

Conflict

Paris attacks as it happened: 2 killed in hunt for Isis jihadist Abdelhamid Abaaoud in Saint-Denis

By Elsa Buchanan , Video by Adam Justice

November 18, 2015 07:04 GMT

Two people have been killed and seven have been arrested after French police raided an apartment in search of suspects linked to the 13 November attacks in Paris that left 129 dead, and wounded more than 350 people.

The raid, led by heavily armed police investigating the Paris attacks, started at 4.10am in Saint-Denis, a stone's throw from the Stade De France, a northern suburb of Paris, where the sound of grenades followed heavy gunfire exchanges.

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Paris Prosecutor François Molins confirmed two terrorists were killed. A female suspect killed herself by detonating a vest rigged with explosives. The woman who triggered her explosive belt is the first female suicide bomber to die in France.

Five police officers were wounded in the initial shoot-out and a police dog named as Diesel was killed, according to the police.

Target of the operation is Abdelhamid Abbaoud

Police sources said the target of the operation was Belgian Isis jihadist Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the mastermind behind the Paris attacks, after reports claimed he may not be in Raqqa, as initially believed.

Abaaoud, a 28-year-old of Moroccan origin, has been linked to a number of terror plots and recruitment efforts in Europe over the past two years. The eighth suspect in the attack, Salah Abdeslam, was also said to be a target in the raid.

Police told local residents and onlookers to clear the vicinity of the operation and to stay

away from windows. Public transport has also been halted in the area.

UPDATE

03:11pm GMT

More information has emerged about the terrorist plot thwarted by the police.

According to broadcaster France 2, the small group of suspects targeted by the raid were planning "imminent" attacks on a commercial centre at Paris' Defense district and on Charles de Gaulle (CDG) Airport, the city's largest airport.

02:22pm GMT

According to Reuters, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the suspected planner of Friday's attacks in Paris, mocked European frontier controls and boasted of the ease with which he could move between Syria to his Belgian homeland and the rest of Europe.

Abaaoud's comments, published in Isis's Dabiq propaganda magazine, has raised a host of questions on how Europe tracks local Islamists and controls the borders it has opened to half a million Syrian refugees.

02:19pm GMT

Two of the bodies retrieved from the scene of the raid - that of a female suicide bomber and that of a man - are reported to be badly damaged following "explosions".

According to local media, this could slow down the identification of both victims.

01:54pm GMT

The Belgian police had questioned two Abdeslam brothers before the attacks but "they showed no sign of a potential threat," the Belgian federal prosecution said on Wednesday.

Salah Abdeslam, who is one of two brothers believed to have been involved in the coordinated terror attacks remains at large while his brother Ibrahim Abdeslam was identified by prosecutors as the man who rented a Seat vehicle used in the massacre.

A French national based in Belgium, Ibrahim, 31, carried out the suicide attack at the Comptoir Voltaire cafe.

"We knew they were radicalised and might visit Syria (but) they showed no sign of a possible threat," the prosecution was quoted as saying by BFM TV.

More than 350 Belgians to fight in Syria - proportionately the biggest contingent from Europe - according to news agency Reuters.

12:27pm GMT

At least one of the seven people arrested by the police was wounded and taken to the hôpital Avicenne in Bobigny - a Paris suburb - it has emerged.

The injured suspect, who was operated in hospital, will not be immediately interrogated, according to local media reports.

12:10pm GMT

Speaking during the Congress of the Mayors of France, President Francois Hollande commended security forces for their "level-headedness" during a "perilous" and "heavy" police operation.

Hollande said this morning's events showed "France is at war" against a terrorist threat that "has an army of financial resources and occupies a territory".

He added: "(the threat) has criminal help in Europe and in our country".

The head of state called on the international community to eradicate Isis. "We need to build a broad coalition to bring decisive blows to Daesh (the Arabic acronym for Isis)".

12:06pm GMT

The owner of the apartment raided by police, Jawad Bendaoud, who is among the seven people taken into custody, was convicted to six years' imprisonment for murder in 2008, according to local media reports.

On 26 December 2006, Bendaoud fatally stabbed his 16-year-old best friend, David, with a trencher in the thorax after a dispute about a cell phone that had disappeared.

The teenager died instantly and Bendaoud went to the police station where he surrendered in the evening.

