

Terrorism Threat Ahead of Olympics Mounting

By Aron Lamm
Epoch Times Staff

American concerns over security threats against next month's Winter Olympics in Sochi are mounting, with a lack of cooperation by Russian security agencies complicating the ability to set up preventive measures.

Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Matthew Olsen told the Senate Intelligence Committee Wednesday that despite the extensive security at the sports venues in Sochi, there is a "substantial potential for a terrorist attack" in the greater Sochi area.

North Caucasus Islamist terrorist groups have a history of attacking soft targets like buses, subway stations, and even more notoriously, schools and theaters, said terrorism expert Max Abrahms, who is assistant professor of public policy at Northeastern University.

Just last month two bomb attacks in the Volgograd transit hub, located roughly 400 miles from Sochi, killed 34 people.

Russia is mounting a massive security operation for the Olympics, deploying more than 50,000 police and soldiers amid threats from Muslim insurgents from the nearby Caucasus region.

But the Olympic host has not been forthcoming in cooperating with security concerns of other nations, such as the United States. Only in recent weeks have U.S. and Russian security agencies been in touch to discuss the Sochi threat, even though the American Olympic delegation to Sochi, consisting of 230 athletes, is the largest.

Some Olympians have taken measures into their own hands and are hiring guards from private security firms. Also the United States is making its own contingency plans. American military vessels are standing by in the Black Sea for possible evacuations.

Not Surprising

According to Abrahms the lack of communication by Russian security agencies is not surprising.

"I wouldn't expect any country to cooperate entirely on counter-terrorism," he said. "Russia, in particular, is a very secretive nation, and it's still quasi-authoritarian."

He also pointed out that the United States and Russia are "adversaries even on a good day," which makes cooperation even more difficult. There is also, more pertinently, some hard feelings on the part of the Russians for the American criticism in the wake of the Boston Marathon bomb-



Security personnel sit in the back of a truck outside the Fisht Olympic Stadium in Sochi, Russia, Jan. 27.

ings, when Russia didn't share intelligence about the Tsarnaev family in a timely manner.

The blame does not rest entirely with Russia, however, Abrahms said, as the United States has also not been too willing to share, for instance, with its extensive know-how and technology on improvised explosive devices (IEDs). This is also understandable, as the United States does not want these countermeasures to fall into the wrong hands.

But does a lack of multilateral

cooperation really increase the risk of a successful terrorist attack?

"To a limited extent," Abrahms said. "But such concerns are on the margin. Russia is doing the very best job it can, and is really cracking down on terrorism. The problem has to do less with cooperation than the inherent ease of carrying out a terrorist attack."

A Prominent Target

The Olympics, with its many foreigners clustered together and massive media attention, is just too attractive a target for

terrorists, said Abrahms. The international attention also places limits on what Russia can do, such as restricting civil liberties too harshly, for instance.

In the North Caucasus Russian Republic of Dagestan alone, which Russia expert Ariel Cohen calls "the epicenter for Salafi-jihadi insurgents," some 7,000 people have been killed in clashes between Russian law enforcement and militants, Cohen said in a blog post.

Yet, the very nature of the threat makes it hard to predict

attacks and protect oneself accordingly. In the end, although Russia, the United States, and Israel are probably among the more favored targets, who actually gets hurt—if there is an attack—might just come down to sheer opportunity and coincidence, Abrahms said.

"[The terrorists] won't have an infinite array of choices," he said. "It will be indiscriminate. No foreign delegation is safe."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Ukraine President's Sick Leave Prompts Guessing Game

By Jim Heintz
& Maria Danilova

KYIV, Ukraine—Is Ukraine's president just sick? Or is he leaving the limelight in preparation for something? And if so, what—

cracking down or stepping down?

Amid the deepest turmoil since the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yanukovich's announcement Thursday that he was taking indefinite sick leave had Ukrainians guessing what was happening to their country.

Yanukovich has faced two months of major protests that sometimes paralyze central Kyiv and have spread to other cities. The protests started after he backed out of a long-awaited agreement to deepen ties with the European Union in favor of Rus-

sia, but quickly came to encompass a wide array of discontent over corruption, heavy-handed police, and dubious courts.

The official line is that the 63-year-old Yanukovich has an acute respiratory illness and a high fever.

But the opposition isn't buying it. Some said he is looking for an excuse to avoid further discussions with opposition leaders, which have done nothing to resolve the tensions.

Preparing for State of Emergency?

Vitali Klitschko, a leading opposition figure, has a more ominous theory—the president could be pretending to take himself out of action in preparation for imposing a state of emergency. That has been a persistent worry of the opposition since violent clashes two weeks ago killed three protesters.

"I remember from the Soviet Union it's a bad sign—a bad sign because always if some Soviet Union leaders have to make an unpopular decision, they go to the hospital," Klitschko said.

Yanukovich's press office said the president is still in charge of the country, but there was no indication of how long he might be on leave or how much work he would be able to do. He isn't known to have serious health problems, although his office said he has taken sick leave twice before—once for a knee problem and the other time also for a respiratory illness.

One political commentator suggested the announcement could be a ruse to take him out of power, as in the attempted coup against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991.

"I don't remember official statements on Viktor Yanukovich's colds. But I remember well, when on Aug. 19, 1991, the vice president of the USSR, Gennady Yanayev, announced the serious illness of Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev," Vitaly Portnikov wrote on his Facebook page.

Still, others took the announcement at face value. Analyst Mykhailo Pohrebinsky noted that Yanukovich had made a late-night visit to Parliament amid tense discussions Wednesday and "those who were close to him said he really was very pale and exhausted."

Hours after the government announced his sick leave, Yanukovich issued a statement to upbraid his political foes, saying, "The opposition continues to escalate the situation and urges people to stand in the frost for the sake of the political ambitions of several of its leaders."

Temperatures in Kyiv have dropped as low as minus 4 F on some nights, bringing severe discomfort to those manning a round-the-clock protest tent camp on Kyiv's main square.

Despite offering several concessions, authorities have so far failed to mollify the protesters.

Anti-Protest Laws Repealed

In a series of moves aimed at resolving the crisis, Parliament

I remember from the Soviet Union it's a bad sign.

Vitali Klitschko, opposition leader

voted Tuesday to repeal harsh anti-protest laws. Yanukovich must formally sign that repeal and it was unclear whether he could do so while on sick leave.

He also has accepted the resignation of his prime minister. But protesters said the moves are insufficient—they want him out and new elections held.

On Wednesday, Parliament passed a measure offering amnesty to some of those arrested in the protests. That new law, however, was only valid if demonstrators vacate most of the government buildings they occupy in Kyiv and in some western cities. The offer was quickly greeted with contempt by the opposition, which regards the arrests during the protests as fundamentally illegitimate.

There are conflicting figures on how many protesters are now in custody. One opposition lawmaker said Wednesday there were 328, whom he characterized as "hostages." But the prosecutor-general's office said Thursday there were 140.

From The Associated Press

AP PHOTO/DARKO BANDIC



An opposition supporter stands next to a burning tire at a barricade in central Kyiv, Ukraine, Jan. 30.

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