

Arrests Follow Terror Raids across Europe

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Terror raids have been mounted in Belgium, France and Germany in the aftermath of the January 7 assault on the offices of Charlie Hebdo.

In Belgium, two suspects were shot dead by police and another seriously wounded in the town of Verviers, near the border with Germany. Thirteen arrests were made, with nine suspects held in raids in Molembeek, two in Brussels, one in Berchem, one in Verviers, and two in France. All three Verviers gunmen were Belgian nationals recently returned from Syria.

The centre of Verviers and its train station were sealed off Thursday by heavily armed police, who tried to enter a flat above a bakery. Witnesses said they heard a series of explosions at 5:45pm and sustained gunfire.

Special police units carried out at least a dozen raids elsewhere in four districts with predominantly immigrant neighbourhoods. A total of 10 search warrants were issued. Police reported that two more suspects had been arrested after a car chase and gunfight in the city of Liege.

Authorities claim they had moved to dismantle an active terror cell spanning Belgium and France that was planning an "imminent" attack targeting police officers and various buildings in Belgium. Eric van der Sijpt, a federal magistrate, said, "The suspects immediately and for several minutes opened fire with military weaponry and handguns on the special units of the federal police before they were neutralised."

Police sources said earlier that they had resolved to launch the pre-emptive operation a fortnight ago, i.e., before the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, after bugging the homes and cars of the men recently returned from fighting in Syria. "I can confirm that we started this investigation before the attacks in Paris," Van Der Sypt said. No link had been established with the Paris attack, he insisted.

The authorities and the media are deliberately downplaying or concealing the wealth of information on the perpetrators, including the gunmen who carried out the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, known by European and US intelligence and police officials in advance of the attacks and alleged plots.

Belgian police this week acknowledged that Kalashnikovs and a rocket launcher used in the *Charlie Hebdo* and Kosher supermarket attacks, as well as the Tokarev handgun used by Amedy Coulibaly, the gunman in the Kosher market attack, had been purchased from Belgian criminal gangs. The information is highly specific. Coulibaly is said to have bought the weapons near the Gare du Midi in Brussels.

Neetin Farasula, from Charleroi, is in detention after he handed himself over to police Tuesday. He admits being in contact with Coulibaly.

In another example of cross-border operations, French national Mehdi Nemmouche last May killed four people at the Jewish museum in Brussels after having fought in Syria the previous year. He was caught by French police in Marseille.

A court case is underway in Antwerp involving 43 men and three women alleged to be members of Sharia4Belgium, which is linked to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

This week, Europol Director Rob Wainwright told British MPs that the names of 2,500 Islamist suspects had been collected from agencies across European Union member states.

In France, 12 people were arrested in anti-terrorism raids targeting people linked to Coulibaly. A spokeswoman for the Paris prosecutor's office, Agnes Thibault-Lecuivre, said the arrests began overnight Thursday and continued in three towns Friday morning. Those arrested included the man who supplied a car to Coulibaly, identified based on DNA found in the car.

The Gare de l'Est train station in Paris was evacuated for an hour Friday morning after an alleged bomb threat. This occurred on the day US Secretary of State John Kerry was in Paris, mending fences with President François Hollande after President Barack Obama's failure to attend the memorial rally for the victims of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack.

Another incident Friday afternoon involved a gunman who took two people hostage in a post office in Colombes, a suburb of Paris. The man was arrested after giving himself up to police and releasing the hostages unharmed. He was reportedly carrying a military weapon that he told police was a Kalashnikov.

Friday saw prominent media reports that several French national media web sites, including *L'Express*, *Le Parisien* and *France Inter*, experienced technical problems traced to a common service provider, Oxalide. About 19,000 French web sites have been hit by cyberattacks in the wake of the Paris shootings, according to Arnaud Coustilliere, head of cyber-defence for the French military. Military authorities have reportedly launched round-the-clock surveillance to protect government sites.

On Friday morning, in Berlin, 250 police were involved in dawn raids on 11 premises, leading to the arrest of two men suspected of helping to recruit for the Islamic State in Syria. One, Ismet D, a 41-year-old man, was suspected of "leading an Islamist extremist group made up of Turkish and Russian nationals from Chechnya and Dagestan," the police said.

On Thursday, police in Wolfsburg, about 200 kilometres west of Berlin, took a 26-year-old German-Tunisian dual national, Ayub B, into custody on suspicion he had fought in Syria for the Islamic State in 2014.

The ruling elite have lost no time in using the raids to whip up a climate of fear and justify demands for further repressive powers for the state.

Jewish schools in Brussels and Antwerp were closed and classes cancelled after officials said they were a "potential target" for attack. The Cheider school, the only Orthodox Jewish school in the Netherlands, was also closed.

Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel announced new legislation making traveling abroad for terrorist activists punishable by law, expanding the reasons for Belgian citizenship to be revoked for dual nationals deemed to be a terror risk, freezing assets of those suspected of aiding terror and, most importantly, authorizing the calling in of the army domestically.

In France, up to 100 people are now under investigation for making or posting comments supporting or justifying terrorism—with some sentences of years in prison already summarily handed out.

In Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet approved a draft bill Wednesday to allow the authorities to withdraw the national identity cards of suspected extremists to prevent them from traveling abroad.

British Prime Minister David Cameron is in the United States seeking the support of President Obama for his own raft of repressive measures. His visit was preceded by former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair speaking at a private strategy session of Republican senators. Introduced by Senator John McCain, he stressed that, "a substantial and not a fringe minority" of Muslims supported fundamentalism, which must be opposed by "force."

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