

A bomb loaded with 3-inch nails exploded on the patio of a lesbian nightclub in Atlanta on Feb. 21, sending one woman to the hospital and injuring four other people. Another bomb found an hour later in the club's parking lot was detonated using a police robot.

Police now say that similarities between the attack on The Otherside and the Jan. 16 bombing at an abortion clinic in the Atlanta suburb of Sandy Springs, which injured seven people, could be evidence that the attacks are the work of a serial bomber—perhaps one with far-right political ties.

Authorities are also looking at whether these attacks could be related to a bombing at Centennial Olympic Park in July that killed one person and injured 100 others.

News of the Friday night attack sent shock waves through Atlanta's sexual minority community. A crowd of 150 people rallied on the steps of the State Capitol on Sunday, Feb. 23, calling for legislation in Georgia to stop hate crimes, while another group of activists gathered near the bombing site to remember the victims and the violence.

At a press conference the same day, Atlanta Mayor Bill Campbell, flanked by representatives from a number of gay organizations, denounced the attack and said that the police would beef up security around other lesbian and gay bars and businesses in the city.

"Anyone who plants an explosive device that targets a particular group is expressing hatred," said Campbell, who described the attack as the work of an "urban terrorist."

Gay and lesbian leaders met with Campbell after meeting among themselves early Sunday morning to decide how to respond to the attack.

"We wanted people to know we were banding together and being strong and that we would not be terrorized," said Larry Pellegrini of the Georgia Equality Project, a statewide sexual minority rights group, who was part of the contingent that met with Campbell. "This was definitely a hate crime."

Georgia's Legislature has for years refused to pass legislation providing stiffer penalties for bias-related crimes, primarily because supporters of that legislation have refused to remove sexual orientation as a covered category. In the wake of the bombing, a renewed push for hate-crimes legislation will be made.

"Politicians need to send a message that this kind of violence is unacceptable," said Pellegrini. "They can't just say it's wrong. They have to do something."

The bomb exploded at about 9:50 pm on a Friday night in the patio area of the club, which welcomes men but has a mostly lesbian clientele. About 150 people were in the club at the time of the blast, which threw nails and shrapnel as far as three blocks away. Four women and one man were injured.

The most seriously injured person, Memrie Wells-Griswell, was hospitalized with a nail wound in her arm. She was reported in stable condition and her injuries were not considered life threatening.

Lesbian bar bombed

Five people are hurt in the Atlanta blast; in its wake, a diverse community rallies together in unity

by Richard Shumate

The carnage might have been much worse, however. The bomb went off relatively early in the evening, before the popular bar filled up with people. And after a week of unseasonably warm weather that might have drawn a crowd to the patio, the Friday of the explosion was stormy, as a cold front blew through the city.

The Otherside sits at a busy intersection but is about two miles away from the Midtown neighborhood, where most of Atlanta's lesbian and gay bars are concentrated. In the wake of the bombing, other bars have implemented stricter security measures, including banning backpacks and searching purses.

Some of the people in the club at the time of the attack apparently fled before being interviewed by police because of fears that their sexual identities might be disclosed. Community leaders and bombing investigators have been asking those people to come forward, saying their anonymity will be protected.

The bombing at The Otherside bears a striking resemblance to an abortion clinic bombing in January. In both cases, the bomber left two devices, set to go off about an hour apart—the second bomb presumably designed to injure investigators and members of the news media responding to the first attack. Long, thick nails were used in both sets of bombs to produce flying shrapnel intended to injure and kill people over a wide area.

The abortion clinic bombs were made of dynamite. Authorities have not yet said how the bombs at the nightclub were made.

In the abortion clinic attack, no one was injured when the first bomb went off. But seven people were hurt when the second bomb, planted in the parking lot of the office complex where the abortion clinic was located, exploded. The area was flooded with police and media at the time.

After the first explosion at The Otherside, police sealed off the area around the nightclub, specifically looking for a second device with a robot. Once one was found, the bomb was detonated without incident. Police were able to use the robot to take X-rays of the bomb, which could provide clues helpful to the investigation.

Because the targets of the two attacks were an abortion clinic and a lesbian bar, speculation has arisen that the bombings might be the work of a person or group with an anti-gay and/or anti-abortion political agenda. Both attacks were also aimed at targets where most of the victims would have been women.

