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WORLD

Suicide Vest Found in Paris Is New Clue in Terror Manhunt as Brussels Extends Lockdown

Investigators believe fugitive suspect aborted suicide mission before fleeing France

By **NATALIA DROZDIK**, **GABRIELE STEINHAUSER** and
VALENTINA POP in Brussels and **NOEMIE BISSERBE** in Paris

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An explosive vest suspected of belonging to a Paris attacker still at large was discovered on the French capital's outskirts Monday, while Belgian authorities said they would keep Brussels on lockdown for a fourth day as they try to head off what they called a similar attack.

A street sweeper found the vest without a detonator in a trash pile in the southern Parisian suburb of Montrouge, near where a signal from the suspected terrorist's cellphone was detected after the Nov. 13 attacks, authorities said. The proximity of the two—and the similarity of the vest to those worn by seven suicide bombers in the attacks—led investigators to believe the fugitive, Salah Abdeslam, had aborted the suicide mission before fleeing France, they added.

The discovery comes as both French and Belgian police are racing to find the 26-year-old Mr. Abdeslam, who crossed into Belgium after the attacks. Belgian authorities said they would keep Brussels on lockdown through Tuesday and under the highest terror-threat status for even longer, as they pursue a cell they believe is linked to Mr. Abdeslam and planning a follow-up attack.

The find also squares with Islamic State's claim that eight terrorists carried out the attacks, though it also suggests that the claim was prerecorded. A police official said the

discovery indicates that Mr. Abdeslam, whose brother was one of the seven suicide attackers, either abandoned a plan to blow himself up or that his vest malfunctioned.

Investigators said that a signal from Mr. Abdeslam's cellphone had registered on an antenna in the vicinity of the trash pile where the vest was found.

Brussels Terror Alert Brings Deserted Streets »

Photos: Soldiers patrolled the streets of the Belgian capital Saturday after Belgium raised the alert status for the city to the highest level. Stores were closed and the metro system was shut down.



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In Brussels, many people responded Monday to the first working day of the lockdown by staying at home. Normally clogged streets were almost traffic free and most cafes and restaurants decided not to open. But it was unclear how residents and businesses would respond to the conflicting signals from authorities who said they would reopen schools and subways by Wednesday even as they were still trying to thwart what they described as a serious and immediate threat.

Belgium's federal prosecutor's office said Monday that a man detained in one of multiple raids in recent days had been charged with involvement in the Paris terrorist attacks and for membership of a terrorist organization.

The prosecutor wouldn't provide more details about the man—one of 16 people arrested on Sunday and the fourth suspect to be charged in Belgium in connection with the Paris attacks.

Police armed with automatic rifles patrolled in front of the Belgian capital's international hotels, government buildings and closed schools. The few bars, restaurants and stores that opened their doors had fewer customers than usual.

For some residents, the lack of information has made the high-level terror alert all the more jarring: They have no idea what authorities exactly know, or how close they are to closing in on the suspected terror cell that officials say is poised to launch an assault.

"My mother calls me all the time from Spain, she's very worried because, of course, on TV everything is exaggerated. But yes, I am afraid, too," said a 29-year-old cashier at the Carrefour supermarket close to the main offices of the European Union.

She said she had to walk 45 minutes to work in the morning and was stopped by police as they were chasing a car and then checked the documents of the Arab-looking people in the car.

Prime Minister Charles Michel said the top alert level would remain in place in Brussels on Tuesday because the threat was still great. Shopping streets, shopping centers and public transport continued to be under threat, he said, and big gatherings would continue to be banned to free up police for other activities.

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However, schools would reopen with additional security measures in place while metro lines would reopen, possibly in stages, on Wednesday even as the threat level in the city would remain at the maximum until Monday, he said. Across the rest of Belgium, he said the alert level would remain at three on the four-step scale.

"We are doing everything possible to return to normal life," Mr. Michel said.

Government ministers said the terror threat level could be reduced sooner if new information allowed. “If there’s a reason to lower [the threat level], we will do it immediately,” Belgian Interior Minister Jan Jambon said. Authorities have said they believe that as they close in on the suspects, terrorists will try to hastily execute a strike modeled on the Paris attacks.

Javier Vaz, a 26-year-old economist walking on crutches outside the European Commission on Monday night, said he avoided taking the train from Brussels Central Station to work, in the town of Diegem, just outside the capital. “There are a lot of people now going to Central Station, so if someone wanted to do something, that would be the place,” Mr. Vaz said.

Belgium’s stock market shrugged off the lockdown, closing down 0.27%. Economy Minister Kris Peeters said Brussels businesses affected by security measures could claim temporary unemployment insurance to compensate for some of their losses. But there were signs that the reverberations of the lockdown would extend beyond this week. One group, the International Association of Privacy Professionals, called off its large, annual conference scheduled for the second half of next week.

“Based on the available information that we’ve been able to gather—including conversations with Brussels security operations, the venue, delegates, sponsors and our members in the city—we have made the decision that next week’s congress is canceled,” J. Trevor Hughes, the group’s president said in a statement.

But others were trying to make do given the unusual circumstances. Some university professors at Brussels’ Free University videotaped their lectures so students could access them online and not fall behind.

In Molenbeek, the heavily Muslim neighborhood near central Brussels that was home to at least three of the suspected perpetrators of the Paris attacks and multiple suspected accomplices, the strains of the heightened security are starting to show. Here, raids and arrests have become a near-nightly phenomenon since the Nov. 13 attacks.

The prosecutors’ office said that the 15 other people detained on Sunday had been released, along with two of five people detained in seven raids on Monday in Brussels and Liège.

“The risk of being confronted with weapons, explosives or dangerous persons as well as experiences in the recent past, necessitate the use of exceptional precautionary and safety measures in these kinds of operations,” it said in a statement.



Soldiers and police patrol Brussels on Monday as the city remained locked down. PHOTO: JAKUB DOSPIVA/CTK/ZUMA PRESS

Justice Minister Koen Geens said a spate of arrests Sunday “resulted in information that was very, very useful, but it’s not finished.”

Brussels has been on lockdown since Friday evening, when authorities raised the terror alert level to its highest level after finding an automatic weapon and equipment often used to make explosive suicide vests in a raid of an apartment in Molenbeek. That apartment was rented by someone apparently connected to Mr. Abdeslam, neighbors and local officials said.

Mr. Abdeslam was last seen the morning after the attacks, when French police stopped him in a car with two other men on their way to Belgium. Unaware of Mr. Abdeslam’s possible involvement in the attacks, police let the group go.

—*Inti Landauro and Tom Fairless contributed to this article.*

Write to Julian E. Barnes at julian.barnes@wsj.com and Valentina Pop at valentina.pop@wsj.com

Corrections & Amplifications:

The International Association of Privacy Professionals was incorrectly referred to as the International Association for Privacy Professionals in an earlier version of this article. (Nov. 24, 2015)

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