted through the wreckage, peeling off chunks of reinforced concrete and hunting for survivors. Shocked neighbors and weeping relatives looked on.

Meanwhile, firefighters battled a blaze that engulfed several floors of the building.

Traces of explosives were found in the wreckage, the Federal Security Service (FSB) said. The force of the blast was equivalent to about 100-300 tons of TNT, it said.

Russian authorities blamed terrorists for the attack, saying it was linked

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to a series of explosions in Moscow and the Caucasus region that have killed nearly 300 people.

"This explosion bears the criminals' signature. I think when the experts report what explosives were used, we're going to be able to say that with a high degree of certainty," said FSB spokesman Alexander Zhdanovich.

Blast in St. Petersburg blamed on natural gas leak

Fears of yet another bomb attack were raised late Thursday, when an explosion shook an apartment building in Russia's second-largest city, killing at least two people. But officials said natural gas appeared to be the cause.

That blast tore through the seventh floor of a nine-story complex near a port area in [St. Petersburg](#). A fire then raged through adjacent floors until firefighters extinguished it shortly after midnight.

"A terrorist attack is excluded," said an Emergencies Ministry spokesman.

Government vows to 'wipe out terrorism'

In the wake of the Volgodonsk blast, Putin gave government agencies three days to elaborate plans for strengthening security in industry, transport, communications and energy installations, as well as in residential areas.

During a meeting of his Cabinet, he turned to the television cameras and urged Russians to help prevent attacks.

"I want to turn to military veterans, police veterans. Take the initiative on yourselves," he said.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin tried to calm fears, insisting he has "the strength and resources to wipe out terrorism."

In response to the recent attacks, Russian riot police and soldiers have launched a massive, nationwide security sweep, named "Operation Whirlwind," combing train stations, subways and city streets and detaining anyone they deem suspicious.

In their latest discovery, FSB detectives found 3.5 tons of explosives at an address in southeast Moscow.

But police said they had previously interviewed residents and checked the bombed apartment building in Volgodonsk for possible explosives, and they believe no one could have stored explosive materials inside.

Police suspected a truck that pulled up in front of the building 15 minutes before the explosion could have been involved.

Attack near nuclear plant

Thursday's attack was eight miles (13 km) from an unfinished nuclear power station -- but an atomic energy spokesman said it posed no danger to the plant.

The spokesman said the plant had never used or stored nuclear fuel and was not affected by the bomb.

Some of the power station's workers who lived in the apartment block were injured in the blast, the spokesman said by telephone.

Kremlin denounces speculation as 'wickedness'

The Kremlin reacted angrily to media speculation linking the state security service to a terrorist campaign that has killed nearly 300 people.

It denied reports in a Moscow daily newspaper suggesting the security service engineered the blasts to allow for the declaration of a state of emergency -- and the cancellation of planned elections.

"Here we are up against obvious wickedness," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Yakushkin said in a statement, referring to the newspaper's allegations.

"By printing such lies, the newspaper effectively assumes for itself a role which has nothing to do with journalism. This is the role of the instigator and the provocateur," he said.

Moscow Bureau Chief Jill Dougherty, The [Associated Press](#) and [Reuters](#) contributed to this report.

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