

France foils 'terror' attack on military

AFP, Paris

France has foiled a "terrorist" plot to capture and decapitate a member of its armed forces at a military base, officials said.

Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said security forces staged dawn raids on Monday and arrested four people, aged between 16 and 23, who were "planning to commit a terrorist act" at a French military installation.

The youngest was quickly released but the other three are suspected of planning to kidnap and behead a member of the military, possibly on December 31 when the facility was thinly staffed.

The oldest of the group served as a navy signalman at the base around the southern town of Collioure, which is also used for training by elite commando forces.

He was identified as Djebbil and was recently kicked out of the navy, said a source close to the investigation who did not wish to be named.

The other key plotter was just 17, and was already being closely watched by authorities due to his activities on social media and connections to French jihadists in prison.

All three of those still under arrest had been planning to travel to jihadist-controlled areas of Syria, the security source said, but the 17-year-old's mother contacted authorities and he was interviewed by counter-terrorism officials.

No weapons were found during the arrests, the source said, although officials discovered documents on preparing explosives.

The news of the arrests followed a statement from President Francois Hollande, who said attacks had been thwarted in recent days.

"This week, we stopped terrorist attacks which could have taken place," Hollande said on a visit to the southern city of Marseille.



(From left, clockwise) A protester hurls petrol bomb on riot police in central Athens, during an anti-austerity protest on late Wednesday; Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras (R) and Finance Minister Eyclid Tsakalotos react during a parliament session; and people march against the bailout deal in Athens.

PHOTO: AFP



EU moves to restore funding to Greece

Greek House backs tough bailout measures

REUTERS, Athens

Europe moved to re-open funding to Greece's stricken economy yesterday, hours after a fractious Greek parliament approved a tough bailout programme in a vote that left the government without a majority and looking to new elections within months.

Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras won the backing of parliament in the early hours of yesterday for the stringent reform measures demanded by Greece's creditors led by Germany, but was left weakened by a revolt in his left-wing Syriza party.

His Interior Minister, Nikos Voutsis, said that a snap election could be held in September or October, "depending on developments".

The move by the Greek parliament was enough to persuade the European Central Bank to re-open vital funds for the Greek banking system under its Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA) programme, after euro zone finance ministers signalled they would unlock 7 billion euros (\$7.6 billion) in bridge loans.

"Things have changed now," ECB President Mario Draghi told a news conference in Frankfurt. "We had a series of news

with the approval of the bridge financing package, with the votes, various votes in various parliaments, which have now restored the conditions for a raise in ELA."

Draghi said the ECB would increase ELA funding by 900 million euros. But he added that it was difficult to make decisions on Greece given the constraints of a programme which was never meant to provide unlimited and unconditional support.

Finnish and Lithuanian lawmakers gave their approval to begin negotiations, a day before the German parliament is due to vote on the issue, while the European Commission said it believed an agreement on providing short-term bridge financing to Greece could come shortly.

However, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble underlined the risks still surrounding the negotiations that will need to be conducted over the next few weeks, saying a temporary Greek "timeout" from the euro may still be a better option.

European finance ministers held a conference call on Thursday morning to agree on a plan for the 7 billion euros in bridging funds to enable Greece to meet its immediate debt service needs and avoid defaulting on a repayment to the ECB next Monday.

Hope, doubt, anger after Iran nuke deal

AFP, Tehran

Washington and London yesterday sought to ease concerns over the Iran nuclear accord as the country's supreme leader warned that major powers are not to be trusted over its implementation.

As part of an international charm offensive, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who strongly opposes the landmark accord struck on Tuesday in Vienna between Iran and world powers led by Washington.

A defiant Netanyahu has condemned it as a "historic mistake" and hinted at a possible military response.

Ahead of his arrival in Israel, Hammond charged that the Jewish state would have opposed any deal with its arch-foe Iran.

After Hammond, US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter is due in Israel next week. Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog is also due to visit Washington, partly to push for security guarantees.

In Washington, Secretary of State John Kerry was to hold talks Thursday with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, whose government has also been alarmed about the deal with its regional rival.

President Barack Obama insisted on Wednesday the landmark agreement was the only alternative to a nuclear arms race and more war in the Middle East.

"Without a deal," Obama said, "there would be no limits to Iran's nuclear program and Iran could move closer to a nuclear bomb ... Without a deal, we risk even more war in the Middle East."

While Obama defended the deal in Washington, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned President Hassan Rouhani that "some" world powers are not to be trusted in implementing it.

In a letter to Rouhani, Khamenei, who had the final word on the agreement, congratulated Iran's negotiators for "their tireless efforts".

