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# Thailand Blames Uighur Militants in Bombing at Bangkok Shrine

By THOMAS FULLER and EDWARD WONG SEPT. 15, 2015

BANGKOK — Thailand’s national police chief on Tuesday blamed Uighur militants, members of an aggrieved minority in western China, for a deadly bombing in Bangkok last month.

After nearly a month of investigations into the bombing, which killed 20 people, the Thai authorities have arrested two suspects and issued arrest warrants for a dozen more people. But the comments on Tuesday, made at a daily briefing, were the first time that investigators were explicit about whom they believe perpetrated the attack and why.

Gen. Somyot Poompanmoung, the chief of police, said the bombing was carried out by a human trafficking network that “moved Uighurs from one place to another.”

He said the bombing was a retaliation. “Put simply, we destroyed their business,” he said.

Local news outlets have speculated for weeks that the attack was a response to the Thai government’s repatriation in July of more than 100 ethnic Uighurs to China. Human rights groups, foreign governments and activists criticized the move, saying the Uighurs were likely to face persecution on their return.

The Thai police had previously said that one of the suspects had a Chinese

passport that showed that he was from Xinjiang, the Uighur homeland in far western China. But the authorities said that they did not know whether the passport was genuine, and they had played down possible ties to the repatriation.

On Tuesday, General Somyot also elaborated on a possible motive, suggesting that in addition to being angry that a human trafficking network was broken up, the perpetrators were upset at the repatriation.

The Uighurs were sent back to China, their heads covered with hoods. Hours later, a mob attacked Thailand's consulate in Istanbul. Turkey has linguistic and cultural links with the Uighurs.

General Somyot linked the attack on the consulate with the bombing, saying both episodes were driven by "the same motive."

The Thai Foreign Ministry said that Thailand had come under pressure from China to send back the Uighurs, all of whom were men. At the same time, Thailand sent a group of Uighur women and children to Turkey.

Concerned about damage to Thailand's lucrative tourism industry and their relations with China, officials had until Tuesday been circumspect about the reasons for the bombing. The military government went as far as to bar officials from using the word terrorism to describe the attack. The authorities had also barred officials from mentioning the possibility of Uighur involvement.

The Chinese government has also been reticent about the case. At a news conference on Tuesday, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, Hong Lei, was asked about recent developments.

"The case is still under investigation," he said. "I don't have more information for you at the moment."

The Aug. 17 blast at the Erawan Shrine in the heart of the city was the worst bombing in Thailand's recent history. The shrine is frequented by Chinese tourists, who were among the dead.

The first suspect arrested in the case was found in an apartment in a northern Bangkok suburb with bomb-making materials. His lawyer says that he is Turkish and had nothing to do with the attack but was brought to the apartment by a smuggling network that had promised to send him to Malaysia. The second

suspect holds a Chinese passport.

Among those for whom the Thai police have issued warrants are a Thai woman and her Turkish husband, two other Turkish men and a Chinese national who flew to Bangladesh from Thailand on the day before the attack.

Many Uighurs say they are discriminated against by the Chinese government and by the Han, China's main ethnic group. The government's policies have been denounced as repressive and anti-Islamic by Uighurs and by many foreign scholars and officials.

China says its policies are in response to terrorism by militant Uighur separatist groups.

Since 2009, there has been a rise in violence along an arc of oasis towns in Xinjiang. There have also been a few notable outbursts of violence involving Uighurs in cities outside Xinjiang; the most prominent took place in the train station of Kunming in March 2014, when a handful of Uighurs armed with long knives or swords killed at least 29 people and wounded nearly 150 others.

Chinese officials have generally said that Uighurs carry out attacks with knives. The bombing in Bangkok was a more sophisticated assault that is common in war-riven nations in the Middle East, but has rarely been used in China.

If Thai officials are correct, the Bangkok bombing would be the first known terrorist attack by Uighurs outside China.

At least one militant Uighur group, the Turkestan Islamic Party, is based in the North Waziristan region of Pakistan.

There have been instances in which foreign officials have accused Uighurs of being part of terrorist plots. In 2010, Norwegian officials said one of three men arrested in Norway and Germany and accused of planning a bombing was a Uighur. The men never carried out the plot.

Uighurs are the largest ethnic group in Xinjiang, according to official statistics, though waves of ethnic Han migrants to Xinjiang have been shifting the demographics in recent years. Some Uighurs argue that a part of Xinjiang should be a separate state called East Turkestan, which in theory would be the easternmost country in a line of Turkic-speaking nations stretching from Turkey

through Central Asia.

Thomas Fuller reported from Bangkok, and Edward Wong from Beijing. Poypiti Amatatham contributed reporting.

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