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EUROPE

# Terrorism Raids in Belgium Yield 16 Arrests

By **ANDREW HIGGINS** and **KIMIKO DE FREYTAS-TAMURA** NOV. 22, 2015

BRUSSELS — After a dramatic security sweep late Sunday marked by gunfire and the deployment of soldiers in the historic center of the Belgian capital, the authorities here announced early Monday that 16 people had been arrested in a joint police and military operation to try to head off what the country's prime minister earlier described as a "serious and imminent" threat of a Paris-style terrorist assault.

Belgian security forces made 19 raids in the Brussels region on Sunday and three in the southern Belgian town of Charleroi, Eric Van der Sijpt, a magistrate and spokesman for the federal prosecutor's office, said at a late-night news conference. Backed by heavily armed soldiers, the police also sealed off at least two areas of central Brussels, including streets around the city's medieval central square, the Grand Place, a major tourist attraction.

But the main target of the clampdown, Salah Abdeslam, one of the gunmen in the Nov. 13 Paris attacks, was not among those arrested, Mr. Van der Sijpt said.

The Belgian news media reported Sunday that Mr. Abdeslam, a resident of the Brussels borough of Molenbeek whose brother blew himself up in Paris, had been seen in the eastern city of Liege but had then again vanished. Mr. Van der Sijpt declined to take questions on that or other aspects of the Belgian investigation into the links between the Paris attacks and Belgium.

Sunday's raids and show of force in the center of Brussels escalated what had been mostly low-key precautions there into a highly visible and often jittery military-style operation in a city usually associated with the somnolent activity of the European Union.

The operation, the biggest in the Belgian capital since the Paris attack, began shortly after a crisis government meeting and a decision to maintain for a second day the highest possible alert level in Brussels.

"We fear an attack similar to the one in Paris," Prime Minister Charles Michel said Sunday at a news conference. "A number of individuals could launch an attack on several locations in Brussels simultaneously." He spoke amid a growing mood of crisis as the authorities extended the hunt for Mr. Abdeslam, the only known survivor from three terrorist squads that attacked Paris, and for a widening number of suspects in Belgium linked to it.

Police officers and soldiers in camouflage blocked off roads around the central headquarters of the Brussels police, near the Grand Place, and also around the offices of Belgium's federal police. Around 20 soldiers patrolled the central station while a police academy in the north of the city was also given additional protection.

Mr. Michel did not elaborate on what information the government had received of a possible assault, saying only that it had "indications that the targets of such an attack will be areas that attract large crowds like commercial centers."

Belgium's interior minister, Jan Jambon, said that the threat was wider

than that posed by Mr. Abdeslam, suggesting that the Paris attacks may have involved a far broader network than originally thought.

“There’s no point in hiding it, there is a real threat,” Mr. Jambon earlier told a Sunday program on the Belgian broadcaster VRT.

A former French intelligence official close to the investigations said that the Belgians were looking for eight to 10 people who are heavily armed with weapons and explosives, in addition to Mr. Abdeslam.

Several Belgian media outlets reported that the police had arrested four people on Saturday evening, one wearing a suicide belt. Geert Schoorens, a magistrate at the federal prosecutor’s office, said Sunday that he could “neither deny nor confirm” those reports because investigations were continuing.

For a second day, the government put the country’s threat level at 4, the highest possible. The United States Embassy in Brussels continued to advise citizens to “remain at home” and avoid public gatherings. The authorities announced that schools and subways in Brussels would remain closed on Monday as well.

A railway station under the headquarters of the European Union’s executive remained sealed off on Sunday, and all traffic on the Brussels metro system was suspended. Soldiers with automatic weapons patrolled shopping malls. Several big stores stayed closed. A massive Sunday market near the Brussels-South railway station that usually draws as many as 50,000 shoppers was canceled.

Mr. Michel said Saturday that the threat level had been raised because of “information, relatively precise, of a risk of an attack similar to the one that unfolded in Paris.”

