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Belgium frees 14 held in terrorism plot

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BRUSSELS: The Belgian authorities released 14 people Saturday, a day after they were detained on suspicion of plotting to break a sympathizer of Al Qaeda out of prison, the Federal Prosecutor's Office said.

Although a court decided there was insufficient evidence to hold them for more than 24 hours, tightened anti-terrorism measures triggered by the arrest of the suspected Islamic militants on Friday will remain in place over the holidays, said Lieve Pellens, spokeswoman for the Prosecutor's Office.

"We think there is still a threat," Pellens said by telephone.

The police picked up the 14 suspects in a series of raids Friday. Pellens said searches of the suspects' homes had found no explosives, weapons or other evidence to persuade the court to charge them with any offense or keep them in jail. Belgium does not have laws that allow terrorism suspects to be held for longer than 24 hours without charge, Pellens said.

The government's Crisis Center said the investigation was continuing into other material found in the searches.

The release of the 14 does not mean the investigation is finished, all the material that was found is being examined," said Alain Lefevre, a director of the center. "Depending on the results, our measures will be adapted."

The 14 are expected to remain under police surveillance and could be detained again if more evidence is uncovered. The authorities did not release the suspects' identities.

Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and the Prosecutor's Office alleged that the suspects had planned to use explosives and weapons to free Nizar Trabelsi, a 37-year-old Tunisian sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2003 for planning to drive a car bomb into the cafeteria of a Belgian air base where about 100 U.S. military personnel are stationed.

The U.S. Embassy had warned Americans "there is currently a heightened risk of terrorist attack in Brussels," although it said it had no indication of specific targets.

The authorities tightened security, warning of a heightened threat of attacks despite the arrests. The police in Brussels stepped up patrols at the airport, at subway stations and at the central Christmas market, which draws large crowds of holiday shoppers.

"Other acts of violence are not to be excluded," Verhofstadt warned.

Pellens said intelligence that an attack could be imminent meant the security forces had to act without waiting to gather the evidence.

"We could not treat this as we would a normal criminal case," Pellens said.

"According to our investigation there were sufficient indications pointing to a terrorist threat; that is why we did not wait to detain the suspects," she said. "But the suspects have not been formally charged and, unfortunately, their release does not come as a surprise to us."

Trabelsi has admitted he planned to kill U.S. soldiers at the air base, Kleine Brogel, which reportedly houses U.S. nuclear weapons, although that has not been confirmed by the U.S. or the Belgian authorities.

Trabelsi said he met Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and asked to become a suicide bomber for Al Qaeda. He was arrested in Brussels two days after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and the police later linked him to the discovery of raw materials for a huge bomb in the back of a Brussels restaurant.

A former professional soccer player, Trabelsi came to Europe in 1989 for a tryout with the German soccer team Fortuna Düsseldorf. 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 a lengthy criminal record.

Eventually, he made his way to Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan, where evidence presented at his trial showed he placed himself on a "list of martyrs" ready to commit suicide attacks.

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