In both incidents, the targeting of police with a second bomb might also indicate an anti-gov-

ernment motivation. The U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms—viewed as villainous by many far-right and militia groups ever since the fatal 1993 raid on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas—has been investigating all of the bombings in Atlanta, and federal agents were among those injured in the abortion clinic attack.

There are some differences between the abortion clinic and nightclub bombings and the attack on Centennial Olympic Park. Though nails were

also used in the park attack, it was carried out with a pipe bomb and a warning was phoned in to 911 before the explosion. There were no warnings in the later bombings.

In a handwritten letter mailed to several Atlanta-based news organizations, a group identifying itself as The Army of God claimed responsibility for the bombings of The Otherside and the abortion clinic in Sandy Springs. The letter vowed more attacks, saying the Army was officially declaring war "on the entire child-killing industry."

As for gay men and lesbians, the letter said, "We will target sodomites, there [sic] organizations, and all those who push their agenda."

Another group, identifying itself as an offshoot of the Ku Klux Klan, also claimed responsibility for the bombings in a phone call to the publisher of the local Gay Yellow Pages. But investigators seem to be giving more credence to the letter from The Army of God, which contained specific details related to the bombs' construction.

The FBI has sent a copy of the letter to its behavioral sciences unit in Virginia for analysis. Meanwhile, federal, state and local law enforcement agencies held a summit in Atlanta on Feb. 28 to discuss how to respond to any future bomb threats or attacks.

No one has claimed responsibility for the first attack, which happened at Centennial Olympic Park during the Olympics in July.

Federal agents and local police have apparently not ruled out the possibility that all three bombing incidents could somehow be linked.

"WE WILL NOT BE FRIGHTENED AWAY"

A week and a day after the bombing at The Otherside, buoyed by the presence of numerous civic leaders and three members of Congress, Atlanta's sexual minority community rallied to show unity and resolve in face of the attack.

"We're here as a community to celebrate peace," said Cherry Spencer-Stark, co-chair of

the Georgia Equality Project, which sponsored the March 1 rally. "Our vision for this community does not include bombings and burnings."

The gathering was held symbolically just two blocks from the tomb of Martin Luther King Jr. By the day of the rally none of the injured were still hospitalized.

"We will turn the bombings around on this terrorist and show we are more united than ever before," said Mayor Campbell, who has offered a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the bombers. "Love is more powerful than hatred. That's why we are here today."

At the peace rally, nearly 1,000 people were joined by a wide array of state and local leaders, with an invocation given by clergy representing Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions. Three sitting members of Congress were also on hand. U.S. Reps. John Lewis and Cynthia McKinney represent Atlanta-area districts, and U.S. Rep.

Maxine Waters, a Los Angeles Democrat, chairs the Congressional Black Caucus.

In a fiery speech, Waters said the bombers must be made to realize that their attempts to create fear will not succeed.

"We will not be frightened away from the work of justice and equality," she said. "If you're going to shoot, you better shoot straight, because we will keep coming."

She also told the crowd that winning against the forces of hate will require gay men and lesbians to stand up for who they are.

"Love yourself and don't worry. When you love yourself, you can teach others what they must be

about," Waters said, to a thunderous ovation.

In her remarks, McKinney took to task some members of Congress whom she says haven't spoken out forcefully enough against far right-wing groups. And she said that has created an atmosphere where "homegrown madness" can flourish, resulting in such tragedies as the Oklahoma City bombing and the attacks in Atlanta.

"America has got a problem, and we've got some politicians that want to tell us that everything is all right. But they don't walk in our shoes," said McKinney. "We've got to teach our young people that America is beautiful because it is diverse."

Also addressing the crowd were the owners of The Otherside, Beverly McMahon and Dana Ford. Just the day before the rally they reopened their bar, which was damaged in the blasts, with a banner draped outside that read "One Goal: Unity."

"I would have opened if I'd had to have a tent," said McMahon. "We've got to stay strong and together."

In what may have been the emotional highlight of the rally, John Hawthorne, whose wife, Alice, was killed in the Centennial Park bombing, made an unscheduled appearance. He had heard about the rally on the news and drove more than 200 miles from his home in Albany, Ga., to lend support.

"I just felt moved to come here today," said Hawthorne. "I just pray to God that all of this senselessness and all of this violence will end. And it will only end if we all stay together."



PHOTO BY RICHARD SHUMATE



U.S. Rep Maxine Waters