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Dynamite found in bomb scare at French department store

The dynamite at Printemps in Paris was not attached to a detonator. A group calling itself the Afghan Revolutionary Front had sent a warning letter demanding France's withdrawal from Afghanistan.

By Sebastian Rotella and Achrene Sicakyuz
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Police officers gather outside a Printemps store in Paris, France, after the store was evacuated following a bomb threat. Five bars of explosive material, which did not pose a risk of detonation, were found at the store. (December 16, 2008)

Reporting from Paris and Madrid - French police found dynamite in a renowned Paris department store Tuesday, a bomb scare during the holiday shopping season that was accompanied by an unknown group's demand for the withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan.

The five relatively old sticks of dynamite planted in the men's store of the elegant Printemps department chain were not attached to a detonator and did not pose a risk of explosion, authorities said.

After evacuating the jampacked store in the heart of the downtown shopping district about 11 a.m., police used bomb-sniffing dogs to find the explosives, which a warning letter sent to a French news agency had said were in a third-floor bathroom.

The letter was signed by the "Afghan Revolutionary Front," a group that is "totally unknown" to French

intelligence services, Interior Minister Michele Alliot-Marie told legislators in comments in the National Assembly.

Despite the rhetoric about Afghanistan, the type of explosives, the language of the communique and other details were not consistent with previous activity by Islamic extremist groups, anti-terrorism officials said.

"We must be wary of the indications in the letter that could orient investigators toward false leads," Alliot-Marie said at the scene, where hundreds of police officers oversaw an orderly evacuation of the store. She announced that security would be stepped up in Paris and other cities during the holidays.

The incident came during a heightened terrorist alert in Europe. On Thursday, French police arrested two suspects tied to a group in neighboring Belgium that allegedly sent militants to train and fight in Afghanistan. Belgian police rounded up an additional 14 suspects the same day because of fears that a suspect recently returned from Afghanistan was preparing a suicide attack.

Last month a Taliban chief issued a video threatening an attack in Paris if France did not withdraw its approximately 3,000 troops from Afghanistan. Terrorism concerns, which usually intensify during the holidays, are heightened this year after the attacks last month in Mumbai, India, that killed more than 170 people, Western anti-terrorism officials say.

Security guards at Printemps' three-store complex on the stately Boulevard Haussmann were already on alert because of a phoned bomb threat against the chain that was delivered last week to Agence France-Presse, the news agency reported.

On Tuesday, the news agency advised police after receiving the letter from the purported Afghan group in the morning. The text released by the news agency describes the location of the explosives and warns authorities that they will have blood on their hands if they do not act.

"Make this message reach your president that he should withdraw his troops from our country [Afghanistan] before the end of February 2009 or we will return to action in your big capitalist stores and this time without warning you," the letter declared, according to the news agency. The communique closed with the statement: "Long live free Afghanistan."

It is very unusual for Al Qaeda or other Islamist groups to advise authorities of the presence of bombs ahead of time, a practice common to Basque militants and other European nationalists, anti-terrorism experts said. Except in the Madrid train bombings in 2004, Islamic attackers rarely use dynamite, preferring chemical-based explosives such as hydrogen peroxide.

The letter also lacked religious rhetoric, experts said. Allusions to capitalism and revolution instead point suspicions toward leftist extremists sympathetic to the Islamic cause, said **Claude Moniquet**, a retired French intelligence officer.

"I find it hard to believe that this was the work of an Islamic group," said Moniquet, who runs a security think tank in Brussels.

"That does not seem likely at all. I would think it is rather some kind of provocation, perhaps by an extreme right or extreme left group."

Built in 1865, the upscale Printemps draws 100,000 customers a day, a quarter of them tourists. During the holidays, crowds flock to ornate Christmas displays in the windows of the store and the Galeries Lafayette next door.

Both stores were the targets of bombings by Hezbollah and Palestinian-linked terrorists in the 1980s.