



Suicide bombers a worry for Russia's Sochi Games



Clive Williams

The two suicide bombings in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) on December 29 and 30 indicate that Islamist extremists will continue to try to disrupt the Sochi Winter Olympic Games as foreshadowed by Doku Umarov, 49, the self-styled Emir of the Caucasus Emirate. In a video statement in July last year, Umarov declared that holding the Games around the Black Sea resort amounted to “demonic dances on the bones of our ancestors” and ordered rebels to “use all means” to derail the event.

The Sochi Winter Olympic Games in Russia will be held from February 7-23, when 55-60 Australian athletes will compete, followed by the Paralympic Games equivalent from March 7-16.

At least some of the participating nations are concerned that Russia will not be able to provide adequate levels of security for the Games, and the US has offered additional security support. For reasons of national pride, Russia is unlikely to accept

external security assistance unless it is provided covertly.

Russia is already preparing security on a scale that could only be achieved by an authoritarian regime. All international visitors will be security screened before arrival in Russia and all Russian visitors to Sochi will have to register. A security zone for the Games will extend 100 kilometres along the Black Sea coast and inland 40km from Sochi. No civilian vehicle traffic will be allowed into the zone for a month before and a month after the Games. More than 40,000 security personnel will be provided to secure the zone. At the same time, security will be ramped up throughout Rus-

sia, particularly at transport hubs, and notably in the North Caucasus, the home territory of Umarov's Islamist extremists.

Are Australians at risk?

It seems unlikely that there will be a significant terrorism threat to our athletes because of the high level of security being provided. One minor concern is that to travel to Sochi airport you have to go via other airports. However, security at all Russian airports has been stepped up since the suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo airport in January 2011.

Those at greater risk will be Australian spectators and supporters making their own way to Sochi and using more vulnerable forms of transport, such as trains and buses. Australians would in any case be better advised to stay at home and watch the Games on a big-screen TV, rather than risk poor accommodation, lengthy travel delays, exposure to petty crime, being ripped-off by experts,

suffering indifferent but expensive food, and experiencing the complications of winter in rural Russia. Security restrictions will also make movement within the Sochi security zone more difficult. Access to competition venues will require bag searches and a spectator security pass, as well as tickets – likely to lead to long queues.

At past Olympics, the main terrorist targets were the Israeli and American teams because of their countries' foreign and domestic policies. Both teams now travel to the Summer and Winter Olympics with their own armed security protection, and are usually housed away from other athletes. At this Olympics, the target is not foreign athletes, but Russian officials and Russians in general to embarrass President Putin while Russia is in the international spotlight.

Their motivation is to remove Russia's tight control of the North Caucasus, a mainly Muslim area that generally does not want to be part of the Russian Federation.

Russia's brutal counterinsurgency campaigns there, particularly in Chechnya, have caused substantial loss of life, and led to the problem of the “Black Widows” – Muslim widows who are prepared to become suicide bombers to avenge the loss of husbands and family members. Since the year 2000, there have been at least 17 Black Widow attacks in Russia, resulting in more than 500 deaths. One Chechen extremist source claims there are as many as 50 Black Widows waiting to become suicide bombers.

Ultimately, conflicts like the ones in the North Caucasus can only be resolved longer term by negotiation, not by suppression and assassination. This is a lesson of history that Putin's Russia seems determined to ignore.

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