

Boston Bomb Trail: Answers in Russia's Islamist South

Chechnya, Dagestan, and North Caucasus are places most people have probably never heard of before April's Boston Marathon bombings. The two brothers suspected of carrying out the attacks—Tamerlan Tsarnaev and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev—lived in this violent area of Russia before moving to the United States.

Recently CBN News discovered radical Muslims are still fighting for control of the region.

In a small three-bedroom house on the outskirts of town, a secret believer in North Caucasus identified only as "Ramza" and his wife spend a few quiet moments reading the Bible and praying.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, he told CBN News, "I'm not a political person, never have been, never want to be. My focus is on loving people."

He is among a handful of Christians secretly sharing the Gospel in one of Russia's most dangerous places.

"I've been arrested many times," he said. "I'm constantly watched by the Russian police and radical Islamists, but I will never stop preaching. This is my home."

For nearly two decades radical Muslims have fought Russian forces almost daily to take over the region for Islam. Their goal is to turn five Russian republics, including Chechnya and Dagestan, into one huge Islamic emirate.

"People of North Caucasus have historically practiced a traditional form of Islam, but that's changed as more people embrace a radical form of Islam," Ramza told CBN News.

Boston Marathon Bombers' Training

The Tsarnaev brothers were born and lived in the North Caucasus before moving to the United States.

In 2012, older brother Tamerlan spent six months in Dagestan. He made regular visits to a local mosque in the capital city. CBN News tried to get an on-camera interview with the Imam, but he refused.

Tamerlan reportedly met two known Islamic terrorists at the mosque, both of whom were later killed in shoot-outs with Russian forces. Investigators have yet to establish if Tamerlan received any training or had links to known jihadist networks operating in the region.

Chechnya was once the epicenter of the Islamist battle. Russia fought two brutal wars against Chechen fighters in the 1990s. They tried to stop them from Islamizing the province.

Alena Muzraeva was only a year old when the first war started.

"As I grew older I heard the stories from my parents of how horrible it was back then," she recalled. Tens of thousands were killed. Hundreds of thousands of Chechens were displaced.

"I remember my parents and I crossing the border to a neighboring province once the bombs started falling," a young Chechen told CBN News. The war left the province in ruins. The capital city, Grozny, was decimated.

Billion-Dollar Overhaul of Grozny

Several years ago Grozny was described as the most destroyed city in the world. This is not the case anymore. The Russian government has been pouring in billions of dollars. In fact, today Chechnya receives the most money out of all 85 provinces.

The evidence is everywhere: streets are rebuilt and walls once riddled with bullet holes are gone. New apartments are going

up, while skyscrapers rise to the skies.

“I don’t think anyone could have imagined the changes happening this fast,” a resident of Grozny said.

The Kremlin-imposed leader of Chechnya has ruled with an iron fist, cracking down severely on radical Islamists in the province. “He has managed to keep them under control for now,” one male resident of the city said.

Rising Islamic Anger

But beneath the surface, Chechens too scared to talk on camera, spoke of a rising anger against the ruling authorities.

Jihadists who once fought on the streets of Grozny have now taken the fight to the neighboring province of Dagestan.

In May, a female suicide bomber attacked the central square in the capital, injuring dozens. The bombers are called “black widows” because many are the widows of Islamic radicals killed by security forces. More than a dozen black widows have carried out suicide missions since 2000.

CBN News recently visited Dagestan’s capital city of Makhachkala. Back in 1999, a group of radical Muslims attempted to turn Dagestan into an emirate ruled by Islamic Sharia law. The Russian army stepped in and quickly stamped that out. But since then, this province, which is home to about 2.5 million people, today has some 3,000 mosques and growing.

Secret Christians

Sasha, another secret Christian believer, lived next door to two Islamic insurgents killed during a police raid.

CBN News has taken similar precautions to protect his identity. Sasha says he actively shares the Gospel with Muslims in the North Caucasus, but it isn’t easy. He was twice

beaten by Muslims.

"I always thought God would protect me as his son, but then I understood that if we have the honor to believe in our Savior then we also have the honor to endure things that he went through in some ways," Sasha told CBN News from a secret location.

"When we are persecuted and feel physical pressure in our lives then we in reality start to understand and feel how close God is to us," he said.

The provinces of the North Caucasus are one of the least-evangelized places on earth. The rising Islamic fervor has prevented many Russians from even visiting the region.

But Ramza, Sasha and other believers who work quietly in the shadows claim it's a risk worth taking to make the name of Christ known.

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