

# High alert as fears bomb robbery syndicate at work

**BRAZEN THIEVES:** Gang uses the same method at PE retailer as was used to blow up ATMs

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EASTERN Cape security specialists and police are on high alert following another brazen robbery this week in which explosives were used to blow open a safe amid fears of further bombings.

Police explosive unit experts were called to Fruit and Veg City on Port Elizabeth's William Moffett Expressway on Monday after a safe was found blown open and another rigged with live explosives.

Explosives are increasingly being used to target retailers in a similar modus operandi to that of ATM bombings, which had waned in recent months.

A national syndicate is believed to be at work. While no lives have yet been claimed in the explosions, this is considered inevitable.

In the wake of the potentially deadly explosives raid early on Monday, Bay security companies are now providing their staff with specialised training in a bid to avert serious injury or death.

Following a spate of attacks in

2007, the bombings dwindled over the past year, but there are fears that they are flaring up again, after this week's incident in Port Elizabeth.

Another attack also took place in Gauteng yesterday, in which a group of armed men held up staff and blasted open an ATM at a supermarket in Springs.

Security companies are increasing their levels of alertness as they believe the gang behind the Fruit and Veg attack is armed and dangerous.

"If they can blow up something, I have no doubt they can be armed," said Atlas Security spokesman Monty Montgomery. His staff responded to the Fruit and Veg incident after the robbers triggered the store's alarm.

Montgomery said it was not the first time Atlas had dealt with robberies in the retail sector in which explosives were used: "I've witnessed a few." These included attacks on Denny Mushrooms, the Picardi Rebel liquor store in Burt Drive and Despatch Spar, all in Nelson Mandela Bay.

He said his staff were being trained to deal with similar situ-

ations, especially in the event of a confrontation with the robbers.

Police sources involved in investigating the bombings when they reached a high point three years ago feared that the latest attack could be the first of many.

In 2007 the SAPS set up a special task team after about 80 incidents were recorded across the country in one year.

"We had our own provincial task team in the Eastern Cape with branches in the various cities," said a high-ranking officer who had worked closely on these cases.

The officer, who asked not to be named, said the perpetrators were found to have been part of a national syndicate which had sourced the explosives from either mines or neighbouring countries - where explosives regulations were not as strict as in South Africa.

"They were very organised. Most of the robbers operating in the Bay came from other cities but had contacts in the area."

They had mostly targeted ATMs, but also used explosives to get into shop safes.

The task team had put "a lot of heat" on the bombers' activities,

causing the number of incidents to decrease. Many arrests were also made during this time.

But security and bomb experts believe that due to the success of the latest Bay attack, it is only a matter of time before the robbers strike again.

Commercial explosives typically used in mining featured in Monday's "well-planned and executed" bombing. They were rigged to detonate electrically so the two safes would open simultaneously, but only one of the bombs went off, blowing the safe wide open. An undisclosed amount of cash was stolen.

Provincial police spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Sibongile Soci said no arrests had been made, but that the matter was handed over to the police's elite investigation unit, the Hawks, for investigation.

Security specialist Rory Steyn believes this type of crime is likely to occur again due to the success of the latest incident.

Additional reporting by Shaun Gillham

