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Brussels prepares for terror attacks

Police and intelligence service to advise on new security measures

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Belgian intelligence and police officers have been meeting in London this week to assess a possible terrorist threat to Brussels, in the wake of last week's bomb attacks on the British capital.

According to the Federal Crisis Centre (DGCC/ADCC) and the Brussels Governor's office, the officers were due to report to the government yesterday, July 13. New security measures may be put into place on their recommendation. Already, Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt has announced that security has been stepped up on the railway and metro system, at Brussels National Airport and around some embassies, including the British Embassy.

According to Federal Crisis Centre Director Alain Lefèvre, Belgium appears to be under less threat of an attack than other European countries. However, terror expert **Claude Moniquet, who runs Brussels-based consultancy the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center**, says there is a real threat of terrorism in this country. "We have a terrorist threat in Belgium, mostly linked to the international institutions,



European Commission Vice-president Margot Wallström (left) and foreign policy chief Javier Solana (far right), along with other Commission workers, take part in a minute's silence for the London bombing victims last Friday, July 8

but also against the Jewish community," he says. Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is clearly aware of Brussels' role in the international community, adds Moniquet. He notes that last month the world's most wanted terrorist released a statement condemning the recent EU conference on Iraq saying that the "enemy of God had met in Brussels to destroy Iraq and not rebuild it".

Concerns about whether Brussels' emergency services could cope with a major attack have resurfaced following the London attacks. The Brussels Fire Brigade (Siamu/BHDB) has prepared by conducting several simulation exercises, but warns that it would not be able to

deal with multiple bombs. Francis Boileau, the brigade's deputy director, says: "Our problem is we are a medium-sized force and we lack manpower and equipment. We have about 1,000 men and women in the fire brigade on paper, but only 135 are on duty today."

Should a London- or Madrid-style attack occur, Boileau says, the Brussels brigade would need support from fire-fighters from as far away as Ghent and Antwerp. But high costs are making it difficult to set up large-scale practice drills for a multiple-bombing scenario, he says.

Hospitals are fairly well prepared, according to Dr Marc Reynaert, head of the emergency department at the

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Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve's teaching hospital. He says all hospitals are required by law to have disaster plans in place. "Brussels' hospitals could handle anywhere from fifty to sixty patients with major trauma. Our hospital could handle five very severe patients, twelve medium cases and more than thirty with minor injuries. We could also use the hospitals in Leuven and Ottignies," he says.

Should an attack happen in Brussels, several response scenarios have been developed, says Lefèvre. The emergency

service members who reach the scene first can order a disaster plan, as can dispatching units. "We have a protocol in the case of more than ten injured or five seriously injured people," says Boileau. A Brussels incident would involve the cooperation of the fire brigades, police, civil defence corps, hospital emergency rooms and the army. It would be coordinated by the Federal Crisis Centre.

The European institutions also say they have taken precautions in case of terror attacks on Brussels. Fernando Suarez, head of security at the European Parlia-

ment, says is "not worried" about the threat. "The best way to be protected is to be informed and we've been in contact with the proper authorities," he says. The European Commission is also prepared, according to spokesperson Valérie Rampi. "The Commission takes a number of measures both to prepare for any potential attack and to be in a position to respond in the event of such an attack taking place," she says. "These are kept under constant review, but no details can be given as to the exact measures, as these are highly sensitive."