

Gunmen kill 19 in Russia's Dagestan region

AFP

Attacks on churches and synagogues in Russia's Dagestan region killed primarily police officers, officials said Monday, announcing a toll of 19 dead after violence that stoked fears over Islamist violence in the historically restive North Caucasus.

The assaults launched on Sunday come just three months after Islamic State group fighters killed more than 140 in a Moscow concert hall, the deadliest terror attack on Russia for almost 20 years.

Moscow said on Monday it had concluded an "anti-terrorist operation" and killed five of the assailants behind the coordinated attacks on Sunday evening in the cities of Makhachkala and Derbent.



Members of security forces carry out a law enforcement operation after multiple attacks in Makhachkala and Derbent, in an undisclosed location in the region of Dagestan, Russia, in this still image from video released June 24, 2024. National Antiterrorism Committee/Handout via REUTERS

The incidents also had echoes of the kind of insurgent violence that marred the North Caucasus during the 1990s and 2000s.

Russia has been a target for Islamic State terror in recent years, with the fundamentalist group opposing Moscow's military support for Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and claiming to have set-up a "franchise" in Russia's north Caucasus.

"According to preliminary data, 15 law enforcement officers were killed, as well as four civilians, including an Orthodox priest," Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, said on Monday.

Five assailants had also been "liquidated", it added, though it was not clear how many had been involved in the attack.

The Russian Orthodox Church said its archpriest Nikolai Kotelnikov, had been "brutally killed" in an attack on a church in the city of Derbent.

The National Antiterrorism Committee, which responds to mass attacks and is tasked with foiling terror plots, said Monday morning it had wrapped up its rapid response operation.

"Following the neutralisation of the threats to the lives and health of citizens, it was decided to end the anti-terrorist operation in Dagestan," at 08:15 am (0515 GMT), it said in a statement.

In the 1990s and 2000s, separatist and militant groups waged guerilla-style campaigns against Russian authorities in the

mountainous North Caucasus following the break-down of the Soviet Union.

Moscow fought two wars for control of the neighbouring Chechnya region, with President Vladimir Putin having touted his success in quashing the insurgency at the start of his presidency.

– ‘War’ –

More than 12 hours after the attack unfolded, the Kremlin was yet to comment.

On Monday, some of Russia’s partners and allies, including China and Azerbaijan, which borders the Dagestan region, issued messages of condolence.

Russia’s Investigative Committee said it had opened criminal probes over “acts of terror,” while Dagestan’s Governor Sergei Melikov called the attacks an attempt to “destabilise” his region.

“We know who is behind these terrorist attacks and what objective they are pursuing,” he added, without providing specific details, but making references to the conflict in Ukraine.

“We must understand that war comes to our homes too. We felt it, but today we face it,” he said.

After the deadly attack on Moscow’s Crocus City Hall in March, Putin had initially said Kyiv had a hand in planning the assault, despite no evidence and an IS affiliate claiming responsibility on multiple occasions.

In a video message posted on social media Monday morning, Melikov said authorities were hunting for “all the members of these sleeper cells who prepared (the attacks) and who were prepared, including abroad.”

Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church and a fervent supporter of the Kremlin, said the “enemy” was seeking to destroy “inter-religious peace” in Russia, without naming who he believed was responsible.

Two Orthodox churches, two synagogues, and a police checkpoint were attacked, according to officials and the Russian Jewish Congress.

– Molotov cocktails –

Sunday was a religious holiday, Pentecost Sunday, in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Dagestan’s interior ministry said 19 people took shelter inside a church in Makhachkala and were later led out to safety.

Gunmen also attacked synagogues in both cities, setting them on fire with Molotov cocktails, the Russian Jewish Congress said in a statement.

Russia’s FSB security service in April said it had arrested four people in Dagestan on suspicion of plotting the deadly attack on Moscow’s Crocus City Hall concert venue in March, which was claimed by IS.

Militants from Dagestan are known to have travelled to join IS in Syria, and in 2015, the group declared it had established a “franchise” in the North Caucasus.

Russian authorities repeatedly announce successful “anti-terrorist operations” targeting alleged IS fighters from the north Caucasus.

Tensions have also ran high in the Muslim-majority region following the start of the Israel-Hamas war last year.

In October an angry crowd stormed the local airport when reports circulated on social media that a plane was arriving

from Israel.