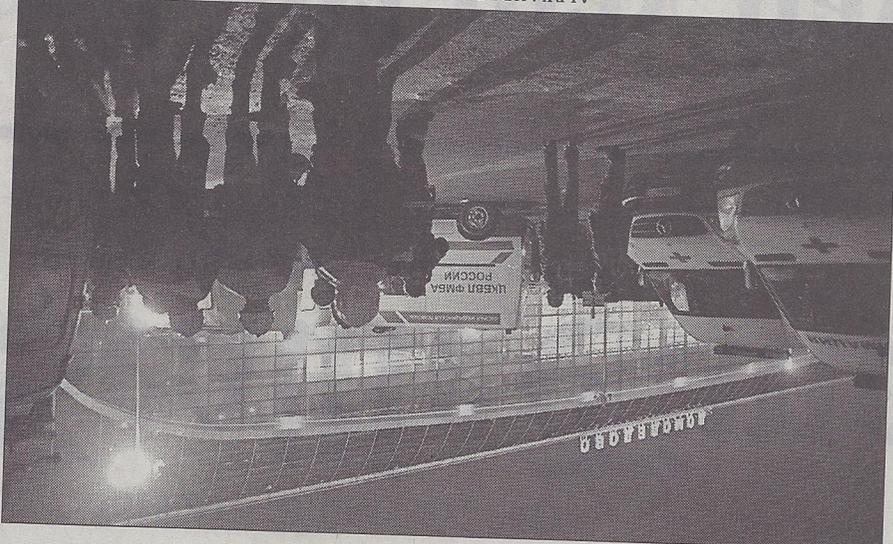


Deadly blast at Moscow airport shows weak spots in security

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ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
 Emergency workers stand in front of Domodedovo airport in Moscow on Monday after an explosion ripped through the international-arrivals hall.

Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post

MOSCOW — A suicide bomber slipped into a crowd waiting for international passengers arriving at Moscow's newest and busiest airport, detonating a huge blast that killed 35 people and exposed another weak spot in security for global air travelers.

The attack at Domodedovo international airport illustrated how difficult it is to safeguard public areas at terminals, even as the United States and other governments engaged in a cat-and-mouse battle with would-be bombers have tightened screenings of passengers and their luggage.

In the United States, such areas at airports are protected by a hodgepodge of security agencies. In Moscow, visitors are supposed to pass through a metal detector, but one survivor of Monday's attack said he saw no one being required to do so.

Russian officials said they were searching for three Chechen men in connection with the bombing. Russia has experienced nearly 15 years of terrorist acts, virtually all of them attributed to Chechens or other Islamic separatists from the North Caucasus, where a low-level civil war continues to smolder. The violence has included bombings of buildings, trains and domestic flights, as well as mass hostage takings in a hospital, a school and a theater.

But Monday's attack, which brought devastation to the country's busiest airport, achieved a new level of visibility. The bomber attacked at the airport's most vulnerable point, the unsecured reception area outside customs.

Domodedovo, which underwent a big renovation and expansion in the past decade, is about 25 miles southeast of central Moscow and is the largest of three airports that serve the capital. It handles 600 flights a day from all points of the globe, including major U.S. airports. It is a more potent symbol than the Moscow subway system,

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bombed in March in an attack that killed 40, or the Moscow-St. Petersburg rail line, disrupted by a bombing 14 months ago that killed 27.

In 2004 a pair of suicide bombers were able to buy tickets illegally from airport personnel at Domodedovo and went on to detonate explosives in mid-air on separate flights, killing 90.

Flights from Germany and Britain were among those arriving about the time of the explosion late Monday afternoon, and Russian officials said two British citizens were among the dead.

One witness said he believed he saw the bomber from the back, a man who was in the middle of about 150 people crowded into the cavernous arrival hall awaiting passengers. He said the man was dressed in a black coat and hat, and had a suitcase at his feet.

"At that very moment when I was looking at him, he disappeared in an explosion," said the witness, 30-year-old Artjom Zhilenkov. "I think it came from the suitcase. I was standing between two columns propping up the ceiling, and that is what I think saved my life,"

cushioning the shock wave. People all around me were lying on the ground. A choking smoke was quickly filling up the place."

The bomb was packed "full of metal pieces" and had the force of between 15 and 22 pounds of TNT, a source in the Russian Investigation Committee told the state RIA Novosti news agency.

Many of the flights arriving at Domodedovo on Monday were delayed, which may have saved lives. Witnesses said the reception area was less crowded than it might have been. A taxi driver who survived said he thought most of the victims were fellow drivers, many arriving passengers. Others in the crowd may have been Tajiks, waiting to greet friends and relatives who were on an overdue flight from Dushanbe.

The arrivals hall was equipped with a metal detector to screen visitors coming to meet passengers, Zhilenkov said, but no one seemed to be using it.

"Neither did I, and nobody said a word to me," he said.