

WORLD

Suicide bombing kills six near Red Square

By ALEX FRIEDRICH
Knight Ridder Newspapers

MOSCOW — In an attack that came disturbingly close to the seats of Russian power, a suicide bomber blew herself up near Red Square on Tuesday morning, killing six people and injuring 14.

The bomb exploded at 10:50 a.m. local time in front of the National Hotel in the bustling city center. It shattered windows in nearby buildings and cars and spewed bits of flesh onto the winter slush.

Though Russian authorities are calling it a terrorist attack, they haven't named a suspect. Some Russian officials and analysts suggest it's yet another bombing by rebels from the war-torn province of Chechnya. Chechens have been blamed for

several other attacks in Russia this year.

The explosion came two days after parties supportive of President Vladimir Putin, who has pursued a hard-line policy against Chechen separatists, swept parliamentary elections. Last week, a suicide bombing killed 44 people and injured more than 170 on a crowded commuter train in southern Russia.

This time, the blast hit close to the heart of Russian government. The National Hotel is across the street from the state Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament. It's also across from the gateway to Red Square — where the Kremlin sits a few hundred yards away.

"The location is indeed ominous," said Ariel Cohen, a research fellow visiting Moscow

from The Heritage Foundation, a conservative policy research institute.

Russian officials suggest that another woman accompanied the bomber. The two may have been trying to blow themselves up in front of the parliament building. A security official said a pedestrian near the hotel recalled being asked by two women where the Duma was. Soon after, he said, the bomb exploded.

"Evidently, the bomb went off on its own," Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov told the Russian press agency Interfax.

None of the victims was American, Russian and

American officials confirmed. Vladimir Kumerkov, 45, said he had dropped off an Italian businessman and was waiting in his car down the street when the bomb exploded.

"There were some students crawling on the street, and they were covered in little chunks of meat and blood," he said. "They were so shocked, they couldn't stand up."

At the scene, investigators found parts of a belt designed to hold explosives. The belt was stuffed with metal balls, and they estimated that the woman had been

carrying up to 1.3 pounds of dynamite.

Security personnel later

The bomb shattered windows in nearby buildings and cars and spewed bits of flesh onto the winter slush.

detonated a briefcase at the hotel, though it was unclear whether it contained explosives.

Law enforcement agents reportedly are looking for a woman who they believe was involved in the explosion. They warned that she may be armed and could detonate a bomb if approached.

Putin, who was in the Kremlin at the time of the explosion, condemned the attack as an attempt to undermine the country's democracy and economy. He was addressing regional leaders who were commemorating Friday's 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Russian constitution.

Putin also denied on Tuesday any intention to revise the constitution. Critics have suggested that after Sunday's victory in parliamentary elections, he might

try to do so to extend his time in office, now limited to two terms.

Gennady Seleznyov, speaker of the previous Duma, attributed the blast to Chechen rebels, and told Interfax that Russian security forces "are working poorly to prevent acts of terrorism."

Cohen agreed. Security officials' inability to detect Chechens' movements into Moscow has raised questions about competency and corruption, he said.

"As long as there's a perception... that the secret services are penetrated and (Chechens) can hide in the city, it's not going to change," he said.

Alex Friedrich is a Monterey County Herald reporter who is serving as a Knight Ridder Newspapers correspondent in Moscow for five weeks.