

Europe

Suspected architect of Paris attacks is dead, 2 senior European officials say

By **Souad Mekhennet**, **Anthony Faiola** and **Missy Ryan** November 18

PARIS — The suspected ringleader of the Paris attacks was killed Wednesday in a massive pre-dawn raid by French police commandos, two senior European officials said, after investigators followed leads that the fugitive Islamic State militant was holed up north of the French capital and could be plotting another wave of violence.

More than 100 police officers and soldiers stormed an apartment building in Saint-Denis, a bustling suburb home to many immigrants, during a seven-hour siege that left at least two people dead, officials said. The dead included the suspected overseer of the Paris bloodshed, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, according to the two senior European officials. Abaaoud, a Belgian extremist, had once boasted that he could slip easily between Europe and strongholds of the Islamic State militant group in Syria.

Paris prosecutor François Molins, speaking to reporters hours after the siege, said he could not provide the identities of the people killed at the scene. A French security official declined to confirm or deny that Abaaoud had died. U.S. officials said they were awaiting confirmation of the identities of those slain.

The two European officials from different countries, who have followed the case closely, said they had received the information about Abaaoud's death from French authorities. The two officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters.

It was not immediately clear how Abaaoud died — whether in police gunfire, by his own hand or in a suicide blast triggered by a woman in the apartment.

After the raid, forensics experts combed through blown-out windows and floors collapsed by explosions, presumably seeking DNA and other evidence.

Molins said a discarded cellphone helped identify safe houses used by attackers to plan Friday's coordinated assaults, which killed 129 people and wounded more than 350 in a series of attacks at a stadium, a concert hall and restaurants across Paris.

Molins said police launched the raid after receiving a witness tip suggesting that Abaaoud was “entrenched” on the third floor of the Saint-Denis building. He said that neither Abaaoud nor another wanted suspect, Salah Abdeslam,

was among eight people who were arrested at the apartment and surrounding locations on Wednesday. Three people were arrested in the raid itself, one of whom suffered a gunshot wound in the arm, he said.

Molins said the sophisticated militant cell used three safe houses around Paris — including the Saint-Denis apartment — and three rental cars to launch the attack. It was “a huge logistics plan, meticulously carried out,” he said.

Abaaoud was the target of a major dragnet in the international search — which stretches from Belgium to Syria — for suspects in Friday’s carnage.

Supporters of the Islamic State, the extremist group whose vast domain straddles Syria and Iraq, have vowed to inflict repeated attacks on the West, including in Europe.

The raid was in part a response to what French officials thought was a plan to stage a follow-up terrorist attack in La Defense, a financial district northwest of Paris, two police officials and an investigator close to the investigation said. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief members of the media.

Seven men and one woman were arrested Wednesday in Saint-Denis, Molins said.

Five days after the worst violence on French soil since World War II, European nations remained on edge, enhancing vigilance against possible attacks by Islamist militants who have promised to bring the brutal tactics employed in Iraq and Syria to the West.

President François Hollande, seeking to reassure French citizens unnerved by the bloodshed on the streets of Paris, said the attacks would not alter the French way of life.

“We are at war against terrorism, terrorism which declared war on us,” Hollande said at a meeting of French mayors. “It is the [Islamic State] jihadist organization. It has an army. It has financial resources. It has oil. It has a territory.

“It has allies in Europe, including in our country,” he continued, “with young, radicalized Islamist people. It committed atrocities there and wants to kill here. It has killed here.”

He renewed his case to extend a state of emergency decreed after the attacks and to make changes to the constitution that he said would make France safer.

Jean-Michel Fauvergue, chief of the elite police unit that carried out Wednesday's raid, said the operation began at 4:16 a.m. with an attempt to blast open the third-floor apartment door with explosives. But the reinforced door would not open properly, and the element of surprise was lost, he said. The terrorists inside then blocked the door with a heavy object.

