May 17 2006, 13:01 ROSTOV-ON-DON, Russia (AP) - A car packed with powerful explosives blew up on a road in southern Russia on Wednesday, killing seven people including a high-level regional police official in what authorities said may have been a suicide bombing.

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Ingushetia's Deputy Interior Minister Dzhabrail Kostoyev, two bodyguards and four civilians were killed when a hatchback exploded on a roadside on the outskirts of the region's main city of Nazran, regional police officials and an Interior Ministry spokesman in southern Russia said.

Ministry spokesman Roman Shchekotin said that preliminary information indicated a suicide attacker had been in the car that exploded. However, Ingushetia's Security Council chief, Bashir Aushev, said it was also possible the car bomb was detonated by remote control.

Kostoyev, a target of previous attacks, had been traveling in an armored vehicle to work in Nazran in a convoy of three cars, Shchekotin said. Ingush Interior Ministry spokesman Nazir Yevloyev said Kostoyev's SUV was thrown 20 meters (yards) by the blast, and television networks showed the wrecked vehicle lying on its side.

Four civilians were killed when their car plowed into Kostoyev's, Yevloyev said, and NTV said they were construction workers traveling to a site. Russian television networks showed footage of a gutted, blackened car on a road littered with debris, and reported that nearby buildings were damaged in the blast, which Shchekotin said apparently had the force of about 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of TNT.

They reported that little was left of the car that exploded, and Yevloyev said he could not confirm there had been a suicide bomber, telling NTV that "no body parts have been found - just fragments of the car."

Ingushetia, which neighbors Chechnya in Russia's restive North Caucasus, has been plagued by militant attacks, many targeting law enforcement officials and facilities. A concerted attack targeting police in June 2004 killed 92 people.

Kostoyev, then Nazran's police chief, was wounded in August when unknown assailants detonated a radio-controlled land mine as his car was passing. The ITAR-Tass news agency reported that a mortar shell hit his office in a February 2005 attack, but that he was not there at the time, and RIA-Novosti said his home in the village of Ekazhevo was hit by gunfire twice late last year.

In another republic of the North Caucasus, Karachayevo-Cherkessiya, unidentified assailants fatally shot the acting chief of a prison in the city of Cherkessk early Wednesday outside his home.

Poverty, corruption and persecution connected with Islam have fueled anger at the authorities in the North Caucasus, an ethnically mixed strip of republics, most of which have large Muslim populations.

The region is troubled by violence in some cases linked to the conflict in neighboring Chechnya, where two wars have been fought in the past 12 years between federal forces and separatist Chechen rebels who have increasingly espoused extremist Islamic ideology.

Yevloyev, speaking on Channel One, suggested the attack was revenge for what he called Kostoyev's "uncompromising struggle" against crime linked with extremism.


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