

Paris shaken by bomb scare

Group warns France to pull troops from Afghanistan

By Sebastian Rotella and Achrene Sicakyuz | Los Angeles Times

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PARIS - French police found dynamite in a Paris department store yesterday, triggering 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 packed 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 said 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 Friday, French police arrested two suspects linked to a group in neighboring Belgium that allegedly had sent militants to train and fight in Afghanistan. Belgian police arrested 14 others because of fears that a suspect who had 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 attacks last month in Mumbai, India, that killed more than 160 people, Western anti-terrorism officials say.

Security guards at Printemps' three-store complex were already on alert because a bomb threat against the chain had been phoned in last week to Agence France-Presse. The news agency advised police yesterday 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 unusual for al-Qaida or other Islamist groups to warn 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, Spain, 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.

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