

Belgian authorities arrest 14 in terror probe; security heightened

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BRUSSELS, Belgium: Belgian anti-terror police detained 14 suspected Islamic extremists Friday after uncovering a plot to free a Tunisian al-Qaida sympathizer imprisoned for planning a terrorist attack on U.S. military personnel, the government said.

The authorities tightened security over the holiday season, warning of a heightened threat of attacks despite the arrests. "Other acts of violence are not to be excluded," said Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt.

Police stepped up patrols at Brussels airport, subway stations and the downtown Christmas market, which draws large crowds of holiday shoppers.

The U.S. Embassy issued a warning to Americans that "there is currently a heightened risk of terrorist attack in Brussels" although it had no indication of any specific targets.

In a series of overnight raids around the country, police picked up 14 suspects and seized arms and explosives apparently to be used to try to free Nizar Trabelsi, a 37-year-old Tunisian, sentenced to 10 years in 2003 for planning to drive a car bomb into the cafeteria of a Belgian air base where about 100 American military personnel are stationed.

The Kleine Brogel base was reported to house U.S. nuclear weapons, although that has not been confirmed by U.S. or Belgian authorities.

Security services in several European nations suspect Trabelsi, who trained with al-Qaida in Afghanistan, had links with extremists in Britain, France and elsewhere in Europe.

"Trabelsi is an important figure for armed Islamic circles, he is a highly symbolic figure who has met Osama bin Laden," said **Claude Moniquet**, president of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, a Brussels-based think tank specialized in terrorist issues.

Details about the identity of the suspects were not immediately released, but the RTL-TV1 television network said one of those detained was Malika El Aroud, the Moroccan-born widow of one of the suicide bombers who killed Afghan anti-Taliban leader Ahmed Shah Massood two days before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

El Aroud, a Belgian resident, was acquitted in a Brussels court of involvement in Massood's killing in 2003. In June, she was convicted in Switzerland for supporting a criminal organization by running Web sites that posted statements from al-Qaida-linked groups and showed executions.

She received a six-month prison sentence suspended for three years, which would keep her from going to jail unless she commits another punishable offense during the time.

Within hours of the arrests, police were out checking for suspicious packages and bags in the capital's landmark Grand Place, where tourists and local shoppers mingled beneath a huge Christmas tree. The Interior Ministry urged citizens to report anything suspicious.

"If a group with an extremist view of Islam was ready to use arms and explosives to release Mr. Trabelsi, there is no guarantee that they would not use them for other ends," said Lieve Pellens, spokeswoman for the Federal Prosecutors' Office.

The extra security measures were expected to last at least until Jan. 2.

Prison Inspector Claude Spinoit told RTL-TV1 he had spoken to Trabelsi on Thursday. He said the former professional soccer player was being held under tight security in Nivelles prison, 35 kilometers (22 miles) south of Brussels. Spinoit described Trabelsi as "calm" and said he had asked for isolation in order to pursue religious contemplation.

The Belgian authorities have faced calls to tighten prison security after a series of high-profile recent escapes. In April, two men hijacked a helicopter at gunpoint and forced the pilot to pluck a French prisoner from an exercise yard at Lantin prison in eastern Belgium where Trabelsi had been held previously. It was not immediately clear why Trabelsi had been transferred to the Nivelles prison.

Trabelsi admitted planning to kill American soldiers. He said he met al-Qaida chief Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and asked to become a suicide bomber. He was arrested in Brussels two days after the Sept. 11 attacks. Police later linked him to the discovery of the raw materials for a huge bomb in the back of a Brussels restaurant.

The Federal Prosecutors' Office said Friday's 14 suspects were planning to free the terrorist. "Trabelsi would be helped by a group of people, driven by an extremist vision of Islam," the Prosecutors' Office said in a statement. Details about the identity of the suspects were not immediately released.

Terrorism expert Moniquet, who has contacts with the Belgian security forces, said he understood those arrested appeared to be part of a "classic" type of extremist cell in Europe and was made up of local residents of North African origin. "It appeared to be a serious plot," he said.

The U.S. Embassy issued its alert to American citizens living or traveling in Belgium, advising them to maintain a high level of vigilance, especially in crowded public places. Its statement said it had "no information to indicate that U.S. citizens or facilities are an intended target."

Moniquet said the location of NATO and European Union headquarters in Brussels made the Belgian capital a potential target for terrorists, but said the danger was similar in other European capitals. The threat level is always very high," he said.

Trabelsi came to Europe in 1989 for a tryout with the German soccer team Fortuna Duesseldorf. He got a contract but was soon let go.

Over the next few years he bounced from team to team in the minor leagues, acquiring a cocaine habit and lengthy criminal record. Eventually, he made his way to al-Qaida training camps in Afghanistan, where trial evidence showed he had placed himself on a "list of martyrs" ready to commit suicide attacks.