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WORLD | EUROPE

Germany Accuses Asylum Seeker of Aiding Paris Attacks Leader

German prosecutors say the 20-year-old scouted potential routes into Europe for Islamic State



A makeshift shrine last year on Place de la République in Paris for the victims of the 13 November Paris attacks. Germany has arrested a 20-year-old Algerian asylum seeker accused of helping the alleged ringleader of the attacks. *PHOTO: EUROPEAN PRESSPHOTO AGENCY*

By **RUTH BENDER**

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BERLIN—German prosecutors Thursday accused an Algerian asylum seeker of helping scout potential routes into Europe for the alleged ringleader of the November Paris attacks.

Germany's federal prosecutor said a 20-year-old identified as Algerian Bilal C., who is already behind bars for theft and fraud, is suspected of having been a member of Islamic State and having kept Abdelhamid Abaaoud informed about the situation along the refugee route through Europe.

The prosecutor's office said Bilal C. traveled on Abaaoud's orders from Syria along the so-called Balkan route that was used by hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees last year to escape the Middle East and Africa, and passed information to Abaaoud along the way.

The detention of Bilal C., who had requested asylum in Germany, is the latest evidence that Islamic State was trying to use record migration to Europe last summer to smuggle operatives into the continent.

In the Nov. 13 Paris attacks that killed 130 people, two of the attackers used the refugee route from Greece to enter Europe, according to authorities. The revelation added to fears of terrorism and the security risks from migration, pushing EU leaders to take increasingly tough measures to limit the flow.

Abaaoud, the alleged architect of the November Paris attacks, is suspected of having slipped into Europe from Syria through unchecked borders, French officials have said.

The Belgian-born terrorist is suspected of having planned and coordinated three teams of attackers who carried out the assaults on the French capital. French authorities are also investigating whether Abaaoud was involved in other attacks and plots against Europe. He was killed in a shootout with police in the Paris suburb of Saint Denis days after the attacks.

The German federal prosecutor's office said Bilal C. received the order from Abaaoud in June 2015 to explore potential smuggling routes along the Balkan route after he joined the terror organization Islamic State in Syria in late 2014.

After receiving the order, Bilal C. between June 2015 and August 2015 traveled from Syria via Turkey, Greece, Serbia and Hungary to Austria and continuously kept Abaaoud informed about border checks, waiting times and access routes, the prosecutor's office said.

During those trips, Bilal C. also kept another man informed, Ayoub El Khazzani, who had attempted a terrorist attack aboard a Thalys train in August 2015, which was thwarted by the quick action of four passengers.

The prosecutor's office said that Bilal C. kept Mr. El Khazzani informed about potential

smuggling routes, especially from Turkey to Greece.

German officials, after initially playing down the risk of terrorists sneaking into Europe as part of last year's influx of refugees and migrants, have in recent months warned repeatedly about security risks of the migrant flow.

They say that while Islamic State has more reliable means of sending terrorists to Europe—for example, by dispatching radicalized EU citizens—smuggling in attackers posing as migrants can serve the group's purpose by inflaming anti-refugee and anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe.

Bilal C. ended his zigzags across Europe in Germany in August 2015, the month when migrant numbers entering Europe surged dramatically. About one million people from Syria and elsewhere arrived in Germany seeking asylum last year, at a rate of as many as 10,000 a day, many of them entering the country without the background checks typical for people applying for a visa.

Bilal C. registered as an asylum seeker in Germany but got into trouble with police for stealing and collecting asylum-seeker benefits in two different cities under different identifies, officials said.

On Wednesday, a court in Aachen near the Belgian and Dutch borders sentenced him to eight months in youth prison for theft and fraud, said a court spokesman. On Thursday, an investigating judge issued a new arrest order on the new allegations.

The federal prosecutor said there is no evidence that Bilal C. continued to operate on behalf of Islamic State after arriving in Germany.

—Noemie Bisserbe contributed to this article.

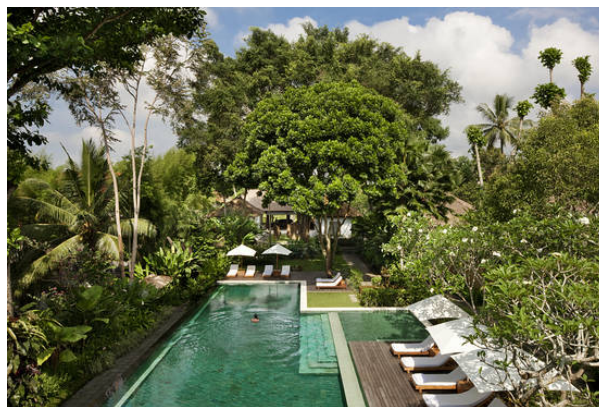
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