Assassination attempt wounds 3 in Russia

Two bombs exploded Thursday on a roadside in Ingushetia, wounding the southern Russian republic's prime minister in an apparent assassination attempt, officials said - the latest sign of growing violence across the heavily Muslim North Caucasus region.

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Ingushetia Prime Minister Ibragim Malsagov was hospitalized after the attack in the city of Nazran, but his life was not in danger, said Fyodor Shcherbakov, an aide to the Kremlin envoy to the region.

Malsagov's driver was killed and two other people were wounded in addition to Malsagov, said Nikolai Ivashkevich, a spokesman for the southern regional branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry. Malsagov, the second highest-ranking official in the region, was hurt in the hand and the leg.

The top police official in Ingushetia, Interior Minister Beslan Khamkhoyev, said two explosives placed about 10-15 yards apart detonated within 10 seconds, the Interfax news agency reported. The attack occurred near one of the city's outdoor markets as Malsagov's motorcade passed.

Lying in a hospital bed with bandages wrapped around his head and hand, Malsagov told state-run Channel One television that he had been traveling on a road near his home in the middle of a three-car motorcade when there was an explosion in front by the first vehicle.

"Naturally, I automatically jumped out to run over and see what happened, and then there was another explosion," Malsagov said. He blamed "forces that want to destabilize the situation."

Russian television networks showed footage of what appeared to be Malsagov's black Mercedes, its rear window a maze of cracked glass, and of a deep crater by the roadside.

Nazran is the main city in the Ingushetia region, which has suffered frequent spillover violence from neighboring Chechnya to the east, as well as attacks by its own militants and criminal gangs.

The top prosecutor for southern Russia, Deputy Prosecutor General Nikolai Shepel, said in televised comments that the attack seemed to have "the same signature" as other terrorist attacks that have struck the North Caucasus, adding, "I mean the international organizations that unfortunately are present in the south of Russia."

Russian authorities are eager to link their fight against militants in the North Caucasus with the international struggle against terror, and often point to alleged international involvement in attacks in the region. Government critics say flawed Kremlin ethnic policy and corruption among regional leaders are major causes of the violence.

Last week, Nazran police chief Dzhabrail Kostoyev was wounded when unknown assailants detonated a radio-controlled land mine as his car was passing.

The republic's police and security forces were also targeted in a devastating overnight assault by militants in June 2004, in which some 90 people were killed. Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev claimed responsibility for that attack and for the hostage crisis that killed more than 330 people last September at a school in Beslan in North Ossetia, which borders both Chechnya and Ingushetia.

The republic on Chechnya's eastern border, Dagestan, has also been plagued by frequent bombings and other attacks targeting government and law enforcement officials.

Authorities in other republics of the North Caucasus have also battled militants they say are Islamic extremists. Analysts have expressed concern that major violence could break out in the region even as Russian and local government officials assert that life is returning to normal in Chechnya, devastated by two separatist wars in the past decade.

In the Stavropol region, north of the band of largely Muslim republics, one police officer a two gunmen were killed in a shootout Thursday in the village of Yanangui, a duty officer at the regional Interior Ministry said. Another gunman was detained.

The Interfax news agency quoted an unidentified regional police official as saying the gunmen were suspected Islamic extremists.