

Belgium Hunts 'Third Man' After ISIS Brussels Attacks

Belgian police were on Thursday hunting for a "third man" filmed with two Islamic State suicide bombers at Brussels Airport as evidence piled up that the same jihadist network was involved in the deadly Paris attacks last November.

With pressure mounting on Europe to improve cooperation against terrorism, EU interior and justice ministers were to hold emergency talks on a joint response to Tuesday's bombings in Brussels, which killed at least 31 people and injured 270.

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls led calls for a "strong European response", but officials say many states, including France, withhold their most cherished data despite a mantra of willingness to share intelligence.

The chief surviving suspect linking the Paris and Brussels attacks, Frenchman Salah Abdeslam, 26, arrested in the Belgian capital last week, appeared briefly in court on Thursday with two other suspects and was remanded in custody until April 7.

His lawyer, Sven Mary, who requested the adjournment, said Abdeslam was no longer opposed to being extradited to France.

"Salah Abdeslam has asked me to inform you that he wishes to leave for France as quickly as possible," Mary told reporters at the courthouse, saying his client "wants to explain himself".

Turkey's president criticized Belgium for failing to track Brahim El Bakraoui, a convicted armed robber whom it expelled last year and who blew himself up at the airport on Tuesday an hour before his brother Khalid, a fellow convict, killed about 20 people at Maelbeek metro station in the city center.

Security sources told Belgian media the other suicide bomber at the airport was Najim Laachraoui, a veteran Belgian Islamist fighter in Syria suspected of making explosive belts for November's Paris attacks, who also detonated a suitcase bomb at the airport.

The third suspect captured on airport security cameras pushing a baggage trolley into the departures hall alongside Laachraoui and Brahim El Bakraoui is now the target of a police manhunt. He has not been named.

The bespectacled man wearing a cream jacket and a black hat ran out of the terminal, federal prosecutors said, and a third suitcase bomb, the biggest of the three, exploded later as bomb disposal experts were clearing the area.

Public broadcaster RTBF said investigators now believed a second bomber was involved in the metro attack close to European Commission headquarters. The man was spotted on security cameras carrying a heavy bag, but his identity was unknown and it was not clear if he had died or escaped.

A computer-generated image showed a young man with hollow cheeks, a tiny goatee beard and thick black eyebrows.

US Criticism

U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the bloodshed in the capital of the European Union, not far from NATO headquarters, showed Washington's European allies should do more to fight Islamic State alongside American efforts in the Middle East.

"The Brussels event is going to further signify to Europeans that, as we have been accelerating our campaign to defeat ISIL in Syria and Iraq and elsewhere, they need to accelerate their efforts and join us," Carter told CNN, using another acronym for Islamic State.

Democratic U.S. presidential candidate Hillary Clinton

criticized the lack of cooperation among European countries, saying the EU lacked a system for exchanging air passenger data or a joint intelligence center to share information.

Opinion polls suggest support in Britain for leaving the European Union in a referendum set for June 23 is gaining ground since the Brussels attacks, which fanned security fears that some politicians have linked to immigration.

U.S. Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump, who has suggested torture could be used on militant suspects, said he expected Britain would vote to leave the EU because of concerns about high levels of migration.

Casualties came from about 40 nations, drawing an international outpouring of support for Brussels during three days of mourning. Washington said Secretary of State John Kerry would visit Belgium on Friday.

The Belgian government deflected criticism from Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan, saying the elder Bakraoui brother, 29, had not been deported to Belgium but to the Netherlands.

Officials have said that, as in the case of one of the Paris suicide bombers, they cannot detain militant suspects expelled from Turkey without evidence that they have committed a crime.

Brahim El Bakraoui was detained near the Syrian border and expelled last July. "Belgium ignored our warning that this person is a foreign fighter," Erdogan said.

Flemish public broadcaster VRT said the bomber had been released from a Belgian prison in 2014 after serving four years of a 10-year sentence for armed robbery. He skipped two probation meetings last June and was ordered to return to prison in August. But police could not find him.

The case highlighted Belgium's problem with some 300 locals

who have fought in Syria, the biggest contingent from Europe in relation to its national population of 11 million.

At the time of the Paris attacks, in which 130 people were killed by Brussels-based militants, its security service had fewer than 600 staff. The government has since raised spending on police and intelligence.

Foreign Minister Didier Reynders, leading efforts to counter international criticism of Belgian policies toward containing violent extremists among its Muslim community, which makes up about 5 percent of the population, said security had to be balanced with civil rights.

As Brussels struggled to return to normal, its airport remained shut until at least Saturday, with the departure hall sealed off by investigators.

Travelers on the busy Easter weekend were diverted to Antwerp, Liege and the northern French city of Lille.

Brussels Airlines advised passengers to arrive up to three hours before their flight because of security measures. There were long lines outside the terminal in Liege as people waited in the rain to put their baggage through new outdoor scanners, VRT reported.

European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker jumped to Belgium's defense, dismissing charges it was a "failed state".

"Let he who is without sin cast the first stone," Juncker told Flemish daily De Standaard. "There was terrorism in Britain and in Germany in the 1970s and 1980. There was terrorism in Spain, in Italy and much more recently in France. People should stop lecturing Belgium." {eoa}

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