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Attacks Reawaken Worry of Guerrilla War in Caucasus

By ELLEN BARRY
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MOSCOW — Investigators were still marching in and out of the Lubyanka subway station on Monday morning, but Nina Ivanovna, a 57-year-old retiree, was not waiting around to hear their conclusions.

She stared coldly at the staircase where wounded and weeping passengers had streamed away from the chaos of the suicide bombing, and said, with a curl of her lip, who she thought was behind it.

“It’s the Chechens, they will never let us live in peace,” she said. “We should build a Great Wall of China to keep them away from us. They should be walled away. They hate us, and they will always hate us.”

During the six years since the last suicide bomb attack on the Moscow subway, Muscovites came to think of themselves as comfortably insulated from the guerrilla warfare in the North Caucasus. They lost the jittery reflexes of a decade in which Russians refused to board airplanes beside a veiled woman, or waited for the last train car because they assumed suicide bombers would get on at the front.

That fear reshaped the Russian state at the beginning of the decade. Vladimir V. Putin, then president, used the terrorist threat to justify a sweeping consolidation of power, and won enormous popularity for apparently bringing the years of violence to an end. But old anxieties rushed back to the surface on Monday, when commuters handed over wads of cash to taxis rather than descend into the subway. Many were asking the same question: Is it starting again?

“Supposedly the war is over and people have been living well” in the Caucasus, said Lyudmila Margulis, 60, an edge of sarcasm in her voice, as she made her way through the Park Kultury subway station on Monday afternoon. The station was still dripping from a thorough washing after the attack, but on the white floor tiles you could still make out a faint trail of bloody boot prints.

“You know, I don’t think it ever actually stopped,” said Aleksandr Zharkov, 22, a graduate student. He said he had started seeking out information about fighting in the Caucasus on Internet news sources, and had been surprised to discover much was still going on there, despite government claims that the insurgency had been brought to heel.

“As long as it’s still going on there,” he said, “it can happen anywhere.”

Monday morning’s attacks almost seemed intended to puncture Moscow’s sense of calm. Statistics from the North Caucasus — including Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia and Dagestan — showed that clashes between militants and government forces jumped last year, nearly doubling the number of fatalities and quadrupling the number of suicide bombings.

But those statistics are abstractions to Muscovites, said Sergei Markedonov, a Caucasus specialist at the Institute for Political and Military Analysis.

“The Caucasus is far away, it’s way over there, ‘those dummies who keep blowing themselves up,’ that’s what Uncle John says — it doesn’t involve us,” he said. “An explosion in Moscow, that involves us directly.”

On Monday, the city felt a punch to the gut. Outside Hospital No. 33, a 70-year-old woman sobbed hysterically, saying her granddaughter had not answered her phone all day. Pyotr V. Novikov kept trying to explain that it was his usual train, that he would have been on it when it was bombed, except that on this morning, “I lay around, and here I am.”

Yekaterina Solovyova, 36, stepped off at Lubyanka station, where shrapnel had broken tiles and carved golf-ball-size chunks out of the marble walls of the station. Glass littered the tracks, and red carnations had been laid near the spot where the bomb exploded.

“This is simply monstrous,” she said.

It was, for many, a reminder of the city Moscow was eight or 10 years ago, when terrorist attacks became, awfully, a routine part of life.

Yelena Knizhnikova’s son was performing in the musical “Nord-Ost” in 2002, though he happened not to appear in it the night Chechen terrorists seized the theater, taking about 850 people hostage. On Monday, she had dropped off her daughter at school and taken the subway to work when she heard about the suicide bombings.

She said she immediately re-experienced the sense of fear, followed by a panicky round of phone calls, then rage at the difficulty of finding information on who had died — it was “impossible to find anything, anywhere.” She could not help worrying that once again Muscovites would take out their anger on ethnic minorities. The randomness of it all struck her.

“At some moment, you understand that — probably since we had gone through this before — you start to perceive things differently, that such is life,” she said. “Who knows why they chose those stations and not others? Like in ‘Nord-Ost,’ we were lucky in terms of timing.”