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Sochi Olympics: Terrorist Attack Imminent?

By Krishna Khanal

Synopsis

The winter Olympics in Sochi are a “prestige project” and symbol of “Russia’s rise”. Despite President Putin’s enthusiasm and optimism, western media have reported the likelihood of a terrorist attack from the Caucasus Emirate.

Commentary

THE WINTER Olympics in Sochi, Russia, face the threat of an imminent terrorist attack by Islamist militants based in the North Caucasus; they have been the subject of online warnings of chemical attacks and suicide bombings. The United States has issued a warning that explosives could be smuggled in toothpaste or cosmetic tubes.

The security at Sochi has been strengthened after US warning that terrorists might be planning to target flights to Russia. Russian president Vladimir Putin however exuded confidence about Russia’s ability to host a safe Olympics. At the same time, Islamist militants have vowed to stop the games by any means. The government has imposed a special security zone called a “ring of steel” to protect the games.

The impending threat

The Russian security forces have been put on high alert for a possible militant attack and have banned liquids in carry-on baggage. The US warned that the explosives could be hidden in tubes to be mixed to make a bomb on board a plane or sneaked into the Olympic village; that could be enough to bring down a plane or blow up a dormitory.

The fact that the US homeland security shared it with the public shows it to be of significant concern. The warning issued is mainly for foreign airlines carrying passengers to Russia. Hiding explosives in tubes is not new. In October 1976, Cuban exiles opposed to Fidel Castro’s regime brought down a Cubana Airlines flight by using explosives hidden in a toothpaste tube, killing 78 passengers and crew. In 2004 Russia witnessed terrorist attacks by liquid explosives in the air when two Chechen suicide bombers blew up two planes; they were carrying the explosive material in a makeup box.

Despite Russian claims of a safe security environment the Sochi games are susceptible to terrorist attacks. Last December suicide bombers killed 34 people in the Russian city of Volgograd, 640 kilometres northeast of Sochi. The US is providing air and naval assets, including two ships in the Black Sea, to help Russia combat possible

terrorist attacks on the Sochi Winter Olympics.

The associated group

The group suspected of carrying out the Volgograd attack is the Caucasus Emirate, an Islamist militant movement based 320 km away from Sochi. This group operates in Chechnya and seven other regions of Caucasus as well. Their main goal is to create an Islamic state based on the Islamic Shariah and to separate the North Caucasus from Russia. The group has been designated a terrorist organisation by Russia and the US and is believed to have links with Al Qaida and the Taliban. The former head of Al Qaida Osama Bin Laden helped the Chechen Jihadists with a view to opening up a new front for global jihad in Russia.

The terrorist network has its roots from the two Chechen wars. The group is led by Doku Umarov, also known as "Russia's Bin Laden". The operational strength of the group lies in the innovative recruitment practices, suicide bombers and various other innovative forms of terrorist attacks. In July 2013, Umarov published a video calling on his group members to derail the Sochi Olympics. He described the games as a "satanic dance" on the grave of their ancestors – Muslims killed fighting Russian forces in the 19th century. In January 2014, the group posted another video taking responsibility for the Volgograd attacks in December 2013 and threatened to give Russia a "present" during the Sochi Olympics.

According to the Russian media, in addition to the threats of chemical attacks, the group has also dispatched three women named "The Black Widows" to carry out the suicide bombings. One of the would-be-suicide bombers, a 22-year-old widow of a militant, is believed to be already in Sochi.

Intentions versus capability

However, despite the presence of a clear and present threat it will not be easy for the North Caucasus Emirate to carry out these attacks for two reasons. Firstly, for the Sochi Olympics unprecedented security measures have been put in place, considering the geographical proximity of Sochi to the North Caucasus where terrorism is quite prevalent. About 40,000 police and military personnel have been deployed in the area.

The security measures also involve anti-aircraft missiles, surveillance by drones, reconnaissance robots, sonar systems, high-speed patrol boats etc. Secondly, the group's operational strength has decreased considerably after the death of the veteran Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev seven years ago.

The Olympics are a special event and a matter of personal prestige to Russian President Vladimir Putin. A militant attack would be a direct assault on Putin. Costing US\$50 billion, the Sochi Olympics are the most expensive winter Olympics ever. It is a chance for Putin to showcase a modern sports-loving Russia.

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