Two years later, the 6 November 2008, Bendaoud - then 22 - was convicted for assault

and battery, which resulted in involuntary homicide, and sentenced to eight years imprisonment by Bobigny Cour d'Assises (criminal court).

Bendaoud was incarcerated at the central prison of Val de Reuil, where it is reported he behaved in an exemplary manner. He was released less than a year ago.

11:40am GMT

Local French media, quoting police sources, say the female suicide bomber who blew herself up this morning is Abaaoud's cousin.

According to the reports, police started monitoring the woman as soon as yesterday after it was believed she was in touch with Abaaoud or was even lodging him.

These reports have not been confirmed.

11:14am GMT

Paris Prosecutor François Molins confirmed two people, who were arrested, were "trying to hide in rubble" near the apartment.

Speaking to the press, Molins said certain elements "could suggest" that Abaaoud was present in a "conspirational" apartment in Saint-Denis.

The Prosecutor said another suspect taken into custody "is a female acquaintance" of Jawad Bendaoud, the owner of one of the apartments raided by police.

Molins, who said the Forensic Services had not yet been able to enter the building where the suspects were holed up, added it was still impossible to identify the individuals arrested and killed.

11:11am GMT

French Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve, who arrived in Saint-Denis as the operation ended, congratulated the 110 "courageous" security forces who "came under fire for many hours".

He confirmed a third person has been killed during the operation.

11:09am GMT

According to an AFP journalist, policemen were seen breaking down the door of a church near the apartment.

10:57am GMT

Details are emerging about the female suicide bomber.

Reports claim that the French police was monitoring the apartment of a woman, who was suspected of having been in touch with Paris attacks mastermind Abdelhamid Abaaoud. It is believed that it is this woman who detonating a vest rigged with explosives just before 6am local time.

The fate of Abaaoud, who was thought to be in Syria, remains unclear.

Local media also report the operation targeted at least two apartments in the building, allegedly linked to suspects involved in Friday's massacre.

10:34am GMT

French Agriculture minister and government spokesperson Stephane Le Foll confirms the operation is now over.

10:26am GMT

France Info reports that a third suspect may have been killed in the raid.

The information has not been confirmed.

10:14am GMT

Journalists on the ground say they have heard a smaller explosion near the apartment. Meanwhile, it is now confirmed that a total of seven people have been taken into custody, while two suspects - including the female suicide bomber - have died. One suspect is still holed up in the building, according to police sources.

10:05am GM

Details are emerging about the investigation that led to the raid on the apartment this morning. According to France TV, a mobile phone abandoned on Friday night after the attacks and found in a bin near the Bataclan concert hall enabled police to advance the investigation.

The phone contained a detailed plan of the venue, and a text message sent that said: "We are done, we are starting," according to newspaper Le Monde. The text message was sent by one of the suicide bombers of the Bataclan at 9:42 pm on Friday.

The information has not been confirmed by the judiciary.

09:54am GMT

The police dog killed at 5am during the raid has been named as Diesel. It was a 7-year-old Belgian Malinois. The police had let the dog enter the apartment to gauge the threat inside. The animal was killed as it entered the scene of the attack.

More information about the dog's death can be read here - Police dog Diesel killed by terrorists during Saint-Denis raid.

09: 52am GMT

The French Council of the Muslim Faith (Conseil Francais du Culte Musulman) announces that a "solemn declaration [condemning] with no ambiguity [any] form of violence or terrorism" will be broadcast in every mosque for the Friday sermons.

"Muslims of France also proclaim their unwavering commitment to the republican pact that unites us all, and the values that make up France," the translated statement read.

09:47am GMT

French broadcaster BFM TV reports that the female suicide bomber screamed and ran towards the police officers before detonating her vest rigged with explosives at 6am local time.

09:38am GMT

Quoting a source close to the investigation, Belgian public broadcaster RTBF, French broadcaster France 24, and Reuters news agency claim the suspects in the apartment raided were preparing to commit attacks against the Défense.

The Défense, the modern financial center of Paris, is Europe's largest purpose-built business district. It is the equivalent to the City of London. More information about the alleged planned attack can be read here - Paris attacks: Saint-Denis suspects 'planned terrorist attacks in La Defense business district'.

