

## Terrorists thwarted, say Belgians

Steven Erlanger in Paris  
December 13, 2008

BELGIAN police have arrested 14 people suspected of having terrorist links to al-Qaeda in early morning raids, including a woman who writes jihadist screeds on the internet and three men the Belgian authorities said had just returned from training camps on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

Authorities said they grew alarmed during the past week when surveillance showed a key suspect returned from South Asia on December 4 and began making what police suspected were preparations for a suicide attack.

The suspect had "said goodbye to his loved ones", according to the Belgian federal prosecutor, Johan Delmulle, leading to fears of an imminent attack.

The arrests came only hours before a European Union summit brought together the heads of 27 countries in Brussels, though the site of the purported attack was unclear.

"We don't know where the suicide attack was to take place," Mr Delmulle said. "It could have been an operation in Pakistan or Afghanistan, but it can't be ruled out that Belgium or Europe could have been the target."

An investigation into the suspects had been under way for a year, but given the summit, Mr Delmulle said the Belgian authorities felt they had "no choice but to take action".

Nearly 250 police officers raided 16 locations in the capital and one in the eastern city of Liege, confiscating computers, data storage equipment and a pistol.

Those arrested include Malika El Aroud, 49, who accompanied her husband to Afghanistan in 2001, where he trained in a camp run by al-Qaeda and then, two days before the attacks of



Suspects ... Malika El Aroud and her husband Moez Garsalloui.

Photo: *Karl Mathis*

September 11, 2001, helped kill the anti-Taliban resistance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud. El Aroud writes online as "Oum Obeyda."

A spokeswoman for the prosecutor's office, Lieve Pellens, described El Aroud as "a very important and serious lady" and said the prosecutor would argue that she was a decision-maker and fundraiser.

El Aroud's current husband, Moez Garsalloui, was also believed to have been arrested on Thursday, according to the president of the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Centre in Brussels, **Claude Moniquet**. But there was no official confirmation of his arrest.

El Aroud has survived several attempts to prosecute her. She was revered in militant circles because of her fierce eloquence, investigators said. "She is really very important and very clever," said another Belgian law enforcement official, who requested anonymity.

Garsalloui was released in July last year after serving three weeks for promoting violence, and then disappeared. Belgian officials said he fled to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and Mr Moniquet said he was one of three suspects prosecutors identified as having recently returned from training camps on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

The federal prosecutor's office said several suspects seemed to have ties to al-Qaeda, and there were "direct contacts between the group around the suspect 'M.G.'" - the initials of Garsalloui - "and important people of the organisation al-Qaeda."

Mr Moniquet said he assumed the target was in Europe. With the US president-elect, Barack Obama, pledging to put more troops in Afghanistan and pressing European countries to do the same, "it's a good moment for those in Afghanistan to make an attack", he said

A year ago the Belgians arrested a dozen people after the US provided information that an attack in Brussels was imminent, Ms Pellens said. Mr Moniquet said pressure from the US was so strong the arrests were made before good cases could be made against the suspects, and all were released the following day. Both cases centre on those close to Nizar Trabelsi, an al-Qaeda member who has been jailed in Belgium since 2001 over a plot to blow up a NATO installation.

**with Agencies**

*Copyright © 2008. The Sydney Morning Herald.*