French media identified the suicide bomber as Hasna Aitboulahcen, a cousin of Abaaoud's. The 26-year-old French citizen is a former manager of Beko Construction, a company in Epinay-sur-Seine, a town north of Saint-Denis. The company closed down in 2014.

Fauvergue said hundreds of shots were exchanged and each side threw projectiles.

As the raid progressed, heavily armed police clad in military gear — some with their faces covered by balaclavas — moved quickly through the dark streets, while sharpshooters were posted on nearby buildings. Helicopters scanned from the skies, and police used a drone and two robots to conduct surveillance. For hours, traffic and public transportation were halted, and schools were shuttered.

Uthayaseelan Sanmugan, a 38-year-old cook who lives near the targeted apartment, said he woke up at 4:30 a.m. to the sound of gunfire, went to his window and saw the lights from weapons outside.

“When I got to the street, I saw a lot of blood on the sidewalk. The blood of the terrorists.”

Residents were evacuated or instructed to stay inside their homes.

“I heard gunshots and, sometime around 7 a.m., a huge blast, an explosion,” said Kelly Ovo, a 45-year-old day laborer who lives close to the apartment that was under siege.

French police reported that a 7-year-old police dog named Diesel was “killed by the terrorists” in the raid.

Abaaoud, an ardent Islamic State supporter linked to several other terrorist attempts, was believed to be in Syria earlier this year. But some officials speculated earlier this week that he could have returned to Europe, perhaps passing undetected among the flood of asylum seekers pouring into Greek islands from Turkey.

The siege appeared to have been aided by another potential breakthrough in the probe: the discovery of a mobile phone in a garbage can near the Bataclan concert hall, the site of one of Friday's assaults.

The phone's data contained a map of the music venue, which was the target of the most deadly attack last week. French media reported that the phone contained a chilling text message sent shortly after the first gunman entered:

“Let’s go, we’re starting.”

The information on the phone opened fresh leads, including to an apartment southeast of Paris in Alfortville, according to Mediapart, a French news outlet.

French officials have cast a wide net in the hunt for suspects in Friday’s attacks. Across France, 118 additional raids were conducted overnight on Tuesday, yielding at least 25 arrests. That brought to 414 the number of raids launched throughout France since Friday, the Interior Ministry said.

The attacks deepened questions about European intelligence agencies’ ability to prevent militant violence. According to Eric Van Der Sypt, spokesman for the Belgian federal prosecutor, Belgian federal police interrogated Brahim Abdeslam, one of the Paris attackers, in February after he returned from Turkey.

Belgian federal police also questioned Brahim’s brother Salah, who they knew had been radicalized, Van Der Sypt said. But Belgian officials said there was no indication that the brothers were going to get involved with terrorism, so they were released.

Across Europe, officials remained on high alert Wednesday. In Copenhagen, a terminal at the Danish capital’s international airport was briefly evacuated after “an overheard conversation about a bomb,” police said in a Twitter post. The terminal later reopened.

Countries, including Sweden and Italy, raised terror alerts. At the Vatican, extra security was posted in St. Peter’s Square, where Pope Francis addressed pilgrims.

On Tuesday, authorities in Hanover, Germany, abruptly called off a friendly soccer match between Germany and the Netherlands that Chancellor Angela Merkel had planned to attend, officials said.

Turmoil continued elsewhere in France on Wednesday when a history teacher at a Jewish school in Marseille was stabbed by three men. Brice Robin, the Marseille prosecutor, said one of the attackers had an Islamic State T-shirt. The teacher received medical aid and appeared to be in stable condition.

Also in Marseille, a young veiled Muslim woman was attacked by a man who punched her and wielded a box cutter. She was taken to an emergency room.

Since last week’s attacks, Hollande has vowed a withering French response. On Tuesday, France invoked a European Union mutual aid pact that calls for members of the bloc to assist other member states if they are attacked, a historic if largely symbolic move.

Daniela Deane in London, Virgile Demoustier, Emily Badger and Karla Adam in Paris, and Loveday Morris in Baghdad contributed to this report.

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