09:22am GMT

The authorities have not yet confirmed whether any of the terror suspects targeted by the police raid is Abdelhamid Abaaoud, the Belgian mastermind of the Paris attacks. The 27-year-old senior Isis commander was identified by Belgian officials in January as the architect of the thwarted attempt to kill police officers in Verviers. Two were killed in a gun battle during a police raid on the eastern Belgian town.

Abaaoud is also believed to have been behind the unsuccessful terrorist attacks on the Thalys train 9364, a high-speed train travelling between Amsterdam and Paris, and a church in the French capital in August and April. More on Abaaoud here - Paris attacks: Who is Abdelhamid Abaaoud - Belgian mastermind of the Islamic State bombings?

09:11am GMT

Reports are emerging that five officers from the French National Police's counter-terrorist unit, Raid, have been lightly injured in the operation, according to BFM TV.

09:06am GMT

A total of five people have been taken into custody - including the owner of the flat raided by police. The police have placed a white tarpaulin near the entrance to the apartment bloc.

08:54am GMT

Local reporters describe how members of the French forensic police has arrived on the scene of the raid. The owner of the apartment raided by police has been named as Jawad Bendaoud by Reuters news agency.

08:51am GMT

French authorities confirm at least 33 members of the Islamic State (Isis) have been killed in French and Russian air strikes on the North of Syria in the last 72 hours, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), confirmed on Wednesday.

08:34am GMT

The Interior Ministry confirmed no terror suspect is on the run.

08:32am GMT

The French National Police's counter-terrorist unit, Raid, is combing the apartment bloc. A police dog was also killed in the raid, it has emerged. Saint-Denis local member of parliament Mathieu Hanotin confirmed there were "no civilian victim" following the operation.

08:11am GMT

Family members of Omar Ismaïl Mostefaï, the bomber who was identified by his severed finger found in the rubble of the Bataclan concert hall, and a second Bataclan suicide bomber Samy Amimour have been released from police custody, according to the Paris Public Prosecutor.

07:56am GMT

The Paris Public Prosecutor confirmed a man and a woman, who were not in the apartment but nearby, have also been taken into police custody. He also confirmed that three men, who were holed up, were "extracted (from the flat) by the Raid and were taken into custody". Their identities have not been established at this stage, the prosecutor said.

Helicopters have stopped flying over the raid zone, as witnesses describe a "deafening silence" on Rue du Corbillon in Saint-Denis. Explosions were last heard 1h30 mins ago.

07:54am GMT

07:51am GMT

A local resident described how he heard "a man or a woman" screaming in the apartment after a shootout with the police. "I think they were hurt," he told local media.

07:39am GMT

The owner of the apartment on 8 Rue du Corbillon, targeted by police, described how he was asked by a "friend" to rent his flat out to a number of people.

"A friend asked me to host two of his buddies for a few days," the man, in his thirties, anonymously told BFM TV. "I said there was no mattress, they told me 'it's okay', they just wanted water and to pray," the owner said, adding he did not previously know they were from Belgium.

"I was asked to help out, I helped out, I was not aware they were terrorists," said the man, who appeared to be very agitated, before being handcuffed. The owner was taken away

by police.

07:23am GMT

Police sources confirmed "one or two suspects" were still holed up in the apartment.

Local journalists described the "tension" around Saint-Denis, as calm returned. According to David Thompson, journalist at Paris' Radio France International (RFI), if Paris attacks mastermind Abaaoud France was in France "we would be beyond the security flaw, he is the most famous French jihadist".

07:10am GMT

Calm has returned around the apartment in Saint-Denis, 800m from the Stade de France stadium, where authorities confirm two terror suspects including a woman have been killed, according to police sources. Three people have been arrested - the first ones since the attacks.

A number of different police forces led the attack, including the "SDAT" elite counter-terrorist task-force and the "Raid" research, assistance, intervention and deterrence unit.

Christian, a resident, told BFM TV: "At 4am, we were sleeping and all of a sudden there were heavy gun shots. In my street, we saw police officers firing shots at the flats in front of my apartment."

The witness described how he heard explosions, before police asked a woman, near his flat, to "put her hands up or they would shoot". Christian then said he heard a loud explosion coming from the flat, which blew away the windows.