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Paul Ames, AP

Belgium frees 14 terror suspects

BRUSSELS (AP) — Belgian authorities on Saturday released 14 suspects detained over an alleged plot to free an al-Qaeda prisoner after a court decided there was insufficient evidence to hold them for more than 24 hours, the Federal Prosecutor's office said.

Lieve Pellens, a spokeswoman for the office, said tightened anti-terrorism measures triggered by the arrest of the suspected Islamic militants on Friday would remain in place over the holidays.

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

Police picked up the 14 suspects in a series of early morning raids Friday. Earlier reports indicated that explosives and arms were also seized, but Pellens said Saturday that searches of the suspects' homes had found no explosives, weapons or other evidence to persuade the court to keep them in jail.

Unlike some other European nations, Belgium does not have anti-terrorist laws which allow suspects to be held for longer than 24 hours, Pellens said.

Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt and the prosecutor's office alleged the suspects planned to use explosives and weapons to free Nizar Trabelsi. The 37-year-old Tunisian was 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 American military personnel are stationed.

Authorities tightened security, warning of a heightened threat of attacks despite the arrests. Police stepped up patrols at Brussels airport, subway stations and the downtown Christmas market, which draws large crowds of holiday shoppers.

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

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

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

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.

Trabelsi has admitted he planned to kill U.S. soldiers at the air base in Belgium.

He said he met al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and asked to become a suicide bomber. He was arrested in Brussels two days after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and 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 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 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. 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 specializing in terrorism issues.