Bringing the talks to a close was a "milestone", Khamenei said, but the agreement requires "careful scrutiny" before it is approved.

"You are well aware that some of the six states participating in negotiations are not trustworthy at all," Khamenei said.



Obama: Iran deal is only alternative to more Mideast war



Khamenei: 'Some' world powers untrustworthy



Hammond: Israel wants a 'permanent stand-off' with Iran

Ukraine moves to give rebels self-rule

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's parliament took the first step yesterday toward granting temporary self-rule to pro-Russian rebels under a change to the constitution the West hopes can end one of Europe's deadliest wars in recent years.

The divisive issue came to the floor on the day lawmakers also vote on belt-tightening measures needed for the quick release of a \$5-billion (4.6-billion-euro) IMF payment that could spare cash-strapped Kiev from slipping into default.

The sudden flurry of activity led visiting US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to call Thursday "yet another historic day" in a war-torn country that has seen 6,500 people killed since the overthrow of its Russian-backed leadership in February 2014.

Nuland will meet Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko later to reassure him of Washington's backing and continued focus on the government's 15-month fight against separatists in the shattered industrial east.

The idea of granting autonomous status to rebel-run parts of Ukraine's east for the coming three years has struck a note of disquiet among many lawmakers and much of the Kiev media.

But it was inscribed in a truce agreement that Poroshenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed off on under strong pressure from the leaders of Germany and France in February.

Lawmakers yesterday voted by a commanding 288-57 majority to ask Ukraine's constitutional court to rule whether such changes to the basic law were legal.

The court must weigh in on the issue before any formal vote is held in the weeks or months to come.

Both Washington and its EU allies believe that partial self-rule could satisfy the insurgents and remove any arguments Russia may have for arming and funding them -- support Moscow firmly denies ever giving.

Poroshenko himself told parliament that a decision to give the militias partial self-rule was "difficult" but necessary because it was a condition being sought with increasing urgency by both Brussels and Washington.



PHOTO: AFP

A picture taken from the Abraj al-Bait Towers, also known as the Makkah Royal Hotel Clock Tower, shows Muslim worshippers praying at the Grand Mosque in the Muslim holy city of Makkah yesterday, a day before the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. The Grand Mosque, which contains Islam's holiest site the Kaaba, can now hold 1.85 million people.

Loyalists vie to secure Yemen's Aden for exiled govt return

AFP, Aden

Loyalist forces battled to oust Iran-backed rebels from their remaining positions in Yemen's second city Aden yesterday as exiled ministers prepared to return to assess the damage from four months of fighting.

The planned visit by the three ministers would be the first since the Huthi rebels and their allies entered the southern port city in March forcing President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi and his government into exile in neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

Since the launch of Operation Golden Arrow on Tuesday, Hadi's loyalists have recaptured Aden airport and much of the surrounding Khormaksar diplomatic district, as well as the provincial government headquarters, in their biggest counteroffensive so far.

Southern militiamen of the Popular Resistance, backed by reinforcements freshly trained and equipped in Saudi Arabia, have also gained ground in the Crater and Mualla districts of the city.

The rebels attempted to bring in reinforcements from the central province of Baida overnight but they were bombed by a Saudi-led coalition which has been waging an air campaign against them since March.

Coalition warplanes also bombed rebel positions on Aden's northern and eastern outskirts and in other districts of the city, military sources and witnesses said.

Pro-government fighters were using loudspeakers on Thursday to offer the remaining rebels in Crater, Mualla and Khormaksar safe passage out of the city if they surrender, local officials said.

The loyalists overwhelmed rebels who had been holed up in the Chinese consulate in Khormaksar and freed 22 of their comrades who had been held captive, Popular Resistance spokesman Ali al-Ahmedi told AFP.

'Israeli commandos' killed Syrian official

BBC ONLINE

Israeli special forces were responsible for the assassination of a Syrian military official in 2008, a leaked US intelligence file says.

Brig Gen Mohammed Suleiman was shot by a sniper while at a beach resort near the Mediterranean port of Tartous.

Israel has never commented publicly on suspicions that it was involved. But a document leaked to The Intercept website by American whistleblower Edward Snowden says Israeli naval commandos were behind the shooting.

Former US intelligence officers said its classification markings indicated the National Security Agency (NSA), for which Snowden worked as a contractor, had made the discovery through monitoring Israeli communications.

Arab media reported at the time of Suleiman's killing said he was shot in the head and neck by a sniper on board a yacht on the night of 1 August 2008 while he was having dinner at his beach-front home.

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