Bernard Clerfayt, the mayor of Schaerbeek, a commune of Brussels, was

more loose-tongued. On Sunday, he told the Belgian television network RTBF that “there are two terrorists on the ground in the Brussels region.”

Brussels was under such high alert that Mr. Jambon said he requested that some football matches be canceled so the reserve federal police, who usually enforce the security during matches, could be deployed in the capital.

At the same time, the French authorities on Sunday published a new call for witnesses related to the attacks in Paris and last week’s raid in St.-Denis, appealing for more information about the suicide bomber who was the second of three attackers to detonate explosive vests outside the Stade de France.

The call for witnesses, published by the French national police on Twitter, included a picture but not a name, and asked anybody who had information on the person to contact the French authorities. The second suicide bomber detonated his vest near Gate H of the stadium, killing no one.

The first detonated his explosives near Gate D, killing one person. A Syrian passport for a 25-year-old man named Ahmad al-Mohammad, from Idlib, Syria, was found near his body, but the French authorities believe that the passport may have been stolen.

On Friday, the Paris prosecutor’s office said that fingerprints for both the first and second bombers were taken at the same check for migrants in Greece on Oct. 3. The third bomber, identified as Bilal Hadfi, 20, a French citizen living in Belgium, detonated his explosives on the nearby Rue de la Cokerie but did not kill anybody.

The appeal for help and the extraordinary security measures in Brussels came amid fresh revelations around another suspect, Abraimi Lazez, 39, a Belgian of Moroccan descent, who was arrested Thursday and charged with helping Mr. Abdeslam after his return to Belgium following the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris.

The authorities arrested Mr. Lazez after finding a handgun and an unspecified amount of blood in his car, his lawyer, Sokol Vljahen, said. Mr. Lazez, who grew up in the same Molenbeek neighborhood as some of the Paris attackers, denied any link to the attacks, his lawyer said.

Mr. Abdeslam was stopped by French police officers on Nov. 14 during a routine traffic check as he drove back to Brussels with two friends, both of whom have since been arrested, a few hours after the Paris attacks. He had a criminal record, but no warrant linked to his file, and he had not yet been linked to the attacks, so he was allowed to drive on.

One of the two men traveling with him and now under arrest has since told the police that Mr. Abdeslam had been wearing a big jacket, “with something underneath,” according to the suspect’s lawyer, Carine Couquelet. While he did not know what it was, the lawyer said, the sight of it “made him scared.”

According to Mr. Lazez’s lawyer, his client never met Salah nor Ibrahim Abdeslam, his brother who died in Paris when he detonated a suicide vest. Mr. Lazez was not friends with Abdelhamid Abaaoud either, he said. Mr. Abaaoud, another Molenbeek resident, was the presumed ringleader of the Paris attacks and was killed in a police raid just north of the French capital on Wednesday.

Mohamed, a third brother of the Abdeslams who was detained briefly after the attacks but released, appealed for Salah to turn himself in.

“We wish for him to turn himself in,” he told RTBF television in an interview on Sunday. “To answer us. For our family, for the family of victims, for all the others. We prefer to see him in prison than in a cemetery.”

He denied any knowledge of his brothers’ plans, even though he said that all three “got along well” and had the usual “banal conversations you have with brothers.”

He said he had not paid attention when the attitudes of his two brothers began to change six months ago. “They started praying,” Mohamed said. “Or they stopped drinking alcohol, but it’s not a radical change. For me it’s the sign of people who wanted to chasten themselves, and to be more respectful of their religion.”

When asked whether his brother Salah, might have been reluctant to participate in the attacks, Mohamed said: “It is my hope that he stepped back at the last minute.”

“Maybe he saw or heard something that made him turn back. After, did he kill victims? Was he at the exact location? Was he there until the end? We don’t know.”

Milan Schreuer and Aurelien Breeden contributed reporting.

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