

Mysterious Turkmen Blast Site Blocked Off

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ABADAN, Turkmenistan — Police were guarding a smoldering blast site near the capital of Turkmenistan after a series of mysterious blasts severely damaged hundreds of houses in the town.

An Associated Press reporter who came within one kilometer of the blast site on Friday saw still-burning debris littering the streets and several heavily damaged homes after explosions Thursday afternoon shook Abadan, a town 20 kilometers from the capital, Ashgabat.

Authorities say the explosion was caused by fireworks in a warehouse and there were no casualties.

Online satellite images, however, show what appears to be a munitions dump at the location, with residential buildings as close as 600 meters away. Exiled Turkmen activists said that was the source of the blast and many people have been killed.

The government is notoriously secretive, and reports are difficult to verify.

Some residents trickled back to their homes Friday. All the windows in some four-story buildings one kilometer away from the epicenter of the explosion were smashed, a region that included several apartment blocks and a school.

Police stopped members of the public from getting any closer.

"When the explosions began, we all began running away," one Abadan resident said, as he knocked shattered glass out of the door to his shop. "I don't know if there were any victims, we were all escaping."

He refused to give his name for fear of being targeted by authorities.

While officials continued to insist that nobody had been killed, Khronika Turkmenistana, a web site run by Vienna-based Turkmen dissident Farid Tukhbatullin, cited a witness as saying he saw four men's bodies covered with sheets. The site also reported that numerous shells could be seen flying off into nearby mountains.

Tukhbatullin is considered a reliable source of information on developments inside Turkmenistan.

Neweurasia, a citizen journalism web site focusing on Central Asia, reported that one Abadan resident wrote online that his house had been leveled to the ground, and he saw a child with hands and feet blown off. There was no way to independently verify the report.

In a signal of its discomfort with international coverage of the day's events, Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry lashed out in a statement late Friday at what it described as inaccurate reporting of events by Russian media outlets. Many Turkmen are able to watch Russian television news via satellite.

"The Turkmen government has expressed its firm objections through diplomatic channels and demanded immediate measures to halt this information assault on Turkmenistan," the ministry said in a statement.

Parliament Speaker Akzha Nurberdiyeva traveled to Abadan on Friday afternoon to urge residents to remain calm.

"You, the people of Abadan, are a very brave and hardy people," she told a crowd, promising that all those whose houses had been badly damaged would be given replacement homes.

Nurberdiyeva said adults who had evacuated the day before would be allowed to return to Abadan, but it was too early to allow children back in.

Traffic police closed the road from Ashgabat to Abadan on Friday, but reopened it later in the day.

In a Cabinet meeting Friday, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov dismissed a number of senior officials, including the head of the Central Bank, the agriculture minister and the editor of the main Turkmen-language state newspaper. No officials running the security

ministries appear to have been affected by the surprise reshuffle.

Also at the Cabinet meeting, Berdymukhammedov pledged to hold a fair presidential election and invited exiled opposition groups to take part, Reuters reported, citing a speech published by state media Saturday.

"We are ready for dialogue with groups calling themselves 'opposition,'" said Berdymukhammedov, widely expected to easily win another five-year term in February. "If someone of their representatives wants to take part in the forthcoming presidential election, he can safely come to Turkmenistan. I guarantee that ... equal conditions and opportunities will be created for them to run in the election."

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